

Nonnegotiable

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

In his *New York Times* column (August 22), Nicholas Kristof wrote about the controversy over the proposal to build an Islamic community center in lower Manhattan: "For much of American history, demagogues have manipulated irrational fears toward people of minority religious beliefs, particularly Catholics and Jews . . . Today's crusaders against the Islamic Community Center are promoting a similar paranoid intolerance, and one day we will be ashamed of it."

His column reminded me that members of my family, showing the influence of their Scottish/Irish ancestors, believed that the pope was behind a Catholic conspiracy to take over the government of the United States. I used to sit on the front porch with my grandmother, otherwise the gentlest, most unconditionally loving person in my young life, while she regaled me with stories about what was going on under the dome of the Roman Catholic cathedral one block away. They're storing guns in the basement, Grandma assured me, and I imagined that the windows in the dome were gunports through which "they" planned to fire on the rest of the city.

Grandma was a lifelong Presbyterian, but at some point she stopped attending church and began to listen to radio evangelists and to send them modest contributions. Her mail was full of the radio evangelists' newsletters and gospel tracts with vivid pictures of the devil and the fires of hell devouring hapless sinners—along with appeals for more money. Some of it was benign. She adored Billy Graham. But some of it was toxic: anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant. As she aged, my grandmother became more dependent on the radio preachers. She also subscribed to their newspapers for me, including *The Sword of the Lord*, which condemned ecumenism, mainline church leaders and the civil rights movement—in short, everything I found compelling about the Christian church and its worldview. Nothing galvanized editors of that publication like Catholicism; when John Kennedy ran for president, *The Sword of the Lord* and Grandma knew that the end was near.

I loved my grandmother and treasure the memory of her love for me, but I'm ashamed of her worldview, and I cringe at Americans' recurrent irrational fear of

minorities.

The most tragic dimension of that irrational fear is the way it is exploited by politicians. I cannot comprehend how otherwise sane and thoughtful people can conclude that an Islamic community center two blocks away from Ground Zero is inappropriate—not to mention dangerous—and think that the religion of the Qur'an is any more violent than much of the religion of the Bible. It's not a mosque and it's not on the site of the World Trade Center twin towers, but even if it were, the right of all Americans to pray and worship how and who and where they choose is one of the most important rights and values of our nation. It is not negotiable.