

C. M. Naim

A DISSENT ON THE “CORDOBA CENTER”

Of the several obscenities spread worldwide through the Internet after 9/11 the worst was a claim that all Jews were absent from their offices in the twin towers on that horrific day. “All 4,000 Jews” had stayed away, the rumor alleged, because the “real” planners of the attacks—who else but the CIA and the Mossad—had warned them. The heartless lie was repeated for weeks in the so-called Muslim world—in public speeches, newspaper columns, TV talk shows, and Internet posts. Then, as it became undeniable that actually any number of Jews had died that day—their names and stories became too public to ignore—the Muslim fanatics modified the lie; now it became, “All 4000 Israelis.” That obscenity has not disappeared; it caters to such deep psychic needs of some Muslims that it never will in entirety.

Equally obscene and psychically anchored is what we have heard in recent weeks from Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, the Fox Channel foul-mouths, and many more of their ilk. Their rants against the proposed Islamic community center in lower Manhattan never make any mention of the thirty or so Muslims whose ashes will remain eternally inseparable from the ashes of the Jews and Christians—not to mention the Hindus, Buddhists, and Atheists—who died in the 9/11 holocaust. These people are filled with such hatred that they would rather have another massage parlor within two blocks of “Ground Zero” than a place where, arguably, men and women named Shabbir Ahmad, Mohammad Salman Hamdani, Sarah Khan, and Nasima Hameed Simjee could have prayed had their lives been spared. It does not matter to these “patriots” that the WTC victims belonged to any number of nations, or that the largest ethnic group among American Muslims was of African-Americans, whose ancestry in this land goes as far back as the whitest of the flag-wavers. Their real target is not the community center but the first non-white President of the United States, whose first and second names happen to be Arabic, and thus automatically “Muslim.” Little do they know that their crooked thinking replicates the equally distorted habit among Muslim ignoramuses who believe that anything Arabic is automatically also “Islamic.”

One cannot reason with racists and fanatics, no matter what religion they belong to.

The only people one might possibly reason with are the proponents of the community center, but I’m not too sure about it either. They have proposed building a “Cordoba Center,” because they consider the Cordoba of old to have been a site of peaceful interfaith creativity. But Cordoba in essence was a site of Arab imperial glory, no different from the Calcutta or Delhi of the British. Somehow I can’t imagine a Muslim community center, celebrating interfaith amity, being named after Calcutta, where Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Sikhs lived equally peaceable and creative lives.

One can only make appeals in the end; I prefer to appeal to the leaders of the Cordoba Initiative:

Please, the point has been made. Mayor Bloomberg, President Obama and countless more Americans of other faiths than Islam have made it absolutely clear that Muslims have the right to build a mosque wherever they wish so long as it meets the same requirements that would be imposed on any church or synagogue. Now show some good sense, please. Do something truly peaceable: build your “Cordoba Institute” some place else. A good choice would be the dominantly African-American parts of Manhattan, but “Cordoba” would not make much sense there either. Your center, as proposed, will be only partly a mosque, most of the space will be given to other activities that are not likely to benefit people below a certain economic level. It will be a glamorous show place for Islam, no doubt, but hardly reflective of the way most Muslims have lived for decades in the city and many areas around it. High powered conferences and interfaith dialogs will not silence your detractors, nor will they put an end to such incidents as the recent stabbing of Muslim cabdriver in Manhattan and the attacks on a mosque in Murfreesboro, TN. You have not raised any money yet, otherwise I would urge you to use your projected \$100 million to open a low-cost clinic in the most deprived neighborhood of Manhattan. Name it “9/11 Memorial Clinic,” and invite Muslim and non-Muslim doctors and medical people to volunteer some time and services there. Healing desperate men, women, and children of all faiths will give expression to real Islamic piety and create more goodwill and mutual understanding than any Islamic “Y” in lower Manhattan, no matter how earnestly conceived.

(September 2010)