

About that other shoe

Joan Chittister | Jul. 29, 2010



Some of the nearly 3,000 Muslims from around the United States gathered outside the U.S. Capitol Sept. 25, 2009, for "jummah," a congregation prayer held on Fridays. (CNS)

From Where I Stand

"I don't understand it," she said to me. "We're Americans, too. Why don't they see the good of what we're doing."

She was Daisy Khan, who with her husband Iman Faisal Khan are leaders in the movement to open the Cordoba Islamic Cultural Center in New York City.

I could see the disappointment, the frustration, in her eyes as she spoke. What can you say to anyone at a time like this? After all, does anybody ever really 'see' what anybody else sees?"

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I've always called this column "From Where I Stand," for instance. The title is a kind of nod to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle which, given other forces in the universe, argues against the likelihood of knowing with precision where particles in space are at any given time -- just as it's difficult to know how other people think about things and why.

The title was also meant to recognize the feminists who pointed out to the world that the male agenda is at best only half of the world's agendas. As in, none of us have the whole truth.

It honors, too, humanists who discovered the Power of One -- the notion that the individual fully developed and fully alive is a significant agent in the shaping of the whole of society.

And, finally, the title is, to me at least, an underscoring of the role of conscience in society, the responsibility of us all to take conscious moral stands rather than allow any institution, political party, culture, or system to decide them for us.

This understanding of multiple viewpoints seemed an easy enough concept to live by till this year when, in fact, it became all too clear for comfort.

The problem Daisy Khan raised for me in her poignant cry for understanding is a current one: Should American Muslims be allowed to build an Islamic mosque two blocks away from the site of the bombing of the World Trade Center Towers that killed over 3,000 people in one blow on Sept. 11, 2001?

Or better yet, How could it possibly be a problem that U.S. Muslims want to build a mosque two blocks away from the site of this greatest foreign attack on U.S. soil? Why is there such an outcry against what is designed to be a monument to peace and reconciliation at a place where the terror of a few had set out to destroy both. After all, they are Americans. Can't they build wherever they want?

Unfortunately, the world has been here before on this one.

In 1984, in Poland, Catholic nuns and bishops were determined to open a Carmelite convent on land proper to what had been the infamous Auschwitz death camp where Jews by the thousands had gone to the ovens at the hands of a gentile army, most of whom were ostensibly Christian. (NYT, May 30, 1989)

To the Jews, the very thought of a Catholic institution on that territory was blasphemy, a sacrilege. After all, they argued, Christianity and its long-standing position that the Jews -- as a people -- had killed Jesus, was of itself a preeminent and underlying cause of the Holocaust.

Jews were insulted at the very thought of a cross on those holy grounds. Christians were flabbergasted at the reaction. In the first place, the purpose of putting a cloistered community of Carmelites in that place was exactly to hallow that ground, to pray for those that died there, to be a sign of peace and reconciliation.

And, after all, half the people who died in the camps, they said, were Christians: Poles, Gypsies, and gays.

Jews were infuriated by the move. Catholics were enraged by the reaction to what they thought was a good thing to do for both groups.

It took years to resolve the issue. In the end historians determined that only 80,000 of those who died in Auschwitz were non-Jews. The other 1.2 million deaths were Jewish deaths. It was, indeed, a Jewish burial ground. And Catholics, led by the pope himself, agreed in 1993 to relocate the convent to a less offensive position in order to provide an education center meant to educate us all to the ways of peace and unity, to the issues in Christian-Jewish relations.

It was a case of Christians wanting to make what they considered a gesture of reconciliation that was seen from the other side of the issue as just one more sign of domination or aggression or assault.

The point is that we, of all people, should know what it means to be rebuffed by those who perceived our attempt to make peace as just another kind of wound.

This time, it is clear, the shoe is on the other foot. We are the ones now who could not bury our wounded, all of whom themselves went to ashes. We are the ones who are claiming the territory as ours alone -- or, in this case, for that part of us who are not Muslim, apparently.

And this time, it is a group of Muslims who have long borne the burden of the Crusades, the expulsion from Europe and the fear of Western/American annihilation -- true or not -- in their psyches, who want to make a gesture of real Islamic peace in the very area that radical Muslims chose to make war.

Cordoba House, the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque at the tip of Manhattan, is designed to be a monument to American Muslim patriotism and peacefulness in the very area where foreign Muslims brought death to many and a threat to the country itself. It is meant to be a hand across the divides of race and religion, a grand statement of U.S. unity, not a reminder of our religious differences.

Named for the over 800 years of Islamic political ascendancy in Cordoba, Spain, a period of intellectual and economic and cultural growth the marks of which exist to this day, the Cordoba House mosque has become a centrifuge of tension. The negative reaction to such a center shocks these peaceful American Muslims, long-time citizens of this country, who find themselves torn between their citizenship and their ethnicity.

To some Americans who lived through the attack on the Twin Towers, who lost loved ones in the blaze, who saw their city go up in smoke, whose own lives changed because 19 terrorists unleashed by the far right minority of a radical wing of Islam -- not unlike the underground forces of the Irish Republican Army and Ulster Defense Force in Ireland -- the very thought of a Muslim presence in that place is unthinkable.

One respondent to a person-on-the-street interview declared with all the passion that fear can bring: "This mosque is nothing but a monument to their martyrs." Say again: Whose martyrs? They are certainly not the "martyrs" of these peace loving people -- anymore than the extremists of the IRA in Belfast were mine.

Radicals on any side may be well-meaning, perhaps, but miserably inhuman in their tactics. Sincere, perhaps, but just as surely dealing in sin as are their oppressors.

To Americans who can still remember another time when to be an American was lost in the hysteria of race, it has all the overtones of the anti-Japanese sentiments during and after World War II.

So, where do all of us stand now that the shoe is on the other foot? This time we are the ones wrestling with the question of whether or not we will refuse the olive branch and a public witness to unity and peace. Will we tell an American Muslim community that the country is theirs -- except, of course, for this one square of it two blocks away from Ground Zero which we will use to remind them always of how outside of us they really are?

From where I stand, there has to be another way to deal with this that is sensitive to both sides, accepting of both positions, healing of both wounds and a monument to real peace. In that case, it will surely be a monument that will shine a strong Islamic light in the very face of that small part of Islam that wants, it seems, to shatter that glow.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister writes a Web column for NCR called [From Where I Stand](#) [1].]

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