

## Contradiction? Majority of Americans Polled Oppose Mosque Near Ground Zero but See Group's Right to Build There

*The Wired Word for August 22, 2010*

### In the News

Revealing an interesting dichotomy, an opinion poll conducted by Fox News last week found that while a majority of American voters surveyed think the Islamic group that wants to build a mosque near Ground Zero in New York City has the right to do so, most also think it would be wrong for the group to do so.

The telephone interviews with 900 randomly chosen registered voters across the United States found that 61 percent of those polled thought the Muslim group had the right to place a mosque close to the site of the 9/11 attack on the twin towers, but that 64 percent thought the decision to do so would be wrong.

The split in responses suggests that while the majority of Americans may realize that the Islamic extremists who launched the 9/11 attacks do not represent moderate Muslims such as those behind the Manhattan mosque project, we are nonetheless unable to completely separate Islam in general from the extremist form that motivated the 9/11 atrocities. The pain, fear and anger from 9/11 is still too deep to decide the Manhattan mosque issue on a purely objective basis.

Some members of **The Wired Word** editorial team think that under the circumstances, the Muslims who want to build the mosque have a good opportunity to show something about the peaceful aims of mainstream Islam by declaring that in the interests of the public good, they will seek a different location for their mosque. So far, however, no such declaration has been made, and, in the opinion of some team members, those who want to build the mosque are showing incredible insensitivity to the concerns of many Americans.

Nonetheless, this is an opportunity to broaden our understanding of the Muslim world. Writing in *The New York Times*, William Dalrymple said that some of the resistance to the mosque voiced by politicians shows "a dangerously inadequate understanding of the many divisions, complexities and nuances within the Islamic world -- a failure that hugely hampers Western efforts to fight violent Islamic extremism and to reconcile Americans with peaceful adherents of the world's second-largest religion."

Dalrymple went on to point out how easily we distinguish differences within the Christian world. We do not assume that Boston Roman Catholics are in league with Irish Republican Army bomb makers, that Orthodox Christians have ties to Serbian war criminals or that Southern Baptists support murderers of abortion doctors.

Likewise, said Dalrymple, our leaders are mistaken "to see the Islamic world as a single, terrifying monolith." He explained that Feisal Abdul Rauf, the imam involved with the effort to build the mosque, "is one of America's leading thinkers of Sufism, the mystical form of Islam, which in terms of goals and outlook couldn't be farther from the violent Wahhabism of the jihadists. His videos and sermons preach love, the remembrance of God ... and reconciliation." He is just the sort of Muslim that Osama bin Laden regards as "a legitimate target for assassination," Dalrymple said.

Dalrymple's full article can be read at [The Muslims in the Middle. \*New York Times\*.](#)

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Poll: 64 Percent Think It's Wrong to Build Mosque Near Ground Zero. \*Fox News\*](#)

[Ground Zero: Exaggerating the Jihadist Threat. \*TIME\*](#)

[Ground Zero Mosque Row Heats Up. \*ABC News\*](#)

[Mayor Blunderbuss Is Sad. \*Homiletics\*](#)

## **The Big Questions**

1. Do you tend to see the Islamic world as "a single, terrifying monolith"? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Is the matter of where the mosque and cultural center locates only an issue of freedom of religion? Why or why not? Could opposing the mosque being built near Ground Zero potentially have a bearing on your congregation's right to locate where it wishes?
3. What role should tolerance play in the current controversy? Is opposition to the mosque plan necessarily an expression of intolerance?
4. If a majority of Americans oppose locating the mosque near Ground Zero, should that have any bearing on the final decision? When is deciding actions based on majority opinion the wrong thing to do?
5. What religious resources help you to not demonize all Muslims?

## **Confronting the News with Scripture**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **Jonah 1:4-5**

*"But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god ...."* (For context, read 1:1-17.)

God asked Jonah to issue a call to the Ninevites to repent, but Jonah, like his fellow Israelites, viewed the Ninevites as archenemies who threatened and oppressed Israel. He so hated and feared them that he disobeyed God, fleeing by sea. His flight put not only himself but those in the boat with him in grave danger.

**Questions:** Imagine that you received a call from God to reach out to an ethnic or political group that you hate and/or fear. Might you be tempted, like Jonah, to run the other way? How would you deal with that?

### **Matthew 22:39**

*"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (For context, read 22:34-40.)

### **Matthew 5:44**

*"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* (For context, read 5:43-48.)

Both of these commands are from Jesus. In the present circumstances, we are being called on to distinguish our enemies from our neighbors. Moderate Islam is really our friend, and hence our neighbor. Extremist Islam has made us their enemy.

**Questions:** Is it a Christian responsibility to distinguish friends from enemies? Why?

### **Luke 9:50**

*"... for whoever is not against you is for you."* (For context, read 9:49-50.)

Jesus gave this response to the disciple John who saw someone other than the disciples casting out demons in Jesus' name. John was apparently upset that this unnamed person had not been officially authorized to perform this ministry. The irony is that the unauthorized exorcist was doing what the disciples themselves had recently

been unable to do! (see Luke 9:38-41). Jesus' response, however, is that they should not stop this man, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

The story can be applied more broadly to suggest that if a Muslim group or some other religious body is working toward reconciliation and peace (as the Manhattan group says it is), then Christians ought not to interfere with them.

**Question:** How can claims of working toward worthy goals be authenticated?

### **1 Corinthians 8:13**

*"Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."*  
(For context, read 8:1-13.)

In Corinth in Paul's time, many people worshiped idols. Those worship practices involved the sacrifice of animals, but generally, the bodies of the animals were then sent to the meat markets where the meat was sold to the public. This raised a question for some Christians in the Corinthian church: Are Christians free to eat meat from animals slaughtered in worship of other gods? Other Christians thought the question was ridiculous. They argued that since the other gods really didn't exist, no real meaning was attached to the meat, especially if you didn't believe in those gods.

Paul agrees in principle with the latter group. He says, "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do" (v. 8). But, says Paul, the matter is not quite that simple. Many of the church members were converts who had previously worshiped one or more of these other gods. "Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled" (v. 7). Therefore, Paul concludes, for the sake of helping those who are weaker in the faith, the stronger members should avoid eating meat offered to idols. "Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak," Paul advises (v. 9). In fact, Paul goes so far as to say that when they, in their strength, do something that hurts a weaker Christian's faith, they sin against God.

Paul then takes it one step further and aims the advice at himself by saying that if his own meat-eating would cause any Christian to fall, not only would he avoid meat from idols, but would actually avoid eating meat at all, even that not from pagan rituals.

**Questions:** Some would prefer that the mosque-builders apply reasoning like Paul's and decide that even though they are technically free to build at their selected location, they realize it will cause pain to others for them to do so, and therefore they will choose another home. Is that what the polls suggest? Should we expect that in this situation?"

### **Questions for Further Discussion**

1. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who supports the mosque proposal, recently said, "To cave to popular sentiment would be to hand a victory to the terrorists." Does that "hand a victory to the terrorists" argument make sense? Why or why not?
2. What do you make of this finding from the Fox poll: "Seventy percent of voters who attend religious services regularly think it is wrong to put a mosque near Ground Zero, compared to 64 percent of those who rarely attend"?
3. Respond to this comment from *TIME* magazine: "Allowing a place of worship to be built in lower Manhattan will constitute neither an American triumph nor a defeat. It will simply tell the world that this nation, wisely, has decided to move on."

4. TWW team member Dr. James Berger tells of being a Planning and Zoning commissioner in Alaska. He says, "We had a case in which the new Mormon congregation was building a church in a neighborhood that was largely Lutherans. The Lutherans protested the presence of the Mormons in the neighborhood, despite their conforming to all zoning requirements. I found myself, a Presbyterian pastor, in the role of commissioner defending the rights of the Mormons. After all, freedom of religion means the Santarias as well as the Salvation Army can practice their faith." In what ways is the Manhattan mosque situation different from that case?

5. If possible, invite a local Muslim to visit your class to give his or her view about what it means to be a Muslim in America right now.

### **Responding to the News**

Given the circumstances of our world today, it could be useful to offer a class in your church to explain more about Islam, for purposes of understanding others who are our neighbors in our country today.

### **Closing Prayer**

O God, we pray that some good might come out of the controversy about the location of this mosque, some good that makes us better able to live at peace with our neighbors, and they with us. In Jesus' name. Amen.