

9/4/2010

MOSQUE MADNESS

by
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Today there is a raging debate about whether Muslims should build an Islamic community center and mosque two blocks from Ground Zero in lower Manhattan, where terrorists attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. Everyone participating in this debate claims to recognize that Muslims have the right to build the center. However, its opponents argue that it is not morally right for them to do so. Opponents have complained that to build the center so close to Ground Zero would be insensitive, as though all Muslims are terrorists, as if all Muslims embrace Osama bin Laden, and as if no Muslims died in the terrorist attack.

Objections to the Islamic center began with right-wing anti-Islamic bloggers. However, many pundits and the mainstream media have chimed in with their opinions on the issue. On August 13, 2010, Charles Krauthammer wrote a column that appeared in *The Buffalo News* under the title "Sacilege at ground zero." Krauthammer and others have argued that just as opponents of a proposed commercial tower at Gettysburg and opponents of a proposed convent at Auschwitz were right to successfully oppose those plans, opponents of the proposed Islamic center, too, have the moral high ground. He further stated that the establishment of the center would be like the Japanese establishing a building at Pearl Harbor. (Similarly, Newt Gingrich said that building a mosque near the site "would be like putting a Nazi sign next to the Holocaust museum.") There is a major problem with these analogies. Muslims are not attempting to build a mosque at ground zero or on it, or next door to it. They merely want to build one near it.

This is the root of the problem. Many people are so offended by the Islamic faith and its adherents that they do not want mosques erected anywhere near them or the areas they deem sacred. Indeed, throughout the United States and Europe, Islamophobes are opposing the construction of mosques. Muslims are planning to build or expand mosques in Brooklyn, New York, Nashville, Tennessee, Riverside, California and other cities in the United States. The animosity toward Muslims in these other cities has thus far been much more virulent than the opposition to the proposed mosque near ground Zero. Yet in these other cases, the sites are nowhere near any supposedly "sacred" sites of non-Muslims.

In the case of the misnamed "Ground Zero Mosque," many have said that it is too close to Ground Zero. That raises the question: How far away should a mosque be from Ground Zero? One mosque opponent believes that 10 blocks from the hallowed ground would be just fine. However, there is already a mosque four blocks from the site. Should that mosque be moved and/or destroyed? (Incidentally, Muslims have held prayer services at the proposed site for some time, with no opposition from Islamophobes.)

Opposition to the mosque near Ground Zero is clearly rooted in many Americans' deep resentment against Islam. In 2005, a poll released by the Pew Research Center revealed that only

41 percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of Islam. In August, 2010, however, a similar Pew poll found that only 30 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of Islam.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) stands opposed to the construction of the proposed center. However, the Jewish rights group acknowledged “an intensified level of anti-Muslim bigotry” in recent months, according to an article in the August 27, 2010 issue of USA TODAY. The ADL found instances of harassment, hate speech, and violence, including the explosion of a pipe bomb at an Islamic center in Florida in May, and arson at an Islamic center in Georgia.

“The mood in the country, in general, is one of lack of civility and anger and rage,” said Abraham Fox, director of the ADL. “When you raise the rhetoric on hate, there is always potential for violence.”

Islamophobia has become integral to conservative politics. Many conservatives consider all Muslims to be enemies of Christianity and the West. In many cases, Islamophobia meshes neatly with anti-Black bigotry. For example, it should not be surprising that a recent poll from the Pew Research Center found that 18 percent of Americans—most of them White Republicans—believe that President Obama—a proud Christian—is a Muslim (which has long been a buzz word among conservatives for “terrorist.”) In March, 2009, “only” 11 percent believed so. Many in the Tea Party “accuse” Obama of being a Muslim, and compare him to Hitler. Though Obama claims that the Tea Party has no racist streak, some of its members have used the N-word and racist images to get their message across.

In New York State, gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino is a leading opponent of the proposed center. Indeed, he has threatened to invoke state powers of eminent domain to stop its construction, despite the fact that many conservatives have long frowned upon such government intervention, and despite the fact such an action would seem to go against the original intent of this state power.

Paladino and his supporters make predictable denunciations of so-called political correctness. Yet Paladino has sent racist and pornographic emails to his friends. In August, he came up with a proposal to reopen prisons for voluntary programs that would include training welfare recipients in “personal hygiene.” African American officeholders responded angrily with a demand that he apologize for the proposal.

“His...suggestion that they need lessons on personal hygiene is appalling and plays into harmful stereotypes,” they claimed in a signed statement. Paladino simply portrays himself as courageous and open.

Opposition to the proposed center—and the Islamophobia it incites—should not be viewed as an isolated incident. It is just one part of a conservative agenda. White conservatives are constantly grumbling about taking “our country back.” From whom do they want to take it back? They obviously believe that a Black president is making life hell for them. However, many of them also hated Bill Clinton, yet never seemed to believe the country was not theirs while Clinton and other White presidents were in office.

Many conservatives are worried about what they see as “the browning of America,” hence their concern about immigration, legal and illegal. According to many demographers, non-Whites will be in the majority in the United States in a matter of decades. Indeed, according to another article in the August 27, 2010 of USA TODAY, “The kindergarten class of 2010-11 is less white, less black, more Asian and much more Hispanic than in 2000, reflecting the nation’s rapid racial and ethnic transformation.” A government survey found that about 25% of five-year-olds are Hispanic, an increase from 19% in 2000. Moreover, the percentage of White five-year-olds decreased to 53% from 59% in 2000. Take back “our” country, indeed!

Why do so many people believe that construction of a mosque near Ground Zero is a bad idea? Why could it not be viewed as a victory over Muslim terrorists by Muslim moderates and true believers in cultural pluralism and religious liberty? Pat Buchanan has stated that because Saudi Arabia does not permit churches, Americans should have no problem opposing the construction of mosques in the United States. He might have some understanding of what Saudi Arabia is about, but he obviously did not get the memo about the importance of the First Amendment.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the head of the project to build the proposed center, has a long record of interfaith work. He is a Sufi Muslim, a sect that militant Muslims despise because of their openness to various cultures. Rauf is now working with Obama to promote peace and understanding throughout the world, but he has also worked with the Bush administration. The Islamic center would be like the YMCA—open to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Perhaps opponents should visit the Islamic center in Amherst, New York, known as the “Tent of Abraham,” that is open to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, or members of the Abrahamic religions. Since 2006, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have gathered together to worship at the center. In 2009, they held a “Walk of Abraham,” a five-mile walk at which members of different faiths were able to meet before going to the mosque. Terrorists need not apply.

Imam Rauf’s critics have complained that he asserted that the United States’ policies “were an accessory to” the attacks on 9/11. Moreover, he has stated that the issue of terrorism is complicated. Yet, anti-American terrorists routinely state that United States’ policies influence their actions. On the other point, the issue of terrorism is complicated. That’s why, though conservatives called death squads in Latin America “freedom fighters”, their victims called them terrorists. It is certainly true that “one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.”

Many people try to paint Islam with a broad brush. They argue for the notion of collective guilt—that every member of a group must be punished for the crimes of a few. However, that is not what true justice is about. Only those responsible for a crime should be punished for its commission. For example, why should all Americans be held accountable for the Vietnam War, even though many of us protested against it—some of us risking our lives? Collective guilt is a dangerous idea that promotes stereotypes and even genocide. It needs to be swept into the dustbin of history.

When the Oklahoma City Federal Building was bombed in the 1995, Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols and others claimed that their Christian faith inspired them to blow it up. However, it would be hard to imagine anyone arguing that it would be offensive for Christians to build a

church near the scene of the crime. It is just as absurd to blame all Muslims for the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Just because some people are offended by the idea of a mosque near Ground Zero, does not mean that they should feel offended, or that any offense is intended. It seems that peaceful Muslims just so happened to find a great place to build a center. Why read any more into it than that? (Incidentally, a coalition of the center's supporters known as New York Neighbors for American Values includes families of 9/11 victims.)

Conservative columnist Kathleen Parker noted that, just as Westerners rightfully insist upon the right to blaspheme the Prophet Muhammad or anyone or anything else, they must recognize Muslims' right to build a mosque wherever they wish. However, the reverse is also true: if Muslims recognize their right to religious liberty, they should also recognize the right to blaspheme. The willingness to be offended is the price we all must pay for genuine liberty.

The bottom line is that too many people still believe in democracy only as far as the defense of their rights. Those that truly believe in liberty, however, must be concerned with everyone's rights. Otherwise, true democracy will never be realized.