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Victor Urecki: Muslims are my friends

Advertiser

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- This is not about a community center or a mosque being built two blocks away or moving it two miles away from ground zero. This is not about understanding sensitivities or the victims of 9/11. Nor is it about the First Amendment, zoning laws or hallowed ground.

It's about friendship and standing with brethren.

I have many Muslim friends in Charleston. Our children attend schools together and count each other as best friends. We converse and laugh together at social events and dialogue about our faiths on panels and in classes. I have been inspired upon hearing the adhan (the Islamic call to prayer) at the Islamic Center of West Virginia, feeling each time the glory of God. Muslims are welcomed at B'nai Jacob Synagogue and at Temple Israel and I suspect, they have been touched by our chants and melodies to the Merciful Father of all of us.

We study and compare Islamic sharia law with the Jewish halachic legal system and discover the astonishing similarities in practices and methodologies. We have argued with each other (oh, have we argued!) on Middle East policy and the Arab-Israeli conflict. We have learned from each other and broken bread in celebration of holy days; we have cried together in moments of national mourning.

I have learned much from my Muslim brethren and, as a result, I have grown as a person and value my friendship with them; sitting at the feet of the wise local imams, I have also grown as a rabbi. Muslims are my neighbors, my colleagues and my fellow citizens.

But most of all, they are my friends and they are, forever, my brethren.

Lately, a lot of horrific things have been said about my Islamic friends and brethren. American Muslims have been labeled "radical Islamists", their teachers and leaders have been called "terrorist sympathizers" and words such as murderers and Nazis have been tossed about casually when referring to Muslims. The faith of Islam, a religion I regard as beautiful and as holy as my own, has been smeared, tarnished and defamed.

I can appreciate why many of my Muslim brethren may feel the need to keep quiet; they do not want to draw unnecessary attention to themselves. They, as I do, believe that America is much more tolerant and far more broadminded than the angry voices that we have been hearing on television and radio. They believe, as many of us who came to this country looking for freedom and opportunity know, that America, despite what we are seeing now, is a country that celebrates diversity. This is an extraordinary place that enjoys, no, welcomes the expansion of religious and cultural richness. Muslims, as almost all immigrants to the U.S. realize that given time, ignorance will give way to understanding as it has always been in the past. In time more Americans will come to acknowledge that Islam is a natural addition to the glorious fabric of American life.

Today, they feel helpless in the face of this bigotry and Islamophobia. Our Muslim brothers and sisters are rightfully offended by the comments being made, the cruel and vicious posters being held and the angry and hurtful rallies taking place not just in New York, but in California, Connecticut, Tennessee and Wisconsin. They are sick at heart seeing their religion being described with such detestable adjectives as "fanatical", "radical" and "violent".

Would that the conversation in our country be only about the location of an Islamic community center, but make no mistake, it is not. It is about people determined to portray Islam and Muslims through a veil of ignorance and distortion. In a land where all are welcome and all faiths are constitutionally guaranteed freedom and respect, a great religion, a magnificent heritage, and a beautiful people are being desecrated and defamed.

Understandably, my Muslim friends and brethren may be reluctant to speak out.

But we cannot remain silent.

It is time for their friends to calmly, but firmly and with courage, stand up and declare that the vile and hateful words that are being said about Islam and about Muslims are unacceptable to us. It is about time that those of us who have patronized their stores, been cared for by their doctors, sought wise counsel from their lawyers, and entrusted our children to their teachers be there for the members of the Islamic

community and speak out forcefully against the intolerance and xenophobia we are witnessing. Muslims should not have to be the ones speaking out. We must raise our voices in unison for them.

I do not know where the Cordoba Institute will ultimately stand as a testament to the beauty of interfaith sharing and co-existence. I pray it is built and that it stands as a tribute to the miraculous gift of religious freedom that can never and must never be compromised. But regardless of where it one day stands, I know where I want to stand today, and that is with all faithful Muslims who share with us the freedoms and obligations as Americans.

Urecki is rabbi at B'Nai Jacob Synagogue in Charleston.