

Why Christians Should Be Fighting for Muslims' Religious Freedom

While protecting our own freedom is a logical motive, it's not necessarily the most Christian one. Jesus said, "For whoever will save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (Luke 9:24). We are called not to self-preservation but to self-denying love, which compels us to make disciples of all nations.

That brings us to the second (and better) reason for protecting religious freedom for Muslims: It helps more Muslims come to Christ.

This is a simple theological argument. Scripture doesn't instruct us to use government power to make disciples. Neither Jesus nor the early church did so. Instead, we're called to "preach Christ" in word and deed (1 Cor. 1:23), trusting the Holy Spirit—not the government—to "convict the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8). As Paul said, "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh"—such as government power—but of "divine power" (2 Cor. 10:4, NASB).

Some people point to ancient Israel as an exception to this rule. They note that the Torah (Old Testament law) commanded the rulers of Israel to punish blasphemy and idolatry and enforce true worship of God (Deut. 17:3-5, Lev. 24:16). So isn't God commanding us to use government power to make disciples?

The problem with this argument is that it equates ancient Israel with modern America, as if the Torah were simply a blueprint for modern American government. But it's not. The Torah was part of God's covenant with His chosen people Israel—"a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" through whom

God promised to bless the whole world (Ex. 19:6). That covenant is fulfilled in Christ. And despite longstanding theological debates about the precise relationship between Israel and the church, nobody believes that the Torah's command to stone idolaters is a model for modern civil governments. It is instead pointing ahead to God's final judgment—not telling us to use government power to make disciples.

This understanding is also consistent with how God created us and interacts with us. God never forces anyone to love Him, because forced love is not love at all. And if God doesn't force anyone to love Him, how much less should the government try to do so?

Using government power to suppress false religion is also counterproductive. Preventing a mosque from being built or preventing a Muslim from wearing a headscarf doesn't bring any Muslims closer to Christ. At best, it may pressure them to feign Christianity—which is not a saving faith. At worst, it can harden them against Christ and entrench them even more deeply in non-Christian religion.

By contrast, defending religious freedom for Muslims can lead directly to opportunities for sharing the gospel. For example, I'm now good friends with the imam from the Murfreesboro mosque. We've had multiple conversations about the differences between Christianity and Islam. He tries to convince me the doctrine of the Trinity makes no sense; I try to convince him we can't earn God's favor and must turn to Jesus as our Savior instead. I never would have had that opportunity if I hadn't defended his religious freedom.

Similarly, which churches do you think have more opportunities to share the gospel with their Muslim neighbors—churches that vehemently oppose the construction of nearby mosques, or churches that recognize their neighbors' legal rights, welcome them to the neighborhood and offer to show them a better way?

Ultimately, the argument rooted in evangelism invites us to examine our own hearts. Why would we try to use the power of government to stop a mosque from being built? Is it because we love our Muslim neighbors and think restricting their religion will help lead them to Christ? Or is it possible we're motivated, at least in part, by something else? Fear of terrorism, fear of losing our way of life or fear of people who are different from us.

Of course, fear may be a natural response when encountering people who are different from us and when memories of 9/11 remain raw. But we're expressly commanded not to fear (Matt. 10:28-31). Instead, we're commanded to view Muslims as people who bear God's image and need God's love.

So the argument from evangelism urges us to confess our fears and love our Muslim neighbors as ourselves. That means caring about their religious freedom, even as we show them there is a better way. {eoa}

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