

The Muslim Mosque at Ground Zero and Freedom of Religion in America

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The precise location in New York City of a new community center that includes a Muslim mosque is being converted into a major national campaign issue by the conservative Republican Party as the Nov. 2 Congressional and state elections in the U.S. draw closer. The Muslim world is watching this development unfold with deep interest and some anxiety.

The centrist Democratic Party, which controls the White House and Congress, is expected to lose some seats in both the Senate and House, but the Republicans are seeking a larger victory by resorting to blatant Islamophobia. In general the Democrats support President Barack Obama's somewhat tepid backing for the project.

Since the U.S. Constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious groups to build houses of worship, Republican politicians, their "Tea Party" warriors (a national right wing activist organization) and far right militias are livid about plans to situate the facility two blocks from where the twin towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed in a terrorist attack nine years ago this Sept. 11.

This calculated tantrum over the essentially trivial issue appears to have seduced a majority of Americans — over 60% — into opposing a project intended to improve relations between different faiths in the U.S., and "in particular between the Muslim world and the United States," according to its backers.

Recognizing that the continuing economic recession and high unemployment in America are the principal issues of the campaign — and that they offer little to the voters on that score — the "Grand Old Party" (the GOP — another name for the Republicans) hopes that the "emotional" issues of an Islamic institution "violating the sanctity of ground zero" will bring in the additional votes.

Republican politicians, joined by some Democratic office holders including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, insist the planned community center be moved an unspecified distance from the "hallowed ground" where 2,749 people lost their lives (among them hundreds of Muslims working in the twin towers). Not to do so, they claim, will amount to a grievous affront to the victims and their families.

The implication of the Republican campaign is that the 9/11 attack by a fringe extremist sect of Islam was actually an assault by the religion of Islam against the United States and its way of life. Otherwise, why would the existence of Muslims at prayer two blocks away be considered a desecration that would cause pain to victim families?

New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, one of a handful of centrist Republicans, is a

staunch supporter of the community center project. He declared Aug. 24 that he opposed establishing a “no mosque zone” around ground zero. “There is already a mosque four blocks away,” he said. “Should it, too, be moved? This is a test of our commitment to American values. We must have the courage of our convictions. We must do what is right, not what is easy.

“We would send a signal around the world,” he said, “that Muslim Americans may be equal in the eyes of the law, but separate in the eyes of their countrymen. And we would hand a valuable propaganda tool to terrorist recruiters, who spread the fallacy that America is at war with Islam.”

President Obama spoke out Aug. 13 in defense of the project. “As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the right to practice their religion, as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable.”

The next day Obama equivocated: “I was not commenting, and I will not comment, on the wisdom of making a decision to put a mosque there. I was commenting very specifically on the right that people have that dates back to our founding. That’s what our country is about.”

A few days later, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd criticized Obama’s clarification: “Let me be perfectly clear, Mr. Perfectly Unclear President: You cannot take such a stand on a matter of first principle and then take it back the next morning.... Our enemies struck at our heart, but did they also warp our identity?.... The war against the terrorists is not a war against Islam. In fact, you can’t have an effective war against the terrorists if it is a war on Islam.”

The Cordoba Initiative, as the New York City project is called, is the brainchild of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a leader for the last 27 years of a Lower Manhattan mosque a dozen blocks from ground zero, and his wife, Daisy Khan, Executive Director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement. Rauf is the chairman.

Cordoba House —the name of the planned community center — is to occupy the reconstructed, long-empty 15-story Burlington Coat Factory building in a neighborhood of small and large stores, food vendors, businesses, small and skyscraper buildings, tourist stores and attractions, fast food restaurants, strip clubs and the nearby financial district surrounding the 16-acres once occupied by the World Trade Center complex.

When completed, Cordoba House will include an auditorium, library, mosque, daycare space, restaurant, cooking school, swimming pool, basketball courts, and more. According to its backers, who are just starting to raise the \$100 million necessary to complete the project, the facility will be “a community center open to all New Yorkers, much like a YMCA and the city’s Jewish Community Center, with a designated prayer space (mosque) in one area to serve the needs of the large existing community of American Muslims in the neighborhood.” Part of the building has been utilized as a mosque for some time.

Why “Cordoba?” The website explains: “A thousand years ago Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted and created a prosperous center of intellectual, spiritual, cultural and commercial life in Cordoba, Spain.”

Although right wing commentators rant that Imam Rauf supports terrorism and seeks to impose Sharia (the sacred law of Islam) in the United States, he is fastidiously moderate, rarely deviating from the center. Ironically, both the Bush and Obama State Departments have sent Rauf on four speaking tours to the Middle East so far to explain America to Muslim audiences. The State Department distributes copies of his book overseas — “What’s Right With Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West.” Rauf has even lectured to an FBI seminar on U.S.-Muslim relations.

The right wing is attempting to keep the mosque issue alive and intensifying until the election — and it is already generating increased hostility to Muslims in several American cities, including an Aug. 24 knife attack on New York City cab driver Ahmed Sharif. The purpose is to stir up anti-Muslim antagonisms to help generate enough votes for the Republicans to weaken or end Democratic control of Congress. Former GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and ex-Republican House majority leader Newt Gingrich are among the public leaders of this effort.

Gingrich believes that Obama is “pandering to radical Islam” and that the Cordoba Initiative feeds into “an Islamic cultural-political offensive designed to undermine and destroy our civilization.” To build support for halting the Cordoba House project he conflated the Muslim religion with German and Japanese fascist imperialism of World War II: “Nazis don’t have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington,” he said. “We would never accept the Japanese putting up a site next to Pearl Harbor. There’s no reason for us to accept a mosque next to the World Trade Center.”

No reason except the Constitution, that is. No reason except that 9/11 was the product of a small group of religious fanatics, not one of the world’s great religions. But Gingrich — who still harbors presidential ambitions — hopes to create a large enough backlash to catapult his party to power. And if it takes extreme national chauvinism, bellicose “patriotism,” xenophobia and Islamophobia, so be it.

Nearly all top Republican politicians — such as House GOP leader Rep. John Boehner — emphatically oppose situating the projected Islamic community center close to the lower Manhattan site. New York State Republican candidate for governor, Rick Lazio — echoing former Republican New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani — suggests foreign intrigue is involved, demanding: “Open the books! Let’s see who’s giving the money to construct this mosque. Is it foreign governments? Are they radical organizations? We deserve to know.”

The Anti-Defamation League, a prestigious and long established Jewish civil rights organization, astonished the inter-faith community by opposing the Lower Manhattan location and declaring: “We are mindful that some legitimate questions have been raised about who is providing the funding to build it, and what connections, if any, its leaders might have with groups whose ideologies stand in contradiction to our shared values.”

In suggesting nefarious backing for the project, the ADL is hardly unaware that the rightist Israeli government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is strongly opposed to Obama’s halting efforts to improve U.S. relations with the Muslim world.

Most New York State Democratic politicians support President Obama’s position, including Senators Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand. Democratic Gov. David Paterson, however, suggests moving the project elsewhere, and he has met with New York City’s Catholic Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan to discuss arranging a compromise. Sheldon Silver,

Democratic speaker of the State Assembly, has called for a compromise by moving “to a suitable place that doesn’t create.... controversy.” Four New York House Democrats have so far objected to the location.

In many cases, comments in opposition to the planned center were accompanied by slurs against Muslims and the religion of Islam. For example, Tea Party leader Mark Williams, who was deeply involved in opposing the New York City project, described Islam as having a “monkey god,” among other comments. He also was called to task for anti-Semitic and anti-African American comments. Williams was finally expelled in mid-July by the National Tea Party Federation for “clearly offensive” remarks.

According to two national opinion polls, Pew Research Center and Time Magazine, 61% of the American people oppose building the Muslim center near the World Trade Center site.

Time reported Aug. 19 that “More than 70% concur with the premise that proceeding with the plan would be an insult to the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center.” The magazine also stated that “the survey also revealed that many Americans harbor lingering animosity toward Muslims. Twenty-eight percent of voters do not believe Muslims should be eligible to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Nearly one-third of the country thinks adherents of Islam should be barred from running for President.”

At the same time, while opposing a mosque just two blocks away from the former Trade Center, the Time poll showed “55% of respondents say they would favor the construction of an Islamic community center and mosque two blocks from their home, and an equal number say they believe most Muslims are ‘patriotic Americans.’”

The CNN/Opinion Research survey showed that 68% oppose the plan to build the mosque in Lower Manhattan, compared to 29% who favor it. According to a Marist poll, 53% of New York City residents opposed the location. (About 8.4 million people live in New York City, though there are many more in its broad metropolitan area. Up to 800,000 city people are Muslims, and their growing population requires additional mosques.)

Going completely against this tide were 69% of the 1.6 million residents of Manhattan, where the World Trade Center was located, who approved building the Muslim Center close to the very epicenter of the 9/11 attack. This might be expected from the most sophisticated of New York City’s five boroughs and the financial, cultural and commercial center of the world. Aside from Mayor Bloomberg, other supporters of the Lower Manhattan location include Democratic Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, and Democratic Rep. Gerald Nadler, who represents the district that includes ground zero. They view the project as

Bloomberg, who is Jewish, as are Stringer and Nadler, has supported the project from the beginning as a gesture of reconciliation, tolerance and respect for civil rights. His exemplary stance in the face of increasing opposition to Cordoba House has earned him deserved tributes from the Muslim community. It was hardly surprising the mayor met with the injured cab driver, his wife and children for an hour in City Hall Aug. 26.

The New York Times, which is housed in Manhattan, published an editorial Aug. 4 titled “A Monument to Tolerance,” which said in part: “It has been disturbing to hear and read the vitriol and outright bigotry surrounding the building of a mosque two blocks from the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. So it was inspiring when New York City’s Landmarks

Preservation Commission voted 9 to 0 on Aug. 3 to reaffirm one of the basic tenets of democracy: religious tolerance....

"The attacks of Sept. 11 were not a religious event. They were mass murder. The American response, as President Obama and President George W. Bush before him have said many times, was not a war against Islam.... There was simply no excuse for the behavior of the Anti-Defamation League, which eagerly piled on with the opponents of the mosque. It should not be built 'in the shadow' of the World Trade Center, the group said, because it would 'cause some victims more pain.' It was distressing to see the rationalization of bigotry used by an organization that has been fighting discrimination of all kinds."

In addition to leading the campaign to convince the American people that Democratic politicians who support building the Islamic center in downtown Manhattan are disloyal to America and contemptuous to the families of 9/11 victims, the continuing right wing effort to depict President Obama as a Muslim and a non-citizen has been making progress.

The Pew Research Center poll released Aug. 19 reports that 18% of the American people now believe President Obama is a Muslim (it was 12% nearly two years ago), and 43% say they "don't know" his religion (it was 32% in October 2008). Even though the White House and Obama himself have stressed repeatedly that he is a Christian, only 34% of the people claim to be aware of this fact (it was 51% in the earlier poll).

These figures testify to the extraordinary ignorance of a not insubstantial sector of the American people — but what explains the increase in false knowledge in the last two years? Evidently it's due to the success of the continuous right wing media campaign to mislead the masses into believing Obama not only sides with the "enemy" but by supporting the right to build a mosque near ground zero he is actually in league with the enemy.

According to the Pew results, "The view that Obama is a Muslim is more widespread among his political opponents than among his backers. Roughly a third of conservative Republicans (34%) say Obama is a Muslim, as do 30% of those who disapprove of Obama's job performance."

Despite a birth certificate showing Obama is an American citizen born 49 years ago in the State of Hawaii, a CNN/Opinion Research poll made public on his Aug. 4 birthday determined that 27% of all Americans think he was "definitely" or "probably" born in a foreign country. Among Republicans, 41% definitely or probably believe he was foreign born, and thus a non-citizen and an "illegal" President.

The right wing will evidently go to extreme lengths to take back Congressional seats on Nov. 2, including untruths, national chauvinism, and anti-Muslim propaganda. Many millions of Americans have been misled about the community center and mosque planned near the former World Trade Center. But millions more average Americans know better and say so in plain terms.

The Wall St. Journal sent a reporter to examine the neighborhood immediately surrounding ground zero where the Cordoba House is to be situated. The reporter noted that there were two strip clubs within three blocks of what some critics of the mosque consider to be a "sacred" space. Without condescension, the reporter interviewed Chris from the Pussycat Lounge, and Cassandra from New York Dolls about the mosque controversy.

Said Chris: "They're not building a mosque in the World Trade Center" grounds itself. "It's all good. You have your synagogues and your churches. And you have a mosque." Said Cassandra: "I don't know what the big deal is. It's freedom of religion — you know?"

Americans with a commitment to civil liberties absolutely agree. It's freedom of religion — you know?

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