

Beyond Park 51: Religious Leaders Denounce Anti-Muslim Bigotry and Call for Respect for America's Tradition of Religious Liberty

As religious leaders in this great country, we have come together in our nation's capital to denounce categorically the derision, misinformation and outright bigotry being directed against America's Muslim community. We bear a sacred responsibility to honor America's varied faith traditions and to promote a culture of mutual respect and the assurance of religious freedom for all. In advance of the ninth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we announce a new era of interfaith cooperation.

As Jews, Christians, and Muslims, we are grateful to live in this democracy whose Constitution guarantees religious liberty for all. Our freedom to worship in congregations of our own choosing, to give witness to our moral convictions in the public square, and to maintain institutions that carry out our respective missions—all of these are bedrock American freedoms that must be vigorously guarded and defended lest they be placed at peril. The United States of America has been a beacon to the world in defending the rights of religious minorities, yet it is also sadly true that at times in our history particular groups have been singled out for unjust discrimination and have been made the object of scorn and animosity by those who have either misconstrued or intentionally distorted the vision of our founders.

In recent weeks, we have become alarmed by the anti-Muslim frenzy that has been generated over the plans to build an Islamic community center and mosque at the Park 51 site near Ground Zero in New York City. We recognize that the vicinity around the former World Trade Center, where 2,752 innocent lives were cruelly murdered on 9/11, remains an open wound in our country, especially for those who lost loved ones. Persons of conscience have taken different positions on the wisdom of the location of this project, even if the legal right to build on the site appears to be unassailable. Our concern here is not to debate the Park 51 project anew, but rather to respond to the atmosphere of fear and contempt for fellow Americans of the Muslim faith that the controversy has generated.

We are profoundly distressed and deeply saddened by the incidents of violence committed against Muslims in our community, and by the desecration of Islamic houses of worship. We stand by the principle that to attack any religion in the United States is to do violence to the religious freedom of all Americans. The threatened burning of copies of the Holy Qu'ran this Saturday is a particularly egregious offense that demands the strongest possible condemnation by all who value civility in public life and seek to honor the sacred memory of those who lost their lives on September 11. As religious leaders, we are appalled by such disrespect for a sacred text that for centuries has shaped many of the great cultures of our world, and that continues to give spiritual comfort to more than a billion Muslims today.

We are committed to building a future in which religious differences no longer lead to hostility or division between communities. Rather, we believe that such diversity can serve to enrich our public discourse about the great moral challenges that face our nation and our planet. On the basis of our shared reflection, we insist that no religion should be judged on the words or actions of those who seek to pervert it through acts of violence; that politicians and members of the media are never justified in exploiting religious differences as a wedge to advance political agendas or ideologies; that bearing false witness against the neighbor—something condemned by all three of our religious traditions—is inflicting particular harm on the followers of Islam, a world religion that has lately been mischaracterized by some as a “cult.”

We call for a new day in America when speaking the truth about one another will embrace a renewed commitment to mutual learning among religions. Leaders of local congregations have a special responsibility to teach with accuracy, fairness and respect about other faith traditions. The partnerships that have developed in recent years between synagogues and churches, mosques and synagogues, and churches and mosques should provide a foundation for new forms of collaboration in interfaith education, inter-congregational visitations, and service programs that redress social ills like

homelessness and drug abuse. What we can accomplish together is, in very many instances, far more than we can achieve working in isolation from one another. The good results of a more extensive collaboration between religious congregations and national agencies will undoubtedly help to heal our culture, which continues to suffer from the open wound of 9/11.

We work together on the basis of deeply held and widely shared values, each supported by the sacred texts of our respective traditions. We acknowledge with gratitude the dialogues between our scholars and religious authorities that have helped us to identify a common understanding of the divine command to love one's neighbor. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all see an intimate link between faithfulness to God and love of neighbor; a neighbor who in many instances is the stranger in our midst. We are united in our conviction that by witnessing together in celebration of human dignity and religious freedom; by working together for interfaith understanding across communities and generations; and by cooperating with each other in works of justice and mercy for the benefit of society, all of us will demonstrate our faithfulness to our deepest spiritual commitments.

We are convinced that spiritual leaders representing the various faiths in the United States have a moral responsibility to stand together and to denounce categorically derision, misinformation or outright bigotry directed against any religious group in this country. Silence is not an option. Only by taking this stand, can spiritual leaders fulfill the highest calling of our respective faiths, and thereby help to create a safer and stronger America for all of our people.

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