

Truth about ?The Mosque at Ground Zero?

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Law, and Healing Our Country's 9/11 Wound]

by Charles Strohmer

There is no mosque being built at ground zero in lower Manhattan. Nor are Imam Rauf and his Muslim colleagues who run the Cordoba Initiative planning to build a mosque at ground zero. Given all the media obfuscation, I thought I should make that fact immediately plain. And there are two or three other crucial facts you should know. But first, it's location, location, location, the three most important words in real estate. And where is the real estate in question located? Any fourth grader with a street map of Lower Manhattan could point it out. Ground zero is located in the large area bordered by Vesey St. on the north, Church St. on the east, Liberty St. on the south, and West St. on the west.

A second fact is this: the Cordoba Initiative's proposed location is a funky old five-story Burlington Coat Factory at 51 Park Place. The huge but empty retail space sits on the side of Park Place that actually locates it in the third block north of ground zero. That, by my calculations, as someone who has walked many miles along the blocks of Manhattan, places the address just about a quarter mile north of Vesey Street, where it sits sandwiched between a five story office building to the east and a ten-story office building (with a large Amish market as its storefront) to the west, just one of many other buildings on that block, all stuck together like giant pieces of an old Lego® set. Its address on Park Place, however, entitles it to be known as two block north. Across the narrow street from the defunct Burlington outlet, in the second block of buildings north of ground zero, a ten story office building dominates nearly the entire city block. So you can't see ground zero from the Burlington building. You have to walk down Park Place to West Broadway, go left, and then walk two blocks south to stand at ground zero. The proposed plan calls for tearing down the Burlington and building a multi-story, multi-purpose community center, which will be run by a multifaith board of directors.

Third: to call the million dollar Park51 project (AKA, Cordoba House) a ?mosque? is like telling your friends that the place your neighbor calls home is a closet. The proposed plan calls for tearing down the Burlington and building a multi-story, multi-purpose community center, which will be run by a multifaith board of directors. This was made very clear to me during a conference call with Daisy Khan, the executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), which is promoted as a non-profit organization devoted to interfaith work, moderate Islam, and building bridges between the Muslim community and the general public. She is also the wife of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who, with his wife and a downtown Manhattan real-estate developer named Sharif El-Gamal, cofounded of the Park51 project.

During the conference call, which was organized by the Council on Foreign Relations, Ms. Khan, whom anyone could tell was overwhelmed with emotion by the firestorm of controversy, explained that the Park51 project is somewhat modeled after the popular multi-use 92nd Street Y. To date, the wide-ranging programs for their proposed community center have been touted widely in the media as including recreational facilities, such as a swimming pool and gym; exhibition space; conference rooms for education and forums, such as about empowering Muslim women; space for weddings and parties; day care and a senior center; areas for interfaith activity and prayer spaces for Jews, Christians, and people of other faiths; and cultural spaces, including a 500 seat theater for the performing arts. In other words, the center will be open to everyone and anyone, she said.

And, yes, of course, of course, why wouldn't it? Ms Khan said it will also include a large prayer room for Muslims, which will be a particularly welcome relief to the Muslim congregation that has outgrown its Tribeca storefront facility several block north on West Broadway. Would we be surprised if an equivalent space for worship were being included if the deluxe community center were being planned by Jews or Christians? And wouldn't we be miffed if a controversy arose suggesting that it was only a synagogue or a church? Also, Imam Rauf stated in his New York Times op-ed piece (Sept. 7) that at "Cordoba House ... there will be separate prayer spaces for Muslims, Christians, Jews and men and women of other faiths."

Ms. Khan also said that Jewish and Christian interfaith groups throughout the country "strongly support" the center. And she explained that they are beginning to meet with as many of the families of the victims of 9/11 as they can, noting that many, but not all, of the families they have met so far with support the proposed project when they understand the intention.

A fourth fact is this: Imam Rauf is a Sufi. Listen, no way is this the kind of Muslim identity that puts him in good standing with the submit-or-die ideologues that run terrorist operations. And that's putting it mildly ? some Pakistani Taliban are implicated in deadly assaults on Sufi congregations in Pakistan. If you walk a mile up West Broadway from ground zero through the pricy Tribeca district, you will find a storefront mosque that was run by Imam Rauf for nearly three decades. It was in fact his presence there, near ground zero, that put him on the religious and political map after 9/11, when the media hounded him for information about Islam. If you check out the website for that mosque, you will see that its denomination is given as Sufi.

The peace-loving Sufis are popularly known as the whirling dervishes. Although they believe in the basic tenets of Islam, Sufis are by far a tiny minority within that religion when compared to either the Sunni or the Shia denominations. Many Sufis tend to practice a mystical and peaceful path of inclusivity with others, which tends to place them outside mainstream Islam, and they are keen on interiority and quality of personal spiritual experience with God, which can place them at odds with their Sunni or Shia brothers and sisters who emphasize and may enforce outer conformity to strict religious boundaries. The spirit and tone of the Sufi is underlined by the Sufi doctrine of 'the unity of being,' which insists on the oneness of humanity and all religions in a kind of New Agey way, as is seen in the work of Rumi, the great 13th-century Sufi Persian poet.

Evidently, Sufism is the backdrop of the interfaith activism that Imam Rauf has dedicated his life to. It seems to come through his book *What's Right with Islam*, which includes passages I have quoted favorably in my work on U.S. ? Middle East relations. Although I don't agree with everything he writes in the book, Rauf explains that he wrote the book after 9/11 to 'help heal the relationship between America and the Muslim world,' and that 'reflected in this book are the philosophy and goals of ... the Cordoba Initiative,' which partners "with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim organizations as well as secular institutions and foundations" to build "a broad multifaith coalition to help repair the damage that has been done to Muslim-American relations over the past fifty years" (pp. 274-275). (I will come back to this salient point, below.) "The center," Ms. Khan explained, "is meant to be part of the transformation against extremism, as it will combine the best of what it means to be Muslim and what it means to be American, whose core values we feel are totally compatible."

The spirit and tone of the Sufi also seemed evident during the hour-long CFR conference call. In her opening remarks to us, Ms. Khan was clear about their intention for Park51. After explaining that the proximity to ground zero was never planned, she went on to say that because the attack occurred in 'our neighborhood...', we wanted to help build Lower Manhattan.... And since 9/11 was done in the name of our religion, we have an added responsibility to disprove those who have distorted our religion and our scripture."

"The center," Ms. Khan explained, "is meant to be part of the transformation against extremism, as it will combine the best of what it means to be Muslim and what it means to be American, whose core values we feel are totally compatible." It 'will amplify the voices of moderate Muslims and be a blow to the extremists, because the very theology that the extremists promote is a theology of exclusivism, and exclusivism will be the exact opposite of the values that the center will promote, which is pluralism."

When author Lawrence Wright (*The Looming Tower*) asked about her thoughts about the large amount fitna (discord or chaos) being caused by the controversy, noting that most Muslims are admonished to refrain from fitna, Ms. Khan agreed that it was a terrible thing, adding, 'Our intent was always to do the opposite, to create harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect in exchange. The fitna has primarily been created by the people who have misconstrued our intent.... We don't want to remain in this controversy. This is why we are seeking the counsel of various stakeholders and meeting regularly to make the right decision.'

When Salam Al-Marayati of the Muslim Public Affairs Council asked how ordinary Muslims could talk to ordinary others in America about the controversy, Ms. Khan said that 'American Muslims are as diverse as America itself. The core values of Islam, faith in God, respect for pluralism and hard work completely resonate with western values.' We believe, she went on, that 'American Muslims are able to combine the best of what it means to be American and Muslim. That's why we don't feel that there is a war between 'us and them'. The 'clash of civilizations' framework is now behind us," she continued, emphasizing a theme found in *What's Right with Islam*. "I don't think that it retains any appeal for ordinary citizens. Yes, some misunderstand political conflict as cultural or religious ones, but the vast majority of us in the West recognize these differences."

So if there is no mosque being build at ground zero, and if there are no plans to build one there, and if Imam Rauf and his wife are, shall we say, the right kind of extremists, then what has gone so wrong? The first answer, I think, must point to a misuse of the little word "at" and an inflated use of the word "mosque." Nobody in their right mind would seek to build a mosque at ground zero

Shame on those political and religious ideologues and an American media who used "at" to start the firestorm, rather than using the correct word "near." Nobody in their right mind would seek to build a mosque at ground zero, nor would Mayor Bloomberg or any other politician in New York City be so foolish as to sign off on such a project. And shame on those who use on the word "mosque" to describe what they know is a deluxe community center that any city would be proud to see built.

I admit I fell for it for a while. The fact was, I was so covered up on a demanding writing deadline while the controversy was brewing that I told myself, you just can't be bothered, Strohmer. But then we had a huge dust up in our church over the "ground zero mosque," and then the firestorm grew and friends began asking my opinion, and then I participated in the CFR conference call.... You get the picture. I was forced to push back the writing deadline and do my own research on the story.

Many years ago I was bemoaning to a colleague about the gullibility of an otherwise pretty sharp American public to be so naive as to swallow at the drop of a hat just about anything they hear on radio talk or in the news media and then talk about it the next day at work as if they were gospel truth. "I call it gulp-ability," he said. My question today is, When are we going to stop holding out our cups before these giants and requesting, "More, please"? We're killing ourselves as a country in ways that extremist religious militants never dreamed possible but are surely glad to see.

What would wisdom do?

To arrive at the second answer will mean first forging a connection that has been overlooked, so bear with me while I try. The firestorm over Cordoba House, the proposed Islamic-run community center in the third block north of ground zero, has unexpectedly revealed that we as a country have not yet had the most agonizing yet most inescapable national conversation about 9/11 that we must have. And that is about healing our collective wound from that day. America went to war instead. It has remained at war for nearly a decade. And war is hell, not healing. The necessity to heal our 9/11 wound has now become imperative. Barring that path to healing, we let our wound fester and irritate, and we keep responding from that.

Healing of this sort, of course, is not without its own pain, and that is no more poignantly represented than in some families of loved ones lost in the attack on 9/11 whose private pain the public controversy over the proposed site touches so movingly that they are speaking out against the planned project. On the other hand are the families of loved ones lost who are speaking in support of the project at the proposed site.

Lisa Miller's insightful Newsweek conversations with two Manhattan mothers who lost firefighter sons at ground zero reveals in microcosm the woundedness that the has been laying low for nine years in the macrocosm of our country, but which has now been brought to the fore. For one thing, the outspoken mothers, Sally Regenhard and Adele Welty, represent the opposing views in such convincing ways that it's probably impossible to gainsay either argument ("War over Ground Zero," Aug. 16). And this is very instructive, the two women also reveal a phenomenal strength of our country.

Miller spent a lot of time with both women together, and she reports that although neither believed they could change the mind of the other, they did not come across to Miller as fundamentalists, nor were the two mothers at each other's throats. "There they sat," Miller writes of a typical meeting, "sharing coffee and sandwiches. Mourning their boys and loving their country. They listened respectfully and smiled at their commonalities; they experienced fresh pain at the other's loss." This adult-to-adult respect across deep difference also represents our country's ethos in microcosm, a strength that will figure large in our capacity to heal.

It is Regenhard who opposes the proposed site, even though she knows that Cordoba House is not at ground zero and that it is a deluxe community center. To me, she as an individual represents the zillions of Americans across the country who are not bigots but who simply feel deeply that it's a bad idea to build the center at the proposed location, at least at this time.

For several days beginning August 20, CBS News conducted a poll, which in the end merely affirmed in cold figures what everyone

already knew. It showed that 67% of Americans believed the developers "have a right to build the mosque near ground zero," but that 71% felt that "building a mosque near ground zero" was not "appropriate."

So I want to ask, How do we as a country so evidently still suffering too much from the wound of 9/11, and so divided as to the way ahead from here, turn this firestorm of controversy into an agent of healing?

In struggling with this question, about the only thing now that seems clear to me is that when it comes to healing of the deeply non-physical sort, different people have different ways of approaching and appropriating it, and that such healing is never quick or dramatic. As we used to say, it's a personal thing. So although I originally sat here at my keyboard to offer a miracle balm, I've now lowered my sights considerably. Since the collective healing of our 9/11 wound begins with each and every one of us a personal, an individual, thing, I'll just say what my own struggle as a Christian has turned up, through a unexpected huddle with myself about the heart of the firestorm. How do we as a country still suffering too much from the wound of 9/11 turn this firestorm of controversy into an agent of healing?

So, once I had the facts fairly well sorted, I tried to put myself in Imam Rauf's shoes and walk a mile or two, and as I walked I talked, to myself. Personally, if I were a religious figure who had put himself on record for thirty years as someone who is not at war with America but: as someone dedicated to building more cooperatively peaceable relations between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in America through interfaith dialogue; as a founder of the planned Islamic community center who wrote in his September 7 New York Times op-ed piece that the "broader mission" of the Cordoba Initiative is "to strengthen relations between the Western and Muslim worlds and to help counter radical ideology"; as a Muslim leader whom the U.S. State Department regularly sends to the Middle East overseas on trips of public diplomacy; as the imam of a mosque near ground zero who took several pages in What's Right with Islam after 9/11 to affirm his strong commitment to these words of Moses and Jesus, to Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31); as someone who reiterated that very commitment in his very public September 7 op-ed piece; and as a Muslim leader who, when invited to speak at Daniel Pearl's memorial service at B'nai Jeshurun, a prominent Manhattan synagogue, said to Judea Pearl, Daniel Pearl's father, "If to be a Jew means to say with all one's heart, mind, and soul Shma Yisreal, Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ahad "hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One "not only today I am a Jew, I have always been one," and then immediately followed that with, "If to be a Christian is to love the Lord our God with all of my heart, mind, and soul, and to love for my fellow human being what I love for myself, then not only am I a Christian, but I have always been one"; as I say, if I were this person, I think I would immediately try to find a way to step back from the firestorm and get out of the line of fire, so that I could find quiet space to figure out if continuing to press for the Park Place address might not actually be sidetracking me from my stated calling. Go on retreat, or get into my prayer closet for an extended period, as we Christians tend to call these things.

As the New Testament reminds us, and as I reminded myself, no man knows that spirit of a man except the spirit of man within him. I don't really know what the imam's actual mission is, but I am still willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, as I have been doing for many years. And because of that, and the stated calling, or mission, and the woundedness that the firestorm is revealing, I think if I were him I would get alone with God for a few days "the door barred against all distractions, the mind silenced of all other voices "and have a good long think and a pray in peace and quiet about my calling as a reconciler in America among diverse peoples. At this point I can only imagine what might occur in my prayer closet. But I know myself well enough to suspect that something like the following might occur to me, a public Christian whose decades of work has, in a variety of small ways, strived for relational peace.

I put it that way only to let you know that is what makes me tick. So even though I'm using my imagination, here, I'm not making this stuff up. My work seeks to introduce wisdom-based ways of reasoning into U.S. "Middle East relations for building more cooperative arrangements between our diverse peoples. And I only note this, here, to mention that if there is any one thing I have learned about the agency of wisdom over the years, it is that it is relational, situational, and peaceable. In other words, the agency of wisdom can be a great source for healing collective relational situations. And here we have what may be an unprecedentedly huge relational situation, one latent with immense potential for good.

So in the quietness of a soul now on retreat, having now given that still small voice a real chance to get a word edgewise, I think my

thoughts would turn toward what is at the very heart of the firestorm: Law.

Certainly I am legally entitled by the U.S. Constitution and federal law to organize my campaign around First Amendment rights, which many interfaith and other stakeholders have been strongly egging me on to keep doing. But maybe the appeal to what is lawful is being overdone in this situation. Maybe we're past the point that this is about law; or, more accurately, have entered an uncharted region where law is not the point. Maybe the intensifying appeal to law is politicizing my calling and mission, beginning to undermine my calling to see relationships strengthened in America between Muslims and non-Muslims.

I'm saying that this is probably what I would be thinking because it is not the point or the function of the juridical aspect of life to bring healing. Sorry to be preaching to the choir, here, but it bears saying because sometimes we need to remind ourselves that law, especially at its wisest, is meant to address the capacity of the majority of a people under it to obey it. If it tries to do more than that, especially on a large enough scale, law can seem like brute force and foster not further social order but rebellion, producing all the serious law and order problems that go with it, such as America experienced during the era of Prohibition. It is a problem acutely accentuated under autocracies and dictatorships, where people can't obey an oppressive regime's laws without relentless policing by the state coming down on top of them at every turn. And please note that my point about law, here, is not that if work were begun tomorrow on Park51 that America would suddenly turn wild in the streets. For I remind us all of the adult-to-adult respect across deep differences that is a profound strength of our country. We would get over it and get on with life. But would we heal?

The reason for introducing this principle of jurisprudence ? the capacity of a people to obey ? into the conversation is because it figures huge in the argument to keep and build Cordoba House on Park Place. If the firestorm of controversy has revealed anything at all, it has revealed that there's simply not nearly enough capacity as yet in our collective heart as a country to accept the presence of a Muslim-run community center in the halo environs around ground zero. And that has revealed our undressed wound. If this is the collective state of the county, then to keep pushing the project through at that location is lawful but not, it would seem to me, consistent with my higher calling as a religious leader dedicated to relational healing in this country.

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If seventy percent of your soul is ill, you don't ignore that, and a soul can't be made whole with law. That is not the point of the law. Again, sorry to be preaching to the choir, but sometimes we religious folk, especially those of us who are politically involved, need reminding that there is the claim upon us of a law higher than even that of the First Amendment. It is the law of love to God and to neighbor as one's self. Might not that law be the applicable one in this situation? It was the question I rather awkwardly asked Ms. Khan during the CFR conference call. It wasn't her answer that got to me, however, it was her pained reply when she said we don't want to be driven from our neighborhood.

I then understood that Imam Rauf and his wife are themselves smarting a bit, too. I do not think they set out to create a firestorm of controversy. That seemed clear during the conference call. I think it was evident to all participants that Ms. Khan was pretty shaken by the whole thing, which is why I think she frequently returned to the issue of intention, which reminds us of calling and mission.

If the stated intention is the actual intention, then the mission of the Cordoba folk remains one of relational healing in America between peoples who are different. I, for one, would not like to see Ms. Khan and her husband sidetracked from that intention, not by well-meaning friends, or people in the interfaith community, or among the stakeholders or the politicians, or anyone else who, however innocently, have been overdoing the argument from law and from rights to push the country beyond its current capacity to accept what is lawfully permissible at the proposed site. When interfaith activism gets subsumed by political activism, law takes over and, however unintentional this may be, love has a very hard time of it, indeed.

This is probably what I would be thinking on the last day of my retreat, when I suspect that my thoughts would return to the words of Moses and Jesus, about love of God and love of neighbor. I said that to myself as Imam Rauf and also to myself as I was ending the conversation because those words of Moses and Jesus are central to what I occasionally refer to as a gospel-shaped wisdom in my work toward more cooperatively peaceable U.S. ? Mideast relations.

Like anyone else, of course, I can be a bit taken in at times, and I could see myself in Imam Rauf's shoes cutting too deep a path with the law for a while. But now that I had made up my mind about what had happened, I would leave my prayer closet with a miracle of grace having been handed to me for the country.

What we need right now is a dramatic gesture that will defuse the firestorm while being an agent of healing. It really would be nothing short of a blooming miracle to have it in one's power to evoke both concurrently, but Imam Rauf now has that in his power to do. To release it would only take a simple announcement in the right spirit that 'we are going to refocus our efforts on finding another site, still in our beloved neighborhood Tribeca in lower Manhattan, but one a bit farther removed from Vesey Street.'

As a Christian I find it fascinating that a Muslim instead of a Christian has been given that power for this huge relational situation today, but I'm not going to argue with God about that. Imam Rauf, perform the miracle. Release grace to start the collective healing of our 9/11 wound, which you yourself have stated was done in the name of Islam and have apologized for. You told us in your CFR conference call this morning (Sept. 13) that 'everything was on the table' during this season of intense negotiations with your stakeholders. Shows us on grand scale that 'Islam,' which you told us in your New York Times editorial, 'comes from a word cognate to shalom, which means peace in Hebrew,' can repay evil with good, big time. Help make our country more sound. Forget about a physical space so near to ground zero. Create a capacity space for healing in the lives of zillions of Americans across this country who are not bigots but who for whatever reasons still remain too sensitive to an overt institutional Muslim presence in the halo area.

Sir, may I wear me heart on my sleeve? You will face many strong, well-reasoned arguments from many quarters not to do this. Some seem convinced that relocating will inflame Muslim radicals overseas against America, as if any action of yours could convince small cabals of submit-or-die ideologues from taking action against any society they deem jahili, including Muslim societies, as you well know. They have an infinite amount of excuses for putting a gun to someone's head. But you are not responsible for others' actions. Only for you own, as you also know well.

Sir, give our country the capacity to heal. Apply the higher law of love. You will have done what law can never do, give grace. More than any jurisprudence can do, the contribution that grace makes to the healing of our 9/11 wound will in time more effectively quell the voice of radical extremists and increase the voice and appeal at home and overseas of those calling for peaceableness among peoples who are different.

Imam Rauf, perform the miracle.

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