

ROLE PLAYING ACTIVITY: PARK51 CONTROVERSY

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ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

Dr. Rose Aslan, Assistant Professor of Religion at California Lutheran University, developed this role playing activity for use in her courses as a way to help make real for students moments of interfaith encounter, tension, conflict, or cooperation. The text below is an annotated version of the handout that Dr. Aslan uses in her course; the annotations help describe pedagogically how the activity plays out in the classroom. Faculty who are not familiar with this issue should also read the materials and watch the films suggested to students. The event involved real people who lived in NYC at the time and deals with a topic of a very sensitive nature, so it is best if the previous class covers issues dealing with Islamophobia in the United States to build up to this activity. This activity would be suitable for a class on religion in the United States, conflict resolution, and various courses on Islam and Muslims.

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

It is July 2009 and Soho Properties just purchased 45-47 Park Place in Lower Manhattan and acquired a 70+ year leasehold. The property is two and a half blocks from Ground Zero, and it is a former Burlington Coat Factory, which was damaged in the 9/11 attacks.

Dr. Aslan notes: *The introduction above connects to readings that students have done about the issue, as well as theoretical texts we have read on space and religion. Students should also glance at the timeline of events that led up to the controversy available [here](#) and well as a timeline of the media coverage [here](#).*

We have gone back in time so you can approach the event from a fresh perspective. While this is a classroom activity, it is modeled after a real situation, one that has already taken its course. It will be up to you to decide if the actual course of action that occurred was appropriate or if you can determine a better outcome. **The primary goal is to reconcile multiple and differing perspectives, and to come up with a solution to a group of Muslims' proposal to build a mosque several blocks from Ground Zero, which many Americans believe is hallowed ground.** News about Park51 being built went viral after public figures, such as Pamela Geller, started blogging about it and speaking to the media. There have been several mosques, such as Masjid Manhattan, which was founded in 1970, in the close vicinity of the World Trade Centers. For years, Muslims had worked in the area for a long time, and the local Community Board No. 1 had no objection to the construction of Park51, then called the Cordoba House. Through this activity, it is hoped that both the instructor and students can also ask questions about how certain figures involved in the controversy surrounding Park51 played a significant role in manipulating the media and spreading fear among the American public.

***Dr. Aslan notes:** The activity hooks students because it makes them feel like they have a chance to rewrite history, by negotiating a real-life event that happened only a few years ago.*

This activity is designed to help you better understand a highly significant contested sacred space in the American context. Through this activity, you will begin to understand the complex decisions, politics, propaganda, and media influence that go into the construction of a sacred space.

At the beginning of the activity, you should find your allies and plan your strategy together. Some people might be undecided and might be willing to change their views, so both sides should be attempting to recruit these people to their point of view. Anti-Park51 proponents will try to convince the Manhattan's Community Board No. 1 to refuse a permit for Park51, will also attempt to influence the media, and will constantly attack supporters of the community center and all "extremist" Muslims in the activity. Supporters of Park51 will attempt to sway the media and convince people that Park51 should be built in its current location for numerous reasons. Supporters and representatives of Park51 will also listen to the concerns of people who believe the mosque should be moved. If you are undecided or unsure of your position, speak to both groups and let them present their case so you can decide who to join.

Groups might decide to hold a protest, interfaith vigil, or other event that would be good for your PR, but be careful, the media might distort your words and it could end up being a PR disaster.

***Dr. Aslan notes:** When I have done this activity in the past, students have staged protests, counter-protests, held press conferences, and more. Observing how the students decide to take action is one of the most fun parts of the activity.*

At the end of the session, Manhattan's Community Board No. 1, along with Mayor Bloomberg, will present their final decision as to whether they will permit Park51 to be built. In addition, representatives of Park51 will announce their decision about whether they will stay at the same location or if they plan on moving the center to a less "sensitive" location further from Ground Zero.

RESOURCES TO READ IN PREPARATION

Dr. Aslan notes: *In addition to asking students to do the preparation below, I ask them to do online research about the specific roles they will be taking on.*

To prepare for the role-playing activity you need to read through the articles listed on the syllabus, particularly, Jeanne Kilde, “The Park 51/Ground Zero Controversy and Sacred Sites as Contested Space” (or another suitable reading by a scholar would be: “The Ground Zero Mosque Controversy: Implications for American Islam” by Liyakat Takim) and watch the short PBS film, “The Man Behind the Mosque.” Another resource is the film “[Building Babel](#),” which closely follows Sharif al-Gamal and his personal life in addition to his efforts to push for Park51. The other resources listed on the class syllabus will have varying use for you depending on your role, but it would be useful to review them to get a broader understanding of the controversy.

As Jeanne Kilde asserts, “These arguments regarding respect, sensitivity, and proximity underscore the fact that the Park 51 controversy was replete with spatial language. The dispute focused on two building projects, with questions of proximity playing the central role. How close should a Muslim community center be built to the World Trade Center site? Two blocks away? Four? A mile?” (298). Kilde also argues that the entire controversy was not necessarily about Park51 being a site built by Muslims near Ground Zero, but rather, that it was about the bigger issue of 9/11, the scars and pain left behind by the attacks, and lack of completion at the Ground Zero site. Further issues that surround this event involve questions, such as: why did many Americans equivocated US Muslims living in New York with the 9/11 hijackers and terrorism and why they incorrectly assumed Park51 was intentionally placed near Ground Zero to provoke and insult the United States? Why are Muslim Americans more often than not placed under the lens of suspicion and seen as outsiders? By the end of the session, you should be able to these questions on a sophisticated level, taking into consideration the wide spectrum of views.

Dr. Aslan notes: *The readings should help students to begin to think about the complexity of religion and political views, and why making generalizations about groups of people is almost always erroneous.*

Resources for role-playing activity on Park51 controversy

- ▶ Tanenbaum, “[Turning Park51 Into a Teachable Moment: Curriculum Guide and Fact Sheets](#)”
- ▶ PBS Newshour Debate “[Should Mosque, Islamic Center Be Built Near Ground Zero?](#)”
- ▶ Democracy Now, “[Tariq Ramadan Debates Moustafa Bayoumi on Proposed Islamic Center](#)”
- ▶ CNN, “[The Muslims Next Door](#)”
- ▶ SPU, “[Building Mosques in America: Strategies for Securing Municipal Approvals](#)”
- ▶ ISPU, “[Not In Our Neighborhood: Managing Opposition to Mosque Construction](#)”
- ▶ Fear, Inc., “[The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America](#)”
- ▶ NYC Religions, “[Get to know Mosque City NY 2015](#)”

- ▶ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "[Controversies Over Mosques and Islamic Centers Across the U.S.](#)"
- ▶ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, [List of Mosques](#) that have faced problems
- ▶ The Daily Show, "[Tennessee No Evil](#)"
- ▶ Colbert Report, "[Weapon of Mass Construction](#)"
- ▶ "The American Muslim," [Islamophobia: Prejudice, Racist, Or Violent Incidents At Mosques](#)
- ▶ CNN, [Renee Ellmers \(current congresswoman of NC District 2\) on Anderson Cooper](#)
- ▶ The Daily Show, "[How to define the sacred?](#)"
- ▶ The Daily Show, "[Freedom of Religion?](#)"
- ▶ The Daily Show, "[Ground Zero Mosque?](#)"
- ▶ The Colbert Report, "[Ground Zero Mosque-rade](#)"

ROLES

Below is a list of the "roles" involved in the activity. Before coming to class, you should do some online research about your role so you can understand their views and what position they would take on this issue. The more prepared you are, the more successful and enjoyable the activity will be! We will be using name tags so you can keep track of everyone.

***Dr. Aslan notes:** In each of the categories below, I list the roles below in general order of significance to the events, so if I have a smaller course, I can discard the roles toward the end to match the number of students in the class. When we assign roles, I print out each of the roles and cut them up into individual pieces of paper, and then distribute them in class the day before so that everyone is clear about which role they will play.*

Pro-Community Center Activists

- ▶ Gamal al-Sharif: Park51
- ▶ Faisal Abdul Rauf: Park51
- ▶ Daisy Khan: Park51
- ▶ Imam Shamsi Ali (Also can quote from the Majlis As-Shura of New York)
- ▶ Debbie Almontaser: Muslim community activist
- ▶ The Sikh Coalition: NYC Leader
- ▶ Reverend Chloe Breyer: Interfaith Center of New York (you can also quote from The Reverend Kevin V. Madigan from the Catholic Church in Wall Street, who wrote an [article](#) about historical parallels to Catholicism)
- ▶ Representative Keith Ellison: First Muslim congressman (Minnesota)
- ▶ NYC Firefighter who served at Trade Center on 9/11

- ▶ Latino male in early 30s from East Harlem. Familiar with the mosques in Harlem and has a few Muslim acquaintances, but doesn't really have any strong opinion about Islam. Sees the uproar about the mosque in light of the parallel (and related) local and national anti-immigration debates and legislation. Mentions Mohammad Salman Hamdani, the Pakistani Muslim EMT who died helping people on 9/11: "They thought [Hamdani] was a terrorist, but Muslims died at the towers too. We were all working together that day as New Yorkers." Look up immigration debates from this time period.
- ▶ Russell Simmons: In connection to Center for Ethnic Understanding, especially Rabbi Marc Schneier
- ▶ Rabbi Marc Schneier: Rabbi of New York Synagogue
- ▶ James: A young, professional man who just moved from Seattle with his boyfriend into one of the many newly renovated apartments in Lower Manhattan. Wants to raise kids in the area and was hoping the community center/mosque Park51 project would go through so his family could have something like the 92nd street YMCA or the Manhattan Jewish Community Center (JCC). He feels the opposition is "crazy" and think the protestors "conflate all Muslims with 9/11. These people are the reason we're off killing people in Iraq and Afghanistan."
- ▶ Adem Carroll: Muslim community activist, founder of Muslim Consultative Network

People Who Are Against Current Location of Proposed Park 51 Community Center

- ▶ Robert Spencer: Director of blog Jihad Watch, co-founder of [Stop Islamization of America](#) (SIOA) and the [American Freedom Defense Initiative](#)
- ▶ Pamela Geller: President of the American Freedom Defense Initiative and runs Atlas Shrugs blog
- ▶ David Horowitz: Founder and president of [David Horowitz Freedom Center](#); runs "Islamofascism Awareness Week" on college campuses across the US
- ▶ Richard Land: President of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission for Southern Baptist Convention; one helpful article is [here](#). Also see writings of William McGurn, journalist and political speechwriter, especially [this article](#) as part of the "sensitivity" argument
- ▶ Foreign Policy Folk: Reuel Marc Gerecht ([article](#)) and Daniel Senor ([article](#))
- ▶ Mother of Trade Center victim (late 50s). White Christian woman who lives in South Dakota. She lost her daughter who was a trader and worked in one of the towers. Feels very uncomfortable with a mosque being built near Ground Zero: "Well, it's just insensitive, a violation of the sacred space of tragedy." Says she this has "nothing against regular Muslims."
- ▶ Abraham Foxman: National director of Anti-Defamation League, and member of the decision-making group who decided to come out publicly against the community center
- ▶ Protestor (White, early 30s, Agnostic) against the Mosque who comes to multiple rallies in Wall Street from Scranton, Pennsylvania. He is a high school American history teacher. Has a brother fighting in Iraq and sees it as their patriotic duty to protest the mosque and protect Ground Zero. Thinks Islam is "anti-American."
- ▶ Tariq Ramadan: Swiss-Egyptian scholar of Islam, based at Oxford University
- ▶ Representative Renee Ellmers: Rep of the 3rd congressional district in North Carolina
- ▶ Neda Bolourchi: Muslim whose mother died in 9/11

Journalists

Dr. Aslan notes: *These are essential roles to the activity. During the activity, we project a Word document onto a projector screen and the “journalists” spend their time listening in to conversations, and reporting on activities (such as protests, vigils, hearings with the Community Board No. 1, etc.) on the screen. Most importantly, the journalists must stick to the perspective they are representing.*

This is a useful way to get students thinking about media bias, and connects to a media analysis assignment we also do in class. At the end of the activity, both journalists debrief the class on what they heard and saw. It can be both humorous and informative, since a lot of things go on at once, and it's useful to get a general overview of the entire activity during the debriefing. It helps lead the class from the activity into a discussion about the purpose of what we've done together.

- ▶ Megyn Kelly, Fox News Correspondent (you will be posting news headlines on the screen during the activity based on your specific agenda/biases)
- ▶ Amy Goodman, reporter from Democracy Now (you will be posting news headlines on the screen during the activity based on your specific agenda/biases)

Decision Makers

Dr. Aslan notes: *These are also essential important roles. During the activity, the zoning board sits with a mayor at a desk and listens to arguments from both sides. The zoning board must decide if they will grant the permit, and the mayor must decide where he stands on the issue, as his opinion could have a lot of influence on what ultimately happens.*

- ▶ Manhattan's Community Board No. 1 (Zoning Committee for Lower Manhattan)
- ▶ Mayor Michael Bloomberg

ACTIVITY SCHEDULE

1. Introductions, everyone presents themselves in their roles
2. Let the activity begin!
3. Manhattan's Community Board No. 1 will present their final decision as to whether they will permit Park51 to be built and along with Mayor Bloomberg will offer his opinion on the situation. In addition, representatives of Park51 will announce their final decision on their plans.
4. Journalists will present overview of events
5. Debrief activity