



The Mosque at Ground Zero

| *Examining the religious concerns*

Introduction

An often-unnoticed mosque named Masjid Manhattan—four blocks from ground zero of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001—is, after forty years, to have a neighbor two blocks closer to that historic site. This one, Park 51 or Cordoba House, has made headlines, dominated prime time, and set the stage for furious conflicts to come. It should have found its place quietly since the Muslims who plan to build it are quite definite about its positive purposes. There, people will celebrate community life, swim, eat, view movies, work on interfaith relations, and, most important, worship.

This proposed building, news of which turned the furies loose last summer and threatens to continue doing so for years to come, is noticed because of its location, sponsorship, national and spiritual context, and exploitability as an issue in politics and the media. It is intended to symbolize a vastly different Islam than the one that al Qaeda claimed when its agents there killed 2,750 Americans on September 11, 2001. No one doubts that al Qaeda, a lethal spin-off from extremist Islam, killed in the name of Allah. However, the leadership of this building and institute, best described as “open” to others, has a clear record of reaching out to non-Muslim America.

A host of Americans, suspicious of or violently opposed to Islam, Muslims, mosques, and *this* mosque, spoke up and organized. While much of the noise being made was inspired by agitators who had only negative and self-serving purposes in mind, fair-minded and empathic defenders of the planned structure will gain no hearing if they do not pay attention to some possibly, if only partly, legitimate reasons for opposition as offered by serious critics.

Most frequently, one hears that such a building at such a location would dishonor the memory of those who were killed and offend the living who mourn them. Some critics go on to say that the building would also dishonor the nation itself since the citizenry as such has not recovered from the al Qaeda assault on its strength and integrity. They voice the fear or the charge that some users of the building might exploit its position at this place where American vulnerability to attack had been revealed. Some New Yorkers could, and many do, make a special case: since they felt the immediate shock of the 9/11 incident a decade earlier, they have never settled back again with the sense of ease they may once have felt.

While millions of words have already been written and spoken since the controversy erupted, we will devote this essay to specifically religious concerns. That means “staying on message” and only briefly mentioning the often-covered subjects, among them:

- The President of the United States weighing in on the issue: should he have, and did he do so properly?
- The interventions of politicians of all parties
- The pundits in the public media, and the nature and effects of those media
- Secular philosophical concerns

Fairness and the Invention of the “Other”

There is always a temptation to “invent the ‘other,’” portraying him or her with negative features that allow or impel one to create a despicable image, which is then to be attacked. Thus the American may invent the international “other,” who, being different and appearing

ominous, can serve to rally the citizens in the homeland. Within the homeland, citizens may divide the “legals” from the “illegal” others or pose their own faith community against every other one. In every case there will be a religious justification for attitudes and actions.

In today’s world, almost nothing serves more to define the invented “other” than religion. Often the description and follow-through in local cases get enlarged in the national community. Thus the Sufi, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, leader of the Cordoba group in Manhattan, belongs to a large element that is separate from and often pitted against other Muslims. You would not know that, however, from the way many anti-Muslim Americans glob all movements, factions, and sects together into one undifferentiated and ominous mass as they discriminate against “The Muslim” or “Islam.” Their doing so frustrates the intentions of leaders like Rauf, who is hated by al Qaeda and who offers what we might call an “open” form of Islam opposed to those closed off from contact with other religious communities. Basic fairness, theological finesse, and interfaith strategy demand that a generalizing of the “other” be ruled out by conscientious citizens and especially religious believers. Why alienate the very Muslims who frustrate the militants?

In the controversy of this summer, television screens and the press were portraying maps of the nation, marking where mosques were to be built. In the “not-in-my-back-yard” mode, many wanted to turn the whole nation into their “back yard” and say “not here or anywhere.” In a spirit that matched anything heard and done among anti-Semites, one now heard explicit and vehement anti-Muslim opposition from millions of humans around the globe.

Certainly such a situation called for other responses, not least of all from the churches and synagogues. In particular, people here labeled “thoughtful Christians” are aware of the burden they carry as part of the majority of citizens, and many have put their energies to work for the sake of a better future for all.

On Telling the Truth about the “Other”

Christians are obliged to tell the truth. Many untruths get told when politics heat up—the mosque incident is certainly heated—and when religion intensifies the

heat. We have to ask: are the representations by the mosque builders and their defenders truthful, insofar as we can check them out? Are the representations by the opponents of the building and Cordoba House truthful when they link it with Islamist extremism?

To excuse the teller of *untruths* because this situation is politically and religiously volatile does not work ethically. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in an essay titled “What Is Meant by Telling the Truth?” wrote: “To restrict [the] problem of truthful speech in certain particular cases of conflict is superficial. Every word I utter is subject to the requirement that it shall be true.”¹ An inventory of statements and claims will be revealing. For this most decisive example: are the accounts of critics true when they portray the sacred book of these Muslims, the Qur’an, as being nothing but a charter for murder in the name of God? Is it honest to single out for attack the passages in it that inspired the 9/11 killers, while bypassing all those that advocate tolerance of the “other”? Similarly, is it fair to select for comparison only the shalom-minded utterances in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures without doing justice to the biblical commands that sound so much like calls for jihad among Muslims? Honestly recognizing that the scriptures of these three faiths combine peace-seeking and war-executing texts is the first step toward building a platform where truth can be spoken.

Some unpleasant truths about Islam or, more particularly, about life in the Muslim worlds need to be uttered in certain circumstances. Bonhoeffer again: “It is only the cynic who claims ‘to speak the truth’ at all times and in places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth.”² So, one must listen for and be mindful of the context, the audience, and the intentions of a statement within religious movements. The language of diplomacy, of negotiation, of attempts to deal with an alien “other” will be different from the language used within intimate community, be it religious or not. But awareness of context does not license untruth of the kind we now hear about Islam or about Rauf and the planners of this mosque this season.

Uttering truth in a world of deception involves risk, but one cannot begin to build trust, as many religious and political leaders in the Christian circles of the United States have done, without some risk. Yes, the thoughtful Christian will examine the words of Rauf that we have

described as “open” to others, including some words that are complicated and may be embarrassing. Meanwhile, the Christian has to know that across the table, the bridge, or other partisan lines, someone is examining your words, our words. In the language of biblical faith, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16) is a command as urgent as it ever was. This is especially so because, in our crowded world of quick communication, neighbors have become very close, only a blog or press release away. We are more likely to confront the religious “other” than before.

On Hallowing

In the current and generally secular controversy, one hears a word often reserved for the religious: hallowed. Muslims, we hear, should not operate two blocks from Ground Zero, because it is hallowed ground. Thoughtful Christians will reexplore what it means to hallow something or to regard a place or event as hallowed. One problem has to do with what marks the hallowed place: a fence, a hedge, a wall, two city blocks? What is the limit of the hallowed zone? Some wits have made a point of it that the site for the new Islamic center has been the Burlington Coat factory, whose practical historic functions were notable—but hallowed? And still others like to point out that the Dolls’ Gentleman’s Club, where strippers cavort, is two blocks from Ground Zero. Others argue: if two blocks are not a sufficient distance for the Mosque to be hidden from view, would it violate the hallowed space if it were four blocks away? Or a hundred?

Christian Impulses to Understand

Suppose the new Muslim center achieves its stated purpose and fulfils the dream of its planners. Suppose it becomes the hoped-for bridge between Americans, including Muslims. Suppose it successfully demonstrates that there is more than one style of Islam both around the world and in the United States. Suppose it provides clues for better relations among peoples on the basis of Islamic sources and offers conference space for conversation and study with people of other faiths. We can make the case that in all of these “supposed” futures, such a place would truly be hallowed. As Americans learn to live with more understanding and less prejudice, they will have reached an outcome

abhorred by the militants who would destroy America in the name of God.

Standard Biblical Language about Relations

Those who stand responsibly within the Christian tradition can draw on all sorts of biblical texts to pursue understanding with others. Some of them will sound like clichés, so familiar are they but so startling because they are so seldom acted on. The Christian hears: if the Muslims down the block are your neighbors, you are to love them. If you regard Islam as the enemy, you are to learn to love its adherents. If you received evil on 9/11, you are to reward evil with good. If by unfair attack you have hurt this “neighbor,” you are to be reconciled, which means you take some initiative and risk. If you have seen the speck in the eye of this “other,” you are to recall that your vision is obstructed by the beam in your own. One is almost embarrassed to bring up such statements because they are so obvious and central. But, we ask: are any of these Christian, counter-intuitive impulses currently being put to work in the public controversy about how to regard the “other”?

Biblical Emphasis on Hospitality to the Stranger

Given the American tradition of first finding that “other” or “stranger” as someone who is alien but eventually coming to regard her or him as a fellow citizen, you will have avoided the judgment that fell on believers through the ages when they failed to welcome the stranger, the alien. In the Scriptures, Israel was to remember that it must be hospitable since once it had been an alien presence and should have learned from having been the subject of suspicion, shaming, and threat. In interfaith relations, many of us prefer this concept of “hospitality” to the more familiar appeals to “tolerance.” Hospitality impels someone to take the initiative and become the host, no matter who the stranger is.

No exceptions? Of course, one makes judgments. Abraham, the biblical exemplar of hospitality, would not wisely invite in a bin Laden or simply and unguardedly welcome a host of aggressive armed people. The Christian faith does not call people to commit suicide or fail to use their brains in assessing the risks that come with hospitality. Yet, the examinations of the Muslim

in the present case suggests that the risk is low. The people who want to build the Islamic center at Ground Zero will hope to demonstrate that most Muslims are fellow citizens with outstanding records, members of the community who support and live by the U.S. Constitution, and exemplary neighbors. The fact that, around the world, many other kinds of Muslims do not grant liberties to Christians and Jews and even to members of their own faith may sadden those of us who would like to see and work for the spread of freedom. But it makes little difference in our world where the concept of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is not to rule.

Can one be hospitable and enjoy the guest or the host in a climate where hatred, suspicion, and distortion lead to a world gone wrong? Cases differ. But it is quite likely that if the new mosque achieves its purpose, the climate will change and the blight of inhospitableness will be lessened or removed. In Hebrews 13:2, an interpreter of the Genesis story says about Abraham and the blessings that came with his hospitality, that he was “[entertaining] angels without knowing it.”

Note that the stranger does not have to be “like” us in every respect. In the present case, for all the common features of their mutual lives as citizens, no one has to gloss over differences and pretend that there are none. Some legitimately have feared that they will see their own faith erode or get diluted if they endorse open encounter with the Muslim “other.” While some enthusiasts of interfaith relations do argue that at heart most religions are more or less the same, most agents of better relations among the faiths instead first deepen knowledge of, commitment to, and enjoyment of their own faith.

Those Muslims in a Manhattan mosque will not expect that all faiths will be blurred and mixed with each other. Instead, they will draw on ancient sacred texts and try to serve God and their neighbors, being too busy to pursue policies which would pose the threats to Americans that enemies of Islam and the mosque would suggest. They will help fellow citizens of other faiths pursue what used to be called “the common good.” And there, two blocks from the site of the 9/11 attack, Americans on occasion will have learned and displayed the fruits of open approaches to life in a pluralist society.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would Muslims read the stories of Israel and the warrior God in the books of Joshua or Judges or elsewhere in the Bible?
2. How does a modern Abraham know when and how to be hospitable and when to stress security and keep the stranger away?
3. Does this exercise of accepting the construction of this mosque do justice to the issues of sensitivity toward the survivors of those killed at Ground Zero? What good is to come of such sensitivity?
4. Would moving the proposed mosque some distance, as many suggest, solve the issues in this controversy?

For More Information

- John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions, from One of America's Leading Experts* (New York: Oxford, 2002).
- Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape* (New York: New Press, 2007).
- Charles H. Lippy, *Pluralism Comes of Age: American Religious Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000).
- Martin Marty, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- Stephen Prothero, *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

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Endnote

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 326–34.
2. *Ibid.*, 360.