

Ground Zero Religious Freedom: Those ‘Unalienable Rights’ include the First Amendment

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The United States of America rightly prides herself on her constitutional tradition for the Constitution clearly and starkly defines individual freedom in the Bill of Rights.

The core of the Bill of Rights is, of course, the First Amendment that states:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Recently, Sarah Palin joined with Mark Williams another prominent leader of the Tea Party Movement when she spoke out in opposition to the creation of a Muslim cultural center in Lower Manhattan that aims to establish mutual respect between people of all faiths. In doing so, Palin and the Tea Party leadership boldly and explicitly proclaimed their opposition to religious freedom.

Borough President Scott Stringer took issue with Mark Williams, “His spewing of racial hatred reminds me . . . of Adolf Hitler. We reject him. We reject his bigotry.”

In her own inimitable style on Twitter, Sarah Palin urged “peaceful Muslims” to “refudiate” [sic] the “Ground Zero Mosque.” When bloggers laughingly pointed to her grammatical error, Palin borrowed a strategem from Dan Quayle who compared himself to JFK – but Palin went him one better by equating herself with Shakespeare for coining the term, “refudiate.” To paraphrase the magisterial Lloyd Bentsen: This writer knows his Will Shakespeare, and, Sarah, you are no Will Shakespeare.

For the past 27 years, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf has served as Imam at the mosque in Lower Manhattan in close proximity to Ground Zero. Since 9/11, Imam Feisal organized the Cordoba Initiative to create appreciation for religious freedom among people of all faiths.

As America’s most well known Muslim, Imam Feisal serves as the spokesman for what he describes as, “The 99.999 per cent of Muslims all over the world including in America who have condemned and continue to condemn terrorism.”

Imam Feisal’s personal story is compelling. Members of his mosque were killed on 9/11. On that date, Feisal and others from his faith provided water to the firefighters, police and first-responders to the tragedy. In the aftermath, Feisal was invited to address all 1200 FBI agents in New York to inform them how Muslim Imams can ensure their mosques will not be grounds for the recruitment of terrorists.

For years, Imam Feisal has vociferously condemned terrorism and committed to fight for its total eradication. More than any other Muslim leader in the world, Imam Feisal is standing up against Islamist terror, and he is doing so from the most poignant point on this planet – Ground Zero.

Working in coordination with a growing coalition of Muslims and Non-Muslims that includes Mayor Bloomberg and Valerie Lucznikowska of 9/11 Families for a Peaceful Tomorrow, Imam Feisal stands at the epicenter of the monotheistic tradition of peace-loving nonviolent toleration that is the classical hallmark of Judaeo-Christianity and Islam.

Imam Feisal's cultural center will function for the entire community exactly like the 92nd Street YMCA and the Jewish Community Center. The cultural programs will serve both the Muslim and the Non-Muslim communities. When Imam Feisal held a recent press conference at 51 Park, the address of the project, he was surrounded by an impressive group of faith leaders from the Christian and Jewish communities who support his mission of religious freedom and intercultural understanding. Speaking on behalf of the project, Daisy Khan said, "This is the Muslim community's effort to rebuild Lower Manhattan."

In spite of what is obviously the best will in the world, there are still detractors in addition to Palin and Williams. Traumatized by the aftershock of 9/11, some Americans and some New Yorkers still blame the global population of 1.2 billion Muslims for the acts of 19 extremists armed with box-cutters who commandeered the airliners that collided with destiny and committed the atrocity.

Politicians of the ilk of Palin and Williams will not hesitate to rally their own extremist factions. As every school child knows, religious intolerance and racism go hand-in-hand in American history. The public reception to the Muslim Cultural Center in Lower Manhattan represents the most visible battle for religious freedom currently taking place on our planet.

Every American should be grateful to Imam Feisal for leading the fight that motivated the American Revolution and inspired the Founding Fathers who drafted the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Their high ideals are expressed sibilantly in the Declaration of Independence—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

From the perspective of Ground Zero, those 'unalienable Rights' include the First Amendment and its precious content, religious freedom. Amen. Mashallah. Salam. Shalom.

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