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Ground Zero mosque: Catholics have seen this before

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NCR Today

A few years ago, I visited an exhibit on Catholics in New York put on by the Museum of the City of New York. It was a fascinating look at Catholic culture in an urban setting and the ethnic communities that were shaped by it, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries. For a person with two Italian Catholic grandparents and one Irish Catholic grandmother, it was interesting to understand how far we've come.

I was jolted to see the opening elements of the exhibit include accounts of the burning of an Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Mass., in 1834 by Yankee Protestant laborers paired with writings by American inventor Samuel F.B. Morse, who was, among other things, a leader in anti-Catholic attitudes in the 19th century. I wasn't surprised to see Morse's anti-Catholic virulence on display -- I became aware of it a long time ago and that's a part of my heritage, too (I am indirectly related to Morse through my father). Still, it was a reminder that, not so very long ago, it was Catholics who were considered a threat to the American way of life.

You can read about the events and context that led to the Ursuline Convent riots at the massmoments.org Web site.

All of this has come to mind recently because of the ginned up controversy around the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque," which is, in fact, a proposal to expand the Cordoba House community center, which has been operating in the Lower Manhattan area for several decades. Elements on the Right have twisted the proposed expansion of the center, a few blocks away from the Ground Zero site, into a larger threat of "invasion" from Muslims. This is not restricted to just New York. Similar efforts to stop mosques from being constructed here in Boston and in other parts of the country have taken place, usually with opponents invoking fears of terrorism and shadowy ties to terrorist groups.

One of the most vocal opponents has been former Speaker of the House and Catholic convert Newt Gingrich, who recently announced that he would fight any effort to impose sharia law in the United States, despite the fact that it would be impossible for sharia law to have any validity under our First Amendment.

I wonder, though, if Gingrich would be so sanguine about these efforts to demonize Muslims if his family's heritage included the kinds of struggles that most Catholics experienced when first coming to this country? When it comes to promoting the key American value of religious tolerance, Gingrich seems to be acting in the tradition of those 19th century Protestant "Know Nothings," who sought to use faith to provoke fear and division, and not in the Catholic tradition of Pope John Paul II, for instance, who worked hard to promote interfaith understanding.

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