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The “Ground Zero Mosque” Controversy and “Post-Race” Racism

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Ground Zero Mosque Supporters. Photo: David Shankbone

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The so-called “ground zero mosque controversy” is not an isolated event. It is one of many incidents in the last decade that signal how Islam is perceived as un-American and even anti-American. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1600% from 2000 to 2001. These hate crimes continue today—just last week a mosque was defaced with bacon, and in August, a passenger stabbed a New York City cab driver after confirming that he was Muslim. According to a 2005 Gallup Poll of American Households, when asked what they most admire about Muslim societies, the most frequent response among those polled was “nothing.” A 2006 USA Today/Gallup poll found that 44 percent of Americans find Muslims “too extreme” in their religious beliefs and less than half believed that U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States. During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, right-wing activists accused Barack Obama of being a closet Muslim. “Once a Muslim, always a Muslim,” declared conservative political commentator, Debbie Schlusel. Widely circulated e-mails stated that Obama would take his oath of office on the Qur’an, would side with Muslims over Americans, and is anti-Israel—all signifiers for being un-American, anti-American, or a threat to the U.S. Obama asserted his commitment to Christianity and assured the American public that he is not now nor has he ever been Muslim.

Many people considered Obama’s successful bid for the presidency to be the dawn of a post-race era, an era in which the U.S. is finally fulfilling its promise of being a colorblind democracy and meritocracy. Yet Obama’s election, while celebrated as signifying racial progress in the U.S., reflects a new era in which explicit racism, a denial of the persistence of racism, and a celebration of the end of racism operate simultaneously. These three strands can be seen in the arguments for and against the Cordoba Initiative’s plan to build a mosque/community center in an abandoned building two and a half blocks away from ground zero. The term “ground zero mosque,” coined by right-wing activist Pamela Geller and then picked up and used by the news media, gives the impression that the mosque/community center is literally being built on the actual site of the 9/11 tragedy and former World Trade Center. The controversy surrounding the “ground zero mosque” is part of a larger debate about the place of minorities in U.S. public life, revealing that logics to legitimize racism are alive and thriving in the Obama era.

Five prominent arguments have dominated the debate. Some opponents, such as Pamela Geller, claim that if the mosque/community center were built, then it means the terrorists have won. She writes that her opposition is “justifiable concern about slaughter in the name of jihad, Islamic supremacism, the subjugation of women, and gender apartheid.” This argument equates Islam with terrorism and women’s oppression, and therefore holds the world’s 1.2

billion Muslims responsible for the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. By extension, all American Muslims are also guilty and should not be entitled to full U.S. citizenship rights. In the tradition of classic racism, a seemingly logical argument is made to justify the exclusion of a certain group of people from full citizenship rights. According to this logic, it is presumably justifiable to prohibit Muslim Americans from building a mosque/community center in the name of national security.

A second argument holds that the purpose of the community center is to resignify Islam, enabling moderate Muslims to reclaim the religion from its symbolic hijacking by the 9/11 terrorists. Imam Faisal Abdur Rauf, who is spearheading the Cordoba Initiative, has stated: "Our broader mission—to strengthen relations between the Western and Muslim worlds and to help counter radical ideology—lies not in skirting the margins of issues that have polarized relations within the Muslim world and between non-Muslims and Muslims. It lies in confronting them as a joint multifaith, multinational effort." He has further stated that the community center will be open to people of all faiths and seeks to build bridges and promote peace. Such efforts to resignify Islam and delink it from terrorism reflect how powerful explicit racism remains. It is not yet common sense, as it would be for Christianity or Judaism, that Islamist extremists do not represent the entire community of Muslims.

Other supporters, presenting a third position, have argued that as American citizens, Muslims have a right to religious freedom as per the first amendment. President Obama supported the construction of the mosque on these grounds, stating: "As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances." Arguments regarding the centrality of religious freedom to the U.S. Constitution reveal that equality is unstable and needs to be continually and actively secured, revealing the idea of a "post race" era as a mirage.

I have heard a fourth argument from some Muslim Americans who fear that the Cordoba Initiative will increase the incidence of hate crimes and intensify feelings of non-belonging. They point to other mosque-building initiatives that have triggered anti-Muslim sentiment. In California, many community members resisted the Islamic Center included in Temecula Valley's expansion plans; the pastor of the neighboring church expressed concern over "Islam's extreme agenda of expansion." Such plans led to a wave of hate crimes against Muslim individuals, mosques, and Muslim-owned businesses around the country. Most notoriously, a church in Gainesville, Florida planned to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks by hosting a Qur'an burning ceremony. Pastor Terry Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center's "International Burn a Koran Day" told CNN, "We believe that Islam is of the devil, that it's causing billions of people to go to hell, it is a deceptive religion, it is a violent religion and that is proven many, many times." In this case, opposition to the mosque is motivated by the fear of increased racism, harassment, and harm. These opponents hope that if Muslims are not in the limelight, then the racism they fear will simply go away on its own, or at least stay under the surface.

A fifth argument that has acquired considerable weight and perhaps the most sympathy and support is that the mosque, if built on the proposed site, would disrespect the memory of the 3,000 people who died on 9/11. This claim makes use of a powerful rhetorical strategy, redirecting the intellectual debate on religious freedom to an emotional plea to respect the victims of the terrorist attacks. Evoking the memory of those who died effectively shuts down the conversation, since virtually all agree that those who died should be respected. No one wants to be perceived as insensitive to the victims' memory or to the grief of their loved ones. However, following this logic, we can argue that no Catholic churches should be built near schools because this would mean disrespecting children who have been abused by priests. The argument is often framed as "we are not against Islam, but want to protect the memory of those who lost their lives." U.S. Representative Peter King (R-NY) has stated, "It is insensitive and uncaring for the Muslim community to build a mosque in the shadow of Ground Zero. While the Muslim community has the right to build the mosque, they are abusing that right by needlessly offending so many people who have suffered so much." To address these concerns, Imam Faisal Abdur Rauf has indicated that the community center would include a multi-faith memorial dedicated to victims of the 9/11 attacks. Assuming a stance of anti-racism and sensitivity, this argument nonetheless operates from the presumption that Islam and terrorism are synonymous and denies Muslims civic participation in the U.S. This is an example of the denial of racism that accompanies explicit racism and the celebration of the end of racism in the so-called "post-race era." This logic maintains that the issue is not Islam or privileging national security, but rather the protection and respect of the memory of 9/11 victims and their families. Nonetheless, it assumes that Islam and Muslims are responsible for the tragedy and therefore furthers the dangerous conflation of Islam and terrorism.

These arguments that conflate Islam with terrorism, that seek to delink Islam from terrorism, that insist on upholding tenets of the U.S. constitution, and that purport to protect the memory of those who died on 9/11 illustrate the ideological battlefield over the place of Islam in the U.S. The "ground zero mosque" controversy reveals the ways in which the boundaries of American identity continue to be policed, often through struggles over who counts as a "real" American. It demonstrates the extent to which Islam is figured as un-American and terroristic, and also the extent to which all Muslims are required to account for the actions of those who commit violence under the rubric of Islam. More than anything, it reflects the state of public discourse in "post-race" America, in which explicit racism, a celebration of the end of racism, and a denial of the persistence of racism operate simultaneously. The furor over the "ground zero mosque" reveals an enduring theme in American life: that race and racism are far from settled national issues. At this historical moment, the most supported argument is one that claims not to be about discrimination or seeking to discriminate, yet nonetheless provides the necessary logic to deny Muslims equal citizenship rights now and in the future.

* Author's note: Thank you, Mona El-Ghobashy, for your generous and helpful feedback.

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