



Asma T. Uddin, religious liberty lawyer (Newseum screengrab)

What a stupid, petty example of harassment of a teacher:

Maha Kassef, 35, an ambitious elementary schoolteacher, aspires to become a principal. But since she wears a Muslim head scarf, she may have to derail her dreams: A proposed bill in Quebec would bar public school principals, and other public employees, from wearing religious symbols.

“How am I supposed to teach about respect, tolerance and diversity to my students, many of whom are immigrant kids, when the government is asking me to give up who I am?” asked Ms. Kassef, the child of Kuwaiti immigrant parents who worked tirelessly to send her and her four siblings to college.

“What right does the Quebec government have to stop my career?” she added.

In fact, the proposed legislation would not only affect Muslims, but adherents of all other religions. No yarmulkes for Jewish men. No turbans for Sikh men. No crosses for Christians. *Laïcité über alles* (he said, mixing languages to make a point). This story focuses on Muslim women in headscarves.

Christians in Quebec may not find this proposed law to be a problem for them, as they could always put their crosses under their shirts. But it would be a massive problem for Orthodox Jewish men, Muslim women, and Sikh men. And for what? What worthwhile public principle is served by such a law?

More from the NYT story:

[Gregory Bordan](#), a leading constitutional lawyer and a religious Jew, has worn his skullcap to the office for the past 33 years. Soon, he, too, may have to leave it at home if he wants to work for the government or represent his law firm on a government contract.

He said the scope of the proposed bill was far wider than many realized and amounted to a political project to marginalize minorities from the judiciary, education and law enforcement.

Under the proposed legislation, he noted, lawyers who wear a head scarf, cross, skullcap or turban could no longer be retained as external counsel by the government to represent it before the courts or with a third party.

Moreover, a lawyer wearing religious garb could not be hired as an employee of the government, the national assembly or various other public bodies, even if appearing before the courts or a third party was not part of their job description.

“The message that this law sends is that unless you look like us, you can’t participate in public life,” said Mr. Bordan, who represents Coalition Inclusion Quebec, a group of religious minorities.

Mr. Bordan, whose great-grandparents came from Ukraine and Poland to Canada in the early 1900s, added that his parents had insisted he become fluent in French, and that he had been raised as a proud Quebecer. Now he felt betrayed.

“It is an insult to be told I am incapable of being impartial unless I remove my kipa,” he said, referring to his skullcap in Hebrew. “I did everything to become part of the society, and now I am being told that it’s all a sham.”

We have strong constitutional protections in the US against this kind of thing, thank God (if I can say that). But I'm interested in the *cultural* impulse to marginalize and ban religious expression. It usually comes from the secular Left, but not always.

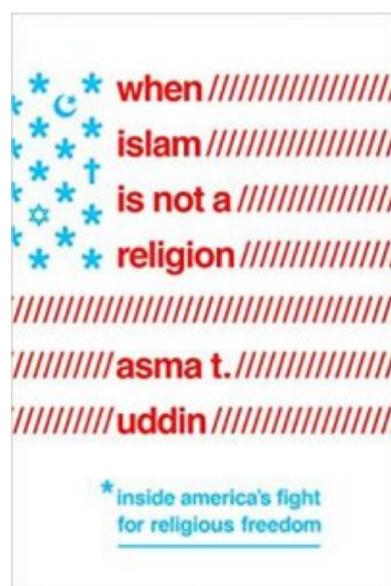
I'm reading a forthcoming book now, [When Islam Is Not A Religion](#), by [Asma T. Uddin](#). She's a religious liberty lawyer who has worked for Becket in the past, and a practicing Muslim. I strongly urge fellow conservative Christians to read this important book. It offers valuable insight into what it's like to be an unpopular religious minority in contemporary America — a position that observant traditional Christians will soon find ourselves — and why it's critical that we know each other, respect each other, and stand with each other. We Christians are going to find ourselves on the front lines with Muslims whether we want to be or not — and we *should* want to be, because defending the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty is at the core of what it means to be a good American.

It was painful to me, as a practicing Christian, to read in the book of the abuse and harassment American Muslims have received at Murfreesboro and elsewhere, when all they wanted to do was to build a house of worship. Look, I'm not exactly a naïf about this stuff. In the 2000s, I wrote critically about how Islamic extremists in north Texas hid behind happy-clappy public rhetoric to teach some appalling things. But those particular Muslims do not represent all Muslims, and besides, as ugly as some of their teachings were — I got into an argument with the then-local CAIR leader over his defense of stoning homosexuals and adulterous women — they absolutely had a First Amendment right to believe awful things. I would have defended that no matter what. Religious liberty only really matters when it protects the rights of unpopular minorities to believe, preach, and do unpopular things.

Religious liberty, of course, is not an absolute right. It is bounded by competing rights. But it is one of our most important rights, and harder to defend as America becomes more secular — and as many people who still profess religion adopt the new belief that religious liberty is *solely* about the right to worship.

I'll blog more about the book when it comes out, but I really want to take this opportunity to put it on your radar. It stands to be a landmark in the religious freedom discussion. I've been saying for a while now that traditional Muslims, Jews, and Christians need to set aside our legitimate differences with each other, and find ways to join forces to protect the religious liberty that all of us depend on. Uddin raises a really interesting point about how US conservatives don't want to accept Muslims at all, while liberals accept them, but only on liberal terms. Uddin writes:

But what are the effects of this “cultural mainstreaming” on the Muslim community itself? The cost is particularly high for religiously “conservative Muslims, who, like their evangelical Christian and Orthodox Jewish counterparts, have tended to view popular culture as corrupting.” For example, the Muslim character in Amazon's *The Romanoffs* wears a headscarf—but “also finds herself in a steamy sexual entanglement with an older, non-Muslim man.”



So, are Muslims “different, or are they the same—’just’ one among many minority communities, each with their own secular grievances?” Religiously conservative Muslims, or in Patel's terms, “traditional Muslims,” don't define Islam as an identity; they define Islam in terms of theology and religious practice. But as the Left embraces Muslims “as a group notable primarily for its marginalization,” Islam in America may in time become secularized. The theological contributions of traditional Muslims to public life will become attenuated. Indeed, these Muslims are already under-represented, as the social Muslims have the biggest public platforms.

At the core, Hamid, Patel, Mandviwala, Saeed, and I are all identifying the same trend: the mainstreaming of Islam in a way that might rob it of its distinctiveness. Of its religiousness, its spiritual character, maybe even its authenticity.

The secularization of Islam is both like and unlike the experiences of other American faith communities in the U.S. Jewish and Christian leaders, too, are bemoaning the “challenges of secularism.” But with Islam, there's a distinct political refashioning that happens when it is secularized, a reconstruction of Islam from oppressive and “bad” to something those outside the religious community find liberating, acceptable, and “good.”

I raise this issue with concern. I recognize that there will always be diverse members of every religious community, and that some Muslims will be deeply devout and others nominally. I also appreciate that the lived experienced of Islam is widely varied; my own spiritual journey reflects this plurality. But I worry about what will happen when Islam is not a religion.

Her point in that last line is that society will come to see Islam not as an actual religion, but as a left-wing political stance, or, you might say, as middle-class liberals who happen to identify as Muslim. If you, reader, as a Christian, can't see a parallel there with how assimilation to bourgeois 21st century norms robs traditional Christianity of its distinctiveness, you are not looking hard enough. Progressive culture is happy to support Islam insofar as it can be used as a club to bash Christians, and insofar as it is open to converting to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. To be fair, it's important to stand as allies with Muslims in the public square on matters of religious liberty, but conservatives should not make the same mistake as many on the left, and merely instrumentalize Muslims as clubs with which to beat secular liberals.

There is little chance that the United States is going to be converted to traditional Christianity or Islam (much less Judaism) anytime soon. In a time in which the tide of faith is swiftly receding, the greatest public policy challenge for all three Abrahamic religions — and all other religions whose belief and practice clash with emerging secular norms — is going to be maintaining spaces for us believers to live, and practice our faith, and pass it on to our children, within a broader culture that is indifferent at best, and hostile at worst.

Anyway, [pre-order Asma Uddin's important book](#). This conversation needs to get started, in earnest. Remember too Canadian Jewish lawyer Gregory Bordan's painful words: “*I did everything to become part of the society, and now I am being told that it's all a sham.*” On religious liberty, we believers — especially we whose faith commitments run counter to the secularizing mainstream — stand together, or we fall together.