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Reason suffers in our brawling society

by NCR Editorial Staff

Most of the stories about the flap over the planned Islamic Center in New York refer to the debate over a Ground Zero mosque. The reality is that the matter hardly qualifies as a debate. It is, instead, the latest example of the degree to which our public discourse has become stripped of reason and fact and driven by mindless politics and ideology.

To begin, take those who say we should all be tolerant of what proponents of the Park51 venture emphasize is a cultural or community center. We agree wholeheartedly with their position. But, caught up in the fervor of argument, they contend that what is involved is not a mosque. That's not true. The imam who is spearheading the effort, the Web site devoted to Park51 and the project in lower Manhattan, as well as the developer of the site say that a mosque is part of the plan. That fact is easily available. So, please, it is a mosque and there's no need to try to minimize or hide the fact.

The question is not whether the center will include a mosque, but whether irrational fear and hatemongering should prevent responsible adherents of the Islamic faith from building a center on property they own. These are people who have contributed to the community, who have been tapped by the government as important agents of tolerance and who have been heralded by leaders of other faiths. Unless we have reached the point of equating all of Islam with its most extreme and violent elements, what's to debate?

A deeper question for all of us, however, is how long reasonable people (we go out on a limb here, trusting that reason might still have a seat at the table) will allow public discourse to be hijacked by lonely ranters who, in another era, would have been left the option of writing windy, disgruntled and largely unpublished letters to the editor. Today their delusions are amplified by a nondiscriminating World Wide Web and by the voracious appetites of 24/7 screamers on cable TV and radio.

In the growing universe of Islamaphobia, President Obama is a Muslim, Islam is out to embarrass the United States by building the mosque in Lower Manhattan, and we are warned about terror babies. In that universe, which fills the need of feeding the hysteria beast, a Kim Lehman, one of dozens of possible examples, is given credibility as someone who might influence the national conversation. You're forgiven if you come up blank on that name. She is a person of some note in the politics and Catholic world of Iowa. We don't know if she trades in non-truths very often. In this case, however, Lehman, who for some segments of the Catholic community would have impeccable credentials -- she's a member of the Republican National Committee, head of Iowa Right to Life and on the board of the Iowa City-based John Paul II Stem Cell Research Institute -- was able to project well beyond Iowa the non-truth that Obama told Muslims that he is a Muslim. Seriously, she said that.

It was in response to a Politico.com piece on polls that showed that despite Obama's well-documented troubles with the pastor of a Christian church that he had been attending for years and multiple declarations of his Christianity, a growing segment of the population believes he is Muslim. The information age is no match for willful ignorance.

Lehman accused Politico of covering up for Obama and (of course) in a tweet said, "BTW he personally told the muslims that he IS a muslim. Read his lips."

She was referring to Obama's speech in Cairo in which he spoke of his father's faith and the fact that he had spent several years as a child in Indonesia, where he became familiar with the rhythms of a majority Islamic society. That paragraph of the speech, however, began with the unqualified declaration, "I'm a Christian."

The significance in all of this is not what faith Obama professes but that Lehman and others in her party, most notably Newt Gingrich on the Islamic center, would feel free to spread hysteria and falsehood without fear of reprisal. Within hours, Lehman's claims were transmitted through major Web sites and such national publications as *USA Today*. They may have noted the correctives to her non-truths, but all the same they reported her incorrect assertions more for the political jolt they contained than in wonder of how anyone in a responsible position could so blithely trade in such stupidities.

More than half a century ago, the noted Jesuit thinker John Courtney Murray, speaking of deeper currents in the flow of U.S. culture, warned that a "certain principle of cohesion" in the culture "has pretty well perished. And nothing has taken its place. Our culture is heterogeneous to the point of being chaotic, and 'truth' is what every man individually thinks it is."

It is at a shallower level today, perhaps, that Murray's analysis applies to the current state of political discourse. Our technology, which holds so much potential for good, has in the matter of public debate and discussion served only to turn the heterogeneous into an endlessly fractured and brawling society that is more in love with its arguments for their own sake than with any pursuit of truth.

A new Islamic center and mosque in Lower Manhattan is the least of our problems.

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