

Editorial: Muslims, a cemetery & Baptist principles

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A proposed cemetery in Texas may be causing old-time Baptists to roll in their graves.

Muslims want to develop a cemetery in Farmersville, a still-rural village in eastern Collin County, about 35 miles northeast of downtown Dallas.

Some locals—Baptists among them—have been trying to thwart the Islamic effort. Protesters cite plentiful possible problems, ranging from terrorists to water pollution.



Editor Marv Knox But if Farmersvillians hear thumping rising up from other cemeteries in the vicinity, it's probably coming from the caskets of dearly departed Baptists who appreciated their principles and held to their heritage.

They would be the ones who know blocking the Muslims' plans for a cemetery are just plain wrong.

They would remember Baptists have been champions of religious liberty and the rights of minorities for 400 years—dating to the days when Baptists were a tiny minority wherever they went. They would know the first Baptist in America, Roger Williams, founded Rhode Island as a haven of religious

freedom, not only for fellow Baptists, but for “Turks,” as he called them. That’s right, Muslims. They would recall a pastor from down in Dallas, George W. Truett, was one of the 20th century’s greatest advocates for free and unfettered religion.

But some of the Baptists and their buddies in Farmersville don’t know that. So, they’re opposing the right of Muslims to bury their dead anywhere nearby.

And they’re whipping up a scare, which has nothing to do with dead people. Cemetery opponents showed up in force at a recent Planning and Zoning Commission meeting. They’re afraid:

- **Muslims will build a mosque in Farmersville.**

Farmersville City Manager Ben White [told the Dallas Morning News](#) he has met with leaders of the Islamic Association of Collin County, and he is confident their plans do not include a mosque.

Khalil Abdur-Rashid, a spokesman for the association who teaches at Southern Methodist University, said the group has no plans to expand beyond the 35-acre tract it bought for the cemetery.

Besides, the correct answer to any lamenting about Muslims building a mosque is simple: So what? Baptists historically have believed all people have a right to worship according to the dictates of their consciences. Baptists who remain true to their principles will continue to defend Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and others who want to build houses of worship.

- **Muslims will proliferate in Collin County.**

Too late. About 22,000 of them already live there. That’s why they want a cemetery. The five Islamic centers now must take their deceased to Denton, Fort Worth or elsewhere for burial. Because of their numbers, cemeteries

are running out of room.

- **They'll also operate a madrasa—an Islamic school.** The scary ones—in places like Pakistan and the Middle East—train terrorists.

Again, City Manager White and Islamic association spokesman Abdur-Rashid insisted the association has no plans to do anything of the sort.

Besides, if something like that started to happen, one would think Homeland Security, and not the Collin County Planning and Zoning Commission, would have something to say about it.

- **Dead Muslims' bodies will pollute the groundwater.**

Muslims traditionally bury their dead in a shroud. This apparently caused one protester to warn, "All they do is wrap 'em in a sheet, throw 'em in the ground and bury 'em," the *Morning News*' Jacquielynn Floyd [reported](#).

Another protester worried rainwater would flow through the earth, past the bodies and into groundwater reserves, thus contaminating the local water source. By the way, that would be Lake Lavon, which is down the road and not in the bowels of the earth beneath a cemetery.

Abdur-Rashid explained their burial practice: They lay shrouded bodies in coffins, which they place in concrete vaults and bury six to seven feet underground. Just like Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians and folks from the Bible church.

Sinning against our neighbors

Of course, we live in a dangerous world. We remember 9/11 and the deaths of Marines in Chattanooga and elsewhere. But when we paint neighbors of other faiths with the brush of extremists, we sin against them and against our God, who created them in God's own image.

So then, we bring trauma and, quite possibly, injury upon others, simply because they are different. We violate Jesus' clear teaching in Luke 4 and Matthew 25. And, ironically, we provide the extremists—who do not accurately reflect their faith anymore than Aryan skinheads reflect Christianity—with fuel for their hatred.

Farmersville Mayor Joe Helmberger [told the BBC](#) local fears are unwarranted. "There's just a basic concern or distrust about the cemetery coming to town," he said.

And the cemetery will be approved as long as codes are met, he added, noting the United States was founded on religious freedom.

Abdur-Rashid said the Farmersville fears grow out of "valid concerns about extremism," but he hopes the cemetery incident will prompt greater understanding.

"Hate is not a friend of rational thinking," he added. "This is an opportunity to have a good interfaith dialogue and intercommunity dialogue."

In those words, Abdur-Rashid and Helmberger represent the historic Baptist spirit.

Editor's Note: After this editorial was posted, a friend of Bart Barber, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Farmersville](#), contacted me to report Barber has stood up for religious liberty in the Muslim-cemetery controversy. Barber, who earned a doctorate in church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has exercised unusual pastoral courage. His advocacy for Muslims' right to establish a cemetery did not show up in my survey of North Texas media. I apologize for the oversight. To read Barber's blog posts on the issue, [click here](#) and [here](#).