

# Georgia Baptist editor claims religious freedom not for Muslims

June 11, 2016

ATLANTA (RNS)—Religious freedom is a foundational Baptist tenet, but apparently one church official in Georgia didn't get the memo, at least as it applies to Islam.

Now Gerald Harris is facing sharp criticism, but also the prospect of a Ramadan meal with local Muslims who invited him so he can get to know them better.

Harris, editor of the *Christian Index*, the official newspaper of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, initially drew fire when he penned a June 6 editorial asking why the leading agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention were joining other groups in the legal fight by Muslims in New Jersey who faced opposition in building a mosque.

"While Muslims around the world and in our own country are shouting 'Death to America,' should we be defending their rights to build mosques, which often promote Sharia Law and become training grounds for radicalizing Muslims?" Harris asked.

## **'More of a geopolitical movement than a religion'**

Continuing his lengthy broadside against Islam, Harris wrote that he believes, "Islam may be more of a geopolitical movement than a religion."

Even if it were a religion, he said, "religious freedom for Muslims means allowing them the right to establish Islam as the state religion, subjugating

infidels, even murdering those who are critics of Islam and those who oppose their brutal religion.”

“Americans kept Communism in check during the Cold War, guarding our borders against those who wished to dismantle our way of life,” he concluded. “Will we do the same when another political ideology endangers our future?”

Harris singled out Russell Moore, head of the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, which had signed on to the legal brief on behalf of the New Jersey Islamic community, for particular criticism.

In a column, Moore shot back, writing that Harris’ views “would represent a direct contradiction of our confessional document and all of its predecessors.”

### **‘Freedom of religion applies to all people’**

Moore noted Roger Williams, the Colonial forebear of the Baptists, “stood up for the right of an unpopular minority in early New England, the Baptists, not to christen their babies.”

And he wrote that Williams “explicitly said such freedom ought to extend to ‘the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish’ consciences as well since we are not to extend God’s kingdom by the sword of steel but by the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”

Failing to defend religious liberty for all, whether you agree with them or not, opens the door to government control of religion, which is the death of real faith, Moore said.

“When we say—as Baptists and many other Christians always have—that freedom of religion applies to all people, whether Christian or not, we are not suggesting that there are many paths to God, or that truth claims are

relative,” Moore wrote. “We are fighting for the opposite. We are saying that religion should be free from state control because we believe that every person must give an account before the Judgment Seat of Christ.”

### **Welcome to the dinner table**

The Georgia chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations also responded to Harris’ attack, not with a rejoinder but by inviting him to an interfaith dinner in Atlanta June 18 to break the Ramadan fast that is a central observance of the Islamic holy month.

Harris told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* a family commitment may prevent him from making that meal, but he planned to attend another one at some point.

The head of CAIR-Georgia, Edward Ahmed Mitchell, told the newspaper, “Americans who meet and greet their Muslim neighbors tend to hold far more tolerant and positive opinions about Islam.”

“We look forward to a friendly discussion with Dr. Harris about the values that unite us as Americans, people of faith and human beings,” he said.

But Harris also indicated he wasn’t necessarily ready to back down on his claims about Islam.

“I would be interested in finding out more about the Council on American-Islamic Relations,” he told the Atlanta newspaper. “I’ve read about it. It professes to be for religious liberty. I would like to know if they would be willing to have a Christian church built in Mecca. That would be a demonstration of religious liberty, I think.”