

GOOD LAW ... BAD IDEA!

by Vic Berecz

Say you're driving through the mountains of western Virginia on I-81, as I so often do. The speed limit is 65. As usual the tandems are out in force. But, it's snowing like crazy and the road is starting to ice up. How fast are you going? Nowhere near 65, I hope! Just because it's legal doesn't mean you must do it ... or even that anyone in their right mind should attempt it. There are perfectly legal actions that in specific circumstances defy common sense. I agree wholeheartedly with President Obama that any religious group in the U.S. has a right to establish a place of gathering and worship wherever they please, subject to reasonable local zoning restrictions and safety standards. That's the law. But, does a large Muslim community center in lower Manhattan meet *common sense* criteria for time and place? Let's examine that question.

The critics of *Cordoba House* are loud and emphatic ... they want no "mosque at ground zero" ... that sounds a lot punchier than the more accurate "Islamic center two blocks from the World Trade Center site." Yes, it's really just another large urban *YMCA* or *JCC* ... that we're talking about. But, that sort of exaggeration is what happens when all-or-nothing extremists (some might call them bigots) start sounding off. Further, the radicals claim the name "Cordoba" was chosen as a symbol of Islamic domination of Christians in Spain. The *Cordoba Initiative* website says "The name Cordoba was chosen carefully to reflect a period of time during which Islam played a monumental role in the enrichment of human civilization and knowledge. A thousand years ago Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted and created a prosperous center of intellectual, spiritual, cultural and commercial life in Cordoba, Spain." You don't believe them? Then how about the Catholic Encyclopedia which (regarding the Caliphate of Cordoba) states "Christians continued to enjoy freedom of worship ... the citizens ... Arabs, Christians and Jews, enjoyed so high a degree of literary culture that the city was known as the New Athens." This when the rest of Europe was mired in what is still known as the *Dark Ages*.

Feisal Abdul Rauf has been the religious leader of a lower Manhattan mosque for decades, and is the guiding light behind the *Cordoba Initiative*. His critics claim that he and his fellow Muslims would substitute Sharia Law for our Constitution. Yet their website states: "Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf believes that all Muslims must adhere to the laws of the land in which they reside, including in America. This is a basic tenet of Islam. He has repeatedly stated that America is already one of the most *Shariah-compliant* countries in the world because of America's adherence to our Bill of Rights and because we allow members of all religions, including Muslims and Jews, to practice their faith freely." That sounds remarkably like the statements Pope Benedict XVI made in Britain recently about religious freedom and toleration in a diverse society. Here's another quote from Imam Rauf, an American citizen. Do these words sound radical or anti-American to you?

The events of 9/11 were horrific. What happened that day was terrorism, and it shames us that it was cloaked in the guise of Islam. It was inhumane, un-Islamic and is indefensible regardless of one's religious persuasion. Not only Americans but also all Muslims are threatened by the lies and actions being perpetrated by these self-serving extremists and their perverted view of Islam.

I don't know whether there is a common-sense answer to the question of whether the Islamic community center should be built at 51 Park Place now, or not ... and its most unfortunate that [using Rauf's words] "the discourse has been hi-jacked by radicals on both sides." If it was my

decision, I think I'd punt. Hopefully, given a reasonable delay, those radicals on both sides would lose interest and/or tone-down their rhetoric. Then the decision can be based on the needs of the community and common sense. But, it's not my decision. And, no matter how much I'd like to (using Sarah Palin's word) "refudiate" radicalism, the decision will ultimately be made locally in New York, probably by the Muslim community. I wish them well, and hope they keep in mind the universal imperative to *love thy neighbor*.

To hear more about the difficulties involved in that decision, I recommend listening to the ABC News (www.abcnews.com/thisweek/) interview of Imam Rauf by Christiane Amanpour on the September 12 edition of *This Week*.

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