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Ground Zero, Religious Liberty & Hypocrisy

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Distinctly Catholic

In an interview with *National Review* shortly after the release of the promulgation of the Manhattan Declaration, Professor Robert P. George, one of the main movers behind the Declaration, said: "I hope that President Obama will understand that the signatories to the Manhattan Declaration are determined to defend the sanctity of human life, the dignity of marriage, and respect for religious freedom. On these issues, they cannot compromise, and they will not remain silent."

The document is clear on the import of religious freedom, and sees it as an issue intrinsically linked with the sanctity of human life and the defense of marriage. "They will stand or fall together," George told *Nation Review*. "Christians confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience," states the text of the Declaration. "Immunity from religious coercion is the cornerstone of an unconstrained conscience. No one should be compelled to embrace any religion against his will, nor should persons of faith be forbidden to worship God according to the dictates of conscience or to express freely and publicly their deeply held religious convictions. What is true for individuals applies to religious communities as well."

I couldn't have said any of this better myself. But, unfortunately, it appears that some of the signatories of the Declaration do not think religious freedom is such a cornerstone of society and culture if the freedom in question is that of our Muslim brothers and sisters. Charles Colson, convicted felon from the Watergate scandal, wrote that "it would not be an act of intolerance to deny the construction of a mosque at a certain location—particularly one, ground zero, where the mosque will serve as a daily reminder to New Yorkers of the terrorists, who, motivated by their Islamo-fascist beliefs, killed 3,000 innocent people in the name of Islam. Go build the mosque somewhere else." Why should a mosque run by peaceful American Muslims make New Yorkers think of the terrorists? My mother was Irish but I did not look at her and call to mind the IRA terrorists who killed Lord Mountbatten.

An aside about Mr. Colson—and those concerned primarily about ecumenism, skip on to the next paragraph. In prison he evidently found Jesus. I am happy that he has turned his life around and come to

value morality. But the man who was at the center of the greatest assault on the Constitution in yours or my lifetime should not be trusted to pontificate about what it means to be an American. I know Muslims who love this country enough that they would never, ever try and subvert the democratic processes which give legitimacy to the government. That is precisely what Mr. Colson did. I do not know what Church ordained him, or if he is ordained, but he should have been sent to a monastery to atone for his sins and contemplate the gravity of the injury he helped to inflict upon the nation. These conservatives like to condemn the sixties because of the way leftie radicals called American institutions into question, but nothing done by the worst pot-smoking, draft-evading, free love-practicing, 60's hippie did more to question the validity of our institutions than what Mr. Colson and Mr. Liddy and Mr. Nixon did. He has become an evangelical preacher and I would have supposed that, after Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and their affairs and drugs and air-conditioned dog houses and after Jimmy Swaggart and his female prostitutes and Ted Haggard and his male prostitutes, evangelicals would have been keener on spotting a fraud. Colson is a fraud and his comments about the mosque in lower Manhattan prove it. He hated the Constitution before his conversion and he hates it still. Thus endeth the rant.

Professor Robert George is a different kind of fraud. He pretends to be concerned with "American Principles" as his website says, but he seems only concerned with those American Principles that cohere with the current political agenda of the Republican Party. That bias is fine by me, but when he explains that the signatories of the Manhattan Declaration "will not remain silent" one is hard-pressed to ascertain why he has been so conspicuously silent about the religious freedom of Muslims to build a mosque on private property in lower Manhattan. Does he share the "all Muslims are the same" bigotry of Colson? Does he think, like Mr. Newt Gingrich, that we should only allow a mosque here when Saudi Arabia permits a church in Mecca, as if the Saudi Royal Family should be a moral compass for anyone? He has found time at his website to post articles about Proposition 8 being overturned, a photograph of King George III, a bizarre article about returning to the Gold Standard, but not a word about the religious freedom of Muslims to build a mosque, not atop the World Trade Center site, by the way, but two blocks away, not far from St. Peter's Catholic Church and St. Paul's Episcopal Chapel to which, presumably, no one objects because, well, you know. (As I write these words, I entertain a vision of the Uptons in "Auntie Mame" explaining that their neighborhood was "restricted" because they did not want the wrong type of people, namely Jews, living there.) Cat got your tongue professor?

This is a moment of truth for all the signatories of the Manhattan Declaration. New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan unambiguously defended the right of Muslims to build a mosque, provided it met the requirements of safety and security that would be applied to the building of a church. He further, specifically, condemned anti-Muslim bigotry writing on his blog, "What is not acceptable is to prejudge any group, or to let fear and bias trump the towering American (and for us Catholics, the religious) virtues of hospitality, welcome, and religious freedom." Will Professor George and his fellow signatories of the Manhattan Declaration be true to their own stated principles? Will that most American principle, religious freedom, find a note of concern at the American Principles Project?

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