

SOME CHOOSE HATE DURING ISLAM'S HOLIEST MONTH

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (nickgier@roadrunner.com)

Read his other columns on Islam at www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/IslamPage.htm

Let us not forget that Muslims were among those murdered on 9/11, and that our Muslim neighbors grieved with us as New Yorkers and as Americans. We would betray our values and play into our enemies' hands if we were to treat Muslims differently than anyone else.

--New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg

As 1.6 billion Muslims world-wide begin their fasts during the holy month of Ramadan, thousands of Americans have joined a campaign of hate and intolerance against them. It is as if Muslims had chosen the most despicable actions of a few Christians and attempted to paint all Christians by the same brush. To America's already distressed Muslims this would be equivalent to an anti-Christian crusade just before Christmas.

There have been fire-bombings of mosques in Tennessee and Florida (could these be Christian terrorists?) and a call for burning the Qu'ran by some conservative Christians. Now the focus is on the proposed Muslim cultural center two blocks from where the Twin Towers once stood in Lower Manhattan.

On September 11, 2001, 60,000 Iranians in Teheran were enjoying a soccer match, but as news of the attacks was announced, there was a stadium-wide moment of prayer for the victims. The President of Azerbaijan, 93 percent Muslim, declared a national day of mourning. Leaders of 49 other Muslim majority nations sent messages condemning the attacks and assuring President Bush that the acts were contrary to Islamic law. Widely circulated video footage of Palestinians celebrating in the streets was not connected to 9/11 at all.

On the morning of September 11, Army Chaplain Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad was moving through the wreckage of the Pentagon in an attempt to find survivors and tend to their needs. Over 100 Defense Department employees meet daily for prayers directed towards Mecca. These Muslims were relieved when Defense Secretary William Gates withdrew an invitation to Franklin Graham, who has preached against Islam in hateful ways, to participate in a National Day of Prayer event at the Pentagon.

Four blocks from Ground Zero Muslims have been quietly worshipping for 40 years, just months before the World Trade Center opened. Located between two bars, the storefront mosque is a progressive Sufi congregation led by a woman. Unlike more orthodox groups, men and women pray together, and during Ramadan, they also celebrate the end of their dawn-to-dusk fast. Are these peaceful people now suppose to relocate out of "respect" for the 9/11 victims, 56 of whom were Muslims themselves?

Twelve blocks from the former World Trade Center there is another mosque founded in 1985. It is led by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf who holds physics degrees from Columbia and Stevens Institute of Technology. His book *What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West* was picked as one of the best five books of 2004 by the *Christian Science Monitor*.

In 2009 Imam Rauf and his supporters bought a 19th building in Park Place, two blocks from the 9/11 attacks, with the goal of building a Islamic cultural center. Imam Rauf said the institution will be modeled on "The 92 Street Y," a Jewish center offering community services and dedicated to interfaith dialogue. Citing the "the important community facilities [the project] will provide," the Lower Manhattan Community Board voted 29-1 (with 10 abstentions) to support the Muslim center. A poll of Manhattan residents indicated that 46 percent were in favor and 36 percent were opposed. New York State and nation-wide polls indicate strong opposition, but critics would surely have to concede that the neighbors' opinions are the most important.

Since 1989 the Landmarks Preservation Commission had been reviewing 29 buildings for historic preservation and 23 were finally designated. The "Italianate" building at 51 Park Place was not chosen, and recently the Commission turned down a request for reconsideration. The fact that it had been damaged in the 9/11 attacks did not sway the commissioners.

Imam Rauf and his partners are now moving forward to build a 13-storey glass and steel building that will have no minarets indicating a mosque. The center has the support of many New York City Christian and Jewish groups, but unfortunately the Anti-Defamation League has come out against it. Contrary to what some critics say, the structure, hidden by two blocks of high rise buildings, will not be visible from Ground Zero.

Critics say that Imam Rauf supports Islamic jihadists because he said that U.S. foreign policy was partly responsible for the 9/11 attacks. But this is also the view of Ron Paul, who won the presidential poll at the most recent meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference. Driving around my very conservative state of Idaho I still see more "Paul for President" signs than any other political posters.

In announcing the decision not to preserve the old building at 51 Park Place, Mayor Michael Bloomberg--with the Statue of Liberty as backdrop--reminded his audience that the early Dutch settlers refused to grant Jews permission to build a synagogue, and that they had also prohibited Quakers and Catholics from holding services.

Bloomberg most moving words were the following: "On Sept. 11, 2001, thousands of first responders heroically rushed to the scene and saved tens of thousands of lives. More than 400 of those first responders did not make it out alive. In rushing into those burning buildings, not one of them asked, 'What God do you pray to?' or 'What beliefs do you hold?'"

Originally, the cultural center was to be called the Cordoba House to honor a golden age of cultural and intellectual cooperation in 10-13th Century Spain. In Cordoba, the largest city in Europe, scholars of three faiths reintroduced Greek philosophy, literature, and science to Medieval Europe. Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in relative peace until 1235, when Christian armies began the "reconquest" of Spain.

Critics of the name "Cordoba House" charge that this glorifies Muslim holy war rather than, as I would see it, inviting people to learn about one of the greatest interfaith achievements

in human history. Under pressure the developers have reluctantly changed the name to “The Park51 Islamic Cultural Center.”

During the Spanish Inquisition, Muslims and Jews had the choice to convert, be burned at the stake, or get out of the country as fast as they could. Joining an American Inquisition, Bryan Fischer, former head of the now defunct Idaho Values Alliance, states that all Muslims in America should go back to their countries, “where they can live in a culture which shares their values.”

Fischer has the audacity to assume that America’s Muslims “chafe against the freedom, liberty and civil rights we cherish in the West.” Some of these Muslim families, such as Minnesota Rep. Keith Ellison’s, have been here for hundreds of years, so repatriation is an absurd proposition. Unlike many Muslims in Europe a great majority of those in America are fully integrated into society.

After wisely consulting with some religious scholars, President George W. Bush was able to speak with uncharacteristic eloquence about Islam as a “religion of peace.” Bush drew an essential distinction between the Islam followed by at least 90 percent of Muslims and the version embraced by Al Qaeda. Bush’s Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes invited American Muslims to be part of an outreach program to the Muslim world. One of those chosen was Imam Rauf, who was sent on speaking tours in the Middle East. His main task was to demonstrate how well America treated its Muslims--at least until now.

Ibrahim Hooper, speaking for the Council on American Islamic Relations, observes that Republicans have “shifted completely away from the Bush administration line on relations with Islam, and they’ve obviously made the political calculation that bashing Islam and Muslims is a winning issue for them.” The cynicism of the GOP on most all issues is absolutely astounding.

Following a tradition going back to Thomas Jefferson, President Obama recently held a Ramadan dinner at the White House. Stressing the American values of religious freedom and tolerance, Obama that “Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and community center on private property.” Later he qualified his statement by saying that he “was not commenting on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there.”

Some on the Religious Right claim that American Muslims wish to impose shari’ah law on the U.S. There is of course no evidence for such a plan. There are tens of thousands of American Christians, however, who want to impose the Old Testament equivalent of shari’ah law. Following the dictates of widely admired R. J. Rushdoony’s *Institutes of Biblical Law*, a local Moscow, Idaho church journal called for capital punishment for “sorcery, adultery, homosexuality, and cursing one’s parents.” For a woman touching a strange man’s genitals, the woman’s punishment is only the loss of one hand (Deut. 25.11,12). Why do these religious extremists enjoy constitutional protections and are allowed to build their churches after being cleared by local authorities, but moderate American Muslims are vilified and threatened? For more see my “Chilling Parallels between Christian and Muslim Fundamentalism” at www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/parallels.htm.

As devout Muslims all over world celebrate Ramadan by giving alms and reflecting on their sins, I challenge those on the right, especially those such as Newt Gingrich who ought to know better, to repent and stop the disinformation campaign that is destroying the very fabric of our great republic. Law abiding Muslims in America need to feel safe in their homes and jobs, and their constitutional rights should be fully respected.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.