What Islamophobic Politicians Can Learn From Mormons

By Asma Uddin
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Showing support for Muslim immigrants in February in Cottonwood Heights, Utah. A history of discrimination against Mormons has made Utah politicians more supportive of religious freedom for Muslims   CreditRick Bowmer/Associated Press

Last month, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on President Trump's travel ban, popularly known as the "Muslim ban" because of his statements, like one in 2015 calling for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."

But Mr. Trump is far from the only Republican willing to discriminate against Muslims. BuzzFeed News reported in April that since 2015, Republican officials in 49 states have publicly attacked Islam, some even questioning its legitimacy as a religion.

The only exception? Utah. In that state, where a majority of residents is Mormon, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, elected officials seem to have a deep understanding that an attack on the religious freedom of one group is an attack on the religious freedom of everyone. The rest of the nation should follow their example.

Utah's politicians stand out against many of those whose statements BuzzFeed News chronicled, like an Oklahoma state representative named John Bennett, who in 2014 called Islam "a cancer," and last year met with Muslim constituents only after they filled out questionnaires asking whether they beat their wives. A Nebraska state senator, Bill Kintner, proposed that Muslims be required to eat pork if they wished to

enter the United States. A state senator in Rhode Island, Elaine Morgan, wrote that "Muslim religion and philosophy is to murder, rape and decapitate anyone who is a non-Muslim" and recommended that Syrian refugees be housed in camps. She later said she was referring only to "fanatical/extremist" Muslims.

In January, Neal Tapio, a South Dakota state senator who is running for the United States House, questioned whether the First Amendment applies to Muslims, asking, "Does our Constitution offer protections and rights to a person who believes in the full implementation of Islamic law, as practiced by 14 Islamic countries" and millions of Muslims "who believe in the deadly political ideology that believes you should be killed for leaving Islam?"

Representative Bennett, the lawmaker who required Muslim constituents to answer questionnaires on whether they beat their wives, said in 2014, "Islam is not even a religion; it is a social, political system that uses a deity to advance its agenda of global conquest."

Jody Hice, a 2014 Republican congressional candidate from Georgia, questioned the compatibility of Islam with the American Constitution and wrote in 2012 that "Islam would not qualify for First Amendment protection since it's a geopolitical system."

And yet, in Utah — one of the most crimson-red states in the Union — such rhetoric is conspicuously absent.

"I'd be the first to stand up for their rights," said Utah's senior senator, Orrin Hatch, in 2010 amid the controversy surrounding the construction of an Islamic community center close to ground zero in New York City. He called Islam "a great religion."

Utah's other Republican senator, Mike Lee, said he did not vote for Donald Trump in part because he saw the travel ban as a "religious test." In explaining why many in Utah opposed the ban, Utah's Republican governor, Gary Herbert, observed, "We had Rutherford B. Hayes in 1879 issue an envoy to Europe saying in essence, 'Don't send those Mormon immigrants to America anymore.'"

Pointing to this history of Mormon persecution, in 2017, a group of scholars with expertise in Mormon history filed an amicus brief in the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit opposing the ban. They drew a comparison between the government's current posture toward Muslims and the government's 19th-century treatment of Mormons. "This court should ensure that history does not repeat itself," they wrote.

Mormon politicians seem to understand better than many of their fellow Republicans that if another's freedom of faith is under attack, so, too, is their own. Perhaps this has to do with the church's 11th Article of Faith, which states, "We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where or what they may."

Their interest in the rights of people of other faiths has also been traced to the views of the Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who put it this way: "If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon, I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist or a good man of any denomination."

Mormons know too well what it means to be singled out for persecution, and to have one's faith maligned as a threat to America. But it shouldn't require that experience to understand that religious freedom for some is really religious freedom for none.

Asma T. Uddin, a religious liberty lawyer and scholar, is working on a book about American Muslims and the First Amendment.

https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/mormons-islamophobia-utah.html