

ACLU and NYCLU Statement on Controversy over New York City Islamic Center

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Religious freedom is one of America's most fundamental liberties, and a central principle upon which our nation was founded. For hundreds of years, even in the face of opposition, religious pluralism and tolerance have sustained and helped to define our nation. Still today, we must continue to boldly oppose religious discrimination rooted in cultural stereotyping, and resist those who seek to trade away our most precious values for political advantage.

We applaud those government officials who have stood up for religious liberty and defended the right of private citizens to build a mosque and community center in lower Manhattan. These officials have rightly understood that we must always — especially in times of controversy — vigilantly uphold our core values, including a faith community's right to build a house of worship, whether a mosque, a church, or a synagogue. The horrific events of 9/11 call on all of us to keep a close watch over our fundamental freedoms. When we violate one group's freedom, everyone's liberty is at stake.

Throughout America's history, almost every religious group, including Jews, Protestants, Catholics and Muslims, has been the target of discrimination. Tolerance and fairness have generally prevailed, but only after principled voices have transcended the fear and hatred.

The American Civil Liberties Union has defended the right of all religious denominations — from majority faiths to marginalized religions — to establish places of worship, and for Americans to pray, or not, as they choose. We will continue that fight now. Preventing Muslims or any other group from freely practicing their faith is unconstitutional and goes against the very core of American freedom. Americans must ensure that our political leaders know that discrimination is a losing proposition and that adherence to the Constitution is not optional. We must not let those who seek to undermine our nation succeed by forcing us to betray our most fundamental American liberties.