

August 23, 2010



This is the print preview: [Back to normal view](#) »

Leon T. Hadar

Journalist and foreign affairs analyst

Posted: August 20, 2010 11:16 PM

It's New York, Not Jerusalem! How About Ending This Crazy Religious War

As a non-practicing Jew growing up in the secular city of Tel-Aviv in Israel I recall the many times that my friends and I were complaining that it was too bad that Israel was so much "not like America" when it came to the relationship between religion and state. We certainly envied Woody Allen and our other co-religionists in New York City who were not subservient to the strictures set by the Orthodox Rabbinate and its definition of "who is a Jew?" and who actually had access to civil marriages or non-religious divorces. And most importantly, Americans were not engulfed in the never-ending Israeli-Arab conflict that was gradually being transformed into a violent clash between Jews and Muslims, including over the control of the religious sites in Jerusalem.

Well, it is beginning to feel as though it is America that is becoming more "like Israel" as far as the role of religion in public life is concerned as the question of whether to allow the building of mosque is turning out to be a national political issue that could affect the outcome of Congressional elections and that also is being intertwined with debates over U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Even more astounding is the fact that a large number of Americans seem to believe that President Barack (Hussein) Obama is a Muslim while the White House insists that President Barack Obama is a practicing Christian. We even have a leading religious figure raising the issue of "Who is a Muslim" (and by extension, "Who is a Christian?") "I think the president's problem is that he was born a Muslim, his father was a Muslim. The seed of Islam is passed through the father like the seed of Judaism is passed through the mother. He was born a Muslim, his father gave him an Islamic name," Rev. Franklin Graham told CNN's John King in a televised interview that aired Thursday night.

Which almost forces me to thank God or someone for New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg who stated that the debate over the scheduled building of an Islamic center near ground zero in New York was "[as] important a test of the separation of church and state as we may see in our lifetimes" and

who has made a strong plea in support of the project based on cherished American principles. As he put it, "The simple fact is, this building is private property, and the owners have a right to use the building as a house of worship, and the government has no right whatsoever to deny that right." Moreover, if it were tried, "the courts would almost certainly strike it down as a violation of the U.S. Constitution."

So yes, the American government has no right to attempt to deny private citizens the right to build a house of worship on private property based on their particular religion. Again Bloomberg: "That may happen in other countries, but we should never allow it to happen here."

From that perspective, whether Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the American cleric who had been the driving force behind the center is indeed a "moderate" Muslim or not and who has spent his life promote interfaith understanding should be of almost no concern for those of us who support the principle of the separation of church and state. After all, there are thousands of churches, synagogues, temples and other places of worship around this country where religious faiths that you and I may find weird and outrageous and perhaps even disgusting, representing views that run contrary to the values -- the sensitivities -- of the majority of Americans.

Yet the First Amendment is supposed to protect the freedom of speech of free exercise of religion even of devil worshippers. We do not ask a priest or a rabbi to state their views on U.S. politics and foreign policy, like, say, "Is Hamas a terrorist organization?" before issuing them a license to build a house of worship.

The government needs to action against a religious group only if its leaders or members have been engaged in unlawful behavior, including terrorism, which clearly does not apply to Imam Rauf who among other things, has been involved in projects sponsored by the State Department and the FBI. And groups and individuals certainly have the right to criticize the Imam or his decision to build the center two blocks from where Muslim terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center in 2001.

What bothers me about this affair is the way some of the opponents and supporters of what is now being referred to as the "ground zero mosque" have framed the debate by suggesting that our position on the issue should be based on whether we indeed regard Imam Rauf as a "radical" or "moderate" Muslim. That assumes that questions of public policy should be based on some agreed standards of religious conduct. It is as though we are asked to decide whether to approve the opening of a bookstore or a restaurant because the first will be selling "educational" books or the second will be providing "healthy" food and so on.

Indeed, I was somewhat troubled by some of the comments made by Abdul Rauf's wife, Daisy Khan, head of the American society for Muslim advancement, during an interview with the conservative pundit Laura Ingraham on *Fox News*. In addition to stressing that the Islamic center would help promote a tolerant message of Islam, Khan seemed to suggest that she was sympathetic to *Fox's* crusade against those leading the "War against Christmas."

"I was most intrigued because I don't think there is a war between people who are believers," she explained. "I think the real issue is bringing people who disbelieve and who have absolutely no notion what God is and believe in the existence of God," adding that "we should **work together** on a common platform to remove that kind of **ignorance against God**." (Yep. Like the way Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders united in opposition to a gay parade in Jerusalem in 2006.)

Even if you disregard the patronizing attitude that Khan shares with many Christian religious figures that disbelievers (like yours truly) need to be exposed to the truth as represented by the Abrahamic religions and be cured of our "ignorance against God" (Ma'am, I do not have anything against or in favor of God!), none of us is -- and should not be -- in a position to decide whether the Islamic tradition her husband espouses is more "tolerant" than others. The fact that Imam Rauf has been critical of Osama bin-Ladin and other radical Islamic groups does not turn him automatically

into a "moderate" in my eyes. The Koran, not unlike the Torah and the New Testament includes numerous denigrating references to women, gays and members of other religious groups, not to mention expressions of belief in the supernatural and statements that contradict current scientific theory. I would not be surprised if like many Christian fundamentalists, Rauf and his followers reject the tenets of Evolution theory. And that attitude is not very "moderate" in my secular book.

Again, that is certainly not a reason to deny Rauf, who is a law-abiding American citizen the right to build his Islamic center. And while I do not buy into the nonsense promulgated on conservative blogs that we should not have a mosque in Manhattan as long as there is not a church in Riyadh, it would be great if Imam Rauf, who is traveling to the Middle East on a State Department-financed trip call on Muslims in the Middle East to embrace a more tolerant attitude toward women, gays and religious minorities.

In general, I do not subscribe to the idea that the U.S. government and American politicians and pundits should be in the business of promoting this or that Imam (or priest or rabbi) based on the notion that he (and there is no "she") represent the "real" Islam. In the same way that Christians and Jews have engaged in long and agonizing struggles over the core beliefs of their respective religions, it is the responsibility of Muslims in America and elsewhere to adjust (or not) the principles and conduct of their faith to the realities of our modern world, and that includes making the decision not to practice their religion (God forbid...)

In that context, the only responsibility of the U.S. government is to ensure that Muslims -- like members of other faiths -- have the right to exercise -- or not to exercise -- their faith and in a way that does not violate American laws (like polygamy in the case of Mormons). That in turn, has helped provide incentives for Catholic and Jewish immigrants to reform their religious institutions and practices and to assimilate into American life.

And btw, the principle of religious freedom applies to Americans as individuals and not as members of religious communities -- as was done in the Ottoman Empire -- which explains why the or anyone else has no business designating President Obama as a Muslim or as a Christian, and why when acts of terrorism (or other crimes) are carried by individuals, we find those individuals -- *and not their religion* -- guilty.

In a way, one of the most dramatic examples of the American success in separating religion from state and embracing a secular tradition is the fact that the current Supreme Court consists of six Catholics and three Jewish Justices and not even one member of Protestant denominations -- which account for more than 50 percent of the population. Again, these six individuals were selected from their jobs based on their qualifications and not because they belong to this or that religious group -- which will be the same criteria that will be applied when Americans will select a Muslim to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court in a few years.

Books & More From Leon T. Hadar



Follow Leon T. Hadar on Twitter: www.twitter.com/leonhadar