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Obama & the Mosque

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The President spoke about the proposed mosque and community center to be built near the site of the 9/11 attack yesterday. The headline in the New York Times reads ?Obama Strongly Backs Islam Center Near 9/11 Site [1]? and Politico.com runs with the headline ?Obama stands up for Ground Zero mosque [2].? I have just read the actual text [3]of the President?s remarks and these headlines are not quite right. And, this is a distinction *with* a difference.

Here is the key graph: ?But let me be clear: as a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America, and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in this country, and will not be treated differently by their government, is essential to who we are. The writ of our Founders must endure.?

The President is not backing a mosque or objecting to a mosque. The President is expressing the complete indifference of the government to the religious expression of the citizenry. The President is backing the First Amendment, the President is standing up for the principle of religious freedom, a principle that the day before yesterday, conservatives like Charles Krauthammer et al., were at pains to defend. Not so much today.

When John Carroll was selected to be the first bishop in the United States, the Vatican approached the U.S. government to solicit the consent of the authorities. Thomas Jefferson, then in Paris, expressed to the Vatican emissary the U.S. government?s complete indifference in the matter. Catholics then, like Muslims today, were the object of great prejudice and bigotry. The First Amendment was designed to protect all, but especially those in the minority, to eliminate the category of ?dissenter? by eliminating state religion, to keep the Church free of government interference and the government free of ecclesiastical interference.

The fact that learned, smart people like Krauthammer have jumped on this bandwagon is distressing. His stance is that while the Muslim community has a right to build a mosque in lower Manhattan, it is in bad taste. Taste is not the issue. The key issue is that this really is not the government?s call. Krauthammer is smart enough to know that the protections of the First Amendment are not there to protect the majority, to protect speech or worship that is not controversial. I suppose no one would object to the building of a Congregational Church in lower Manhattan. Krauthammer also lobs the accusation that the imam who intends to build the mosque has said some foolish things about Hamas, but foolish things are said about Hamas in Catholic and Protestant pulpits too.

Catholics have a special obligation to join this fight. Anti-Catholic prejudice is one of the enduring aspects of American history. There were times when we were prevented from building our churches where and when we wanted: Check out the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Washington, which was prevented from being on 16th Street because prominent WASP property owners who lived on the fashionable street did not want their address besmirched. President Kennedy had to overcome latent, and not so latent, prejudice to win the White House, assuring a group of ministers, who presumably supported the idea of religious influence on public leadership, that he would never let his religion influence his public leadership. We do not have to support the mosque. We do have to support the First Amendment.

As for President Obama, yesterday?s comments are among his finest hours.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/14/us/politics/14obama.html?_r=1&hp=&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=128178
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