



Cultivate an open mind

For Immediate Release

For a review copy of the book
or an interview with the author,
please contact Dottie DeHart,
DeHart & Company Public Relations,
at (828) 325-4966 or Dottie@dehartandcompany.com.

Fear and Loathing at “Ground Zero”?

Why the Mosque Melee Actually Signals a New Era of Religious Tolerance

The proposed Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero has generated a whirlwind of debate and protest across America. If this intolerance has you worried, author Jim Kenney urges you not to despair—what we’re experiencing, he says, is an ultimately doomed pocket of resistance to inevitable, positive cultural change...really!

Chicago, IL (September 2010)—*A mosque on Ground Zero spits on the graves of 9/11 victims.* So read a sign recently carried in protest of the proposed Islamic cultural center near the site of Ground Zero—and it was typical. If you follow the news at all, you’re aware of the virulent opposition to this project. And like many Americans, you may well be concerned about what seems to be a widespread intolerance that defies one of our nation’s founding principles: religious freedom.

To be sure, thoughtful Americans can find themselves on either side of the controversy—after all, such is our right. But it does lead many to wonder: *What does the whole dispute mean in terms of society at large? Isn’t the rise of angry intolerance a sign of cultural retrogression? Doesn’t the apparent rise of “Islamophobia” in America signal a return to religious and cultural intolerance, or even to a sort of racialism?*

Not at all, insists Jim Kenney, an expert on the interreligious movement. In fact, the opposite is true.

Quest Books

306 West Geneva Road · P.O. Box 270 · Wheaton, IL 60187-0270

630.665.0130 · www.questbooks.net

“The ‘Ground Zero’ ferment offers, on one hand, a clear demonstration of progressive values-shift,” insists Kenney, author of *Thriving in the Crosscurrent: Clarity and Hope in a Time of Cultural Sea Change* (Quest Books, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-8356087-6-3, \$16.95, www.seachanges.net). “On the other hand, it’s a classic example of the creation and intensification of an anti-evolutionary *eddy*.”

Thriving in the Crosscurrent explains that we’re living through a time of dramatic cultural evolution—a sea change. The old values of patriarchy, racism, war mongering, and exploitation of nature really are giving way to new values of gender equality, human rights, nonviolence, and ecological awareness.

So why all the turmoil? And why does it seem that, in the mosque example but also in many others, Americans are more divided than ever? According to Kenney, any time mainstream thinking about important issues begins to change, some of us find our core identities threatened. This produces *eddies*—cultural “whirlpools” of stubborn and even angry resistance to progressive values-shifts.

“When individuals haven’t had the opportunity or the occasion to reflect on such matters, they often feel that their own identities are being attacked,” he explains. “Their reactions range from discomfort to disorientation and from resentment to anger and even violence.”

In other words, the backlash itself stands as proof of the culture shift. According to Kenney, the controversy over the Islamic cultural center is one such eddy—intense, but not fated to last.

“While Islamophobia is clearly on the rise in some regions of the country, interfaith respect and mutuality have been growing all over the land for the past 40 or more years,” he points out. “Informed respect continues to trump ignorance and intolerance. Eddies of resistance can slow but never stem the incoming tide. And that, I believe, will prove to be the case with the ‘Ground Zero’ swirl.”

Read on to explore Kenney’s dissection of this particular eddy in more detail, both its background and its implications:

Actually, “mosque” is a bit of a misnomer. (And it isn’t really at Ground Zero.) Originally entitled “Cordoba House” (in celebration of the coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Cordoba, Spain, from the 8th through the 11th centuries), the project envisions a community center with performance space, sports facilities, a restaurant, a bookstore, etc. While the center would include a Muslim prayer area, the presence of the wide range of community services, organizers maintain, precludes it from being a mosque. It has been likened more accurately to a Jewish community center.

What’s more, its location near the site of the WTC attack, Park 51, is *not* at Ground Zero. Still, that has not prevented the spread of the viral term, “Ground Zero Mosque.”

“As you may recall, the proposal to build an Islamic cultural center some two-and-a-half blocks away from the site of the World Trade Center was at first hailed by many progressives and conservatives alike as a gesture of healing and an expression of American cultural resilience,” Kenney points out. “But not for long. Recently, a war of words has broken out, polarizing families of victims of the 9/11 attack and the broader American populace alike.”

The polarizing war of words is being fueled by politicians. Opposition to the project has, for the most part, been spurred by the political right. Charles Krauthammer, Newt Gingrich, and Sarah Palin (popularizing the inaccurate and misleading “Ground Zero” identifier) have all been heard from. On the other side of the spectrum, Democratic politicians have reacted to the political heat, with Harry Reid, Howard Dean, and even Barack Obama defending the principle of religious freedom, while suggesting to varying degrees that the Islamic cultural center might better be built elsewhere.

“Feelings are strong on both sides of the debate,” says Kenney. “Families of 9/11 victims are understandably divided, with roughly equal numbers opposed to and in favor of the proposed center. And, while most American Muslims support the project as an important step toward reconciliation and interfaith understanding, a number of them have expressed concerns about perceptions of cultural insensitivity on the part of the organizers.

“Mixed feelings are normal,” he adds. “Differences of opinion are normal. The trouble starts when opportunists step in to manipulate people’s emotions and escalate conflict.”

New Yorkers are less anti-Cordoba House than you might expect. Today, while New Yorkers oppose the project by almost 2 to 1, residents of Manhattan—the borough in which Cordoba House would be located—support it, in a recent poll, at the 53-percent level. Tellingly, even opponents overwhelmingly *affirm* the constitutional right of the Muslim community to carry on with the work.

“I think it’s significant that residents of the neighborhood in which the center would be built have strongly supported it,” states Kenney. “It seems opposition varies directly with distance from 51 Park Place. That, of course, is an artifact of aggressive political manipulation of the issue—which isn’t surprising. Seizing on the issue as a way to score some easy political points is par for the course. And given the national trauma occasioned by the 9/11 attacks and two subsequent wars, it all makes a kind of tragic sense.”

Even Americans opposed to the project don't seem to be anti-Islam in general. Actually, the controversy highlights a major change in the attitudes of average Americans toward other religions, including Islam. In a recent *Time Magazine* poll, while 61 percent opposed building a “mosque” on “Ground Zero” (unsurprising, perhaps, given the misleading rhetoric that has filled the airwaves and countless web pages), fully 55 percent believe American Muslims to be patriotic citizens, and an equal number would favor the construction of a mosque within two blocks of their own homes.

“*This* is the shift that tells the story,” Kenney emphasizes. “The majority of polls seem to suggest that opposition to Park 51 can be equated to real antipathy toward Islam and Muslims in only about 20 percent of respondents. For the rest, the concern seems to have more to do with perceived insensitivity and the stirring up of painful memories. Personally, I find that data very encouraging.”

The “mosque melee” aside, a bit of thought will convince most people that we’ve made a major shift in religious tolerance. If you’re experiencing doubts that the recent protests won’t grow into something larger and uglier, Kenney challenges you to imagine a conversation with your grandparents about the rights of “other” religious communities. How similar would their views be to your own? Next, imagine (or actually *have*) that conversation with your own children or grandchildren.

“Can you discern any signs of progressive cultural evolution—of the decline of intolerance and the growth of interfaith openness?” Kenney asks. “I think most of us are very likely to find exactly that. And how might such conversations have differed even 30 years ago?”

For an individual example that interfaith tolerance is not only possible, but already strongly in existence, Kenney points to Charles Wolf. Wolf, whose wife, Katherine, perished in the attack on the World Trade Center, hopes that authorities won’t give in to the clamor and change the site, giving extremists of various persuasions an excuse to lament American “intolerance.” Movingly, he writes:

The powers of evil were piloting those airplanes...[and now] here is where we’re falling into the terrorists’ trap...trying to tear each other apart. Good people fighting other good people—does that sound like evil at work?

In fact, concludes Kenney, the outcome most to be desired (and most expressive of the spirit of *sea change*) has already begun to take shape in calls for dialogue between those who advocate Park 51 and those most directly affected by the 9/11 tragedy.

“Many family members of victims have called for mutual respect and calm,” he says. “That call is likely to resonate with those closest to the scene, as a genuine opportunity to overcome the forces of intolerance becomes more apparent every day.

“Yes, positive cultural change really is at work,” he adds. “Try to always look at the world with eyes of clarity and hope, and you’ll see that much of what seems inexplicable and hopeless—like the controversy over Cordoba House—truly isn’t.”

#

About the Author:

Jim Kenney has been recognized for decades as a leader in the global movement for intercultural understanding. Working to promote harmony and cooperative action among the world’s religious communities, he had a major role in the two largest interreligious gatherings ever held, the 1993 and 1999 Parliaments of the World’s Religions (Chicago and Cape Town). He was global director of the Parliament from 1995 to 2002; and, in 2002, he founded the Interreligious Engagement Project, helping global interreligious communities address critical planetary issues.

Kenney is the cofounder and executive director of Common Ground, an adult educational center offering a wide range of programs on the great cultural, religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions and their implications for every dimension of human experience. He is also cofounder and coeditor of *Interreligious Insight: A Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* and, from 1988 to 2009, was consulting editor and a regular contributor to *Conscious Choice*, an alternative-living magazine based in Chicago.

For over thirty years, Jim has lectured widely on political, social, religious, and cultural issues. Over the past decade, his research and writing have focused on cultural evolution: how human societies adapt—sometimes dramatically—to a changing world. *Thriving in the Crosscurrent* is the pinnacle of that work.

For more information, please visit www.seachanges.net.

About the Book:

Thriving in the Crosscurrent: Clarity and Hope in a Time of Cultural Sea Change (Quest Books, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-8356087-6-3, \$16.95, www.seachanges.net) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.