

OPPOSITION TO PLACES OF WORSHIP & RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE U.S.

There is a long history of opposition to places of worship and religious practices in the U.S. The following are just a few examples of religions that have been targeted since the very beginning of our nation's history:

JEWS

Historic opposition:

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. Even then, Stuyvesant continued trying to restrict Jews to practicing their religion "in all quietness" and "within their houses." Congregation Shearith Israel survived. Now located at Central Park West and 70th Street,ⁱ it is the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States,

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, when the British declared that public worship would only be allowed for those who professed faith in Christ.ⁱⁱ

Contemporary opposition:

In the second half of the 20th century, the Orthodox Jewish synagogue in New Rochelle, New York grew from just two dozen to over 325 families.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2003, when the synagogue announced plans to build an auxiliary 600-seat sanctuary and social hall down the street to accommodate its growing congregation, local residents (including non-Orthodox Jews) protested.^{iv} They formed "Neighbors of New Rochelle" and complained that the structure would endanger nearby wetlands and disturb traffic flow.

Many synagogue members believe that the protestors were actually afraid that their neighborhood would become overwhelmingly Orthodox. Opponents of the expanded synagogue used the term "The Brooklynization of New Rochelle," referring to Brooklyn neighborhoods that are primarily comprised of Orthodox residents and shops that cater to them.^v Though the town's zoning board ultimately approved the project in 2003, the synagogue was embroiled in lawsuits from neighbors for several years. In 2006, the congregation was able to begin construction^{vi} and the new building opened in 2008.ⁱⁱⁱ

QUAKERS

Peter Stuyvesant also prohibited Quakers from meeting during his tenure in New Amsterdam during the 1650s. The Quakers responded with an appeal to Stuyvesant for the right to practice their beliefs freely. They submitted a petition now known as the Flushing Remonstrance, which was the first document to explicitly set forth a justification for the right to religious freedom in the colonies. Although scholars have not determined whether the

Flushing Remonstrance directly influenced the authors of the Bill of Rights, it served as a precursor to the First Amendment. The Flushing Remonstrance, signed by non-Quakers, also took a stand on behalf of Jews who had been persecuted for building their synagogues. Though the Flushing Remonstrance did not immediately achieve its goal, greater freedom to practice different traditions did occur in the years that followed.^{vii}

CATHOLICS

Although many British colonists fled religious persecution by the Church of England, they did not all practice religious tolerance toward others after they settled in the U.S. For example, anti-Catholic sentiments were rampant in the thirteen colonies. Many colonial charters barred Roman Catholics from having any political power. In the 1640s, the Colony of Virginia and the Massachusetts Bay Colony legally prohibited Catholic settlers. Because of such opposition, it 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.^{vii}

HINDUS

In Chino Hills, California in 2004, there was widespread opposition to proposals for building a 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 2004 *Los Angeles Times* article reported “[that one opponent concluded that the cultural center] would turn Chino Hills into a ‘Third World city’ and a haven for terrorists. [And that] [o]ne petition to stop the project argued that the temple would play a role in ‘changing the city’s demographics forever’.”^{viii}

The BAPS temple was completed in 2012, having been built by approximately 900 volunteers, who gave approximately 1.3 million man hours to construct the mandir (or temple), cultural center, gymnasium and lotus-shaped pond.^{ix}

WICCANS

In Oregon Township, Michigan in 2004, residents asked the Township Board to shut down “the devil worshippers,” a group of Wiccans who were using a house in the neighborhood to practice their faith and advertising it as “The Temple of the Oak.”^x The Township Board found that the residents of the house had violated one ordinance: their sign advertising the temple was too big.^{xi}

In 2005, Wiccans of the Ozark Avalon Church of Nature in Missouri made a reservation at the Hannibal Inn to celebrate Imbolc, a Wiccan holiday that celebrates the cross-quarter day between the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox. After local ministers complained, the hotel cancelled the Church’s reservation for fear of boycotts and protests. After the incident, the ACLU released a statement saying Ozark Avalon had a potential religious discrimination case, but there is no reliable information on whether or not they ultimately filed suit.^{xii}

AMISH

In 2009, 11 Amish families in Morristown, New York filed a religious discrimination suit in federal court after ten local lawsuits were brought against members of their community for building traditional style homes without building permits. In 2006, the town had changed its building codes to require that all structures “keep pace with advances in technology in fire protection and building construction.” But the Amish in Morristown, of the very traditional Old Order Swartzentruber sect, said that requirements such as fire detectors and building inspections violated their religious beliefs. After a Morristown judge held that “their religion gave them no special standing to avoid compliance with local building codes,” the Amish filed their religious discrimination suit.

The religious discrimination complaint in the federal court set forth that the Morristown Code Enforcement Officer, who was appointed in 2006, had not only issued code violations to members of the Amish community, but

sometimes did so on off-hours after making unannounced visits to their homes. The complaint further alleged that the Enforcement Officer “posted messages at an anti-Amish website.”^{xiii} In 2012, the Amish and Morristown signed a settlement agreement in which all criminal charges were dismissed and the Amish were allowed to continue to use their traditional building methods. In return they agreed to utilize certain traditional practices deemed safe under the state building code.^{xiv}

SIKHS

For years, the congregation of Austin, Texas’s only Sikh gurdwara practiced in a manufactured home. In 2005, Austin Gurdwara Sahib (AGS) had received all the permits required to build a more contemporary building on its property, when a neighborhood couple filed a lawsuit to halt construction. Some of their objections were general; they complained that the gurdwara would be an eyesore, cause traffic and lower their property values. Other grievances were interpreted as anti-Sikh, however, including the use of the words “eyesore” and “terrorizing the neighborhood”.^{xv} The couple lost their suit and the gurdwara was completed, but they appealed the ruling. In July, Appellate Court reversed the lower court’s decision and ordered the gurdwara to be torn down.^{xvi}

In 2006, after the Guru Nanak Sikh Society in California was repeatedly denied a permit to build a gurdwara after trying to do so in several different locations, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that the County of Sutter had “imposed a substantial burden on Guru Nanak’s religious exercise” that was in violation of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA).^{xvii}

MUSLIMS

New York, New York

In the spring of 2010, a proposal to build a Muslim community center that would include a mosque on its premises was approved for a location two blocks from Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. The project was then called Cordoba House; later, the community center became known as Park51, and the mosque became known as PrayerSpace. The idea was to create a community center open to members of all faiths, similar to the YMCA and Jewish Community Center models; the location was chosen because existing mosques in the area were overflowing.

In August 2010, widespread and internationally-publicized protests and counter-protests took place in lower Manhattan and across the U.S. in response to the proposed community center and mosque. Much of the backlash focused on its proximity to Ground Zero, and much of the media dubbed the project the “Ground Zero mosque.” Amid the controversy, plans for Park51 and PrayerSpace were also involved in a rent dispute. In April 2014, Sharif El-Gamal, the real estate developer who serves as president of Park51, announced that he was now planning a three-story museum “dedicated to exploring the faith of Islam and its arts and culture” instead of a fifteen-story Islamic community center and prayer space. A spokesperson said that Park51, which has continued to hold daily Islamic prayer services and cultural events at the site, will temporarily relocate elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Murfreesboro, Tennessee

In 2010, officials in Rutherford County, Tennessee approved plans to expand an existing Islamic Center in Murfreesboro. This resulted in protests and a four year-long legal battle.^{xviii} The Center had existed in the area for almost 30 years and outgrown its current space. Opponents maintained that the new center would be a front for terrorism, and one of the opponents’ attorneys argued in court that the First Amendment’s protection of religious freedom did not apply to the mosque because Islam isn’t a religion. When the Center put up a sign announcing the “future home” of the new building, vandals spray painted “not welcome” on it.^{xix} In August, 2010, during the month of Ramadan, trespassers broke into the site and set fire to construction equipment.^{xx}

Kevin Fisher, Lisa Moore and Henry Golczynski filed a lawsuit to prevent the Center from winning any more building permits and lost.^{xxi} In April 2011, they re-filed the suit with an additional 14 plaintiffs^{xxii} and lost again. The Tennessee Supreme Court denied a request for an appeal. The local Chancellor, Robert Corlew III, denied the ICM's application for an occupancy permit. The Department of Justice intervened.^{xxiii}

Though the mosque opened in time for Ramadan in August of 2012, in part due to a federal court order, the controversy continued when the same group of plaintiffs sought a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on whether the Department of Justice had overstepped by intervening.^{xxiv} In June 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear their case.^{xxv} That same month, a related lawsuit, which sought to overturn plans to construct a cemetery at the site, was dismissed.^{xxvi}

Temecula, California

The Islamic Center of Temecula Valley aimed 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”^{xxvii} to protest a “worldwide political movement meant to dominate the world.”^{xxviii} The Temecula City Council approved construction of the Islamic Center in early 2011.^{xxix}

Sterling Heights, Michigan

In September 2015, the city planning commission of Sterling Heights, Michigan unanimously denied a land use permit to build a 20,500 square foot mosque on residential land in the area. Officials said that the proposal was rejected due to concerns about the size and scale of the project, but civil rights activists argued that anti-Muslim bias played a role.^{xxx} Across the street from the site of the proposed mosque, people had posted signs reading, “We don’t want it!!!” and “build it elsewhere!” Groups opposing the mosque held two rallies in August 2015.

It was widely reported that the dispute had stoked tensions between the area’s Muslim population and Iraqi Christian, or Chaldean, population. Iraqi Americans, most of them Christian, comprise 12% of Sterling Height’s population, and the area surrounding the proposed mosque site is a center of Chaldean life in the region. A city council meeting in August became a forum for heated rhetoric from members of both communities about the other.^{xxxi}

During the planning commission vote, several hundred opponents of the proposed mosque gathered outside, and when the rejection was announced, many chanted “God Bless America” and booed Muslim and civil rights leaders as they left City Hall.^{xxxii} According to Dawud Walid of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), some members of the crowd spit on Muslims and pulled on their head scarves. CAIR reported that it believes the planning commission violated a religious land use act and that it would file a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice.^{xxxiii}

MORE RESOURCES

- [An Interactive Map from the PEW Forum](#), last updated in September 2012, shows 53 proposed mosques and Islamic centers that have faced opposition from community members in recent years.
- [Islam: Not in my Backyard?](#) – Article about opposition to mosques specifically written for a student/teenage audience.
- [The Flushing Remonstrance](#) – Information including the text, historical context, significance for the practice of religion in America and links to further resources.
- [In Fierce Opposition to a Muslim Center, Echoes of an Old Fight](#) – Article analyzing the similarities between opposition to Park51 and the opposition encountered by St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church, now the oldest Catholic church in New York State.

- [Countering Islamophobia – A Jewish Testimony](#) – Tanenbaum *Peacemaker in Action* Yehezkel Landau shares his powerful experience testifying on behalf of Park 51 at a public hearing convened by the Zoning Board for lower Manhattan.

ⁱ “The Jews of New York,” Jewish Buffalo on the Web <<http://jbuff.com/c010104.htm>>.

ⁱⁱ “Dutch New York,” A Nation of Immigrants Curriculum: Grade 11, The City University of New York <http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/immigrants_curriculum/11_pdfs/Dutch_New_York%20Grade11th.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Young Israel of New Rochelle <<http://www.yinr.org/>>.

^{iv} Uriel Heilman, “New Shul or Bust,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 April 2003 <<http://www.urielheilman.com/yinr.html>>.

^v Joseph Berger, “As a Synagogue Outgrows Its Space, Its Building Plans Draw Opposition,” *The New York Times*, 17 August 2010 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/17/nyregion/as-a-synagogue-outgrows-its-space-its-building-plans-draw-opposition.html?src=pm>>.

^{vi} “New Rochelle – Young Israel to finally start building,” *The Yeshiva World News*, 2 September 2006 <<http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/article.php?p=2668>>.

^{vii} Tabettha Garman, “Designed for the Good of All: The Flushing Remonstrance and Religious Freedom in America,” MA thesis, East Tennessee State University, August 2006 <<http://queensbp.org/remonstrance/documents/GarmanT080506f.pdf>>.

^{viii} Hugo Martin, “Hindu Temple Plans Uncertain” *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 October 2004 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2004/oct/04/local/me-temple4>>.

^{ix} “Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Chino Hills.” Wikipedia, 2015. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BAPS_Shri_Swaminarayan_Mandir_Chino_Hills

^x “Wiccan ‘Temple of the Oak’ Under Siege in MI (Oregon),” *The Flint Journal*, 16 October 2004 <<http://pluralism.org/news/view/9139>>.

^{xi} “Lapeer County house practices Wicca,” ABC12, 21 October 2004 <<http://www.occultforum.org/forum/topic?id=25008&p=1>>.

^{xii} “Hotel Cancels on Wiccan Celebration,” Associated Press, 11 February 2005 <<http://pluralism.org/news/view/9866>>.

^{xiii} “Amish Sue New York Town for Discrimination Over Building Code Enforcement,” FOX News, 6 January 2009 <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,477110,00.html#ixzz1Mk2lWmFv>>.

^{xiv} “Yoder v. Morristown, New York (2006-2013).” The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. <http://www.becketfund.org/yoder/>

^{xv} Anju Kaur, “Austin Gurdwara Asks Texas Supreme Court to Stop Its Destruction,” Sikh News Network, 2 March 2011 <<http://www.sikhnn.com/headlines/1285/austin-gurdwara-asks-texas-supreme-court-stop-its-destruction>>.

^{xvi} Save the Austin Gurudwara! <<http://savegurudwara.com/>>.

^{xvii} “Guru Nanak Sikh Society of Yuba City vs County of Sutter; Casey Kroon; Dennis Nelson; Larry Munger; Dan Sivla,” United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 1 August 2006 <http://www.justice.gov/crt/spec_topics/religiousdiscrimination/guru_nanak_ruling.pdf>.

^{xviii} Bob Smietana, “Opponents of Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Have Case Declined By U.S. Supreme Court.” *Huffington Post*, 4 June 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/04/islamic-center-of-murfreesboro_n_5439867.html.

^{xix} Abby Ohlheiser, “A Fight over a Tennessee Mosque Has Cost One County \$343,276 (so Far).” *The Wire*, 13 February, 2014 <http://www.thewire.com/national/2014/02/fight-over-tennessee-mosque-has-cost-one-county-343276-so-far/358054/>.

^{xx} Robbie Brown, “Incidents at Mosque in Tennessee Spread Fear,” *The New York Times*, 30 August 2010 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/31/us/31mosque.html>>.

^{xxi} Bob Smietana, “Murfreesboro mosque opponents file lawsuit,” *The Tennessean*, 18 September 2010 <<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20100918/NEWS01/9180323/Murfreesboro-mosque-opponents-file-lawsuit>>.

^{xxii} “Judge lets 14 more plaintiffs join Murfreesboro mosque lawsuit,” *Wate.com*, 13 April 2011 <<http://www.wate.com/story/14439440/judge-lets-14-more-plaintiffs-join-murfreesboro-mosque-lawsuit>>.

^{xxiii} Abby Ohlheiser, “A Fight over a Tennessee Mosque Has Cost One County \$343,276 (so Far).” *The Wire*, 13 February, 2014 <http://www.thewire.com/national/2014/02/fight-over-tennessee-mosque-has-cost-one-county-343276-so-far/358054/>.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*

^{xxv} Bob Smietana, “Opponents of Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Have Case Declined By U.S. Supreme Court.” *Huffington Post*, 4 June 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/04/islamic-center-of-murfreesboro_n_5439867.html

^{xxvi} Gannett Tennessee, “Dismissal Could End Murfreesboro Mosque Cemetery Case,” *The Tennessean*, 19 June 2014, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/rutherford/2014/06/19/murfreesboro-mosque-cemetery-case-judge-court/10885725/>.

^{xxvii} Phil Willon, “Islamic Group Denounces Planned Temecula Mosque Protest,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 2010 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/28/local/la-me-mosque-protest-20100728>>.

^{xxviii} “Robertson: ‘Islam is not a religion. It is a worldwide political movement meant on domination,’” *Media Matters for America*, 12 June 2007 <<http://mediamatters.org/research/200706120009>>.

^{xxix} Peter Surowski, “Mayor Vows to Help Build Mosque,” *Temecula Patch*, 29 May 2011 <<http://temecula.patch.com/articles/mayor-vows-to-help-build-mosque>>.

^{xxx} Robert Snell and Candice Williams, “Sterling Hts. Panel Rejects Proposed Mosque on 15 Mile,” *The Detroit News*, 10 September 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/macomb-county/2015/09/10/sterling-heights-mosque-rejected/72037002/>.

^{xxxi} Niraj Warikoo, “Proposed Mosque in Sterling Heights Stirs Opposition,” *Detroit Free Press*, 10 September, 2015, <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2015/09/09/proposed-mosque-sterling-heights-stirs-opposition/71885024/>.

^{xxxii} Robert Snell and Candice Williams, “Sterling Hts. Panel Rejects Proposed Mosque on 15 Mile,” *The Detroit News*, 10 September 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/macomb-county/2015/09/10/sterling-heights-mosque-rejected/72037002/>.

^{xxxiii} Aaron Baskerville. “CAIR Says Muslims Were Spit on, Yelled at after Proposed Sterling Heights Mosque Was Voted Down,” *WXYZ Detroit*, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/macomb-county/2015/09/10/sterling-heights-mosque-rejected/72037002/>.