



## The sacred and secular at Ground Zero

BY ANTHONY DEPALMA

IN THE 10 YEARS SINCE 9/11, the section of Lower Manhattan known as Ground Zero has resonated in the minds and hearts of Americans more than any other place in the nation, not because of what it is — a 16-acre hole in the ground that you can walk around in about 20 minutes — but rather because of what it represents, even though what it represents has changed continually since that September morning.

On any day, visitors from all over the world can be seen in a sort of pilgrimage, slowly making their way along the fences that delineate Ground Zero. Most of them know at least the outlines of the area's history, how in little more than 100 minutes it went from being a seat of international commerce that incorporated two of the tallest buildings in the world to a crime scene where thousands of innocents had been murdered. Some also may be aware that for months afterward it had to be treated as a multi-alarm fire that gave off hazardous smoke and gases.

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There were other changes, too. In the days immediately after the attack it was the site of a search and rescue operation. Sadly, when all miracles had expired and there was no longer the slightest hope of finding survivors, it became the place of a recovery and cleanup job.

And today? After many years of delay, several skyscrapers are rising to take the place of the towers that were destroyed. Commercial office space in the new towers is already being leased, and soon many of the high-stakes enterprises that once buzzed inside the World Trade Center will be returned to that part of Lower Manhattan. Once more, thousands of people will enter the area each morning, ready to pursue the American dream.

As surely as September 11 will never be just another day, however, these 16 acres will never be just another part of New York's financial district. The footprints of the twin towers — the 211-by-211-foot space where each of them once stood — will essentially remain concrete voids, never to be built upon again. Although this is some of the most valuable real estate in the United States, the decision was made long ago that those pieces of ground are hallowed and can be filled only by what once was and no longer is. Instead of towers of commerce, the spaces will hold memorial fountains, and around the fountains will be etched the names of the nearly 3,000 who died there that day.

Clearly, the exact space where those buildings stood for almost three decades has been transformed by the attack into sacred places where people come to pay their respects or silently pray. And because those sacred places are located right in the heart of one of the most important commercial districts in the world, a curious conflict has arisen between the sacred and the secular. Ten years later, that conflict has yet to be resolved.

Of course, in a pluralistic society like ours, sacred places are not always religious places. As a nation we have been reluctant to mix religion with affairs of state. Yet we have always been willing to recognize certain sites as worthy of special respect and to do what we can to protect and preserve them. For some, this is merely one dimension of civil history, a means of guarding our past and the essence of what it is that makes us who we are.

And yet to visit such places, to stand at Valley Forge or look out at the place where Washington crossed the Delaware and turned the tide of the Revolution, is to feel something more than just history, something that can connect us to a deeper and more profound order of the world.

Many such sites have been established over the years, but perhaps no other instance comes closer to underscoring what it means for a place to be sacred than the dedication of the Gettysburg Battlefield in 1863, just months after the terrible engagement ended. President Abraham Lincoln recognized the purpose of the day in his address at Gettysburg, yet he stated how impossible the task was: "We can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract."

And so it is with Ground Zero, which was consecrated by the lives of the brave men and women who rushed into the burning towers and died there, along with the thousands who were simply going about their business when they were confronted by the menace of evil and thus became martyrs. Among the visitors who flock to the site are many who stop and silently pray, invoking their own faiths. For them, the area's connection to religion is absolute. There are the voices that called for the 20-foot cross made of busted steel beams that was uncovered in the ruins to be preserved indefinitely at Ground Zero. The cross, now in the 9/11 museum at Ground Zero, is a subtle solution to the sacred/secular dilemma because the artifact is officially designated a building remnant, a poignant reminder of the destruction. Yet for many it is the most profound of religious symbols (and for that reason a group of atheists has filed a lawsuit to have it removed).

There's no doubt that 9/11 has become a holy day, and Ground Zero sacred ground, even though the ceremonies held every year to commemorate the events of that day have avoided overtly religious symbolism. In a solemn and always moving part of the commemoration, the names of the dead are intoned every September 11 with sanctity and reverence. The ceremony is heavy on patriotic imagery but free of religious overtones, punctuated only by the ringing of a fine silver fire bell.

For all the deep emotion attached to Ground Zero, religion has played a minor role there, and when questions that touch on faith have been raised, religion has tended to bring more trouble than peace. It might simply be a sign of the times in which we live, or

maybe it is something deeper than that, something that goes to the heart of our own concepts of openness and equality, that brushes up against the limit of our tolerance and tests the depths of our suspicions.

This much was revealed last year when plans were announced for the construction of an Islamic Center, including a mosque, on the site of an industrial building on Park Place in Lower Manhattan. Nothing happened at that site to warrant veneration or mark it as sacred. People with enough money simply bought the old structures and decided to convert them. But because their plans included a mosque, the site — which is actually two-and-a-half blocks from Ground Zero — quickly became known as the Ground Zero mosque.

In the past year, the proposal to build the Islamic Center has driven a wedge into American society. A recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 56 percent of all people surveyed consider Ground Zero to be a sacred site, with Catholics most likely (68 percent) to see it that way. Yet, the sanctity of the land itself does not necessarily invite openness or tolerance. A slightly larger group (57 percent) than those who saw the site as sacred said they oppose the construction of the mosque.

Despite such popular opposition, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and other city officials have steadfastly supported the right of the developers to build the center there and have worked to clear the way for its eventual approval and construction. A New York City police patrol car now has to be parked in front of the Park Place buildings at all times to keep the peace.

The city's rigid defense of the Islamic center has made it all the more difficult for some people to understand what is happening to the one small section of the 16 acres of Ground Zero that is, in fact, both sacred and religious. Through a quirk of history, St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church had occupied 1,200 square feet of ground at the southwestern edge of the trade center site.

You can see the church in many dramatic photographs of the twin towers — a four-story wood-frame building constructed as a private residence in the 1830s, nearly 140 years before the towers went up. The humble dwelling went through several transformations over the decades, and for a time was converted into a tavern. In 1916, a small group of Orthodox Christians from the neighborhood, which was then made up primarily of Greeks and Syrians, acquired the old building. A top floor was added, along with space for a church bell. Czar Nicholas of Russia donated bone fragments from his namesake, the original St. Nicholas (aka Santa Claus) and St. Nicholas Church was founded.

The church and its consecrated patch of land sat just 250 feet from the façade of the World Trade Center's 1,362-foot-tall South Tower. At just 35 feet high at its highest, St. Nicholas was a fleck of mud on the foot of an elephant. About 70 families belong to the parish, but it became well-known in the financial district as an oasis of calm and serenity, and was often visited by the people who worked there, regardless of their faith.

When the South Tower collapsed on Sept. 11, it came down with all its might right on top of the church, obliterating it. Fortunately no one was injured when the building was flattened. Little has been recovered — a bible covering, some beeswax candles, the clapper from the rooftop bell and two paper icons of St. Dionysios of Zakynthos

and Zoodochos Pega. The 600-pound safe containing the relic of St. Nicholas was never found.

When plans were being drawn up for rebuilding Ground Zero, the church was included in the overall design. "St. Nicholas, as small as it was, was an incredibly moving piece of Lower Manhattan," the project's master planner, Daniel Libeskind, told *The New York Times* in 2004. He called the church "part of the spiritual legacy of the site."

The land on which the church stood is owned by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. That means the church's private property rights have had to be respected as the rebuilding moves forward. The configuration of the new towers and the preservation of the footprint of the old towers forced Ground Zero to grow to accommodate the new structures, and the expansion went right through the church's property. In short, the developers needed the church's land to proceed with the rebuilding of Ground Zero.

Complex negotiations between St. Nicholas and the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, which controls the land at Ground Zero and is overseeing the rebuilding, dragged on for years. In 2008, the agency announced that it had reached a tentative deal with the church to move St. Nicholas's property slightly to the east where a new sanctuary could be rebuilt on top of an underground terminal where buses and cars coming to Ground Zero will be screened for explosives, a necessary recognition of post-9/11 reality. The Port Authority agreed to provide \$20 million to help defray the additional infrastructure costs of building in such a potentially dangerous spot.

Eight months after the deal was announced, the Port Authority abruptly canceled it, claiming the church was making too many

demands. St. Nicholas insisted it was willing to work with the Port Authority and asked for negotiations to resume. The agency refused, and when the church could not get the support of city officials, it filed suit in federal court in February of this year charging the Port Authority with "arrogance, bad faith and fraudulent conduct." The agency has denied all charges.

In this clash of the sacred and the profane, both sides claim the moral high ground. The Port Authority, which lost more than 80 employees on 9/11, claims it had to move forward without St. Nicholas's participation to ensure that the long-delayed Ground Zero reconstruction project could proceed, providing the city and the country with tangible proof of their own resilience. St. Nicholas, it says, will be permitted to rebuild later, on its original site.

St. Nicholas claims it simply wants what it was promised, so it can fulfill its unique role in the destiny of this place. Archbishop Demetrios, the primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in America (whom Notre Dame honored in 2010 with an honorary doctorate) had declared within a month of the church's destruction in 2001 that it would be rebuilt "on the same sacred spot as a symbol of determined faith."

Fulfilling that promise has been the church's guiding principle ever since. Father Mark Arey, the designated spokesman for St. Nicholas, said the design for the new church would have included a gathering place outside the sanctuary where people of all faiths could reflect on the circumstances that led to the destruction of the towers and the deaths of so many people. He said it should always be remembered that the people behind the attack were acting in the name of religion, even though their acts actually perverted their own faith.

The Freedom Tower now under construction at Ground Zero will eventually rise 1,776 feet above the street, a soaring and patriotic testament to the spirit of America. Plans for the new St. Nicholas called for it to be even squatter than the original's 35-foot height, though it would have covered a larger footprint to accommodate the meditation area. If it ever gets rebuilt, the new church is intended to be a humble reminder for all of the power of faith.

It has been argued that for all of the religious freedoms guaranteed by our constitution, and the high percentages of Americans who tell pollsters they consider themselves to be religious, the predominant faith in America is actually a civil religion that has more to do with values than creed, more about memory than sanctity.

Although people worldwide venerate every inch of Ground Zero, St. Nicholas was the only sacred site to be destroyed on 9/11, and the sacred remains of St. Nicholas have been mixed in with the mortal remains of all the others who fell victim that day. Even so, the church's place in the rebuilt Ground Zero has become something of an awkward afterthought, an issue elected officials clearly would rather not have to deal with.

It is a perplexing turn of events, for sure. Ten years ago, the attack on the trade center unified our society and led to a national day of prayer in which everyone, regardless of faith, was invited to take part. Now there is a bitter standoff over a tiny church and a controversial mosque that divides us and threatens to keep us apart. And that's too bad. If the last painful decade, with its wars and its deaths and its anger and its fears, has taught us anything, it ought to have made clear just how high the price of intolerance can be. □

