

USA: Murfreesboro vs. Islamophobia

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WHEN THE MUSLIM community in Murfreesboro, Tennessee sought a permit to build an expanded Islamic Center, local bigots saw an opportunity to exploit the same "moral panic," invented by the Tea Party, the Christian Right and much of the corporate media, that would also emerge in New York around the so-called "Ground Zero mosque." The amalgamation of racial, ethnic, religious and national identities into a demonic Islamic "Other," has been spreading throughout the United States as well as Western Europe.

It was in this context that forces in middle Tennessee — representing some of its most reactionary elements such as real estate mogul and neo-Confederate ideologist Howard Wall — signed on with the national Islamophobic campaign, expecting an easy escalation of anti-Muslim sentiment across the area.

It's a condition of the Religious Land Use Act and Tennessee's zealous equivalent (passed, ironically enough, as an agenda item of the Christian Right), that there is precious little legal space for county planning commissions to bar — for any reason at all — a permit for land use by a religious institution as long as it meets certain legal criteria. The case of the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro's (ICM) purchase of land for an expanded Islamic Center, serving their growing congregation (several hundred families), was no different.

The Rutherford County Commission approved the permit for construction by the ICM without any controversy. Controversy arose at the following County Commissioner's meeting in May, when hundreds opposed to the construction of the new Islamic Center packed all three floors of the County Courthouse to register their absolute opposition to the rights of Muslim Americans in our county.

This involved elements from the Wilson County Tea Party, forces involved with the Tea Party campaign of Lou Ann Zelenik, and congregants of the World Outreach Church (WOC) — a massive facility in Murfreesboro whose services often end up shutting down the flow of traffic in town. The role of the WOC (especially via its pastor Alan Jackson) is especially ironic as one of the "mainstream" reasons oft cited by the opposition is that the mosque would result in traffic jams.

In the midst of this meeting — which was extended in order to allow as many speakers as possible time to spout ignorant and vitriolic slander against their fellow citizens — it became clear that the public face of opposition to the mosque had been established: Kevin Fisher.

The fact that Fisher, by most accounts, was the only person of color at any of the mosque opposition's events led to many questions as to why he surfaced as their leader. Fisher — a

committed fundamentalist Christian whose idea of an “interfaith” service involved only an interdenominational invitation — also raised many eyebrows after it was discovered that his ex-wife had converted to Islam upon leaving him.

Whatever the reasons for this choice of spokesperson (one cannot help but entertain the idea that a Black spokesperson was chosen in order to fend off accusations of racism), Fisher announced in the local paper, *The Daily News Journal*, that he would be leading citizens to march on July 14th through the town square in order to present a petition to the County Commission calling for a reversal of its approval of the ICM’s paperwork.

In spite of all the racist discourse about Muslims and people from the Arab world, Fisher maintained a strict party line at this point: this issue was about due process; the citizens who live on Veals Road were not given proper notification by the authorities (or so he claimed to the exasperation of the county’s legal representatives, who time and again pointed out that no such notification is required due to Tennessee’s state level variant of the Religious Land Use Act); tests should be conducted by the relevant authorities on the environmental impacts of the graveyard planned by the congregation (apparently because the lack of use of coffins presented an environmental hazard...); and so forth. These pretexts were all familiar to us in Tennessee: “if they move in, my property value will decline” is ultimately the main argument for informal segregation that has been used following the Civil Rights movement.

Mobilizing for Religious Freedom

Upon reading the article announcing this march, members of Middle Tennessee Solidarity formed a Facebook group called “Middle Tennesseans For Religious Freedom” (MTRF) — we consciously chose “freedom” in order to avoid the liberal “tolerance” perspective — and called for a meeting on the Middle Tennessee State University campus by all interested parties.

More than 20 people showed up to this initial planning meeting and it was decided to plan a counter-rally on the square the day of the mosque opposition’s march. Activists from local environmentalist, LGBT, civil rights, interfaith and other progressive groups gathered together to form a united front for a coordinated fightback against this wave of Islamophobia. We were determined that, if nothing else, we should make it clear that not all citizens of this county are propelled into the streets by a call to hate.

After many phone calls, press releases, flyers, door-to-door drives and phone-banking, MTRF managed to hold a second meeting with 70 members present. A good portion (80% or more) of the meeting was comprised of local (and some Nashville) residents over 30 years of age — a significant fact, since the opposition regularly critiqued MTRF by saying we were youth hired and paid, apparently by the distribution of marijuana, by the Islamic Center or by some left-wing shadow organization. It was here that the organizers planned a counter-rally for July 14th.

Many local activists with lots of experience told us we were fighting a losing battle. We would never be able to pull out enough people to adequately respond to the bigots’ numbers; people would not be able to sustain a campaign over time that involved multiple mobilizations; we did not have the knowledge, expertise or experience to properly defend the Islamic community; we were presuming to speak for the ICM (in spite of their representation at our meetings and our seeking their approval for all of our actions) in a manner that perpetuated white privilege. Our experience on the 14th would show these positions to be unfounded.

Most stunning of all, not an insignificant minority of “liberals” expressed concern with any defense of Islam as it was a “backward” religion that oppressed women and homosexuals.

July 14: “Murfreesboro Coexist”

Roughly 15 organizers of MTRF met on July 14th before our counter-rally to discuss last-minute logistics. “Murfreesboro Coexist” was written across a number of posters to be held up by a group of citizens when the opposition’s march approached the courthouse.

It is interesting to note that this slogan, and the images of people holding up the signs, eventually became the MTRF’s icon. The easily recognizable reference was consistently photographed at subsequent events and made national (and even international) news. A key to our success was encapsulated in this ability to communicate on a level of symbols.

When we approached the meeting location, a group larger than anticipated was already forming in the middle of the square — in fact, some of the organizers were contacted by shocked employees of the local Democratic Party campaigns couldn’t believe belief such numbers could be turned out for a progressive cause. Organizers immediately began rallying the crowd as several news teams converged on the location. The local police were few in number at this event and fairly cooperative.

Kevin Fisher and the rest of the ICM opposition marched about half a mile from a local school. This particular event was their only specifically designated rally and would prove to be their largest public showing. Our counter-rally met them on one side of the courthouse in silence, as voted and decided upon at the community meeting, while the opposition sang “America the Beautiful.”

The attitude of the anti-mosque protestors was restless and somewhat aggressive as several members of the march heckled our side; yet we kept our silence in the face of their vitriol and met them around the other side of the courthouse.

Several key members of the opposition’s leadership presented their petition to officials in the courthouse. The code of silence agreed upon by our group slowly deteriorated as the two sides began exchanging words. Breaking the silence drastically altered the feeling of the counter-rally.

A number of arguments ensued, but MTRF organizers were able to monitor and enforce a safe space between the participants. The confrontation culminated in the opposition singing “Amazing Grace” as MTRF responded, louder and in chorus, with “the Star-Spangled Banner.” Our organizers decided shortly after to instruct the counter-rally to turn their back to Kevin Fisher’s group and march out in silence and dignity before the situation devolved into unnecessary conflict.

Continuing the Struggle

After July 14th the ICM issue remained on the lips of city residents and became the number one news item for every major media outlet in the area. The counter-rally was not only an impressive show of force but a statement that much of Murfreesboro was unhappy with the town’s current image. MTRF almost immediately decided to organize a presence at the next County Commissioner’s meeting on August 12th.

Kevin Fisher’s group turned out significantly fewer people than the previous month, but many of their leaders and benefactors were present including local real estate giant Howard Wall.

MTRF organizers failed to investigate how to register for public notice and didn’t realize that speakers were prioritized on a first-come, first-serve basis whereas the opposition knew from its previous experience. Ten citizens spoke — nine were members of the opposition and the tenth spoke about an unrelated matter.

Though we turned out a significant crowd, our lack of a voice at the meeting appeared as a defeat in the eyes of the public. Coupled with the recent red-baiting that was flung at MTRF by local talk radio, this public setback significantly impacted the activists' morale.

The mosque opposition, however, was dealt a blow just before the County Commission meeting: the defeat of Tea Party candidate Lou Ann Zelenik in the Republican primary for Tennessee's 6th District, although by a very narrow margin.

With the loss of Zelenik's campaign the wind was somewhat taken from the sails of the mosque opposition: the single issue that propelled Zelenik's candidacy from her previous position (far behind in the polls) seemed to be discredited with Zelenik's defeat. Whatever the residents of the county thought of their Muslim neighbors, it did not seem as high on their agenda as it had previously seemed.

This was the context of the sudden and dark turn that the whole affair took at the end of August when some unknown arsonist(s) (shades of the 2008 burning and swastika-tagging of an Islamic Center in nearby Columbia, Tennessee) set fire to construction equipment at the future site of the Islamic Center on Veals Road.

Organizers of MTRF quickly responded with a candlelight vigil the following Monday, as a way for the community to publicly condemn the crime and gather in solidarity with their Muslim neighbors.

The numbers present amazingly rivaled the crowd organized back in July, and the rally itself also marked the largest presence of media at any MTRF event. Speakers at the vigil included a Catholic priest, a rabbi and a Neo-Pagan priestess.

Kevin Fisher's group had zero presence in response (though Fisher condescendingly made a comment about holding candles for "broken farm equipment" a few days beforehand). At the end of the vigil, however, organizers learned that a group of bigots had been circling the square in a truck and were arguing on the outskirts of the courthouse.

Participants were warned of possible aggressors, but the event dispersed without much more than a few heated debates — all of this occurring with a backdrop of federal agents, national and international media and the largest police presence the town had seen since the Civil Rights Movement.

Bigotry Defeated

With the defeat of Zelenik and the public relations disaster of the arson, things turned bleak for the mosque opposition. At the final County Commissioner's meeting held September 16th, MTRF spokespersons would secure a majority of the time slots for speaking. The opposition had called for a rally, but MTRF activists who went to their convergence site to report on their numbers informed organizers within the meeting that fewer than 10 people had shown up, and subsequently dispersed.

At this point it became apparent to everyone involved that, at least in the contest of the streets, our side had won. The contrast of the failed opposition rally with the powerful speeches given at the courthouse — for the first time on the public record — drove home a realization to the organizers that has become increasingly rare on the left: the sensation that we had won this battle.

Following these events, multiple mainstream churches held public meetings in support of the ICM. The Imam — now with the support of mainstream clergy — was no longer afraid that his presence in public would harm the ICM's efforts. The opposition has now turned to a dead-end legal strategy (the point of the court case is to rule that Islam is not a religion), and the community's wounds are

beginning to heal.

MTRF's efforts effectively galvanized multiple interfaith events and other public shows of support for religious liberty and respect for our Muslim neighbors. While organizers realize that the situation here can rapidly change (especially with escalations of the wars against predominantly Muslim countries), we know that there is now a solid force to fight any future threat of Islamophobic scapegoating.

Our small grassroots network took on a megachurch, the local Tea Party apparatus, various national Zionist organizations, the ridiculous assertions of Pat Robertson on the 700 Club, death threats and the general climate of ignorance and reaction — and we won, at least for now.

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P.S.

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