

“A Mosque at Ground Zero: A Privileged Response to Religious Diversity”

by Rev. Jason Cook

The long, vitriolic, and obstructive response to the attempted building of an Islamic community center a few blocks from the site of the former World Trade Center buildings is reflective of the way in which power and privilege create oppressive conditions that interrupt the potential for greater religious diversity. Proposed after the September 11 attacks, the Islamic Center would have been called Park51 and would have included a prayer space that was characterized as a mosque by media and protestors; i.e. “Ground Zero mosque,” as it became commonly (and inaccurately) known.¹ For the purposes of this examination, Allan G. Johnson’s work on the social construction of difference will provide a basic framework for understanding the ways in which privilege has asserted itself in response to the proposed building of this cultural center. Johnson describes privilege as “when one group has something of value that is denied to an other simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do,” a statement that essentially sums up the dynamics of this situation—a situation which can ultimately be regarded as the denial of the needs and concerns of a marginalized religious group by a dominant one.² Even more pointedly, Abby L. Ferber’s work on Christonormativity will provide a way of comprehending the very specific role religious domination has played in the unfolding of this situation, one that can be readily seen as evidence of racialization and Islamophobia.

If it is true that “privilege generally allows people to assume a certain level of acceptance, inclusion, and respect in the world, to operate within a relatively wide comfort zone,” then it is also true that those Muslims who would have benefitted from the building of

¹ Keith Olbermann, “There is no ‘Ground Zero Mosque,’” *NBC News*, Accessed December 10, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/38730223/ns/msnbc_tv-countdown_with_keith_olbermann/#.Vm2kf3vXeRo.

² Allan G. Johnson, “The Social Construction of Difference, In M. Adams, W. Blumenfield, C. Castañada, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York & London: Routledge, 16.

Park51 were not the recipients of specifically that understanding of privilege.³ The outcry against the proposed cultural center was swift, angry, and reflective of a lack of acceptance and inclusivity. The conversation about Park51 occurred over a period of almost fifteen years, and in following it, I am confident in characterizing it as one that was reactionary and Islamophobic. Oppositional voices in the public arena included politicians, clergy, media personalities, and an assortment of spokespeople from other organizations across the spectrum of social engagement, all well documented in countless media sources; sometimes these voices were fairly measured, utilizing ostensibly rational concerns, and sometimes they relied on the worst kind of emotive and manipulative rhetoric to characterize Muslims—either way, these voices affirmed that Muslims are not afforded the same level of agency and respect given to other identity groups. This inability of Muslims to assume the same level of acceptance and inclusion as others is perhaps best summed up in the words of Steven Israel, the Democratic Representative of the Second District in New York, who said, “While they have a Constitutional right to build the mosque, it would be better if they had demonstrated more sensitivity to the families of 9/11 victims. I urge them to do so before proceeding further.”⁴ Usually, in thinking about Constitutional rights, there is the assumption that these rights are available to all. As this politician and others stated upon multiple occasions (many with less politeness than Rep. Steven Israel), Muslims are expected to not have the same level of easy comfort and security as others in the assumption of living out their Constitutional rights; instead, they are expected to engage in highly nuanced thinking and decision-making that goes beyond prioritizing their own rights and requires them to consider (first and foremost) the concerns of non-Muslims. In particular, the thrust of many of these arguments is that Muslims should prioritize dominant Christian voices

³ Johnson, 19.

⁴ “Where LI pols stand on the Ground Zero mosque,” *Newsday*, Accessed December 11, 2015, <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/where-li-pols-stand-on-the-ground-zero-mosque-1.2215347>.

over their own needs and concerns. This is typical of the way power and privilege operate; after all, “privilege increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to set the agenda in a social situation and determine the rules and standards and how they’re applied.”⁵ In thinking about Johnson’s explanation of privilege as the ability to function within a relatively wide comfort zone, then it is clear that for Muslims, this comfort zone is much more narrow, if it exists at all. In fact, out of fear of those more privileged voices who objected to Park51, some Muslims even raised their own voices in opposition, though their framing of their concerns was markedly different from non-Muslim protestors. For instance, in detailing his reservations about the project, Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed said, “I do not think that the majority of Muslims want to build a symbol or a worship place that tomorrow might become. . . a shrine for Islam haters whose aim is to turn the public opinion against Islam.”⁶ For Muslims, the choice to support or not support Park51 was not an easy one as there was much fear to navigate; either way, as is so often the case in oppressive social systems, there was a price to pay.

Another point that Allan G. Johnson makes about privilege is that it “grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgments stick,” a process that clearly played out during the debate about Park51 and the racialization and stereotyping that occurred during this period.⁷ Historically, “when the majority of Arab immigrants to the United States were Christian, they were more likely to be defined legally as White;” now, there has been a radical shift, and those of Middle Eastern ethnicity are absolutely not seen as white, nor are they able to access the privileges that come (unjustly) with whiteness.⁸ In fact, after the September 11 attack, multiple racial identities became consolidated by the dominant social

⁵ Johnson, 19.

⁶ Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, “A House of Worship or a Symbol of Destruction?” *Al Arabiya News*, Accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2010/08/16/116802.html>.

⁷ Johnson, 19.

⁸ Abby Ferber, “The Culture of Privilege: Color-blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (2012), 70.

discourse into a group that was essentially understood as consisting of those who look like potential terrorists.⁹ This puts contemporary Muslims (and those who “look” Muslim) in the non-privileged position of having to “take steps to prove loyalty to America,” an unenviable (and impossible) position that has been held historically by other racial groups, such as Japanese Americans during World War II, which led to a shameful period of American history culminating with the internment camps.¹⁰ We have much historical evidence of the dangers of stereotypes and yet they “so permeate the society that they are not noticed as contestable,” and thus the marginalized “find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere.”¹¹ This schism between how Muslims view themselves and how members of the culturally dominant group view them is very much audible when privileged voices critique the supposed lack of Muslim voices who decry terrorist actions, even though most Muslims do not psychologically associate themselves with those perpetrators of violent actions and therefore feel no need to publicly speak out against them. (Nonetheless, many Muslims have openly stated their objections to this kind of violence, usually with little media attention.) Similarly, much of the debate around Park51 centered on Muslims’ accountability to the dominant culture’s perception of them, with little regard for *their* view of *themselves* as peaceful people simply in need of a place to gather, socialize, and worship. The stereotyping and racialization of Muslim identities during the fourteen-year period that Park51 was being considered are evidence of the dynamic “between the privilege and normativity associated with Whiteness and Christianity, and the othering of dark

⁹ “We Are All Muslim: Coalition Building,” *Vimeo*, Accessed December 11, 2015 from <https://vimeo.com/28238250>.

¹⁰ Duncan Ryūken Williams, “From Pearl Harbor to 9/11: Lessons from the Internment of Japanese American Buddhists” In M. Adams, W. Blumenfield, C. Castañada, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York & London: Routledge, 286.

¹¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: New Jersey, 1990), 59.

skin and non-Christian-ness.”¹² In reading through the arguments against Park51, a clear theme emerges; for the dominant culture, the presence of an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero was all about having an enemy (with a different skin color) desecrating a sacred space. As one commentator said, “in a country dedicated to freedom, forces have gathered to blow out of all proportion the construction of a minor community center; to transform it [by their mistaken perception] into a training ground for terrorists and an insult to the victims of 9/11.”¹³ The racialization and association of all Muslims with violence is a sad reminder that power and privilege as oppressive forces are alive and well in the United States. As Johnson says, “privilege means being able to decide who gets taken seriously, who receives attention, who is accountable to whom and for what.”¹⁴ For Muslims in a post-9/11 world, the power to make these decisions around agency, accountability, and authority is curtailed and even, at times, withheld altogether.

Interwoven into the racialization that has occurred during this period is also the continued cultural centering on Christonormativity, which refers to “the normalization and privileging of Christianity as the dominant religious and spiritual culture in the United States.”¹⁵ This emphasis on Christianity as the only truly valid religious identity and experience works to allow members of the dominant social order “to define reality and to have prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience,” indicators of which we see over and over in the Park51 controversy.¹⁶ (The fact that the building of a non-Christian religious cultural center is considered controversial at all is strong evidence of Christonormativity, much like the fact that the “black lives matter” campaign is considered controversial is actually evidence that racism is alive and well.) Evidence that “Christian privilege is embedded in our laws, policies, schools and workplaces” is

¹² K. Y. Joshi, “Religious Oppression of Indian Americans In the Contemporary United States,” In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, C. Castañada, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York & London: Routledge, 251.

¹³ Olbermann.

¹⁴ Johnson, 19.

¹⁵ Abby Ferber, “The Culture of Privilege: Color-blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (2012), 70.

¹⁶ Johnson, 19.

interwoven into the history of Park51, particularly in the many voices who argued against it with little understanding of the Christian privilege from which they spoke.¹⁷ For instance, Richard Land, a self-identified Christian commentator, wrote at the time of his concerns of spaces of worship being organized in places that he views as socially inappropriate or insensitive:

Having a mosque at Ground Zero would be the equivalent of having a Japanese Shinto shrine built next to the USS Arizona. Do the followers of Shinto have a right to have a shrine in Honolulu? Yes. In close proximity to the USS Arizona? No. I am well aware that many Japanese did not support the attack on Pearl Harbor. . . . That still does not negate the fact that it would be inappropriate to have a Japanese shrine in close proximity to the USS Arizona. It is similarly inappropriate to put a mosque in close proximity to Ground Zero.¹⁸

Notably, Land does not provide *any* examples of where a Christian-identified house of worship would be inappropriate, evidence of the way in which the system is able to “erase from view Christian privilege, reinscribing Christianity as normative.”¹⁹ For Land and other Christians, Muslims are viewed as “the other,” and as such, they are subject to different, unwritten (though no less compelling) rules on what constitutes religious freedom for them, as has already been pointedly discussed in the assumptions of how Constitutional rights should or should not be utilized by “those people.” For Christians and those who are perceived to be part of this Christonormative group, their identity “grants a presumption of superiority and social permission to act on that presumption without having to worry about being challenged,” which is essentially the opposite position Muslims were asked to take during the Park51 controversy.²⁰ They were asked to *not* presume (even when their “presumptions” were based on Constitutional religious freedoms); they were asked *not* to challenge, but instead graciously acquiesce to the challenge being given to them. Finally, when plans (after a decade of delays) to finally open the center

¹⁷ Ferber, 71.

¹⁸ Richard Land, “A mosque near Ground Zero is unacceptable,” *Faith Street*, Accessed December 12, 2015, <http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2010/07/22/a-mosque-at-ground-zero-is-inappropriate-and-counterproductive/7432>.

¹⁹ Ferber, 73.

²⁰ Johnson, 20.

went ahead on a much smaller scale on a trial basis, focused solely on cultural arts, this heavily compromised approach still generated “street clashes in view of the trade center site” that “pitted supporters against opponents of the center.”²¹ Clearly, even after a decade, the controversy continued. Ultimately, in addressing the conflict, the center’s developer said, “we didn’t understand that we had a responsibility to discuss our private project with family members that lost loved ones.”²² I would suggest that the organizers had no real responsibility to include non-Muslims in developing this project; strategically and, arguably, ethically, it was ultimately a good move, but for Muslims to have to develop their social and worship spaces with the concerns of Christians prioritized is the very definition of cultural domination and oppression.

Johnson reflects that “to have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked in ways that identify you as an outsider, as exception or ‘other’ to be excluded, or to be included but always with conditions.”²³ This is a privilege not afforded to Muslims, as has been seen in several recent incidents, and quite notably in this stormy, decade-plus long battle to open Park51. Alas, despite that small-scale trial opening in 2011, the plans for the center have now been scrapped, and a proposal to instead build a new condominium tower there is currently on the table.²⁴ This tower will be affordable only for the very wealthy “with amenities to evoke a five-star hotel.”²⁵ I am sad to think that a place that could have offered worship, connection, and healing to so many people will now simply be another structure designed to reinforce our inextricably interconnected economic, cultural, and religious systems of domination. Perhaps most tellingly, in a time when the gap between the “haves” and “have nots” is wider than it has been in a century, there has been no outcry against this luxury building,

²¹ Karen Zraick and Verna Dobnik, “Park51 Islamic Center Opens Its Doors Near Ground Zero,” *Huffington Post*, Accessed December 10, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/22/park51-islamic-center-ope_n_975585.html.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Johnson, 20.

²⁴ Oshrat Carmiel, “Luxe Condos at ‘Ground Zero Mosque’ Site Aim High on Pricing,” *Bloomberg Business*, Accessed December 11, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-25/45-park-place-pricing-ground-zero-mosque-condos-aim-above-market-rate>.

²⁵ Carmiel.

and there likely will be none. The system has done its job (as systems do) and with the Islamic center no longer on the table (but the echoes of the controversy around it still ringing in the air), the division between Christian and Muslim is wider than ever, and the gap between the lifestyles of the rich and poor further increases. The status quo is affirmed once again.

I do not want end on a hopeless note, however, for there is actually much hope to be found in the story of Park51, even in analyzing how power and privilege were used to offer opportunities for growth and change. Some voices of families of 9/11 victims were courageous in offering their support to the Islamic center. Some politicians offered their support, such as New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, who said, “We want to make sure that everybody from around the world feels comfortable coming here, living here and praying the way they want to pray.”²⁶ Likewise, President Obama said, “As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property.”²⁷ These are prime examples of people using their privilege and power to offer support to those who are marginalized, to welcome them into spaces of inclusivity and acceptance. Admittedly, it takes more than just words of support to dismantle oppression, and we are only really beginning to see the kind of multi-leveled, collaborative, organized action take place to dismantle the racialization, stereotyping, and “othering” of Muslims in the United States. Yet, those important steps are beginning to happen, especially as some actively work to form coalitions whose ambitions are to reject and dismantle any system or institution that is primarily interested in “explaining away inequality and trying to naturalize and justify oppression and privilege.”²⁸ The

²⁶ Javier C. Hernandez, “Planned Sign of Tolerance Bringing Division Instead,” *New York Times*, Accessed December 10, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/14/nyregion/14center.html?_r=0.

²⁷ Reshma Kirpalani, “‘Ground Zero Mosque’ Clears Hurdle to Build,” *ABC News*, Accessed December 10, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/ground-mosque-wins-legal-battle-build/story?id=14062701>.

²⁸ Ferber, 74.

tragic history of Park51 should be a lesson to us all. It should stand as a testament to what happens when privilege and oppressive power gets in the way of religious freedom. It should stand as a testament to what happens when the concerns and needs of the group in question are put behind the prejudices of those who dominate. Finally, it should serve as a testament that even within actions characterized by failure and human selfishness, there can be moments of grace and hope.

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