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Catholics and Park51

Suzanne Morse | Nov. 24, 2010 NCR Today

I?m a few weeks behind, but I was both startled and saddened to see the Gallup poll [1] that showed that Catholics and Mormons, among religious groups, were most likely to support the idea of moving the Park51 mosque to another location. Interestingly, the survey also indicated that Catholics and Jews, even more than Muslims and Protestants, were well aware of the controversy. Jews, however, were far less likely to believe that the solution is for the mosque organizers to move to a separate location.

Catholics were inundated with messages about the Park51 controversy, including a piece by William McGunn in the Wall Street Journal [2] referencing Pope John Paul II?s asking Carmelite nuns to move a convent they had proposed to build on the edge of the Auschwitz concentration camp site. Many used this example to justify their belief that the more ?prudent? action would be for the mosque organizers to move to a different location.

First, some thoughts on that argument by McGunn. A cursory Internet search reveals some crucial differences between the Carmelite nun location and Park51. Whereas McGunn described the nuns as wanting to move ?into an abandoned building on the edge of the former Nazi death camp to pray for the souls taken there,? press reports from that time reveal that, in fact, the Carmelite convent was to be built just beyond the barbed wire of Auschwitz in a building that was clearly a part of the operations there. In fact, according to a New York Times article from 1993 [3], the nuns were going to occupy an abandoned building that, at one time, was used as a storehouse for Zyklon B, the gas used to kill hundreds of thousands at the camp.

As most people know, Park 51 is two blocks from the edge of the World Trade Center site and almost six blocks from where most of the destruction took place. Some have claimed that the site should be considered hallowed because landing gear from one of the planes landed on the building, which was formerly a Burlington Coat Factory, but given the amount of debris that was distributed across lower Manhattan, it seems as if that excuse could be used to deny the placement of this center anywhere in the area. And, in any case, this building really does not have the same connection to the World Trade Center site that the building that the Carmelite nuns occupied had towards Auschwitz.

More importantly, as even the quote above shows, it seems as if the Carmelite community at Auschwitz was specifically interested in praying for the souls of those who died there during the Holocaust. While certainly a noble endeavor on behalf of the sisters, given the rationale for ?The Final Solution,? it was clearly one fraught with negative symbolism. As the Jewish Virtual Library [4] summary of the controversy says, ?The presence of the convent would contribute to the minimization of the Jewish aspect, already scarcely mentioned in the official communist era descriptions on the site as prepared by the Polish government.?

It was likely that concern that motivated Pope John Paul II to work with the archbishop of Warsaw to relocate the convent. Perhaps one of John Paul II?s greatest legacies as Pope was his continued efforts to foster greater understanding across faith traditions, particularly between Catholics and Jews. He had witnessed the horrors of the Holocausts first hand as a young man in Poland, and so he may it a part of his life?s work, first as a Bishop and then as Pope, to repair relations between Jews and Catholics. As outlined by Paul Moses at Commonweal?s blog [5], he also extended those pastoral efforts towards Muslims, as well.

The motivation for Pope John Paul II?s involvement in that controversy no doubt came out of a place of spiritual and pastoral care, not only for the members of his own flock, but for the Jews and others who died there. That kind of care is seemingly not the motive for those who continue to object to the placement of Park 51, some of whom have compared all adherents to Islam to the Nazis.

I don?t know if the continued comparisons to the Carmelite nuns are why so many American Catholics were so aware of this story and are so fixed in their belief that the right solution is for the mosque organizers to move. But I wonder if many Catholics are unaware of our history in this country, that once upon a time, we were the ones who had our religious buildings burned and had thousands of Americans calling for us to change our modes of practice. I hope that, once reminded, most Catholics would recognize that one of the most important values that Americans hold dear is the right to worship freely, wherever you want.

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