

## New York's anti-religious pandemic

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 18, 2010 Just Catholic

**NEW YORK** -- Who could be against Mother Teresa?

It's a good question, and one that New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan asked after the Empire State Building refused to light its spire in Teresa's signature blue and white to honor the 100th anniversary of her birth on Aug. 26.

Mother Teresa, as we all know, made it her life's work to care for the most abandoned people on the planet. Along the way, she won the Nobel Peace Prize and is now one step away from sainthood.

She's earned a group of critics in the blogosphere, where Christopher Hitchens once called her a fanatic and published a book with the too-tacky-for-words title, *The Missionary Position*.

She also seems to have gotten under the skin of Empire State Building owner Anthony Malkin, who retroactively applied his new "policy" against honoring religious figures, even though he's already approved lighting requested by the Jewish Community Relations Council, or for St. Patrick's Day, or to honor the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Yet Mother Teresa's birthday isn't the only religious quarrel brewing in Gotham's sticky summer heat. There is a new anti-religious nastiness around, and the flap over Mother Teresa's birthday is a mere symptom of the virus.

Further downtown, tempers boil over a planned Islamic center a few blocks from Ground Zero. Mayor Michael Bloomberg weighed in on the Islamic center (for) and on Mother Teresa (against). Perhaps predictably, his reasoning in both cases centers on questions of free speech and private property.

The idea of a Muslim holy space at or near Ground Zero has politicians in a knot. On the one hand, this is America, and America values religious freedom and expression. On the other hand, Islam -- or a perverted vision of Islam -- is why terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center.

Opinions are all over the downtown grid: President Obama (sort of for), New York Gov. David Paterson (against), New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (everybody calm down), and a host of others in between. The prevailing wisdom seems to be: sure they can build a mosque, but why do they need to do it next to Ground Zero?

Back up at the Empire State Building, Malkin is standing firm against the folks rallied by the Catholic League, which is recruiting everyone it can think of for a Mother Teresa rally across 34th Street on the would-be saint's birthday. Officials plan for busloads of cheering Mother T fans wearing specially made blue or white T-shirts. They're hoping for representatives of every stripe and color -- Hindus, Muslims, Catholics, Jews -- from the great *mélange* of nationalities and religions that moves through New York's streets every day.

Just so we have this straight: downtown, most folks don't want an Islamic mosque, and uptown one man doesn't

want to honor a Catholic woman who began her work in a predominantly Hindu nation.

The bottom line in both situations: nobody looks good and everybody's angry.

This is particularly bad for New York -- the melting pot of all melting pots. If we can't respect and honor the good in everyone's religious systems, we might as well pack it in.

To be sure, we cannot blame all Muslims for the actions of a few fanatics. And, of course, a private individual can light his building whatever color he wants, whether it's the Empire State Building or not.

But in both cases, I can't understand what either side was thinking. A mosque near Ground Zero? No birthday lights for Mother Teresa? It just doesn't seem to make sense. None of it.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies. This column is provided by Religion News Service.]

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