The Lower Manhattan Islamic Community Center and the Discourse of Social Identity Conflicts

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Introduction

The debate over the proposed Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan has become a tool in the current highly contentious political environment and an example of the fostering and use of social identity conflicts that shapes most of our public discourse. In order to find a way through this heated dispute, we need to understand the situation, how social identity conflict is being fostered and used, and what are alternative ways to deal with this and other contentious issues.

The Proposal

According to the developer, Sharif El-Gamal, who calls the property Park 51 (the address), the center will be dedicated to pluralism and service to the community and will have a swimming pool, basketball court, 500-seat auditorium, library, child-care services, a September 11 memorial for quiet contemplation, and a mosque open and accessible to all.

The Imam behind the center, Feisal Abdul Ruaf, calls it Cordoba House after the Spanish city where Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together. Its mission is to strengthen relations between the Western and Muslim worlds and to help counter radical ideology. He envisions a shared space for community activities, including a swimming pool, classrooms and a play space for children. There will be separate prayer spaces for Muslims, Christians, Jews and men and women of other faiths.

The Center in Context

A recent New York Times Poll (Barbaro & Connelly, 2010) revealed that there is limited support for the Islamic center and much wariness about Muslims:

- 1/5 of New Yorkers acknowledged animosity toward Muslims
- 33% said Muslims as compared to other American citizens are more sympathetic to terrorists
- 60% said people they knew had negative feelings toward Muslims because of 9/11
- 67% said the center should not be built where planned, they should find a less controversial location
- 52% thought that NY politicians should take a stand on the proposed center
- 62% said they have right to build it

Across the country, Muslims have filed more complaints with the EEOC in 2009 than following September 11, 2001. Complaints include ethnic slurs and failure to provide reasonable accommodation for religious practices.

According to The Toronto Star editorial:
Several studies show that significant percentages of Americans admit to prejudice against Muslims; approve of racially profiling them and forcing them to carry identity cards; and say that Muslims should not be allowed to run for president or Congress or be appointed to the Supreme Court, etc. (2010)

There have been numerous incidences of prejudicial behavior against Muslims and protests against and denouncements of mosques in various parts of the US. In Madera, California, a plastic pig with graffiti was thrown into a mosque. Late June, in Temecula, Calif., members of a local Tea Party group took dogs and picket signs to Friday prayers at a mosque that is seeking to build a new worship center on a vacant lot nearby. In Upstate NY, shots were fired and cars raced up and down the road outside a house where Muslims were praying.

In Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Christian ministers led a noisy fight against a Muslim group that sought permission to open a mosque in a former health food store bought by a Muslim doctor. The conflict over the mosque was settled when the Town Executive Council voted unanimously to give the Islamic Society of Sheboygan a permit to use the former health food store as a prayer space (Goodstein, 2010).

In Murfreesboro, Tennessee, arsons set fire to construction equipment at the site of Muslim center. Republican candidates have denounced plans for this center proposed near a subdivision, and hundreds of protesters have turned out for a march and a county meeting. A group called Former Muslims United put up a billboard saying "Stop the Murfreesboro Mosque." The group's president Nonie Darwish said, "A mosque is not just a place for worship. It's a place where war is started, where commandments to do jihad start, where incitements against non-Muslims occur. It's a place where ammunition was stored" (Goodstein, 2010)

All of this is having its impact on US Muslims. In recent conversations with Christians, Jews, and Muslims conducted in NYC by the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding (Queens College/CUNY), one Muslim woman said,

I am upset. Real emotions come to the surface. People are being hateful. It is not even about the mosque anymore but about Muslim’s in general. A clerk at a store refused to serve a Muslim woman. If people harbor feelings it can lead to something more significant in the future. Muslims around the world shouldn't be blamed for 9/11. It's not the religion itself that did it.

Social Identity Conflicts

One could dismiss the controversy and the rise in prejudicial behavior as a lack of understanding and a product of the anxiety produced by challenging economic times. However, the very visible attacks on Muslims that has accompanied the Islamic community center controversy can be seen as another manifestation of social identity conflicts.

Social Identity conflicts are less about disagreements over resources and needs and more about one’s understanding of self and other, group dignity, integrity and purpose, security, agency and efficacy, who is included/excluded, values, beliefs, and what is just (Azar, 1990; Burton, 1987; Lederach, 1997; Rothman, 1997, Coy & Woehrle, 2000). People’s identity is often constructed by “disidentifying” with the “out-group”: we are the people who act differently from those other groups. Some go so far as treating anyone who associates with the out-group as a threat to their own group (Fiol, Pratt, & O’Conner, 2009). Especially with long standing community, racial/ethnic group, and national conflicts, each group’s collective identity gives group members a sense that “they belong to a distinct, cohesive, and superior
social group that provides them with mutual respect, a meaningful understanding of the social world, and the collective strength to act efficaciously” (Simon and Klandermans, 2001, p. 321).

Each side works from separate ideologies and separate narratives about the situation and its history. These narratives both shape and assert social identity. There are usually intolerable moral differences, high-stake distributional issues, or efforts to protect self worth and maintain domination or status. And in cases of ongoing discrimination and oppression, each party creates identity informing narratives about who has more rights to resources and who is the oppressed (Rothman, 1997).

Intensified and long standing identity conflicts can lead the parties to see each other as harmful to society and, therefore, have to be restrained or excised. Each group believes that its own constructive behavior demonstrates its core values and that negative acts are justified responses to acts of the other group. In turn each constructive act by the other group is seen as manipulation; and each negative act demonstrates their core values.

Social Identity conflicts are not confined to racial, ethnic, and religious differences. Less intense forms of identity conflicts exist between classes, professions, political parties, and those who operate from different positions on the conservative – progressive continuum.

The Narratives That Foster and Use Social Identity Conflicts

In social identity conflicts, the objective of interactions with other groups is not only to convince them of the “rightness” of one’s own group’s beliefs, values, perspective, etc. but to identify an “us” who are different from a feared, discomforting other, and to pose an either/or choice for people to claim or not their membership in this “us.” The narratives used are not open to be proven accurate or inaccurate because they are more about asserting the values, beliefs, and understanding of self that establish we are the ones who stand for patriotism and defense of “our” way of life and they, Muslims, are the threat to all of this, and the defenders of the Islamic center, are elitist, secular rationalists, and cowards in the face of the obvious threats posed by Islam. Those who defend the Islamic center foster identity conflict when they identify themselves as tolerant, rational, sensitive, and defenders of the rule of law and identify those opposed to the Islamic community center as intolerant, irrational, Islamophobic, threats to a pluralistic society. On both sides, critical comments are not opportunities to question what was said but interpreted as attacks on one’s identity, which call for counterattacks on the other’s identity: you may call us Islamophobic but you are liberal elites who do not understand patriotism. On both sides, there are narratives of conspiracy and threat and narratives of “rational” arguments that reinforces that one’s own group is better and that the other group, and those who associate with them need to be denounced, controlled, and possibly excised.

The Narratives of Those Opposed to the Islamic Community Center

Often the out-group is associated with a conspiracy to dominate the in-group. Newt Gingrich has said he believes that Sharia, the Islamic law, is coming to America by stealth and threatens the survival of America. One source of this is Peter Hammond's book: Slavery, Terrorism and Islam: The Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat, where he argues that Islam is not a religion but a system of life aimed at taking over other societies.

In reaction to the Temecula, California Mosque, a grandmother who lost her job, said "I learned that in 20 years with the rate of the birth population, we will be overtaken by Islam, and their goal is to get people in Congress and the Supreme Court to see that Shariah is implemented. My children and grandchildren will have to live under that." "I do believe everybody has a right to freedom of religion," she said. "But Islam
is not about a religion. It's a political government, and it's 100 percent against our Constitution" (Goodstein, 2010).

Besides using the conspiracy argument, identity narratives often associate the out-group with other historically despised groups. Frank Gaffney in *The Washington Times* associates the Islamic Center with Hitler’s Afrika Korps, the threat of Sharia, and the Muslim Brotherhood’s stealth jihad. He says that anyone that accuses the attackers of the Islamic center of intolerance is an enabler of the Islamic conspiracy, and the protesters against the Islamic center are ordinary Americans and patriots:

To be sure, the rally held two blocks from the World Trade Center was not a decisive defeat of the enemy like that dealt by the storied British "Desert Rats" to Hitler’s Afrika Korps in November 1942. But there was something pivotal about the fact that throngs of ordinary Americans - many of them family or friends of those who died on Sept. 11, 2001 - had come together to stand for hours in an intermittent rain not just to contest the construction of a mega-mosque at a wholly inappropriate location, but in informed opposition to the impetus behind that mosque: Shariah…

The assembled union workers, firefighters, police officers, Patriot Guard bikers and other regular folks were addressed by a succession of citizen activists, community leaders and Sept. 11 family members. The thunderous response to patriotic speeches and songs about freedom and the threat posed to it by people like those who toppled the once-adjacent World Trade Center rang in the canyons of Lower Manhattan and - because of the massive media presence - across the land…

Specifically, the public is learning of the obligation of Shariah's adherents to impose this toxic program everywhere via jihad - holy war, waged by violence or by stealth. Thanks to the Ground Zero Mosque controversy, Americans also are getting a crash course on the pre-eminent perpetrator of the stealthy form of "civilization jihad," the Muslim Brotherhood. While its tactics may differ from, say, al Qaeda's, the Brotherhood's objectives are identical: the supremacy of Islam and the establishment of a theocratic ruler, the caliph, who is to govern worldwide in accordance with Shariah.

As spokesmen from various Brotherhood front groups (notably, the Council on American Islamic Relations, the Muslim American Society and the Muslim Public Affairs Council) have been vociferously demanding that the construction of a mega-mosque is a test of our religious tolerance, more and more of us are realizing that this is what is known in Shariah as taqiyya - lying for the faith…the Brothers endlessly make such claims as part of the stealth jihad. Their playbook calls for them cynically to use our civil liberties to suppress opposition to the insinuation here of the most intolerant doctrine of all: Shariah.

In the same newspaper, Jeffrey Kuhner attacks Mayor Bloomberg by identifying him as an example of how liberals use charges of racism and intolerance to undermine patriotism. The out-group is not just Muslims, but includes anyone who defends them. The in-group is anyone who is brave enough to stand up to Islam and charges of racism and intolerance; especially because the in-group has been very accommodating and tolerant to the out-group. Mayor Bloomberg is an elitist liberal, a country-club Republican who believes most Americans are Islamophobic bigots - primitive hicks who need to be led toward a rationalist, secular progressive future. Patriotism, blood-and-soil nationalism, honoring the memory of our war dead - these are values he finds strange and repulsive.
This equation of patriotism with xenophobic bigotry lies at the heart of modern liberalism. It is why our political and media class despises Middle America. The belief in American exceptionalism and love of country must be smashed. Charges of racism and intolerance are the hammer and sickle of cultural liberalism. They are used to beat the rebellious heartland into submission.

Liberals have embraced a post-American, post-Christian globalist world. Mr. Bloomberg embodies the values - and utter disconnect - of the new ruling elite...As mayor, he has transformed New York into a sanctuary city for illegal immigrants. His tax-and-spend policies are leading to economic ruin. Investment capital and jobs are fleeing. Crime is surging. Government dependency and social permissiveness are rising...There are more than 1,200 mosques in America, about 100 in New York alone. Contrary to Mr. Bloomberg's fantasy Islamophobia, there is nowhere in the five boroughs that is off-limits to them - except for one place...To construct a mosque - led by a militant imam who boasts that "the United States has more Muslim blood on its hands than al Qaeda has on its hands of innocent non-Muslims," defends Hamas, demands we adopt Shariah law and claims U.S. policies were an "accessory" to the Sept. 11 attacks - is not only insensitive and provocative, but blasphemous. It denigrates and defiles the dead.

The conservative commentator, Bill Whittle, argues that tolerance for Muslims is equivalent to the tolerance demonstrated by the UK and the US for Hitler before WWII. From his perspective tolerance is weakness, moral cowardice, surrender, and suicide in the face of the enemy.

Members of the groups opposing the center call it the Ground Zero Mosque or the mega-mosque, implying it is actually at the former World Trade Center site and, therefore, an affront to the events of 9/11. Conservative columnist, Charles Krauthammer summarizes the view that the Islamic center is an affront to the victims of 9/11.

When we speak of Ground Zero as hallowed ground, what we mean is that it belongs to those who suffered and died there -- and that such ownership obliges us, the living, to preserve the dignity and memory of the place, never allowing it to be forgotten, trivialized or misappropriated...

Who is to say that the mosque won't one day hire an Anwar al-Aulaqi -- spiritual mentor to the Fort Hood shooter and the Christmas Day bomber, and onetime imam at the Virginia mosque attended by two of the 9/11 terrorists?

An Aulaqi preaching in Virginia is a security problem. An Aulaqi preaching at Ground Zero is a sacrilege. Or would the mayor then step in -- violating the same First Amendment he grandiosely pretends to protect from mosque opponents -- and exercise a veto over the mosque's clergy?

Rick Lazio, in his unsuccessful primary bid to be the Republican candidate for governor, tried to use this strategy of standing for tolerance while defending opposition to the Islamic center; he also uses one of the other key opposition narratives, the money for the Islamic Center is coming from enemies of the US:

The debate over the proposed "Ground Zero mosque" is not a debate about religion; there are more than 100 mosques in New York City and nearly 2,000 in the country, and no one argues for a cap on the building of mosques. There are millions of peace-loving, patriotic Muslims across this country, but Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf does not represent them.

Imam Rauf, the driving force behind the proposed mosque, has been lionized as a bridge-builder by a few, but in light of the imam's statements over the years, this argument falls apart. He has said that American policies were an "accessory" to 9/11. He has refused to condemn...
the terrorist group Hamas. He has said that America has "more Muslim blood on its hands than al-Qaeda has on its hands of innocent non-Muslims." Imam Rauf has gone so far as to suggest Osama Bin Laden was "made in the USA." Ask yourself, does this sound like a peace-loving bridge-builder to you?

The mosque developers' plans call for an imposing $100 million structure, but when asked, they've refused to say whether they will take money from Iran. In fact, he refuses to say where any of the money is coming from. Will the money come from hostile foreign governments? Will foreign radical groups send money?

The Narratives of Those Who Defend the Islamic Community Center

The defenders of the Islamic center argue that the planners have the legal right to build where they wish and that opposition to the mosque encourages radical Islam. They offer “rational,” “factual,” “historical,” and sometimes ironic arguments.

Both Mayor Bloomberg and President Obama have defended the legal right of El-Gamal and Rauf to build their community center, though President Obama and a number of other defenders of the Islamic center advise considering another site in the city. Given that the New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission voted unanimously to deny landmark status to protect the building where the Islamic center is planned, Mayor Bloomberg said,

Whatever you may think of the proposed mosque and community center, lost in the heat of the debate has been a basic question: Should government attempt to deny private citizens the right to build a house of worship on private property based on their particular religion? That may happen in other countries, but we should never allow it to happen here. This nation was founded on the principle that the government must never choose between religions, or favor one over another. (Elliott, 2010)

Borzou Daragahi in the Los Angeles Times argues that opposition to the center encourages radical Islam and is a rejection of Islam:

Many Muslims abroad are miffed by the stateside debate, largely conducted by non-Muslims, that has grown so loud as to become a topic of discussion on talk shows and newspapers from Bali to Bahrain, from Baghdad to Berlin. The proposed Cordoba House has become a symbol of America's fraught relations with the world's 1.5 billion Muslims.

"Rejecting this has become like rejecting Islam itself," said Ahmad Moussalli, a professor of Islamic Studies at the American University of Beirut. "The United States has historically been distinguished by its tolerance, whereas Europe, France, Belgium and Holland have been among those who have rejected the symbolism of Islam. Embracing it will be positively viewed in the Islamic world."

Nicolas Kristof associates Republicans who oppose the center with views of Al Qaeda, uses irony and narratives of "fact" to accuse them of being contradictory, enablers of radical Islam, and purveyors of disinformation. He also identifies the attacks on Muslims as similar to the intolerance that has been shown toward many immigrant groups.

It's striking that many American Republicans share with Al Qaeda the view that the West and the Islamic world are caught inevitably in a "clash of civilizations." Anwar al-Awlaki, the
American-born cleric who recruits jihadis from his lair in Yemen, tells the world's English-speaking Muslims that America is at war against Islam. You can bet that Mr. Awlaki will use the opposition to the community center and mosque to try to recruit more terrorists.

In short, the proposed community center is not just an issue on which Sarah Palin and Osama bin Laden agree. It is also one in which opponents of the center are playing into the hands of Al Qaeda.

These opponents seem to be afflicted by two fundamental misconceptions.

The first is that a huge mosque would rise on hallowed land at ground zero. In fact, the building would be something like a YMCA, and two blocks away and apparently out of view from ground zero. This is a dense neighborhood packed with shops, bars, liquor stores -- not to mention the New York Dolls Gentlemen's Club and the Pussycat Lounge (which says that it arranges lap dances in a private room, presumably to celebrate the sanctity of the neighborhood).

Camie Ayash, a spokeswoman for the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, lamented that people were listening to what she called "total disinformation" on Islam...

Dr. Mansoor Mirza, the physician who owns the property, said he was trying to take the long view of the controversy.

"Every new group coming to this country -- Jews, Catholics, Irish, Germans, Japanese -- has gone through this," Dr. Mirza said. "Now I think it's our turn to pay the price, and eventually we will be coming out of this, too."

Defenders of the right to build also speak of there being many mosques in the US and that part of Manhattan for many years; there is one 12 blocks away, another 4 blocks. Goodstein (2010) quoting a Duke University study and Ihsan Bagby’s revised survey of American Mosques, says that mosques help to prevent terrorism,

A two-year study by a group of academics on American Muslims and terrorism concluded that contemporary mosques are actually a deterrent to the spread of militant Islam and terrorism. The study was conducted by professors with Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy and the University of North Carolina. It disclosed that many mosque leaders had put significant effort into countering extremism by building youth programs, sponsoring antiviolence forums and scrutinizing teachers and texts.

Radicalization of alienated Muslim youths is a real threat, Mr. Bagby said. "But the youth we worry about," he said, "are not the youth that come to the mosque."

Edward Curtis, millennium chair of liberal arts at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, offers “historical” and “factual” answers to misconceptions about the practice of Islam in the US.

- Mosques are not new to this country; they have been here since the colonial era. Between 1731 and 1733, African American Muslim slave and Islamic scholar Job Ben Solomon, a cattle driver, would regularly steal away to the woods for his prayers... The Midwest was home to the greatest number of permanent U.S. mosques in the first half of the 20th century. In 1921, Sunni, Shiite and Ahmadi Muslims in Detroit celebrated the opening of perhaps the first
purpose-built mosque in the nation. Funded by real estate developer Muhammad Karoub, it was just blocks away from Henry Ford's Highland Park automobile factory, which employed hundreds of Arab American men. Today there are more than 2,000 places of Muslim prayer, most of them mosques, in the United States.

- Most mosques in America do not teach Islamic law for a simple reason: It's too complicated for the average believer and even for some imams. Islamic law includes not only the Koran and the Sunna (the traditions of the prophet Muhammad) but also great bodies of arcane legal rulings and pedantic scholarly interpretations.

- A 2009 Gallup poll found that African Americans accounted for 35 percent of all Muslim Americans, making them the largest racial-ethnic group of Muslims in the nation. It is unclear whether Arab Americans or South Asian Americans (mostly Pakistanis and Indians) are the second-largest. Muslim Americans are also white, Hispanic, Sub-Saharan African, Iranian, European, Central Asian and more -- representing the most racially diverse religious group in the United States.

- While there are instances in which foreign funds, especially from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf region, have been used to build mosques in the United States… the vast majority of mosques are supported by Muslim Americans themselves. Domestic funding reflects the desire of many U.S. Muslims to be independent of overseas influences.

- In addition to worship services, most U.S. mosques hold weekend classes for children, offer charity to the poor, provide counseling services and conduct interfaith programs. No doubt, some mosques have encouraged radical extremism. Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind Egyptian sheik who inspired the World Trade Center's first attackers in 1993, operated out of the Al-Salam mosque in Jersey City, N.J. But after the 2001 attacks, such radicalism was largely pushed out of mosques and onto the Internet, mainly because of a renewed commitment among mosque leaders to confront extremism.

The narratives of conspiracy and threat and the narratives of fact, rationality, and reasonableness do less to convince other groups than to identify that one group is different from the other—who is the “we” and who are the questionable “others.” Not presuming to know the authors’ intent or motivation, the effect of each author’s narrative is to ask us to believe the “rightness” of their argument and identify with the values and beliefs they are presenting. Each narrative serves to satisfy our needs for understanding of self and other, group dignity, integrity and purpose, security, values, beliefs, agency and efficacy, and who is included/excluded, who to trust, and what is just. Do you identify with being a patriot and hero willing to stand up to those who threaten our way of life? Or are you a rational and tolerant person willing to counter bigotry? Will security be reached by countering the Islamic conspiracy or not feeding radical Islam? Whose side are you on in the “clash of civilizations?”

Much of the political discourse today is structured this way—do you identify with the “right” group or with those “dangerous” others. Politicians and commentators manipulate social pluralism, the rule of law, ethnic and religious issues to gain support and divide the public. “Middle Americans” and “Real and Patriotic Americans” are victims of a ruling class of elites; or “Tolerant and Rational People” and pluralist society are under siege. Interestingly, Thanassis Cambanis says in the NYT:

The one constant expressed, regardless of geography, is that even though many in the United States have framed the future of the community center as a pivotal referendum on the core issues of religion, tolerance and free speech, those outside its borders see the debate as a confirmation of their pre-existing feelings about the country, whether good or bad.
The Way Forward

We need to intervene to prevent violent and destructive behavior in conflict situations. Political discourse will most likely continue to involve winning voters to one side or the other by attacking the efficacy and integrity of the other side. Differences of values, beliefs, goals, purpose, etc. will continue to inform, shape, and intensify conflicts between groups. Some people will refuse to risk moving beyond the security and efficacy of their identity positions, at least until they are ready. With those givens, how do we move forward from identity discourses to dialogue aimed at listening, understanding, and negotiating differences? And how do we do this in a way that does not make another appeal for people to reject one group in order to identify with a group who values dialogue?

First of all there needs to be a willingness to have a conversation rather than make an appeal for one side or the other. Once the conversation begins, those involved can:

- Recognize and acknowledge that the identity discourse is happening and share what they experience when they hear the narratives from both sides
- Listen with resilience to what may be difficult to hear
- Articulate and listen to one’s own and others different understandings of self and other, group dignity, integrity and purpose, security, values, beliefs, agency and efficacy, and who is included/excluded, who to trust, and what is just
- Find uncommon ground where the conversation continues and each moves to action not out of rejection of the other in an attempt to assert a particular group identity but out of clarity about the different understandings and willingness to negotiate shared goals.

Elina Noor, in the Malaysian New Straits Times, talks about the lessons from the Islamic center for Malaysia and implies the same for the US. Those lessons include having a constructive conversation about diversity:

Finally, a nation that is able to confront tough questions about its diversity is not necessarily headed for chaos and anarchy. Tensions among communities of different ethnicities and faiths in a rapidly changing world are only to be expected. But a society that is able to pause in that blur of confusion to ask itself what kind of nation it wants to be - and proceeds to act pragmatically rather than emotionally - is a society capable of maturing beyond merely tolerating to genuinely accepting, even embracing, the "other" as part of the nation.

No country is perfect. Even the most developed democracies will engage in difficult debates about their identity. The sooner we realise that national identity can never be a zero-sum game among communities, the quicker we will progress in our long road towards meaningful national unity.

References


