

Should Muslims Stay Off Our 'Holy Ground?'

I thought I might write about the kerfuffle surrounding Mike Huckabee's recent rebuke of a Christian church for allowing Muslims to worship in its building. I was going to side with the former Arkansas governor and likely 2012 presidential candidate. I suppose the truth is that I do. But I spent some time today talking with a Muslim, which reminded me how easy it is to depersonalize these questions, which is certainly something I've done more than once.

To personalize the question, then: What to say to a friendly Muslim neighbor when he wants to pray to Allah with his friends and children in the basement of your local Christian church?

You might simply say that the church building is off limits because you believe Muslims are heretics and leave it at that. But this is a lot harder to do when you're looking into the eyes of an earnest person who really does mean well, who really doesn't see why the two of you should be at odds.

Further, "I don't like what you believe—doesn't seem so compelling a reason. I think, in effect, what many of us who find Muslim prayers in a Christian church problematic want to say is that church ground is holy, that prayers to a god who is not the Triune God of the Christian faith are offensive in such a place, in a way they would not be in, say, a YMCA building.

But then I wonder if we've gotten ourselves into a pickle. How many of us really, truly consider our church—the physical space in which we worship—to be holy ground? Not holy on Sundays when we're singing and hearing a sermon, but holy all the time.

We—Protestants especially—are inclined to think of our buildings like our sacramental elements: symbols, representatives of mysteries residing solely in the spiritual realm. We also view them as instruments of worship—necessities to carry out our modern rituals. But are they—and in particular the church building and grounds—holy? Do we believe something sets them apart, that they are somehow special and separate and inviolate?

I don't recall hearing such language, but I'm admittedly tone-deaf about some things. I've heard people thank God for giving them space in which to worship, and I've heard them call the place where they hear sermons the "sanctuary," and I've even heard people suggest that the sanctuary is holy ground when the worship service is in session.

But I've also seen them hold band practice and town hall meetings in their sanctuaries, and sell their churches to non-church organizations without batting an eye about what's to become of their holy ground, which suggests they believe the ground, if holy, is only so by virtue of being owned by an entity defined in the IRS tax code as a church. Meanwhile, the language we use when it comes to church buildings is largely that of finances and utility, not holiness.

All of which leaves me wondering: If the church building is not itself holy, but instead whatever holiness arises has more to do with the worship service itself (something akin to the notion held by many Protestants that the "one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church" of the Nicene Creed is an invisible entity comprised of all the real Christians around the world), then what is our objection to Muslims worshipping in Christian church buildings?

I think it should be something more than "I think you're wrong." Maybe that's just because I see such a response severing a relationship where a relationship is vital, where a relationship might one day lead to revelation and thereby

salvation for souls now captive to darkness and deception. If our reason for opposition is simply our dislike of the Muslim faith, perhaps we ought to reconsider.

Yet I find myself opposing this practice all the same for a very explicit reason: I believe the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is indeed holy and indeed dwells not just in the spiritual but the physical realm. Perhaps I don't really part ways with most of my Protestant friends in this. But if I don't, I suggest we use this dispute as an opportunity to consider what we really believe about the holiness of the church. We'll be a lot more convincing if we behave as if we believe it's holy ground all the time, and not just when Muslims want to pray on it.

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