

Beckian Religion

by **Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.**
for the Sunday Gazette

“Let me count this day, Lord, as the beginning of a new and more vigorous life, as the beginning of a crusade for complete morality and the domination of the Christian church through all the land. Dear Lord, thy work is but begun! We shall yet make these United States a moral nation.”

-Last paragraph of *Elmer Gantry*, by Sinclair Lewis, 1927

I was aghast to read that some 500 or so people from the Capital District rode buses to attend Glenn Beck’s “Restoring Honor” rally on August 28 in Washington, close to a tenth of a percent of our population. That is much greater than the 0.03 percent of all Americans who attended, about 90,000. (Beck claims 500,000, but he lives in an alternate universe and is prone to seeing things that aren’t there.) I didn’t think that our area was such a hotbed of Tea Party fanaticism. But perhaps it is not, and the bus riders knew something that I didn’t, namely, that when Beck took the podium for which we all thought would be a political rally, he would morph into a Christian evangelist. Halleluia! Shades of Elmer Gantry.

Elma Gantry, a.k.a. Sarah Palin, was right there with him, intoning “It is so humbling to get to be here with you today, patriots, you who are motivated and engaged and concerned, knowing to never retreat. We must not fundamentally transform America as some would want. We must restore America and restore her honor!”

Beckian religion is hard to fathom. Glenn Lee Beck, age 46, born in Everett, Washington, was raised a Roman Catholic, divorced his first wife, and became a Mormon upon marriage to his second one. In 2006, Beck appeared with Iman Feisal Abdul Rauf on a segment of ABC’s Good Morning America. As one, they stressed the need to distinguish the vast majority of Islamic believers from the 19 Muslim terrorists who, in 2001, killed a similar number of American Muslims and 3,000 others when they crashed their hijacked jets into the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Now, fast forward to December of last year. Iman Rauf announces that his congregation intends to build a 13-story community center in New York City, partially on land that they already own at Park Place and Broadway. The project is called Cordoba House, but is later renamed Park51, derived from its address of 51 Park Place. There is little fanfare and minimal press coverage until someone notices two things, that the expanded project would continue to include a small Islamic chapel, and that the site is “only” two blocks from Ground Zero (though it cannot be seen from there, or vice versa). The chapel would be similar to one at the Pentagon, which was also attacked on 9/11. Even closer to Ground Zero are a Catholic church, a pizza parlor, and an emporium that employs young women who parade around wearing far less than a burka.

Gradually, opposition builds. The whole community center is called a mosque, as if it mattered if it were, and a growing chorus demands that it be moved further away from Ground Zero. Some say a mile or two, some say a couple of states away. As late as May of this year, Glenn Beck defends the right of the “mosque” to be built on constitutional grounds, but on August 11 he attacks Iman Rauf, claiming that he is a supporter of Hamas, and four days later says that President Obama is “in lockstep with the leadership of Hamas” on the issue of the mosque..

On August 13, President Obama said “Let me be clear: as a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. A few days later, the President followed up his earlier remarks, saying “If you can build a church on that site, if you can build a synagogue on that site, or a Hindu temple on that site, then we can’t treat American citizens of the Islamic faith differently. That is central to who we are.”

On August 24, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg delivered a courageous and impassioned speech on religious freedom at a Ramadan dinner at Gracie Mansion, saying "there's "nowhere in the five boroughs of New York City that is off limits to any religion."

The first amendment of the Constitution states that Congress shall not make any law "respecting an establishment of religion", or "impeding the free exercise of religion," without defining either the word "religion" or that murky first quoted phrase. Ah, there's the rub. The Supreme Court, without doing so either, has stated that the amendment applies not only to the federal government but also to the states and all local governments. If I were to try to define "religion," a task I might or might not dare to tackle in some future essay, I would have great qualms about a belief system that embraces bodily harm or death by stoning or any other means as punishment for alleged offenses. That wouldn't leave many currently recognized religions left, so I'd best be careful.

There are hundreds of recognized religions, but 83 percent of the world's six billion people adhere to one of the four major faiths. There are 1.9 billion Christians, 29 percent; 1.6 billion Muslims, 22%, one billion Buddhists (plus or minus a half million—for some reason they are harder to count), 16%; and a billion Hindus, 16%. Thus there are still more Christians than there are Muslims, but due to very different rates of reproduction, Muslims are gaining fast. One source claims that their number will exceed the number of Christians by a mere 13 years from now. Unless, of course, we send Elmer and Elma overseas for some emergency evangelizing

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