

The Mosque: A Test Case for Religious Freedom

Recently President Obama has come under fire for his statement supporting the right of some New York Muslims to build a mosque and community center on land they own just two blocks from Ground Zero. Clearly, not everyone shares my relief and gratitude that the President did not waffle on this issue, or duck it altogether. If religious freedom means anything, it must include the right to use private property for religious purposes, irrespective of the popularity of the religion in question.

However, critics are saying that a constitutional right to build the mosque doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. I agree, formally, with this argument. Thus, I may have a right to say nasty things about other people, but that doesn't make it right to do so. I may have the right to my own opinions, but that doesn't make me right when I express them. It certainly is not right for me to foist them on others if I am uninformed and don't really know what I'm talking about. Consequently, I try to limit my public statements to matters about which I am well informed.

Some critics are also saying that the President's position, in particular his refusal to accede that building the mosque may not be the right thing to do, shows a lack of sensitivity. Come again? The critics obviously believe that some people, such as those who lost loved ones at the World Trade Center on 9/11, will be unduly upset by the building of the mosque. That may be true, but it's hardly a conclusive argument against building the mosque.

Is there good reason for such people to be upset? I don't think so. But even if there were, is it not also incumbent upon the President and all the rest of us to show some sensitivity to members of the Islamic community in our midst? Many Muslims have felt stigmatized and distrusted because they are (unfairly) associated with the purported terrorists who carried out the attacks of 9/11?. Must we continue to stigmatize those who had nothing to do with the horrific events of that day?

Religious people are obliged to show charity toward those whose views or values they may not entirely share. All of us citizens are obliged to respect and honor the rights of those with whom we may differ, and not practice guilt by association and misinformation.

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