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Article

The Park 51/Ground Zero Controversy and Sacred Sites as Contested Space

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Abstract: The Park 51 controversy swept like wildfire through the media in late August of 2010, fueled by Islamophobes who oppose all advance of Islam in America. Yet the controversy also resonated with many who were clearly *not* caught up in the fear of Islam. This article attempts to understand the broader concern that the Park 51 project would somehow violate the Ground Zero site, and, thus, as a sign of "respect" should be moved to a different location, an argument that was invariably articulated in “spatial language” as groups debated the physical and spatial presence of the buildings in question, their relative proximity, and even the shadows they cast. This article focuses on three sets of spatial meanings that undergirded these arguments: the site as sacred ground created through trauma, rebuilding as retaliation for the attack, and the assertion of American civil religion. The article locates these meanings within a broader civic discussion of liberty and concludes that the spatialization of the controversy opened up discursive space for repressive, anti-democratic views to sway even those who believe in religious liberty, thus evidencing a deep ambivalence regarding the legitimate civic membership of Muslim Americans.

Keywords: Ground Zero; sacred space; Islam; Muslims; Park 51; mosque; Islamophobia; Christianity; cross; religious liberty

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Introduction/Background

The controversy over the planned construction of an Islamic community center at 51 Park Street in lower Manhattan burst onto the public stage like a storm in late summer 2010. Journalists and pundits

from both the political right and left offered views on framing the problem as well as on the meanings and contexts of the debate. Should an Islamic organization be allowed to build near the site of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center perpetrated by self-described Islamic jihadists so intent upon combating the United States that they murdered over 3,000 people in the trying? While some bloggers and demonstrators used the situation as an opportunity to express their hatred for Islam and their opposition to the growing Muslim presence in the United States—a position that has been termed Islamophobia—others, including New York mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, situated the debate squarely within the context of the First Amendment and argued that Muslim citizens of the United States had as much right as any other religious group in the country to build where they pleased. Seemingly midway between these two poles of thought emerged what some referred to as a "compromise," an argument that hinged on the idea that even though Muslims had a right to build where they wanted, it would be a sign of respect for the feelings of those who lost loved ones and for the country in general for the group to relocate the planned building to a site farther from Ground Zero.

The number of public figures adopting this seemingly middle position grew rapidly. Two former New York City mayors, Rudolph Giuliani and Edward Koch, both took this position, calling the project "offensive" and "insensitive" if completed as planned on the Park 51 site. Both favored moving the project. Giuliani, in particular, went on record supporting a "compromise" proposed by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, Timothy M. Dolan, and New York Governor David A. Paterson, who suggested that the project be moved to a distant site where state-owned land could be used (presumably sold to the developers) for the project. Giuliani praised the plan as a "nice compromise" and urged the developers to "find another place" and to "build a beautiful mosque" there [1,2]. Various Jewish organizations weighed in on both poles of the overall debate, but some supported the "compromise." The Anti-Defamation League's national director, Abraham H. Foxman, for instance, argued that while the developers had every right to build on the chosen site, they would be wise to "refrain" from doing so "in deference to the survivors" of the 9/11 attacks [3,4]. "Compromise" for all of these people meant putting distance between a new Islamic center and Ground Zero [5,6].

These arguments regarding respect, sensitivity, and proximity underscore the fact that the Park 51 controversy was replete with spatial language. The dispute focused on two building projects, with questions of proximity playing the central role. How close should a Muslim community center be built to the World Trade Center site? Two blocks away? Four? A mile? Certainly, as some opponents argued, not within the "shadow" of the now absent Twin Towers. The centrality of this spatial language points to meanings associated with the two sites that, in my view, particularly help us to understand the seemingly moderate view calling for sensitivity and compromise and illuminate why the controversy, which began as a local dispute, escalated into a full-blown national debate. My goal in this essay is to use the analytical tools honed by scholars of space and particularly of religious space to provide perspective on this dispute. Central to this analysis is the premise that the dispute centers less on the meaning of the proposed Islamic center than on the multiple and contested meanings of Ground Zero itself and on its troubled history over the nine years preceding the dispute.

Spaces, of course, are imbued with meanings, and those meanings influence our thoughts and behaviors—or, in this case, our disagreements. In what follows, I will briefly outline three defining sets of meanings or contexts associated with Ground Zero along with some of the controversies over those meanings that have arisen since 9/11. These will include (1) notions of the Ground Zero site as

sacred, (2) understandings of rebuilding the Twin Towers as retaliation against the attackers, and (3) ideas about the sanctity of America as a nation. Then I will return to the Park 51/Ground Zero dispute to locate it within this context of spatial meanings and raise some further suggestions for how the spatial controversy gained the discursive power to influence moderates not generally associated with Islamophobic sentiments.

Ground Zero as Sacred Space

Ground Zero is a site of trauma. On it occurred a "hallowing" experience [7]. Chaos, disruption, and violent death of enormous proportion naturally propelled discourse around the event into the realm of the religious. Almost immediately after the attacks, then-mayor of New York City Rudolph Giuliani publicly termed the site "sacred ground," and the phrase was repeated over and over in the press. But what did the term "sacred" mean with respect to this site? What is "sacred ground," or, in the more common phrase, "sacred space"?

The concept of "sacred space" is not easy to pin down; it has been the focus of much debate among scholars of Religious Studies who advance a variety of understandings of it. Among the most prominent stems from the groundbreaking work of history of religions scholar Mircea Eliade, who proposed a "substantive" understanding of sacred space as that imbued with an extraordinary character through a direct connection with a divine source [8]. This view is probably the most intuitive, particularly for people who hold a set of religious beliefs. In contrast to this substantive view, other scholars, including Jonathan Z. Smith, have argued that space is made sacred through human endeavor. A product of human activity, "sacred space" is made sacred, or sacralized, by individuals and groups for specific purposes, be they spiritual or social, through specific behaviors or practices [9]. This more instrumental view of sacred space links it to both ritual performances and other types of intentional and unintentional activities. Smith's work owes much to that of sociologist Émile Durkheim, who emphasized the social character of the construction of sacred space and the related creation of prohibitions and interdictions or "taboos" to separate it from profane space and to maintain its purity and sacred character [10]. For Durkheim and Smith, the processes of sacralization are inherently social and political, rather than supernatural or substantive. Building upon these ideas, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal have argued that the human production of sacred space is an embodying practice aimed at disciplining bodies in certain sites and defining appropriate or pure behaviors from inappropriate or desacralizing behaviors. Not surprisingly, therefore, sacralizing processes, in their view, are often carried out in the context of intense conflict over the space in question as groups clash over ownership and discipline, attempting to both appropriate the space and exclude others from it [11]. We see all of these understandings of sacred space in the rhetoric of the Park 51/Ground Zero debate, but for the purposes of this article, the instrumental view of sacred space as created through human effort and the role of contestation in those efforts sheds the most light on the controversy.

Nevertheless, it was an Eliadian-like understanding of the substantive character of sacred space that informed the thoughts of the vast majority of commentators on the controversy. The people of New York, the press, citizens of the United States, even people from around the world understood the space as set apart, extraordinary—a site of death, loss, horror, and unimaginable pain. Understood in Eliadian terms, the hallowing of the ground had much to do with the transcendence of death. For many,

particularly for those who had lost family members or close friends, the site was sanctified by the blood of the victims. Here they had breathed their last; here, many believers understood, the spirits of their loved ones had departed this world. Soon this understanding transitioned into an understanding of the site as a burial ground, but one of a unique character. Indeed, as acknowledgment that the process of recovering the remains of victims was becoming increasingly futile, many family members were forced to come to grips with the fact that the site was to be the final resting place of the incinerated remains of thousands. Protecting the site, seen now as a cemetery, from further desecration became paramount.

For others, the sacredness of the site sprang from a sense of loss that was more metaphysical, encompassing loss of life, certainly, but also loss of a sense of security. Chaos reigned on 9/11 and for weeks to come at the devastated site. Notions of personal safety that had been taken for granted by Americans for decades were suddenly and violently disrupted. Not only had people died on the site, but so too had a sense of immutability. For still others, the sacred character was tied to a sense of nostalgia engendered by the loss of a familiar and meaningful place. The neighborhood was completely disrupted by the tragedy, the devastated site becoming "other" in a new and frightening way. Many feared that the area would be abandoned, and in fact in the months following the attack, the Financial District became "a ghost town" after the end of the business day [12]. From all of these perspectives, the site's vulnerability and need for protection became prevailing themes linked inextricably to its perceived sacredness.

This first set of meanings—Ground Zero as sacred space—applied what religious studies scholar Roland Sherrill has called a lexicon of religious sensibility to the site, emphasizing ideas about the relationship between death, the transcendent or divine, and notions of redemption, salvation, purification, and protection [7]. A great sin or sacrilege had taken place; those sacrificed seemed to cry out for atonement and redemption. This first set of meanings readily brought to mind Abraham Lincoln's dedication of the Gettysburg battlefield on which some 51,000 soldiers had died during the Civil War. Neither words nor actions could hallow the ground further than the consecration wrought by the blood of the victims [13].

Yet a further consecration was soon achieved, a consecration that overtly underscored a religious interpretation of the site. Amidst the chaos and death came a seemingly miraculous survival: two still-joined I-beams in the shape of a cross. Understood by some Christian believers as a powerful statement of God's presence among disruption and disorder, it marked the site as sacred in a distinctly Eliadian manner: that is, the space was made sacred through a *hierophany*, an eruption of the *numen*, the divine, into ordinary space. For many, including the rescue worker who found the crossed I-beams and interpreted them as the Christian symbol and Father Brian Jordan, the Roman Catholic priest who, upon being hurriedly summoned, pronounced the image a sign from God, the image became iconic, a symbol of hope and the reassuring presence of the power and salvation of God, a symbol that provided comfort and the suggestion that order could be restored. Jordan worked assiduously to have the cross reclaimed from the debris and mounted at the site, and for months afterwards said a Mass at the site of the erected cross every Sunday, further underscoring the notion of a divine and specifically Christian presence at the site [14,15]. The story of this cross and Christian reclamation of the site of destruction was later the focus of a documentary film created by the Alabama-based Erwin Brothers, a filmmaking team with experience in producing Christian films and music videos. *The Cross and the Towers*,

released in 2006, won the Palm Beach International Film Festival Award that year for Best Documentary and since then has played widely across the nation, garnering rave reviews and numerous awards from Christian organizations [16]. In these ways, this powerful narrative of the cross was adopted nationwide, and even though the people who perished in the attacks represented a variety of religious and non-religious perspectives, the "miraculous" cross was seen to visually claim the space, fixing the site within the historically dominant Christian tradition

These understandings, developed and adopted primarily by individuals who adhered to a religious point of view and belief in a divine force or being, closely follow the patterns that Eliade, similarly coming from an emic perspective, had identified. From an external or etic perspective, however, we can at the same time see how these behaviors themselves sacralized the site in ways concordant with the arguments of Durkheim, Smith, Chidester, and Linenthal. A less sectarian sacralization of the Ground Zero site appeared in the collaboratively designed “Tribute in Light” memorial, which ran initially in March and April 2002 and has continued yearly since then. Featuring over eighty searchlights pointed skyward to create shafts of light where the original Twin Towers stood, this art installation alludes to loss through the sparking of visual memory. The display makes the absence of the towers visually palatable against the night sky. Similarly, architect Michael Arad’s design for the memorial, which retained the square footprints of towers as reflecting pools, alluded to the theme of physical absence and the necessity of retaining a collective memory of the devastating event.

These notions of the "sacred" character of Ground Zero and the many actions performed there functioned to sacralize the site over the days, weeks, and months following September 11, 2001. They located the site within a context of special, ultimate meanings reserved most often for religious discourse. They also attested to a society looking inward to make sense of the attacks and to pay homage to the victims. Widely reported by the media, these ideas and innumerable actions—ecumenical religious services held on the site; the placing of thousands of personal tributes at the site that created a spontaneous shrine running hundreds of yards around it; the hushed, tearful, and awe-filled demeanor of the millions of visitors to the site—all combined to appropriate (or reappropriate) the site, establish proper discipline, define the sacred meaning of the site, and underscore its significance. These meanings, solemn and even pietistic, characterized by inner struggles with loss and desires for hope, were in no way militant [17]. These meanings alone, however, constituted only a portion of those that informed the controversy over the proposed Islamic center at 51 Park Place.

Ground Zero as Contested Space

While ideas about the sacred character of the space grew from the devastation of the attack itself, two other sets of meanings emerged as people began to contemplate the future of the site. While one of these sets of meanings was roughly aligned with the sacralization processes mentioned above, the other, which I will explore first, countered what was understood as the sacred nature of the site and sparked significant opposition.

This countervailing set of meanings developed as those who had significant commercial interests in the site began to lay plans for rebuilding. Within days of the collapse of the towers, Manhattan real estate developer Larry Silverstein, who held the lease on the Twin Towers property and thus, ostensibly, fiduciary responsibility, brought together his team of architects to begin developing a

project to replace the ten millions of square feet of office space lost in the attack. The goal was to rebuild as quickly as possible—not only for financial reasons, but for martial ones. Swift rebuilding, according to Silverstein, would serve as a kind of retaliation for the attack. In his words, “It would be a tragedy not to rebuild this part of New York” as “it would give the terrorists the victory they seek” [18].

This notion of rebuilding as a response to or retaliation for the attacks quickly evolved into a desire to erect a monumental building to replace the towers. Developers, architects, financial leaders, and others talked about creating a monumental skyscraper on the site. Building the tallest skyscraper in the world, an overwhelming building, or at the very least, an architecturally significant building, would produce a “symbol of the public realm.” Such a building, according to John Whitehead, chairman of the World Trade Center Memorial Fund, would use architectural design to “capture the public imagination . . . and eloquently demonstrate our spirit” [18]. In this set of meanings, the commercial and architectural energies of New York and the United States were advanced as central aspects of an American spirit that would not be cowed by terrorists. Echoing what Linenthal has called the martial dimension of the American mind, this group argued that building bigger and better, higher and more erect, to adopt the all-too-obvious Freudian image, would “show them!” [18-22].

This commitment to build quickly and bigger to demonstrate American power and resilience was perceived by many as a direct challenge to what they understood as the sacred character of the site. For those who had lost loved ones, the all-too-transparent commercial goals of the response/retaliation perspective were anathema to their perception of the space as made sacred by the blood of the dead. Many argued that a building of any kind would add insult to injury, desecrating a now sanctified space. As Monica Iken, founder of a group called September's Mission, said, “The souls cry out. You can't build there. It is hallowed ground” [18]. For this group and others holding this view, protecting the purity of the site from the threat of profane commercial use became a fundamental mission.

Architectural historian Paul Goldberger has traced the conflicts that emerged around plans to rebuild the site, examining the positions of a number of interest groups that organized in the months following the attack. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), founded by Governor Pataki, for instance, included financial and corporate executives and embraced a decidedly Republican ethos, maneuvering to exclude a number of prominent Democratic figures, including the area's state assemblyman, Sheldon Silver, who was serving as speaker of the assembly [18]. Families and friends of the victims quickly formed countering organizations, including September Mission, the Families of September 11, the 9-11 Widows and Victims Family Association, and a group associated with the Cantor Fitzgerald Group. Local neighborhoods groups also organized, including the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York City. These groups defended an array of positions, from the aforementioned skyscraper-as-retaliation position to what Goldberger calls the "void" position, that nothing should be built on the site, to various redevelopment positions, such as the suggestion that the rebuilding should be a model for sustainable urban design.

Wrangling over the meaning of the site within each of these general categories was intense. Even those who considered the ground sacred and were working to develop a memorial disagreed on several questions, including who should and should not be represented in the memorial and whether/how access to the memorial might be regulated to privilege certain groups (e.g., surviving family members of victims). On the other side, those who favored the response/retaliation view debated the financial, architectural, engineering, and aesthetic aspects of the response.

These debates were by no means simply local, either. The destruction of the Twin Towers had been a national tragedy, and rebuilding became a process of national and even international interest. As the question of what to do with the site was debated across the country in the months following September 11, a competition for design suggestions was launched. By summer 2002, over 900 entries had been submitted from professional and amateur designers worldwide. The competition brought focus to a public discussion on the role of public memorialization, pointing up the tensions between the needs of the families of victims, the needs of the neighborhood to rebuild, and the needs of the nation to process the event and honor the dead. In July 2002, a public meeting held in New York and dubbed "Listening to the City" attracted over 5,000 participants who aired a variety of perspectives. Nationally, many commentators pointed to Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., as a successful memorial site at which families and the public can grieve and remember in relative compatibility. In December 2002, final plans by a handful of chosen architectural firms were unveiled to an expectant public convinced by then that architectural design could respond to all these various needs and perspectives. Not surprisingly, there was little agreement regarding the designs, and it would take another four years before a rebuilding plan was finally approved [18,22].

These debates and disagreements themselves functioned to heighten the perceived sacredness of the site for family members of the victims, residents of the local neighborhood, and for the nation generally. The controversies themselves underscored the ambiguity of the meanings associated with the site and the possibility that certain meanings and uses could pose significant threats to the uniquely vulnerable space. Just how to maintain and honor the sanctity of the site would not be easily settled. As Chidester and Linenthal argue, contests over space understood to be "sacred" raise the stakes for all parties, upping the ante for owning, protecting, and preserving what is understood to be hallowed. For some, these debates were over the perceived desecration or profaning of the site. For others, the debates were about control and ownership. Exclusions were built into all of these perspectives: if the site were to become commercial, family mourners could be excluded; if the site were to become a public memorial, commercial interests and family mourners could be excluded; if the site was to become a burial ground, public mourners and commercial interests could be excluded.

Ground Zero as American Space

As these debates ensued among stakeholders in the rebuilding process, a third set of meanings coalesced, weaving the terrorist attacks and the response into a narrative of American patriotism. This third narrative was particularly, although not exclusively, articulated by those directly involved in the redevelopment process and served as a response to those who accused the corporate stakeholders (including Silverstein, the New Jersey Port Authority, and the LMDC) of being insensitive in their rush to replace the lost commercial space. Architect Daniel Libeskind, whose plan for the spatial organization of the site was ultimately chosen, was the most prominent voice suggesting this new set of meanings. Libeskind explicitly discussed his conception for the site in the context of what has been called American civil religion when he unveiled his original plan for rebuilding the site in December 2002. Invoking his experience as a ten-year-old immigrant to the United States, Libeskind described his arrival in New York aboard the SS *Constitution* and the inspiring view of the Statue of Liberty as the ship neared Manhattan. The new building, he asserted, should be an answer to "the call of the

Statue of Liberty" [18]. He envisioned it as a place celebrating the "spirit" of the country, invoking not the language of architecture but, as Goldberger observes, that of "commemoration, memory, mourning, and renewal" [18]. The architectural plan he proposed evoked the memory of the September 11 tragedy by retaining and exposing the slurry wall that had survived the attack and by preserving the original footprints of the Twin Towers as plazas, named the Wedge of Light and the Park of Heroes. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs has noted that "every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework" [23], and Libeskind seems to have internalized this idea, using spatial and architectural design to encourage a specific type of collective memory: one that merged a memory of the dead with a triumphal narrative of U.S. patriotism. The site would be reclaimed by the city and the nation to proclaim, in the final words of Libeskind's presentation, "life victorious," a phrase that met with lengthy applause from the assembled crowd. Governor Pataki, picking up this theme, dubbed the tower portion of the rebuilding plan the Freedom Tower and declared that with it New Yorkers would "reclaim the skyline" [18,24].

Although some scholars have challenged the concept of American civil religion posed by sociologist Robert Bellah in 1967, the belief that the United States has been blessed by the Judeo-Christian God with a particularly sacred mission nevertheless continues to resonate among many Americans and has been defended and advanced by any number of patriotic groups [25]. The almost immediate erecting of American flags on the site of the destruction at Ground Zero marked the site as uniquely American. Hundreds of flags, "God Bless America" signs, and other patriotic images and objects were left at the site by mourners in the weeks after the attacks. A wave of patriotism swept the country, linked closely to religious ideas. Religious congregations of many stripes came together in ecumenical prayer services. As Americans celebrated Thanksgiving two months after the attack, patriotism was the theme of New York's Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and similar events in other cities. [26]. These articulations of notions of America's divine sanction quickly merged with ideas about sacred ground and raised the stakes for those who saw building as a form of retaliation. They also deepened convictions that the site needed to be preserved and protected from further desecration.

These three sets of meanings—the site as sacred ground, the notion of rebuilding as retaliation, and the assertion of American civil religion—are crucial to an understanding of the Park 51 controversy. In the debate over the Islamic community center, we see the religious language of sacred ground combining with the response/retaliation theme and these two themes then morphing into the nationalistic patriotism of civil religion and American spirit. The Park 51 controversy that escalated to a national crisis hinged on the redefinition of this religious and pseudo-religious/patriotic language within a context of escalating Islamophobia and its redeployment to demonstrate, however illogically, that a new threat to the site existed—this time religious, rather than terrorist, in character. The American, Christian sacredness of the site was understood as being threatened by those who shared one feature in common with the terrorists who wrought its destruction in the first place: the religion of Islam.

Islam and the Spatialization of Meaning and Power

The conflicts over meaning associated with Ground Zero—not only the Park 51 dispute but also the many conflicts arising throughout the post-attack period—aligned the site with numerous other

religious and memorial sites. As Linenthal has noted, memorialization processes frequently follow a pattern that includes two central components: the growth of notions of custodianship with respect to a site and the development of conflicts over the site that in turn deepen those feelings of custodianship [27]. Whether those conflicts are over issues of purification (including keeping the impure out), maintaining control over the narrative meanings of the site or over pedagogies for disseminating that meaning to larger audiences, or over other issues, disputes such as these deepen feelings of custodianship and raise the stakes on "failure." As we have already seen, a number of such conflicts arose early in the rebuilding process, resulting in an increasing concern that the site itself was vulnerable and in need of protection.

Like all conflicts, those surrounding the rebuilding were ultimately contests over power. Who had the power to control the message of the site and who would be allowed to participate in the site? These questions had been negotiated through a variety of democratic processes of public meetings and juried competitions aimed at including as many voices as possible. But what many voices created was cacophony, not concrete results. Cleanup proceeded slowly, resulting in other sets of debates. Rebuilding inched along at a snail's pace, with contentions over insurance, ownership, and building rights surfacing. In 2007, Mayor Bloomberg became involved in the process, promising to speed it toward a conclusion, but by the summer of 2010, construction had all but stopped. As the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks neared, the site remained a hole in the ground, an open wound. Power had been diffused, even abdicated, opening up discursive space for a new contest, providing an opportunity for those with new agendas, namely opposition to Islam and Muslim immigration, to make a play for power by inserting their arguments into the already fraught situation.

Over the same period, the war on terrorism had advanced, with U.S. military forces going first into Afghanistan and later into Iraq. Islam itself was increasingly characterized as problematic as diverse Muslim groups in these countries and throughout the Middle East struggled to negotiate shifting political, military, and cultural ground. Despite George Bush's efforts to avoid characterizing the conflict as one between Islam and Christianity shortly after the attacks, over the next several years Islam was increasingly depicted (not least by Islamic fundamentalists sympathetic with Al-Qaeda's actions), as the enemy of the West and, by extension, of Christianity, fostering a backlash of anti-Islamic feeling among some Americans. By early 2010, anti-Islamic views could be readily found on the Internet and various media outlets.

When anti-Islamic individuals began to voice opposition to the plans for the development of Park 51, the project had been in development for some time. With the aid of the press, Islamophobic rhetoric tapped into all three of the spatial meanings described above, and these spatial meanings lent those perspectives a unique legitimacy and authority. The sanctity of the Ground Zero site was now understood to be threatened not simply by something profane but by the very enemy who had originally defiled it. In Durkheimian terms, the presence of the so-called "mosque" breeched a taboo, requiring a strong interdiction to ensure the purity of the site. Arguments about building too close to the sacred site pointed to a need to maintain its purity in the face of a threat of desecration. References to the "shadow" of the Twin Towers called forth the visual absence of the towers in a way similar to the earlier expressions of collective memory discussed above. The focus on buildings as adversarial statements (indeed as weapons) in a cultural struggle reworked the building-as-retaliation theme, but from a new perspective. Now an Islamic building was claiming the space and, in the view of some,

"triumphing" over the site. Most importantly, this view aligned the demonizing of Islam with both the retaliation theme and the civil religion theme, suggesting an enemy within. Those who protested against Park 51 demonstrated what Chidester has called a militant "patriotism of power" that distinctly countered the nine-year-long discussions more often characterized by a "patriotism of pain" [28].

Clearly, conflict over the erecting of religious sites has a long history in this country and elsewhere. Father Kevin Madigan of New York City, for instance, pointed out during the controversy that the construction of the first Roman Catholic church in New York City, St. Peter's, was vehemently opposed by anti-Catholics in 1785 [29]. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, efforts to erect Catholic monasteries, Mormon meetinghouses and temples (indeed Mormon communities themselves), synagogues, and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls all met with resistance. During World War II, Shinto shrines in Hawaii and California were forced to close [30,31]. And more recently the construction of Sikh gurdwaras, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and Islamic mosques has set off conflict in localities across the United States. Strategies used to halt mosque construction on the local level have involved legal maneuvering to redefine or change zoning codes, complaints over noise levels and parking congestion, and most recently in Murphfreesboro, Tennessee, efforts to deny that Islam is a "religion" at all and is therefore not covered by the First Amendment. Further, once completed, religious sites have not infrequently been the targets of violence. The Temple, a Reform Jewish synagogue in Atlanta, was bombed in 1957 by white supremacists opposed to the rabbi's desegregation activities [32]. The 1990s saw several attacks on and acts of vandalism against mosques throughout the United States, from Illinois and Michigan to Colorado and California [33,34].

In each of these cases, members of the religious group in the cross-hairs were understood by their opponents as not "real Americans," not *bona fide* members of American society. Their opponents constructed or coded them using what sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has termed a "discourse of repression," positioning them negatively with respect to the symbolic structures of civil society. As Alexander argues, such negative codings or repressive discourses, the flip side of a Janus-faced concept of liberty that also welcomes democratic qualities such as openness and trust, are inherent in civil society, particularly *in situ*ations regarding internal threats [35]. Such repressive discourses have enormous power, triggering false ideas and "irrational behavior," in Alexander's view, "even in good citizens themselves, for deceptive information can be provided that might lead them, on what would seem to be rational grounds, to turn away from the structures or processes of democratic society itself" [35]. Despite the national commitment to religious liberty, the other side of the coin is too often the denial of "American-ness" to non-hegemonic (usually non-Christian) religious groups.

The case of Park 51 mirrors the above-mentioned local efforts to deny minority religions access to public space, but due to the national discussion surrounding the rebuilding of the Twin Towers site and the ambiguity regarding the rebuilding, the resulting discourse of repression in this case became national in scope. Given the success of Islamophobic efforts to code the September 11 attacks within a Christian-Muslim conflict, concerns about the Ground Zero site's vulnerability and the desire to protect it from further desecration opened the door for a new taboo with its accompanying exclusions: no Muslims allowed. A visceral religious incompatibility was deemed to exist on the sacred site, and by definition, Muslim presence, no matter how loosely connected to the radical jihadists who carried out the attacks, undermined and profaned the memory of the dead, the purity of the site, and the feelings of the mourners. In effect, the spatialization of the civic processes that were aimed at coming

to terms with the September 11 attacks—that is, the spatial processes that sacralized Ground Zero—created an opportunity to code the conflict as specifically religious, *i.e.*, between Christianity and Islam, and specifically about a threat to American civil society [36,37]. The spatial meanings that emerged in the days and weeks following 9/11—sacredness, retaliation, patriotism, and, in particular, vulnerability—in conjunction with the ensuing war against terrorism and rise of Islamaphobia constituted a powerful context against which this local effort to erect a building was interpreted as a volley within a political struggle between adherents to a religion and citizens of a nation. Those two groups—Muslims and Americans—were conceived of as necessarily mutually exclusive.

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier in this essay, most curious to me is that fact that many people who were *not* caught up in the fear of Muslims or Islam argued that the issue was one of "respect" for feelings—that moving the community center away from the immediate proximity of Ground Zero would be more respectful on the part of the Muslim group and would ultimately solve the problem. That this argument—despite its inconsistency with deeply held notions of religious liberty—resonated so widely is, in my view, also largely due to the power of the spatial meanings associated with Ground Zero outlined here: ideas of sacred ground, retaliation, and civil religion. To the extent that these contexts were understood to imbue a Christian or sanctified American identity to the space, in the current political climate in which Islam is associated with terrorism, Ground Zero and Park 51 were recast in terms of a religious dispute between the sacred and the impure, a conflict between Christian America and Islam as seemingly adversarial systems of belief. Within this context, the idea that all Muslims represent "the enemy" and thus their presence would corrupt the sanctity of the vulnerable Ground Zero site gained considerable traction.

To diffuse this dispute, supporters of the community center were called upon to demonstrate "respect" for the sanctity of Ground Zero—whether that sanctity was associated with the consecration of the ground by the blood of the Christian dead or with American civil religion—by moving the community center an unspecified distance to a place where it would not violate the purity of the site. This argument for respect and distance exemplifies Alexander's point about "good people" being swayed by repressive codings and led into anti-democratic behavior. Perhaps more pernicious than outright Islamophobia, this perception of vulnerability and subsequent calls for "respect," both informed and achieved by spatialized social processes, are in effect a measure of the distance that Islam and American Muslims are from being viewed as fully American. For until those who do believe in religious liberty banish the fear of internal threat, eschew the power of repressive codings—spatial, religious, or social—and fully embrace Muslim membership in American civil society, opportunities for the negative side of the discourse of liberty, and religious liberty in particular, to assert itself will, sadly, continue to challenge not only the legitimacy of Muslim participation in American society but also that of other religious groups, in effect putting the lie to the American ideal of freedom of religion.

Sadly, it was not widely understood that the discursive space for the Islamophobic reading of the Park 51 threat to Ground Zero had been opened up by the perceived vulnerability of the site and the instability in the meanings associated with it that had been triggered by the many contests over the rebuilding. Despite all the spatial rhetoric and clues to the importance of the meanings attached to the

space that erupted in the media during the controversy, few commentators at the peak of the dispute in August and early September 2010 seemed to understand that the debate had emerged precisely because the meaning of the Ground Zero site remained unsettled nine years after the attack. Nick Gillespie of reason.com was one of the few who pointed out that had the site been something other than a still-undeveloped scar, had a successful memorial been erected, the building of an Islamic center in the vicinity would not have been an issue [38,39]. Indeed, had the meanings and power relations pertaining to the site been previously stabilized, the possibility for alternate readings drawing upon a sense of vulnerability and desecration would have been considerably lessened. Had the redevelopment of the Ground Zero site been completed by August 2010, the controversy over Park 51 would likely have remained a local debate, and the idea that the Islamic community center site would threaten our national identity or our national mourning as embodied within the site would have been preposterous.

In contrast to media commentators, New York civic leaders did understand that the undeveloped space of Ground Zero lay at the heart of the controversy and the repressive discourse. As the Park 51 controversy escalated, they sought to reassert authority over the meaning of the site, publicizing detailed plans for moving forward on the stalled project and demonstrating an astonishing level of renewed interest in completing it. The resulting activity will likely achieve a reasonably completed site by the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, closing this particular gap in the symbolic structures of American civil society and removing at least one opportunity for casting Muslims as non-Americans.

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