



John Paul II, Lower Manhattan and the Power of Religious Symbolism

28.09.2010 | Philip A. Cunningham

The recent controversy over the proposed construction of an Islamic center and mosque in Lower Manhattan has raised unsettling questions about religious freedom, sensitivity to the victims of Sept. 11, Islamophobia, political demagoguery and the limits of accommodation by the majority society to minorities.

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Some commentators have acknowledged the legal right of the mosque's sponsors to build their center, but have urged that sensitivity to the pain of the victims demands that it be built elsewhere. Some recall the intervention of Pope John Paul II in the "Carmelite convent controversy" at Auschwitz.

In the early 1990s, he pressured the Carmelite nuns to implement a 1987 agreement to relocate their convent away from the death camp. His sympathy for the Jewish victims of the Nazis, it is claimed, should be repeated today in the case of the families victimized by Al Qaeda terrorists. While this comparison might initially seem attractive, closer consideration shows that the two situations are not comparable. Indeed, another action by the late pope is arguably more pertinent.

Religious symbolism is at work in both disputes, but symbols evoke very different emotions in different people. When Christians and Jews, for example, are asked their reactions to seeing a cross, most Christians quickly reply that they feel God's love or gratitude, or acknowledge having been saved. Yet they are shocked when some Jewish neighbors express feelings of fear, anger or even an urge to flee. The ensuing discussion usually unpacks the long history of the Christian majority's oppression of the Jewish minority in Europe, of which many Christians are ignorant.

The convent at Auschwitz, especially when numerous crosses were erected at the site by Polish nationalists, thus seemed to the devastated remnant of the Jewish minority as one more attack by the majority Christian culture against them. The Jewish survivors were the last vestige of a minority Polish culture that had lost 90 percent of its people to a continent-spanning machinery of death.

Recognizing that a cross symbolically challenged the uniquely anti-Jewish nature of the genocide that Auschwitz represented -- and having himself experienced the loss of most of his boyhood Jewish friends -- John Paul II intervened on behalf of the victimized minority. He also supported the speedy establishment of a center for interreligious dialogue nearby.

The difference with today's dispute is that the planned Islamic center is sponsored by a minority religious group in American culture, not by the majority religious group, as was perceived by the Jewish victims in Poland.

A more cogent episode concerning John Paul II involves his preparations in 1986 to visit the Great Synagogue of Rome. Some of his Jewish hosts were concerned that the pope would wear his

customary cross. Besides raising religious questions, there was fear that the prominence of a symbol that brought dread and antipathy to numerous Jews would undercut the pope's mission of healing and reconciliation.

When the issue was brought to his attention, the pope reportedly replied that such negative feelings were exactly the reason why he must wear his cross to the synagogue. If there was to be true friendship between Christians and Jews, then he had to decouple the long association of the cross with the oppression of Jews. Jews needed to see Christianity's central symbol worn by a friend, reaching out in amity and esteem. The cross' symbolic function was thus quite different than at the Auschwitz convent.

This episode is very relevant today. If some Americans are currently offended by the thought of a mosque in Lower Manhattan, it is because for them, Al Qaeda terrorists somehow symbolize Islam (which recalls the centuries of Christian symbolization of all Jews as culpable for the crucifixion of Jesus). If many Americans thus symbolically link all Muslims with terrorism, then perhaps John Paul II teaches us that we need to decouple such associations, as he sought to do with the symbol of the cross in 1986.

Philip A. Cunningham, Ph.D., is professor of theology and religious studies, and director of the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He is also a vice president of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

Published in: [The Jewish Exponent](#), 16 September 2010