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# 4 Ways Muslims' Religious Freedom Fight Now Sounds Familiar to Evangelicals

The two faiths have endured similar legal backlash—underscoring the importance of advocating for religious freedom for all.

THOMAS C. BERG | SEPTEMBER 9, 2019



Image: Illustration by Rick Szuets / Source image: Unsplash/Envato

Religious freedom for Muslims in America has become a significant issue in recent years, as Asma Uddin details in her book *[When Islam Is Not a Religion](#)*. We have seen campaigns in various communities to block the construction of mosques, and [spikes](#) in vandalism and harassment against Muslims. (Read CT’s interview with Uddin [here](#).)

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campaigns rest on claims that American Muslims incubate terrorism or plan to impose Sharia law, and that globally “Islam hates us,” as President Trump has said. Evangelical Christians help lead these campaigns. Anti-mosque rallies have featured sermons by pastors and hymn singing by demonstrators. [Polls show](#) white evangelicals “are more likely than any other Christian group to have low respect for Muslims,” [reports](#) Fuller Seminary professor Matthew Kaemingk.

I have written on religious liberty and advocated it in courts and legislatures for 25 years. The majority of my cases have involved Christian individuals or organizations. I want to explain why evangelical Christians have a stake in protecting the religious freedom of Muslims.

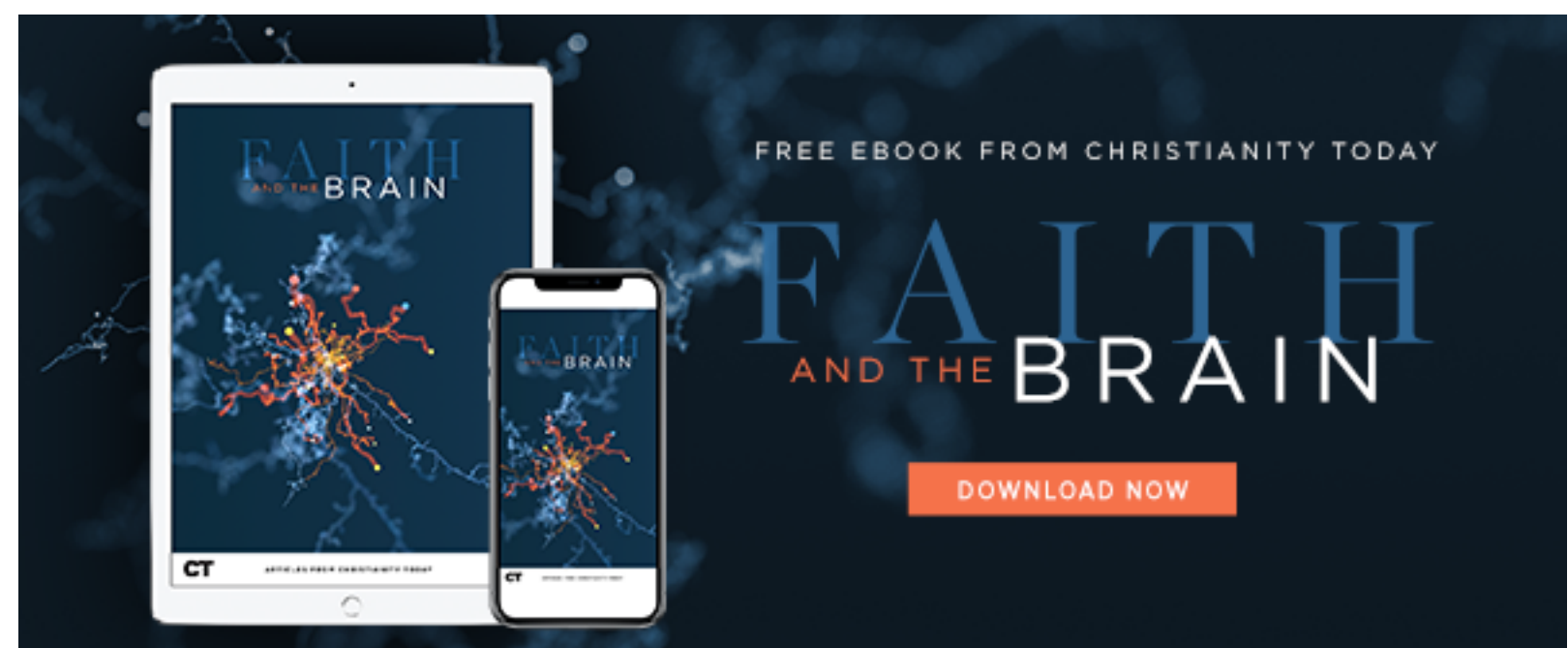
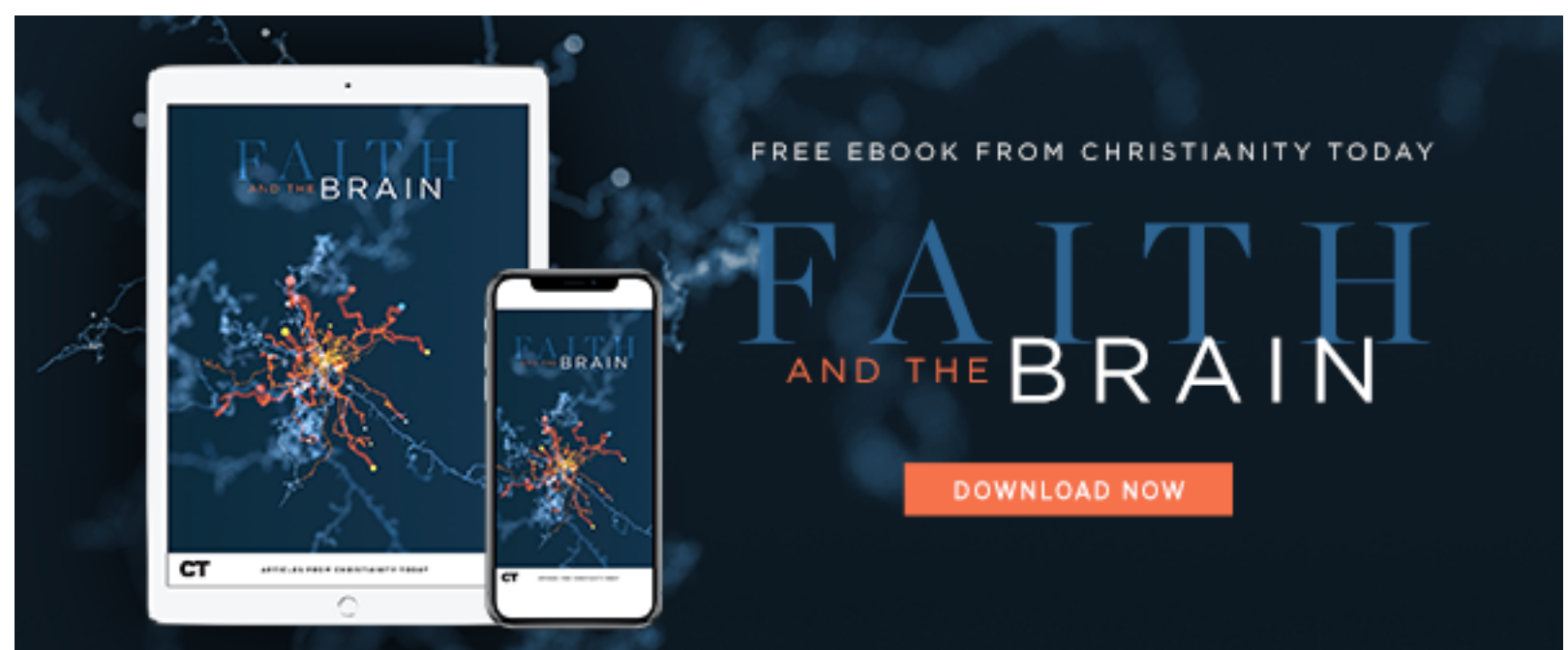
Above all, Christians should affirm everyone’s religious freedom as an aspect of human dignity: Every soul must be free to seek and respond to God. To affirm that, you do not have to say that all beliefs are true. You simply affirm that true faith can come only from God convicting the heart, not from government pressure. And the prerogative to judge souls belongs to God, not government.

Religious freedom for everyone rests also in the second great commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves. We must treat others as we would wish to be treated. Jesus’s moral call is to identify with the neighbor.

In this instance, the Golden Rule also makes pragmatic sense. American evangelicals aren’t persecuted like Christians abroad, but they do face increasing religious-freedom challenges: penalties on colleges or social services for their sexual conduct rules, on small wedding vendors who decline to create expressive goods for same-sex weddings.

Christians will receive little sympathy for those claims if they fail to show it to others. As John Stonestreet of BreakPoint Radio says, “‘Religious freedom for me but not for thee’ reinforces the narrative that Christian arguments for religious freedoms are, at best, a kind of selfish pleading, and at worst, a grasp for power.”

Moreover, restricting Muslims can provide precedent for restricting Christians as well. From my work defending both Christian and Muslim religious-freedom claims, I’ve seen specific similarities between the two:



## Unpopularity

Both groups, in different places and settings, are [unpopular](#) and face hostile, overly burdensome regulation. Opponents label them “Muslim terrorists” and “Christian bigots.” I don’t claim the situations are identical; Muslims are a small minority almost everywhere, while conservative Christians often have political and cultural power. But conservative religious beliefs about sex and other issues are highly unpopular in some places: in secular universities, in states and cities that are deep blue politically. Conservative Christians in those settings face restrictions, and it hurts their cause when Christians in power elsewhere restrict Muslims.

## Politics, Not Religion

As the title of Asma Uddin’s book indicates, some opponents of Islam even deny it is a religion. During a Tennessee mosque controversy, the state’s lieutenant governor generalized that Islam resembled “a violent political philosophy more than [a] peace-loving religion.” Pat Robertson frequently [says](#) Islam is “a political system masquerading as a religion,” “intent on dominating you and killing you.”

It’s ludicrous to deny that Islam is a religion. And although Islamic extremism obviously presents one form of terrorism threat, it is grossly unfair to charge American Muslims with supporting such acts. In fact, their views about terrorism mirror those of the general population (for example, in a 2017 [poll](#), 82 percent of Muslim Americans said they worried about global Islamic extremism, compared with 83 percent of Americans overall).

And conservative Christians face accusations that their religious freedom claims are mere masquerades. In 2015, *The New York Times* [editorialized](#) that photographers, florists, or bakers who declined to create goods for a same-sex wedding were “using religion as a cover for bigotry”—as an insincere excuse for mere hatred. You can find the same charge in countless articles and reader-comment sections. I once began searching and immediately found this comment embodying the attitude: “The Religious Right isn’t a religious movement.... [It’s] a political movement that uses religion as a cover to justify and rationalize its political views.” Sound familiar?

Evangelicals’ opposition to same-sex marriage is fair game for criticism, and the Supreme Court has held that it can’t be written into law. But when evangelicals seek to protect their own ability to live by that belief, they deserve a presumption that they are acting conscientiously and not simply rationalizing hatred. But if evangelicals ask for a presumption of sincerity, they must also give it. They cannot assume that the conflict of conscience they face will receive sympathy. Encouraging that sympathy requires encouraging a culture that values conscience generally, including that of Muslims.

## Faith In Private

Even if Muslims are left alone in their private devotion, they are often told not to display it in public settings. Uddin recounts numerous stories of women facing disapproval or discrimination for wearing headscarves at their jobs. She quotes Pamela Geller, a noted anti-Muslim activist, arguing that women seeking accommodations for headscarves are

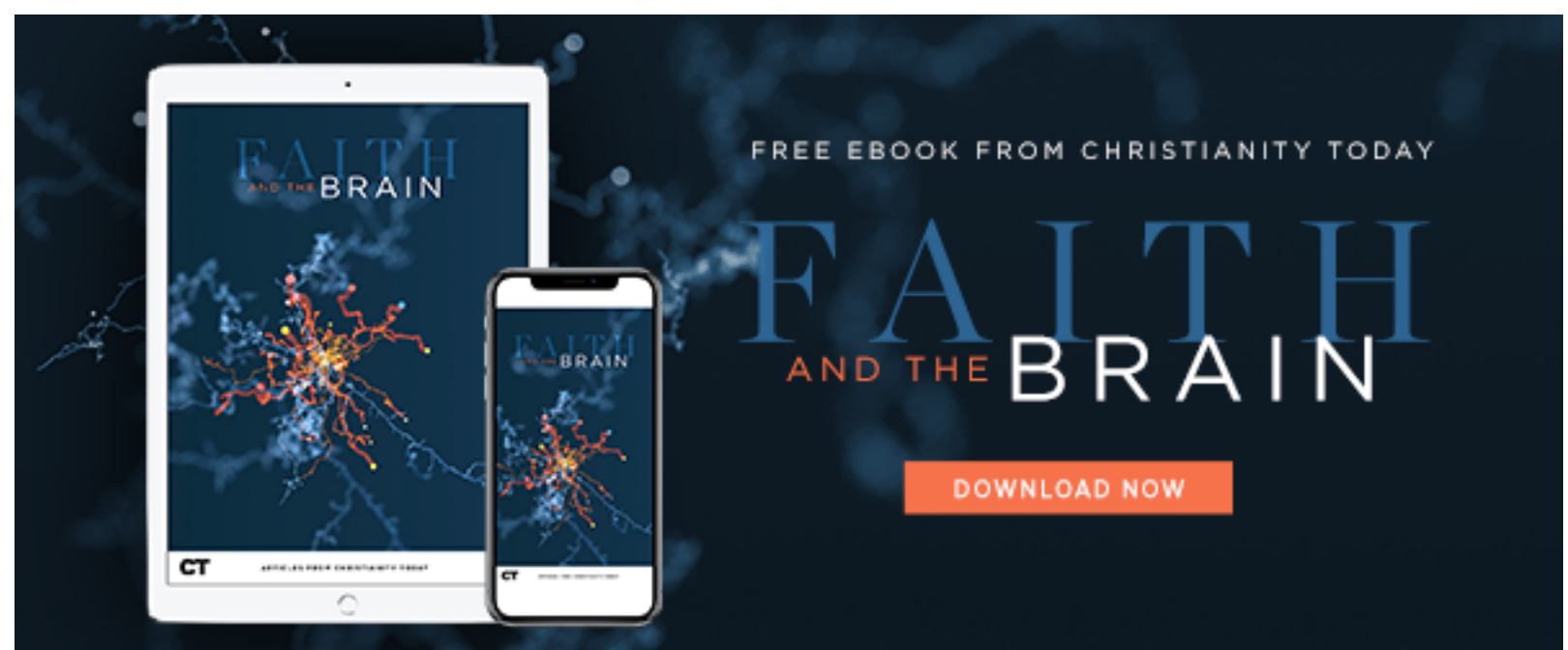
part of a “Muslim effort to impose Islam on the secular workplace.”

Christians are also told to keep their beliefs out of the workplace or other public settings. The most common issue involves not head coverings, but rather non-aggressive religious language that others unreasonably perceive as threatening or inappropriate. To take just one example, I recently filed a [brief](#) in support of a young man denied admission to a radiation therapy degree program at a public college. During his admissions interview, he’d been asked, “What do you base your morals on?” and replied, “My faith.” The program director stated that the applicant had lost points for this answer because it suggested he might inappropriately discuss his Christian faith with patients. She told a similar interviewee that he should “leave [his] thoughts” about religion out of his answers.

Employers have the right to limit expressions of faith that pressure others or interfere with the functions of the workplace; sometimes that line is tricky to draw. But it is not interference or imposition when a person simply says he is religious or mentions it to others in the workplace. Nor is it imposition when a person wears a headscarf as an expression of her faith.

## Pretexts for Regulation

Opponents seeking to block construction of a mosque have relied on dubious claims about the noise or traffic the construction will cause. But the same arguments can block construction of a Christian church or food pantry (the latter are especially unpopular among nearby property owners). When false arguments for regulation get to court, judges have been fairly vigilant in rejecting them. But trying to get judges to adopt them is a bad idea.



When government hostility manifests itself, it shouldn't be ignored. The Supreme Court upheld President Trump's ban on travel from seven mostly Muslim nations even though the ban originated in the president's campaign promise to impose a "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims entering the country. Noting that the ultimate ban was narrower, the Court refused to look behind its terms to question whether its adoption was driven by the president's original sentiments of hostility toward all Muslims.

But just three weeks earlier, the Court had invalidated a state agency's order penalizing Jack Phillips of Masterpiece Cakeshop, who'd refused to design a cake for a same-sex wedding, because the commissioners who adjudicated his case made hostile statements about him (calling his actions "despicable" and drawing an analogy to the Holocaust and slavery). I co-filed a [brief](#) in the case, for the Christian Legal Society, the National Association of Evangelicals, and others, supporting Phillips against the state's discrimination. But the Court's admirable willingness to protect him against hostility contrasts with its unwillingness to do the same for Muslim families who were separated by the travel ban.

You could point out differences between the two cases, differences running in either direction. But the bottom line is that in upholding the travel ban, the Court missed an opportunity to declare a strong rule against hostility toward any faith. If we want protection for unpopular beliefs, including conservative evangelicalism, the rules must be consistent.

Obviously, government can limit the exercise of religion (by those of any faith) based on safety or other vital public interests. But we have ample ways to achieve those interests without targeting Islam or restricting the peaceful exercise of that faith.

We can attack terrorism through sound intelligence and police work (the trust of the Muslim community is invaluable for such efforts, but targeting destroys that trust). There are versions of Shari'ah law that oppress women; but they are constitutionally barred in the US, as are oppressive laws based on any faith or ideology.

But when Muslim religious practice is targeted or unjustifiably burdened, and conservative evangelicals have a hand in it, the credibility and the valid religious freedom claims of evangelicals suffer too.

*Thomas C. Berg is the James L. Oberstar professor of law and public policy at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis, where he teaches on religious liberty, law and religion, and constitutional law.*

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