OPPOSITION TO PLACES OF WORSHIP IN AMERICA

Fact Sheet

There is a long history of opposition to building places of worship in New York and America at large. The following are just a few examples of religions that have been targeted since the very beginning of our country:

Jews
In the 1650s, the Dutch governor of New York (then New Amsterdam), Peter Stuyvesant, banned all religions, practices and places of worship other than the Dutch Reformed Church. He tried to evict all Jews from the city as well. Stuyvesant’s superiors in Holland overruled him, citing economic and political considerations.

The Upper West Side synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel, was founded in 1654, while Peter Stuyvesant was still governor of New Amsterdam. It is the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States, now located at Central Park West and 70th Street. Notwithstanding its founding, Stuyvesant kept trying to restrict Jews to practicing their religion “in all quietness” and “within their houses.”

When the British were in control of New York City in the late 1600s, Jews again had to fight for their right to worship in public as the British declared that public worship would only be allowed for those who professed faith in Christ.

Currently, New York’s population is about 8.4% Jewish.

Quakers
Stuyvesant also prohibited Quakers from meeting, which led to what is known as the Flushing Remonstrance, a document that appealed to Stuyvesant for the right to freely practice religion. The Flushing Remonstrance has been considered foundational to the birth of religious freedom in America and a precursor to the United States Constitution’s provision on freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights. The Flushing Remonstrance, signed by non-Quakers, also stood up for Jews who had been persecuted for building synagogues. Though the Flushing Remonstrance did not immediately achieve its goal, greater freedom to practice different traditions did occur in the years that followed.

Catholics
While many British colonists were fleeing religious persecution by the Church of England, many did not practice religious tolerance when they arrived in the U.S. Anti-Catholic sentiments were rampant in the thirteen colonies. It therefore took more than 150 years after the first Catholics arrived in the colonies for St. Peter’s Catholic Church in New York City to be built.

Currently, New York’s population is about 38% Catholic, the largest religious affiliation in the state.

Hindus
In Chino Hills, California in 2004, there was widespread opposition to proposals for building a very large Hindu temple and cultural center, called the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam
Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS Hindu Temple), to serve the large Indian Hindu population in southern California. A *Los Angeles Times* article reported that an opponent said that the cultural center “would turn Chino Hills into a ‘Third World city’ and a haven for terrorists. One petition to stop the project argued that the temple would play a role in ‘changing the city’s demographics forever.’”

BAPS is currently in the process of being built with parts of the complex open for use.

There are approximately 1.5 million Hindus in the United States, representing 0.5% of the population.

**Muslims**

In addition to the opposition to Park51 in Manhattan, there is opposition to legally-approved mosques at other sites across the United States. This contrasts with the position of some opponents to Park51 whose objections are site-specific, (i.e., that their concern is its proximity to Ground Zero). In the summer of 2010, protests against the construction of mosques have taken place nationally in:

- **Murfreesboro, Tennessee**
  Plans to expand an existing Islamic Center in Murfreesboro resulted in several protests. The Center has existed in the area for almost 30 years, and has outgrown its current space. Opponents maintain that the new center will be a front for terrorism. In late August, during the month of Ramadan, trespassers broke into the site and set fire to construction equipment.
  1% of Tennessee residents practice Islam.

- **Staten Island, New York**
  The Board of Trustees of a Roman Catholic Church rejected a proposal to sell a vacant convent to the Muslim American Society, which planned to turn it into a mosque. The pastor of the church had approved the sale, but protest from Staten Island residents ensued, some of whom feared the mosque would operate as a front for terrorism. One resident said, “We just want to leave our neighborhood the way it is — Christian, Catholic.”

- **Temecula, California**
  The Islamic Center of Temecula Valley aims to replace the industrial building where congregants currently pray with a four-acre center. Opponents, including Tea Party members, protested at the current mosque during Friday prayers and brought dogs, an act that offended many Muslims. Organizers encouraged protestors to “bring your Bibles, flags, signs, dogs and singing voice” to protest a “worldwide political movement meant to dominate the world.”
  There are about 1 million Muslims in California, which is the highest number of any U.S. state.

- **Wilson, Wisconsin**
  The first mosque in Sheboygan County was opened in May 2010 by a doctor. At a community meeting, opponents were quoted as saying: "I know they'll say there's the violent or jihad Muslims and there's the peaceful Muslims, [but] to me it doesn't make a difference because their goal is to wipe out Christianity around the world." "The basis of this community is on Christ and Christ alone ... Do we really want this in our backyard?" "If they're against Christianity, I don't want them coming after my kids." "Lest we forget, we had some troops at Fort Hood just recently who were massacred by a doctor. He was a jihad idealist."

  Shortly after it opened in a former health food store, the mosque was vandalized when a rock was thrown through a window. On August 19, 2010, a *Time* magazine article discussed this situation and its impact.

Muslims make up about 0.2% of the population of Wisconsin.