

The Park51 Islamic Center near Ground Zero: Principles from Jesus

Secular pundits have debated endlessly the proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero. Does Christian faith offer resources for thinking faithfully about this controversy? Here are a few:

False witness

Jesus says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” (Mt 19:18). We sometimes forget that this is one of the Ten Commandments alongside commandments against murder, stealing and adultery. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf has been accused of supporting terrorism and of other grave offenses. FactCheck.org has [documented](#)¹ how his words have been taken out of context, distorted, exaggerated or even fabricated.

Love vs. Fear

Scripture says, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn 4:18). Love may not always tell others what they want, but it refuses to give in to fear. Much of the media storm surrounding Park51 has appealed not to our moral sensibilities, but to our fears. Christians must not allow fear to motivate moral decisions.

Do unto others...

Jesus says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31). If Christians want Muslims to defend religious liberty for Christians in Muslim-majority countries, then Jesus’ words mean we must speak up for Muslims’ liberty when they are in the minority.

In the town of Bekasi, Indonesia a Christian congregation has long sought to build a church on land they own, but has been prevented by Muslims who object, “The non-Muslims should understand the feeling of the Muslims here. We are the majority here.”² In the meantime the congregation has held makeshift, open-air services on their property, but two Sundays ago their pastor was beaten and one elder was stabbed by Muslim assailants. Last Sunday police [barred](#) the Christians from holding their worship service.³ Christians who would like Muslims to speak up in defense of these Christians’ rights must themselves speak up for Muslims’ rights to build mosques and worship freely.

Someone may object that Ground Zero is hallowed ground and therefore different from Bekasi. Muslims respond that Park51 is two blocks away from Ground Zero, and that four blocks from Ground Zero is a mosque which predates the World Trade Center, and that 32 innocent Muslims died on 9/11. Jesus’ do-unto-others principle adds another dimension: if we would not want Muslims to ban, say, Iraqi Christians from building any churches in the entire Abu Ghraib neighborhood of Baghdad, because Christians committed atrocities there, then we should not deny peaceable Muslims the right to build an Islamic center in Lower Manhattan.

Some argue, “We’ll let them build a mosque there when they let us build a church in Mecca.” But immediately after enunciating his do-unto-others principle, Jesus added, “Do good,

¹ <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/08/questions-about-the-ground-zero-mosque/>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11279317>.

³ For Al-Jazeera’s coverage (in English) see here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_289cMAPfY.

expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6:32-35). We must defend liberty for others whether or not they reciprocate. Christians should set a moral example for the world, not wait for others to lead.

Hate crimes

Last summer a dear American friend and colleague of mine was murdered by Al-Qa‘ida in North Africa because of his Christian faith. I was grateful to Muslim leaders who spoke out condemning this hate crime, and to the government, which erected a monument in his honor highlighting the biblical words “God is love.”

A few weeks ago a Muslim taxi driver in New York had his throat slashed by a college student who cursed him for being Muslim. News media paid only passing attention to this, as it was just one of numerous hate crimes against Muslims in the context of anti-Muslim rage over Park51. Jesus’ do-unto-others principle says that if I want Muslims to speak out against the murder of my friend, then I must speak out about hate crimes committed against Muslims.

“Do unto others” in reverse

Similar to Jesus’ do-unto-others principle, Islamic tradition reports that the Prophet Muhammad said, “None of you has truly believed until he loves for his neighbor what he loves for himself.” This means Imam Feisal and the Park51 team also need to imagine themselves in the shoes of their non-Muslim neighbors, and must be sensitive to the pain Muslims might feel if the situation were reversed.

Shortly after the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, some Christians wanted to erect a large cross in downtown Baghdad. They intended to communicate a message of love and reconciliation, but Iraqi Muslims perceived it as a message of militant conquest. I was among Christians who urged that this was not a sensitive or effective way to communicate a message of love. These Christians had a right to free expression, but this was not the wisest way to exercise that right.

Imam Feisal’s goal is to promote tolerance, interfaith understanding and healing. But reaction to Park51 has had the opposite effect, bringing out intolerance, and opening not-yet-healed wounds. The next time I speak with Imam Feisal, I will affirm strongly that he has a right to build his center just as planned, and that I will defend that right. But I will also suggest that he will accomplish his goal more effectively and sensitively if he voluntarily and uncoercedly considers revising his plan – perhaps moving it, perhaps giving it a more thoroughly interfaith character, or perhaps just consulting carefully with friendly Muslims, Christians, Jews and others about how this crisis might be defused. I am encouraged that he currently appears to be doing precisely that.

In the meantime, however, it is not the place of Christians to lecture Muslims about how *they* should live the Golden Rule. Jesus says we must “Do good, expecting nothing in return.” And Jesus’ words about logs and specks (Luke 6:41–42) suggest we must *first* defend Muslim fellow-citizens’ liberty, and only *then* will we “see clearly” to ask Muslims about their actions toward non-Muslims.