

# America needs to have the real debate on Islam

Suppose Timothy McVeigh had acted upon some distorted Christian religious belief when he bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Would anyone have objected 10 years later if a Christian church were being built across the street?

The emotion surrounding whether to allow construction of a mosque near ground zero in New York is a symptom of a complex and deep-rooted problem that needs to be addressed.

Sadly, instead, our president falls back on a clichéd statement that all religions have the right to worship in our country, then waffles by refusing to comment on the wisdom of the decision.

Meanwhile Republicans, fueled by national polls indicating nearly two-thirds of Americans don't think the mosque is a good idea, pounce on the president's remarks as a political coup for the midterm elections.

Someone needs to take the leadership, put political correctness aside, and ask some difficult questions. When our founding fathers drafted the First Amendment to the Constitution stating "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," they likely viewed religious diversity as variations of the Judeo-Christian theme prevalent throughout Europe and the colonies at the time. But things are much different today.

So, the first question we should be discussing is: Do we

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really mean "any" religion? Satanism is on the rise in countries like Poland, and it has become so prevalent that its practice is now allowed in the British Royal Navy.

What if the Aztec religion, complete with horrific human sacrifice and its policy of conversion or death, suddenly enjoyed resurgence? What if some religion worshipped a god of fertility and practiced pedophilia?

Do we truly believe Americans should be allowed to practice any religion? If not, we are abandoning a founding tenet of American liberty. And where do we draw the line?

I'm guessing the majority of Americans have limits to what they believe is acceptable as religion. But that's not what we espouse. We need to resolve this dichotomy.

Next, if we feel construction of a mosque near ground zero is insulting to the victims of 9/11, that implies we also feel Islam is partly to blame for the terrorist act.

There are undoubtedly practicing Muslims in the United States who would like to see the destruction of democracy, capitalism and much of what America stands for.

But there are also practicing Muslims here who are models of American ideals. So, the dif-

ficult question is: What exactly is Islam?

Unfortunately, the answer varies depending on whom you ask.

Is it a religion of peace, as many contend? Or is it "death to the infidels" as practiced by the 9/11 hijackers?

Here is where America's Muslim community could greatly assist the dialogue. Naming these two extremes with different labels would substantially help the average American, like me, understand who I'm living next to.

If "real" Muslims are peace-loving, then who are these hate mongers? On the other hand, if "real" Islam is committed to the destruction of Western ideals, then what is the religion you practice?

Islam and Christianity have a history of mutual destruction going back more than a thousand years. Old habits die hard, so it's not surprising we mistrust each other.

If we're all to co-exist, then we need a national dialogue on this issue. But if we're going to remain in a crusade against each other, then everyone should know the ground rules.

We can dance around this issue so as not to violate someone's sensitivities. Or, we can put our concerns on the table and try to figure out some solutions.

Real resolution to the mosque issue will require answering these questions.

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