

US: What mosque hysteria has to do with the disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

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The controversy surrounding the proposed Islamic community center in downtown Manhattan is not about religion. It's about war.

For some years now the fear factor that followed the attacks of September 11, 2001 and fueled public support for the “global war on terror” (or the onomatopoeic “GWOT”) has been diminishing. Along with the long and intense work of the antiwar movement and the rising levels of casualties, fear reduction has played a key role in building opposition to the wars. Part of that process has been the growing normalization of the site of the 9/11 attacks in New York. “Ground zero,” the site of the destroyed World Trade Center, is now a busy construction venue in the midst of a hectic commercial district that includes all the usual hodgepodge of convenient and useless, businesslike and tawdry aspects of Manhattan street life: Office buildings and food vendor carts, coffee shops and strip joints. There's nothing hallowed about it.

That normalization hasn't yet made possible the kind of serious national debate this country so desperately needs. That debate is not about September 11, but about September 12 — the day George Bush launched a war our country was now going to wage anywhere he chose against whomever he designated for as long as he wanted without any restrictions. The whole world — though most especially the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as those of Yemen, Somalia, Palestine and Kenya, and so many more places — as well as those of us here in the U.S. continue to pay the price.

But the “mosque at ground zero” controversy (which of course we know is not actually about ground zero or an actual mosque at all) erupted in a very specific place in a very specific context for a very specific purpose. It wasn't launched by New Yorkers because it was never about New York. It's not insignificant that as the New Yorker has pointed out, opposition appears “roughly proportional to distance” from New York: 31 percent of Manhattan residents oppose the planned Islamic center; but 53 percent of all New York City residents disapprove, and at the national level, opposition spikes to a dangerous 68 percent.

The controversy isn't only about religious bigotry in general and Islamophobia in particular. It isn't only about claiming the U.S. as a country that belongs just to Jews and Christians. It isn't only about xenophobia running rampant and fueling a bitterly racist anti-immigrant hysteria. It isn't only about blaming all Muslims for the horrors of 9/11.

The controversy certainly is about all those things. And all of those are dangers that must be fought — passionately and powerfully — with a clear understanding that this most recent attack on equality is part of this country's legacy of racism and intolerance. Andrew Sullivan, the right-wing iconoclast, of all people, had it mostly right when he said the campaign against construction of the Cordoba House project in lower Manhattan was “so dangerous in its assumptions, so pernicious in its bigotry ...that it needs to be repudiated as swiftly and as powerfully as possible.”

Of course Sullivan didn't get it right across the board. He went on to describe the current anti-Islamic mobilization as "antithetical to the principles on which this country was founded." He must have forgotten about the principle of legally sanctioned discrimination against a host of religions and sects, from Jews to Catholics to Quakers and more, in communities, territories and states from the earliest days of European settlement in North America. Not to mention the other "principles on which this nation was founded" — the principles of genocide, slavery, Jim Crow discrimination and indentured servitude whose realization created this country's size, wealth and power. Religious bigotry — along with racial, gender, national and a host of other varieties, is right at home in the U.S.

The phrase I deleted from Sullivan's statement was "and so dangerous in the war on terror...." Meaning that the public's rejection of an Islamic center in the U.S. would likely inflame popular opinion among Muslim communities around the world, and thus cause more difficulties for that "war on terror."

That's probably true. But there is a far greater danger in the right-wing mobilization at the core of the Islamic center controversy. That is its goal of rebuilding the political support structure for that global war on terror, just at the precise moment when the failure, the illegitimacy, the casualties, and most of all the costs of the GWOT are resulting in a profound and rapid decline in support for the war. That's why reclaiming the specific area around the site of the old twin towers is at the heart of this struggle — the intention is to reassert the "hallowed" nature of that spot of land. Not out of respect for the victims of the 9/11 attacks (Muslim and otherwise). But because if the site of those attacks is "hallowed," then the wars waged in the name of 9/11 are not only good wars, they are hallowed, too.

That is the often-overlooked threat at the heart of this crusade against the construction of the Islamic community center in New York; even beyond the huge threat it poses to religious freedom, equality, civil rights and pluralism. The danger is evident in the wide range of right-wing forces using the campaign to mobilize renewed support for American exceptionalism and the U.S. hegemony it has long embraced. It is evident in the effort to re-validate the increasingly unpopular and delegitimized "global war on terror." It's about reclaiming the catastrophic war in Afghanistan as not just the "good" war but as a heroic, even sacred war.

But war is never sacred. And the wars of empire are further away than others from any so-called "hallowed" ground. The only thing sacred — meaning a commitment to be met — in this entire conversation is the continuing obligation of those of us who stand against war, against Islamophobia, against racism and xenophobia, and against empire, to do something about it.

Phyllis Bennis

Director of the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies

P.S.

* From The Huffington Post:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/phyllis-bennis/is-mosque-hysteria-being_b_697745.html

* Phyllis Bennis is a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. Her most recent book is 'Ending the U.S. War in Afghanistan: A Primer.' This article first published in Alternet.