Mosque – Oh, On the Hudson?

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"*Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground*" Exodus 3:5.

For four days in the summer of 1990, I visited Prague, in what is now the Czech Republic. It was just after the Velvet Revolution. We saw many beautiful buildings, and the Prague Castle and the wonderful bridges. But what sticks with me is Wenceslas Square. This is the central meeting place for the city, and it was where in 1969, a young student named Jan Palach set himself afire to protest the Soviet invasion that had put down the Prague Spring the year before. Two decades later, it was where the Velvet revolution was staged, with crowds in the hundreds of thousands gathering to demand, firmly but quietly, an end to Soviet domination. And they got it.

I remember a low stone wall, curved, maybe circular, somewhere near the equestrian statue of St. Wenceslas. The wall was maybe two feet high and had a diameter of about seventy feet. What I remember was candle wax. All the way around the perimeter of that wall was the wax of thousands of candles which had been lit in protest and in memory of the martyrs who had gone before. Though my visit was a good year after the Velvet Revolution, no one had removed the wax, probably because people were still lighting candles there.

Holy ground does not become holy by a decree of the government or of the church. Holy ground becomes holy by the common consent of people; the people of Czechoslovakia, as the country was then known, had made Wenceslas Square holy ground.

In the past three decades, the enshrining of ordinary space has become very common. Where a cyclist has been killed by a motorist, the family and friends of the deceased will choose a telephone pole or the signpost for a traffic sign and place a wreath or teddy bears or hearts, and will write notes. If the police take away these mementos, the family will often put them right back. These days, the spot where someone died is often considered consecrated to his or her memory.

This is a relatively new phenomenon. Traditionally, the memory of a person is associated with the final resting place of the remains – a cemetery or memorial garden or columbarium. And of course a burial spot is better set up to make a permanent shrine. A roadside shrine can last only so long, though the police often are reluctant to take it down.

Up until the 1980's, most public memorials to war dead were impersonal and idealized. They often had statues of specimen soldiers doing something heroic. When Maya Lin proposed her Vietnam Memorial, many conservative voices hated it because it didn't fit into the mold of war memorials. It was to be a series of black marble walls set into the earth, and on the walls was to be etched the names of each of the 58,000 American soldiers who had died in the war.

The project went ahead amidst intense controversy, but when it was in place, it suddenly became clear that the design allowed for a far greater intimacy, and was far more moving, than the traditional war memorial. Vietnam vets and the families of deceased soldiers immediately sought out the names of their loved ones. Notes were written, words were said. It had become holy ground.

When we call something holy ground, we are saying that the place is imbued with something which is out of the ordinary, which gives it a special worth. Consciously or

unconsciously, we hark back to the Gettysburg Address. Gettysburg was both the scene of a terrible battle in the Civil War and the location of a new national cemetery containing the remains of those who had fought – in other words, it was both the site of death and the site of the final resting place for the remains. The occasion for Lincoln's speech was the dedication of the cemetery, but Lincoln was interested not just in dedicating it but in what made it holy ground, what consecrated it, and what consecrated it was the present conflict seen through the lens of the national purpose, whether a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal could long endure:

> We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.
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> But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

Lincoln uses the rhetorical device of the ascending series here, with three verbs in increasing order of importance: dedicate, consecrate, hallow. Consecrate, as we saw last week, means to make holy, and hallow is for the ground to be holy, so I don't see much difference between the last two verbs in his series.

But he is clearly saying that the deeds of the fighting men, both those who survived and those who died, are what make it holy. The rhetoric of the politicians does not make it holy. What makes it holy is that soldiers engage in the life-and-death struggle to test whether a notion conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal can long endure.

With that perspective let us turn to the mosque. I have gone into some depth about the idea of holy ground because that seems to be the essence of the claim of those who oppose a project variously known as Cordoba House or 51 Park, but which its opponents have termed the Mosque at Ground Zero. The project is proposed as an Islamic version of the YMCA, a community activity center which would have a prayer room as one of its spaces.

Many commentators have pointed out that this proposed activity center is two blocks away from the site of the former World Trade Center and that closer to that site are businesses such as a strip club and a betting parlor. These, however, do not keep the WTC site from being holy ground.

Now insofar as holy ground is concerned, a distinction can be made between the world trade center and the battlefield at Gettysburg. All the soldiers who fought in the civil war on either side were conscious that they were engaging in a struggle for the future of the country. Their actions and their deaths had meaning in that struggle. They knew they were risking their lives, and so there is something real when Lincoln says that they have consecrated the ground more than any politician can do.

The people who were killed in the World Trade Center or on the airplanes, by contrast, did not sign up to be martyrs. They were going to work that day. They were out to make some money. They might have known that there was some risk that they would die in a terrorist action, as any of us living in these times knows that we may die that way, but there would have been nothing more than that remote chance at the time they each committed themselves to be in what we now can see was an inextricable trap. So you can't make an equivalence between the civilians killed in 9/11 and the soldiers at Gettysburg or in any other war.

But what about the firefighters? They are a bit closer to the Gettysburg soldiers, because

they knew as they entered the buildings that there was a fair chance they would not make it out alive. Unlike the civilians, by the time they committed themselves, they knew that their lives were at considerable risk.

But they would have only the dimmest notion of why. At the time they entered the building, little was known about the origins of the plot to fly airliners into buildings. It could have been something domestic as the Oklahoma City bombings had been. The firefighters did not have time to give it much thought, but if they had, they might not have come up with the idea that the huge crimes which were being committed were the work of thugs who tried to inspire themselves with Islam.

In saying this, I am not trying to disrespect in the least the firefighters or the civilian dead in the World Trade Center attacks, only to point out that there is a difference between them and the soldiers of whom Lincoln speaks at Gettysburg in making a national cause out of them, as Lincoln did. The soldier at Gettysburg died knowing he was a participant in a titanic struggle between north and south. The civilian or firefighter dying at the World Trade Center would have no clue that he or she was in a cultural clash with Islam.

Does this distinction make any difference? Not if the question is whether the World Trade Center site is holy ground. I think it is, particularly in the modern sense that it is the death site of a lot of innocent people. It is holy ground as Port-au-Prince, Haiti is holy ground, as much of Pakistan is holy ground from the floods and Pompeii is holy ground from the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 C.E. Natural disasters as well as mass murders can make holy ground.

No I will concede that the World Trade Center site is holy ground. But it does not follow from that that this Islamic culture center should not be developed nearby. I said just now that a firefighter or civilian dying in the conflagration would have no reason to believe that they were in a cultural clash with Islam. Bu even those who survive, those who know the score, are not justified in believing that this is a cultural clash with Islam. Rather, our adversary is and always has been a group of thugs who use the name of Islam. They are no more Islam than the KKK was Christianity. The New York Times hits the nail on the head when it says that Mr. Guiliani's failure to distinguish between prayerful Muslims and terrorists is despicable.

To me, President Bush's big mistake was in declaring war on terror rather than on Al Qaeda, but at least he took pains to say that we were not declaring war on Islam.

Islam is a multi-faceted religion. Al Qaeda and other radical groups like to portray the struggle as one between Islam and the modern west, particularly America. Against this, our stance in Afghanistan and in Iraq is that America is fighting extremists, not Islam itself. As New York Times columnist Frank Rich pointed out recently[1], the conservative opposition to the Manhattan mosque essentially undercuts America's position in Afghanistan and affirms Al Qaeda's recruiting stance.

For a mosque, a Muslim worship space, can be offensive to the families of those killed in 9/11 only if all Muslims somehow share the blame for those events. To hold that they do is a bigoted position, to put it bluntly; it is a position born of ignorance of the vast diversity within Islam. It is a sad feature of contemporary conservative rhetoric that it cynically and hypocritically incites bigoted positions and then reacts with self-righteous anger if anyone points out that the opinions are bigoted. Methi9nks the lady doth protest too much.

A racial or religious stereotype is a set of opinions about the behavior of members of a group based on some perception about known members. Stereotypes give us valuable formation

[1]"How Fox Betrayed Petraeus," August 21, 2010

when we don't know the actual behavior of actual members of the group, but they fade away when we do. People who think that all Muslims are terrorists don't know any Muslims, just as Al Qaeda recruits who think that all Americans are materialistic and corrupt don't know any Americans.

Gabriel Winant, a Yale graduate student in American history and frequent Salon.com commentator published a perceptive essay on the idea of holy ground in our history a couple of days ago[2]; he pointed out that there was a rough equivalence between conservatives' embrace of Ground Zero and liberals' embrace of the Lincoln Memorial as the site of Martin Luther King's 1963 speech. As conservatives are offended by the idea of a mosque near the WTC site, liberals are offended by Glenn Beck's attempt to usurp the legacy of Dr. King. It feels like he's treading on holy ground.

Winant points out that the Tea Party vision of America is a very sanitized one in which all characters were noble and there weren't any real issues in conflict. It is a theme-park America which he calls Americana. That is why the heirs of the conservatives who opposed King can claim King as a hero. "Unfortunately," says Winant, "this is a myth of white supremacy. The right wing is busy evacuating the real, troubling meanings from important historical sites, and replacing them with legends of self-flattery."

Winant goes on to point out that in the decades after the Civil War, reunionists on both sides conspired to bury their actual policy differences and the moral issue of slavery, and to promote the idea that it was just a little difference of opinion and both sides fought nobly and well. This concordance between white northerners and white southerners pushed blacks off the stage entirely, until the civil rights movement – in fact, King's 1963 address – forced the nation's attention back to unfinished business.

Winant says Glenn Beck is seeking the same amnesia that prevailed after the Civil War: "This is what's just happened at the Mall. Nobody was in the wrong during the civil rights years; King was a happy saint in the American tradition, not a dangerous radical."

Then Winant turns to the mosque issue, and his concluding paragraphs sum up so well what I have been trying to say they are worth quoting at length:

> "The story with the hallowed ground of New York City is a little more complicated, but not too different. The real meaning of the disaster on September 11 -- the way violence begets violence and fanaticism begets fanaticism, the way geopolitical maneuvering makes victims of ordinary people -- is all gone. In its place is the vacuous sanctimony that it the place is "hallowed," but all that seems to mean is that it is not open to Muslims.
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> Appropriately enough, just a few feet behind Palin's podium on the Lincoln Memorial are Lincoln's own words, on just this topic, carved into the marble. At Gettysburg cemetery, he warned, "We cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow -- this ground."
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> What is the meaning of the tragedy of September 11 supposed to be, that makes the place holy? For what purpose did those people die? And who are Sarah Palin

[2]Glenn Beck, Park51 and the politics of hallowed ground, Salon.com, August 30, 2010 http://www.salon.com/news/glenn_beck/index.html?story=/politics/war_room/2010/08/30/beck_park51_hallowed_ground

and Newt Gingrich to decide? What about the civil rights revolution? If conservatives can appropriate a movement that their ideological ancestors universally opposed, then surely, like the reunionists of the 19th century, they have warped its meaning.

Lincoln's lesson at Gettysburg was that, while the willingness of Union soldiers to die sanctified the battlefield, so did the cause itself: the "new birth of freedom," the end of slavery. His words read now like an admonishment against sanctimony and narcissism. Don't make this about you, he seems to say. "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."

In classic Tea Party fashion, Palin and Gingrich and Beck have been exaggerating their numbers. But they're padding the figures with an army of the dead, unwillingly conscripted. That's not just dishonest. It's ghoulish, and it's racist to boot. African-Americans and Muslim-Americans are being treated like supporting characters, not capable of their own citizenship, their own causes, their own struggles, and their own history. In the temples of Americana being built, the parts of our national past that don't belong to the white, conservative population are being sacrificed."

The World Trade Center site is holy ground, all right, but it is holy ground in a struggle between a system committed to diversity and acceptance and freedom of worship and a radical group of religious fanatics dedicated to trying to exterminate anyone who disagrees with them. If the ground is consecrated to this end, the mosque is an appropriate symbol of the values America represents.

Which is why the UUA President and the ministers of all the UU Churches in New York wrote an open letter to Mayor Bloomburg supporting the Park51 project, and which is why I have joined many ministers, imams and rabbis in signing my name to a petition to support the right of all Americans to worship in their chosen place. If you wish to do the same, you may go to waronprayer.org. Amen.

Readings

Exodus 3

1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock
beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD
appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was
not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the
bush is not burned up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him
out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer!
Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6
He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the
God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

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Mistrust and the Mosque

It has always been a myth that New York City, in all its dizzying globalness, is a utopia of humanistic harmony. The city has a bloody history of ethnic and class strife. But thanks to density and diversity, it has become a place like few others in this country, where the world rubs shoulders on subways, stoops and sidewalks, where gruff tolerance prevails and understanding thrives.

The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island are two pinnacles of American openness to the outsider. New Yorkers like to think they are a perfect fit with their city.

Tolerance, however, isn't the same as understanding, so it is appalling to see New Yorkers who could lead us all away from mosque madness, who should know better, playing to people's worst instincts.

That includes Carl Paladino and Rick Lazio, Republicans running for governor who have disgraced their state with histrionics about the mosque being a terrorist triumph. And Rudolph Giuliani, who cloaks his opposition to the mosque as "sensitivity" to 9/11 families without acknowledging that this conflates all prayerful Muslims with terrorists, a despicable conclusion.

As the site of America's bloodiest terrorist attack, New York had a great chance to lead by example. Too bad other places are ahead of us. Muslims hold daily prayer services in a chapel in the Pentagon, a place also hallowed by 9/11 dead. The country often has had the wisdom to choose graciousness and reconciliation over triumphalism, as is plain from the many monuments to Confederate soldiers in northern states, including the battlefield at Gettysburg.

New Yorkers, like other Americans, have a way to go. We stand with the poll's minority: the 27 percent who say the mosque should be built in Lower Manhattan because moving it would compromise American values. Building it would be a gesture to Muslim-Americans who, of course, live here, pray here and died here, along with so many of their fellow Americans, on that awful September morning. But it's all of us who will benefit.