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Muslims Praying in the Pentagon. Who Knew?

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| [Christopher A. Preble](#) ^[2]

Two stories that cropped up today call attention to the fact that -- for nearly eight years -- Muslims have been praying on "sacred ground" a few steps away from where American Airlines Flight 77 slammed a giant hole in the Pentagon on September 11th.

[Reuters explains:](#) ^[3]

Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Mormons and Episcopalians regularly hold services in the multifaith chapel that was dedicated in November 2002 after reconstruction of the section of the Pentagon hit by Islamist hijackers on September 11, 2001.

"I've been here four years next month and the chapel and its function and role have never been an issue," George Wright, an Army spokesman at the Pentagon, said on Thursday.

Petula Dvorak [in today's *Washington Post Metro* section](#) ^[4] explains "In this Pentagon chapel, Muslims can unroll their prayer mats once a day and give praise to Allah. On Fridays, they bring in an imam to conduct a service."

She wonders, where's the outrage?

"Nope, never heard a word about it," folks in the Pentagon chaplain's office told me Thursday after we visited the crash site memorial and the chapel next to it. "No one has had a problem with it."

[...]

As we were talking about the 3,500 Muslim service members, one of the chaplains told me that there are plenty of U.S. military facilities across the globe that have spaces dedicated to Muslim services, not just interfaith chapels. "On bases in Iraq and so forth, we have mosques," he said. "No one has ever raised any concern about that."

Dvorak concludes with a statement framed as a question: "Why should anyone?"

I agree with those sentiments, but wonder about the more basic question: "Why hasn't anyone noticed the Muslims praying in the Pentagon?"



It could be that the leading voices opposing the construction of a Muslim cultural center in Lower Manhattan simply didn't know about daily prayers and Korans in the Pentagon. The story surrounding Cordoba House began as a neighborhood zoning question, debated at a public hearing; the military generally doesn't have such things. It was only after a few politicians and the cable news networks picked up on the local story that it gained national attention. Indeed, the stories regarding the Pentagon appear to have been prompted by an offhand comment by a cable news show talking head. If that is the case, renewed scrutiny of Muslims in the military might simply launch another round in a debate that has already revealed the limits of tolerance in American society today.

As the Cordoba House story has played out, I have tried to discern the opponents' end game. Is it to bar just *this* mosque because of its proximity to Ground Zero? If so, is any location in lower Manhattan off limits? How about Times Square? Or any place in Mid Town? Or the Upper West Side? If the entire island is too close, how about Brooklyn? Or Hoboken? Or Connecticut?

Or does this debate (if it can be called that) really transcend whether a mosque will be built on the site of a Burlington Coat Factory ^[5] and is it really about whether a mosque will be built anywhere in the United States? I suspect the latter. To judge from the tenor of the debate, the dispute is over the character of Islam, as a religion, and of all Muslims, not merely of this particular construction project.

If that is the case, I genuinely fear where this entire discussion will take us as a nation. Religion being what it is (i.e. a matter of *faith*), the potential for varying interpretations of the Prophet's teachings to be misconstrued by non-believers is enormous. Much of that has been playing out since 9/11, with anti-Muslim web sites and blogs attracting a very wide audience. Meanwhile, national security arguments being what they are (i.e. notoriously prone to misperception [6] and threat inflation [7]) arguments based on Constitutional grounds (things like freedom to practice one's religion [8], and to assemble peaceably) are likely to be discarded by those whose immediate reaction to any such claims is that "the Constitution is not a suicide pact."

Stay tuned.

More by

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