

Filled With Misgivings: 9/11's Birthday

✖ Last Friday I had the privilege of appearing on the MacNeil/Lehrer Hour. My segment of the program had a Muslim leader, a liberal church leader who had worked extensively in New York just after 9/11, a secular current affairs blogger and myself (an evangelical minister). Our exchange was lively but thoughtful. The rest of the panel accused the majority of Americans of religious intolerance to some degree. They saw the threat of Koran burning made by Pastor Terry Jones of Dove Fellowship in Gainesville, Fla., as emblematic of a huge national resurgence of anti-Islamic sentiments.

On the other hand, I pointed out that the nation has never fully processed its grief about Sept. 11 or been told how to conduct itself in the “new” America. I cited the fact that religious leaders have the greatest access to the bulk of the American public. Unfortunately, many of us have not addressed the twin sisters of intolerance (fear and anger) that lurk within the hearts and minds of many of our parishioners. Political correctness has not allowed spiritual leaders to talk about their members’ concerns or encourage them to be tolerant of Muslim neighbors’ faith and background. I also was able to declare that tolerance works two ways. A few years ago, my congregation experienced a situation in which several community groups opposed our desire to build in a very exclusive neighborhood. Although we have the right to erect a church on an historic farm, which included the state of Maryland’s oldest beach tree and a slave graveyard; it would not have created an environment for ministry in that community. Therefore, we chose to sell the property to a developer and find another location.

This is exactly what the ground zero mosque folks should do. If they extended an olive branch of peace and tolerance,

instead of demanding their rights, they would embody the true American value of forbearance and service. Time did not permit me to explain that in our "new America" people like Malik Nadal Hasan (the alleged Fort Hood Massacre shooter) have greater allegiance to intolerant religious beliefs than they have to our nation's vision, values or goals.

I came away from the program feeling compelled to write this piece. I wanted to share some observations that I have gleaned from talking to my clergy friends.

First of all, we have a unique opportunity to advance racial and/or religious tolerance in the U.S. The election of President Barack Obama demonstrates that it is possible to break through the glass ceilings of race, class and gender in business, politics, entertainment and national leadership. The old adage about change describes where we are as a culture – "Desperate times require desperate measures." Our problem is that when we are under pressure, it is easy to go back to old paradigms.

Ironically, the progressive political ranks are always accusing conservatives of preying on the fears of a nation. Unfortunately, they have been guilty of overusing fear in recent months as they describe everything from the Tea Party Movement, to healthcare, to the economy. For example, last week President Obama merely cast aspersions on those that he felt were being religiously intolerant instead of giving the kind of speech that he gave on race during the election. Very few people have the oratory talent or ability to paint a clear picture of the perils of religious prejudice as clearly as the president. In the arena of faith, he seems just as blind as he was enlightened about race in 2008. In such an address, he could probably clear up the misconception that he is an undercover Muslim and facilitate a healthy national dialogue.

Secondly, evangelicals leaders are more concerned about America's future today than they were nine years ago. Their

concerns about terrorism have not been relieved. As I have already stated, American bred terrorists make our defacto struggle with religious radicals even more concerning. Further, mainstream Christian fears about the theological content of Jeremiah Wright's liberation theology have also created a concern about how the president's value of money, free enterprise, taxes and the redistribution of wealth.

Finally most spiritual leaders I know believe that America's greatest problem is the lack of heartfelt, personal spiritual commitment. We believe that the nation needs a third great awakening that will help us love and respect both our neighbors and ourselves. Naturally, the choice of each individual's faith journey is sacrosanct. No, my ministry peers do not want a modern theocracy. Neither do they believe that spiritual leaders should impose a "one size fits all" form of moral or political orthodoxy on the nation.

They believe like Alexis de Tocqueville, the French political thinker and historian most famous for his work Democracy in America. He declared that, "America will cease to be great when she ceases to be good." Most evangelical ministers I am close to believe that it is the personal application of concepts like honesty, faithfulness, marital fidelity and honor that will ensure America's continued moral courage and professional excellence. External liberty without internal restraint could lead to anarchy instead of productive democracy.

These sentiments were at the core of the recent Glenn Beck Restoring Honor Rally. It is also the reason I am a part of a spiritually-based movement that is praying for a third great wakening in the U.S. We are calling for thousands of clergy, business people and laymen to offer heartfelt prayers and personal examination so that spiritual renewal of the nation may begin with each one of us individually.

The website for the "Pray and Act Movement" is www.prayandact.org. It all begins

with a 40-day prayer adventure on Monday, Sept. 20. Become part of this national campaign. It has the potential to change not only your life, but also the lives of generations to come.