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On 9/11, finding hope for Islam in America

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A small c catholic

I am finding this ninth anniversary of 9/11 even more troubling than the eight before it.

For my family each 9/11 lacerates our hearts anew because my 31-year-old nephew, the son of one of my three sisters, was a passenger on American Flight 11 -- the first plane that hijackers smashed into the World Trade Center. Karleton Fyfe was simply a fabulous young husband, father (his wife was early in her pregnancy with their second son when Karleton died), son, brother, cousin, nephew, friend, and businessman.

If we have felt the stupefying loss each day -- and we have -- every 9/11 anniversary rips even more sharply at our emotional scar tissue. But this year seems especially disquieting, given the controversy over whether to locate an Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York [1]. That dispute has revealed the distressing reality that a growing number of Americans irrationally fear Islam. They act as if the whole religion attacked the United States that malignant day.

I?ve thus been seeing the term Islamophobia all over, including in the recent cover story of *TIME* magazine [2].

So now we Americans -- among the most religious people in the world -- must acknowledge the profound irony of our ignorance not just about Islam but about religion in general. This willful and self-perpetuating know-nothingism is one reason religion scholar Stephen Prothero wrote his important 2007 book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know -- And Doesn?t [3]*.

What our individual and collective ignorance leads to is prejudice and fear, just as ignorance about Catholicism earlier in American history led to exactly those same appalling results -- to say nothing of violence.

In its cover piece *TIME* concluded, in reference to the proposed New York City Islamic center, that ?it is plain that many of Park51?s opponents are motivated by deep-seated Islamophobia.?

This fear has not developed without efforts to combat it. Ever since 9/11 -- beginning in what I was writing then for *The Kansas City Star* but continuing since on my blog [4] and in other venues -- I?ve sought to describe how the 19 hijackers acted wildly outside the bounds of Islam. Many other journalists and religious commentators have done the same.

I have traveled to such countries as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Uzbekistan to help readers get a better understanding not just of Islam today but also what it looked like in its cultural zenith several centuries back. I?ve attended conferences about Islam?s place in America and have reported to readers on how America has become a crucible in which a modern version of Islam is being formed and lived out in ways fully in harmony with traditional democratic values.

And yet despite such work the image of Islam among many Americans is dismal. In fact, a recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

[5] found that the percentage of Americans holding a favorable opinion of Islam has declined since 2005. Indeed, only three in every ten Americans now think well of Islam.

Beyond that, fully 25 percent of Americans say local authorities should prevent construction of mosques simply if they don?t want them.

I hope that when you hear such sad news you also think about America?s capacity to get beyond its Protestant-led denigration of Catholicism and its Christian-led disdain of Judaism.

That redemptive history gives me hope that, in time, Americans can understand that the enemy is not Islam, but the violent extremists who claim to be acting in the name of Islam -- just as we knew immediately that Christianity did not murder Wichita abortion doctor George Tiller in 2009. Instead, that was the evil work of one man who acted wildly beyond the bounds of what Christianity teaches.

So this 9/11 I continue to grieve the death of my nephew but I also grieve the anti-Islamic hatred I find among some Americans. And yet I grieve not as others do who have no hope.

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Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters [6]" blog for *The Star*?s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [7]*. His e-mail address is wtammeus@kc.rr.com [8].

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