

Zoned out: Building plans for mosques and temples

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [October 7, 2008](#) issue

In mid-August I attended the grand opening of the new Al-Farooq Masjid in midtown Atlanta, a complex that includes gardens, fountains, a school and a 46,000-square-foot prayer hall with room for 1,800 worshipers. Along with other guests, I admired the hand-painted dome, the carved stonework, and the custom-made carpet with individual prayer spaces woven in, all pointing toward Mecca.

Since usury is off-limits in Islam, the \$10 million building is paid for. It sits on the site of the old prayer hall in this once shabby neighborhood of Atlanta where Muslims from more than 30 countries have prayed since 1980. That long ago, visitors who had a hard time finding the masjid sometimes ended up at the Fox Theatre on Peachtree Street, fooled by the onion dome and minarets of the Yaarab Temple built there in 1929. Al-Farooq is easy to find, with its 65-foot golden dome gleaming from a rise on 14th Street.

When I asked the architect if the community had encountered zoning problems, he said no, that good neighbors had helped the building process go smoothly. I was glad to hear it, since other new religious communities in Georgia have not been so lucky.

Buddhist groups often have the hardest time, since many come from countries where monks live in community and teach where they live. Most groups are so small that a separate temple complex is not affordable. What they do instead is buy a house for their teachers and gather at that house for services, which is usually when the trouble begins.

I have made a hobby of reading the minutes of local zoning boards and planning commissions, which often state for the record that religion is not a factor in their decisions regarding these communities. The stated issues are parking, noise or traffic, even when the numbers of people involved are fewer than those meeting in a small Christian house church.

When a religious community accumulates enough capital to attempt new construction, such issues multiply. In 2006 a Hindu community north of Atlanta ran into trouble when 22 of its proposed 250 parking spaces turned out to be 37 feet away from a stream instead of the required 50. Officials cited concerns about storm water runoff. Plans for another temple were rejected on the grounds that the marble and stone edifice “would not mesh with the surrounding area.”

Further north, members of the Dalton Islamic Center hit a wall when they asked county commissioners to approve their proposal for a new mosque on an 11-acre tract of land. Their old facility, where they had prayed since 1992, was no longer large enough for their community. The planning and zoning commission held a public hearing at which local residents strongly opposed the plan, citing concerns that ranged from traffic to terrorism. One woman said she often visited family who lived near the proposed site and would find the idea of an Islamic center next-door “unsettling.”

As I reviewed these reports I was reading *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, by Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who did three years of nationwide research in preparation for the volume. Among other things, he concluded that “in our public discourse about religion we seem to be a society of schizophrenics.” On one hand, he says, we express tolerance and respect for people whose religious traditions are different from our own. On the other hand, we know little about those traditions, continuing to think and speak of the U. S. as a Christian nation founded on Christian principles.

My guess is that this schizophrenia accounts for some of the anxiety in zoning boards across the country. As previously invisible religious minorities save enough money to begin creating significant centers of worship—visibly changing the neighborhoods and skylines of the places where they live—their Christian neighbors are experiencing uncomfortable feelings that they may not know how to name. Some who are unable to say “We are afraid” say “We have parking rules” instead. Some who are reluctant to say “We don’t want you here” say “We are concerned about storm water runoff.”

Wuthnow says that his interviews with scores of pastors convince him that “many churches—probably a majority—are dealing with the growing religious diversity of our society by simply avoiding the issue.” This leaves many—probably a majority—of Christians in the odd position of learning more about their religious neighbors from

CNN than they do from their churches.

The good news is that the Dalton Islamic Center got a green light. After performing a traffic survey at the proposed site of the new mosque, county commissioners unanimously approved the building plan—with the exception that no calls to prayer go out over loudspeakers. To date, no one has complained about the racket from church bells in the area.