



**ANNULLING MUSLIMS' RELIGIOUS RIGHTS:  
DECLARING PRINCIPLE; DENYING PRACTICE**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 08-26-10, p.A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

One of the defining features of the myth-laden, mean-spirited and ultimately evil debate around denying and limiting the religious rights of Muslims and one that has marked the country's approach to the rights of those different from the ruling race/class, is to declare the principle and deny the practice. Even at the beginning formation of the country, the "Puritans", who, the legend goes, fled England to obtain religious freedom, persecuted those among them considered "impure" or incorrectly religious, burned their women as witches and conducted genocidal campaigns against the so-called "pagan" Native Americans who saved them from famine, disease and certain death.

Given, this, the current controversy around Muslim presence in lower Manhattan is about more than sacred ground and real and contrived sensitivities. And thus, the mosque and community center must be built at the intended site for several reasons. First, freedom of religion and conscience is a fundamental human right, an inalienable right which cannot be taken or surrendered. And though in the U.S. and other countries it's also a constitutional right, it is first and foremost a human right. Thus, it cannot and should not be open to redefinition by demagogues and wind-sniffing politicians ready to do or say almost anything to win elections, undermine President Obama or curry favor with supporters of Israel and haters of Muslims and Arabs.

Secondly, the mosque must be built as a necessary resistance to the attempts to criminalize and penalize Muslims and Islam as a whole for what a few extremist Muslims did. The current push is to assign a collective guilt to all Muslims for the acts

of a few, although no such collective guilt is perceived or permissible for all Christians and Jews, regardless of the terrible and terrorizing things some Jews and Christians or their states might do.

Thirdly, the mosque must be built in resistance to attempts to deny and dismiss the shared death, sacrifice and resultant family suffering of Muslims also in the 9/11 attacks. Many Muslims died in the attack and lost their lives in rescue efforts and they must not be deprived of their place among those dead and deserving respect and remembrance to please and placate racial and religious bigots—regardless of how numerous they are. The tyranny and bigoted opinions of the majority must not hold sway here. After all, Native American genocide, the Holocaust of enslavement, segregation and other inhuman and immoral systems and practices were once sanctioned by the majority. The question is always, even with a majority, is it right, just and moral? Otherwise, opinions and peoples in the minority are crowded out and crushed in the name of numbers.

Building the mosque also means a rejection of the attempts to monopolize and manipulate the varied voices of the victims' families. For not only are Muslim families supportive of building the mosque and community center where they are, but also family members of other victims are supportive. The September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows is such a supportive group, asking for "justice and freedom for all."

Fourthly, the mosque and community center must be built, for not to build it would be tantamount to Muslims collaborating in the demagogic attempts to demonize and delegitimize Muslims and

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Islam, one of the three Abrahamic faiths, now targeted to be demoted and classified as the false faith of a lesser God. It would be to passively accept this false characterization and the prescribed restrictions as a kind of probation and parole, in hopes of future redemption and release from stigma and eventual entry into that self-defined religious circle of "the elite, the elect and the chosen."

Moreover, the mosque and community center must be built to avoid the pernicious precedent of establishing Muslim-free zones in the U.S., ritual racial and religious cleansing of areas of so-called "foreign and impure" elements. Also, if the Manhattan site is declared hallowed ground and off-limits to Muslims, shall we also declare an area around the Pentagon or site of the plane crash in Pennsylvania as sacred ground and prohibit the presence of Muslims? What criteria shall we use for setting boundaries? Is there a specific distance and direction to be observed? Should they be concerned about the buildings' size or height, given the demand that they be humble, unassuming and ultimately invisible? And shall we declare areas off-limits for Christians around the federal building in Tulsa or at the women's medical facilities where Christian terrorists and extremists have taken lives? And shall we exclude Jews for similar collective-guilt offenses? We think not and likewise, cannot, in any moral or rational sense, impose on Muslims such an unjustifiable, unjust and unacceptable penalty.

Finally, the mosque and community center must be built because it is both a right and the right thing to do. This is so especially when one realizes this campaign is not about one proposed mosque and one place. It is about the place of Muslims and

mosques in America as a whole, about hostility and hatred toward Muslims, Islam and Arabs, especially Palestinians, in deference to Israel and in fearful recognition that invasions and seizures of their resources and lands and the gross injuries incurred will not go unanswered.

If we are to talk about sensitivity, it must be mutual, not exclusive or a request for self-indictment or surrendering of human and constitutional rights. The narrative of the Pope conceding to Jews and removing a nun's building at Auschwitz is not applicable or comparable. For no one was challenging the authenticity of Catholicism as a religious faith, or its right of presence in Germany, or asking it to confess to crimes it did not commit, or calling for days of burning its sacred text, or attacking its adherents and places of worship around the issue. Indeed, the Pope was in a position of power and thus could be magnanimous and concede a single point and space without losing anything.

The political and religious right have declared the area around the point of attack in Manhattan hallowed ground and have not raised questions about the shopping mall to be built directly under "ground zero" nor the strip joint in the same area. The irrationality, hatred and hostility involved in the issue becomes even clearer when one sees that apparently for them, stripping and lap dancing on this hallowed ground is less an affront than a Muslim in meditation and prayer. Our task, then, is to stand up in the midst of the silence of the political and religious lambs that cower, concede and confer in convenient corners, and to answer the ancient African ethical imperative "to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice."

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