

Mosque at Ground Zero: The Republican Right Versus The Peaceful Imam

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Standing in front of the derelict hulk of the Burlington Coat Factory in Lower Manhattan, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf made what historians will regard as the most explicitly peaceful statement of any Imam in the post-9/11 Era.

"I have been Imam of a mosque ten blocks from here for the last 27 years. Our congregation, our faith community, has been . . . victims of 9/11. From my congregation there have been people who died. From my congregation, my faith community we were part of those who gave water to the firefighters. We are part of this community, and we intend to be part of this community. We want to rebuild this community. We are working with the other faith communities, because this is what this is all about. This is about the vast majority of moderate Muslims – who have been and want to continue to be part of the solution.

"I have worked with the law enforcement agencies. I was invited by the FBI right after 9/11 to address and to speak to all 1200 agents in New York City as to how we Muslim Imams can ensure that our mosques will not be grounds for the recruitment of terrorists. We condemn terrorism. We recognize that it exists within our faith community, but we are committed to eradicate it. We cannot do this by ourselves. We need your support. We need your cooperation. We need a coalition of Muslims and Non-Muslims together to achieve the common objectives that we as patriotic Americans want to achieve.

"I thank you for expressions of support, and I pray that God bless us all – and bless all of us from the faith communities. I wish to acknowledge the support from other members of other faith communities like Holy Trinity Church and . . . others from the Tanenbaum Center who have come here to stand with us on this day, and the many other faith leaders who have come to express their expressions of support. I thank you all, and may God bless us and bless you all."

Imam Feisal founded the Cordoba Initiative, a project to build an interfaith community center to be named, Cordoba House, in Lower Manhattan with a host of programs to serve the Muslim and Non-Muslim communities alike.

Imam Feisal's vision of cross-cultural engagement was inspired by the glittering Cordoban Period of intercultural peace, enlightenment, scholarship and science when the Spanish city was the undisputed global center of cultural advancement with remarkable achievements in mathematics, medicine, science, language, scholarship, the arts and classical studies.

Imam Feisal's branding is brilliantly cutting edge. At the time of the first millennium, 1000 AD, Cordoba achieved a massive population for urban centers at that time of 500,000. Not only was Cordoba one of the world's leading urban conurbations, it was also the center of medieval learning, arts and sciences and just as importantly – Cordoba was the financial and economic powerhouse of the Mediterranean world.

Given the above information, it might seem odd that the Republican Party is now centering their juggernaut of political momentum and their entire autumn on a plan to oppose the construction of Feisal's cross-cultural center in Lower Manhattan.

With two wars raging and an economy in the doldrums, the Republicans have chosen to fight the Democrats on the hallowed ground of 9/11 – just like they did in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008. The Republicans are now in open warfare against cross-cultural engagement with the most peaceful Imam on the planet. They are now shifting gear in support of a global holy war – a crusade as President Bush put it – against the 55 Muslim nations and their 1.2 billion people.

But it gets worse – because the Republicans are now planning a huge hate rally on 9/11 to condemn Cordoba House – and they are uniting with Geert Wilders, a European radical so extreme that Glenn Beck has labeled him, “fascist.” John Bolton and Newt Gingrich have committed to share the podium with Wilders to rally the Republican brown shirts against the Islamic center of the Peaceful Imam.

Rumors linking Imam Feisal to terrorism have fallen on their face. Every day since 9/11, Feisal has worked with US law enforcement agencies to “eradicate terrorism.” More – since 9/11, Imam Feisal has worked with the US Department of State (including during the Bush-Cheney years) to combat terrorism throughout the Muslim world from Manhattan to the Persian Gulf, to Pakistan, to Indonesia and even unto Malaysia.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf has a unique background. Born in Kuwait to Egyptian parents, as a child he lived in Egypt, Great Britain and Malaysia. In his teens, his family moved to America, and Feisal studied Theoretical Physics at Columbia, eventually earning his Masters degree in Plasma Physics. But, 27 years ago, Feisal became the Imam at the Masjid Al-Jarah, the mosque nearest the financial community in Lower Manhattan. The Republicans would know all of this if they had read the recent edition of *Time* where they would have found a profile titled, “The Moderate Imam Behind the ‘Ground Zero Mosque’.”

Here is a quote from Imam Feisal's *Time* profile:

“Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan, are actually the kind of Muslim leaders right-wing commentators fantasize about: modernists and moderates who openly condemn the death cult of al-Qaeda and its adherents — ironically, just the kind of ‘peaceful Muslims’ whom Sarah Palin, in her now infamous tweet, asked to ‘refudiate’ the mosque. Rauf is a Sufi, which is Islam's most mystical and accommodating denomination.”

American Muslims have more informed and more nuanced views on the Middle East than mainstream Americans. Muslim American views on the politics of the Middle East and political trends in Europe, Africa and Asia are quite distinct from those of the Republican Party – very different, indeed. Perhaps, that is why the Republican Party is so adamant in opposition to the cross-cultural understanding that Imam Feisal and his faith community in

Lower Manhattan are threatening to bring to Lower Manhattan.

In the case of Cordoba House, America is being given a huge Rohrschach Test. America must decide whether she is prepared to live up to the ideals enshrined in the First Amendment:

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.

Or not.

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