

A Religious Shrine at Ground Zero?

By Daniel S. Brenner

A serious and inclusive discussion of the future of the Ground Zero site is now underway. The [Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York](#) is in the midst of conducting an important series of open public meetings on various aspects of the planning process. From the sidelines I've been following this conversation and have been keeping a close eye on the growing list of proposals by architects, urban planners, and others offering up cultural centers, art spaces, memorial parks and business complexes. What is conspicuously absent from these proposals is any attention to religious needs that might be associated with the site. Even the discussion of the victims' memorial that is to be erected as part of any rebuilding plan for the site, has been framed in essentially secular terms. No proposals even for the quiet, understated ecumenical chapels one finds in hospitals. As one of the many chaplains who witnessed the events of the 11th, and volunteered with many other clergy to help deal with some of the spiritual and emotional crises that followed, I'm wondering -- Why has religion suddenly been thrust to the sidelines?

Religious groups and organizations were among the first to respond to the attack. Moreover, in the days following the attack, Americans flocked to their synagogues, churches and mosques in record numbers. I will never forget watching the televised services held at the National Cathedral and Riverside Church, both powerful expressions of our collective sense of grief and hope.

But while those services were articulations of America's common spirit, they also spoke to our religious particularities. As an American I listened intently to all the clergy who spoke, but as a Jew, I cared most about what the rabbis had to say. I imagine that this was the case for Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Buddhists, all who were represented in those services. America is great because we not only allow for the freedom of religion, but we have a public square that can encourage our religious diversity at the right moments.

For this reason, I would ask, why not build a mosque at ground zero? And a church, and a synagogue as well? Why not erect a vast inter-religious center on the premises as a supplement to the secular, cultural, and artistic elements that will figure in the blueprint for the site's reconstruction? An inter-religious center could serve for educational purposes, and the religiously specific chapels could be used for baptisms, confirmation ceremonies, bar and bat mitzvahs, and even weddings of those whose parents or loved ones have perished in the attacks. It would be a site of healing for many. And just imagine what it would be like for American Muslims, and Muslim visitors from abroad to visit such a shrine.

Building a mosque on the site would also send a message to the Islamic world about America, and our commitment to the freedom of religion. At a time when many Muslims are being fed endless distortions about America and what we value, it will take more than a publicity mission by Muhammad Ali to change America's image.

What traditional religious adherents in the Islamic world, and elsewhere fail to comprehend is the great irony of American church-state separation: The more secular the state, the more religious the nation. In America, religious faith is freely chosen and religious communities are strong. In an increasingly diverse world, America may hold the model that the world needs.

But would building an inter-religious center at Ground Zero help?

Maybe a few misguided Muslims would go there to praise Allah for his great victory in destroying the towers - but I imagine the vast majority of American Muslims would go to simply offer prayers of gratitude that Allah, in his mercy, has created a place called America, where both freedom and faith can flourish.

The perception of America's role in the world is being redefined. In addition to being regarded as an economic and military power, we are now seen as a global police force attempting to root out terror. But America is a spiritual power as well and it is important that we do what we can to get this message out. Building an inter-religious center on the site of the World Trade Center could be an important step in this direction. It would be a living testimony to the American conviction that secularity and diversity are not the enemies of faith, but are rather the very basis of spiritual strength and religious renewal.