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The Mosque Design Project

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In the teaching of Islam, there are many ways through which we can engage our students in the classroom. My intention here is to share one assignment that I have developed over the years that has proven to be incredibly dynamic in both how it can be incorporated into an Islam-related course and in its ability to draw attention to important topics and issues related to Muslim religious life. The assignment in question is a mosque design project. I was first introduced to this type of assignment during my time as a graduate student [My thanks to Prof. Ali Asani and his Harvard course *For the Love of God and His Prophet: Literary and Artistic Expressions of Muslim Devotional Life* for that initial experience.] and I have adopted, adapted, and expanded the assignment since those days for the purposes of my own teaching repertoire. In brief, the assignment asks students to design a mosque with the needs of a specific Muslim community in mind. Of course, what those needs are and how those needs are addressed is precisely what opens the doors for creativity for a project of this nature.

Before I delve into the specifics, it's worth noting that the assignment has proven itself to be incredibly flexible over the semesters. It's one of the main reasons that I continue to return to it time and again. Thus, while I will describe shortly the particulars of how I have developed

the assignment for my teaching purposes, I also want to emphasize that the project is easily scalable to the needs, scope, and afforded time of virtually any course that one might offer.

In my situation, the mosque design project has come to serve as a core pillar for my Islam in America course. It is not simply an assignment amongst many. The mosque design project helps determine in part how the course itself is planned out. First, I invite students to imagine themselves as members of a Muslim community of their choosing somewhere in the United States and to take on all the many responsibilities involved in building or renovating an Islamic house of worship in their chosen location. After a site is selected, they are tasked with investigating the religious history of their chosen cities and surveying those cities' respective demographics with particular attention paid to the local Muslims residing therein. The project, then, is more than a "design" of a mosque in an architectural sense or as a worship space. It is just as much concerned with delineating a mosque's envisioned socio-cultural and political footprint within a community. Students are being asked whom does your mosque serve and how will that space go about serving them? They are not just thinking of their immediate and imagined congregants, but the wider town or city community as well. While I leave the specific parameters of the project largely open-ended, there are nonetheless certain areas that I ask students to explicitly address at some point in their project, namely: How will the mosque be governed and how would such a governing body be constituted? What qualities and qualifications are sought for those who would serve in religious capacities (imams, chaplains, counselors, caretakers, and so on) and how would such talent be hired and retained? What sort of programming and services would the mosque provide through the typical calendar year? And how is all of this sustainable?

To impress the subtleties that the preceding questions raise and to spur discussion around key issues of interest, there are a number of well-suited readings, films, and activities that I have used throughout the years. For the sake of brevity, I will discuss only a selection of them here:

1) Dave Eggers' book *Zeitoun* (McSweeney's, 2009) is a quick, but engrossing read that brings to light the human-wrought trauma suffered by the city and people of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. When discussed in class the book can prompt a number of productive conversations concerning Islamophobia, race, government policing policies, and the escalating climate of securitization. Moreover, assigning the book early in the semester typically results in several mosque projects being set in the still recovering environs of New Orleans.

2) The documentary *Talking Through Walls: How the Struggle to Build a Mosque United a Community* (Unity Productions Foundation, 2008), which follows a mosque construction project in Voorhees, New Jersey beginning in 2003, is effective in highlighting the post-9/11 climate facing many mosque-building efforts today. It also illustrates the productive ways in which interfaith efforts and alliances can provide critical community support.

3) Selections from Ibrahim Abdul-Matin's *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches About Protecting the Planet* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010) often lead students to design a more "green" mosque. Students are inspired to implement energy-efficient, environmentally friendly

construction measures and to craft programs and outreach efforts with sustainability in mind.

4) In past semesters, I used Zarqa Nawaz's documentary *Me and the Mosque* (2005) to bring attention to the politics of identity and gendered space problems plaguing many mosques in North America. More recently I have turned to Ahmad Eid's documentary *Unmosqued* (2014) since it raises alongside those concerns other important questions concerning ethnocentrism, intergenerational differences, alternative community spaces, and the growing population of disenfranchised mosque congregants or the so-called "unmosqued."

5) Finally, there is the possibility of conducting site visits to nearby mosques or inviting community members into the classroom. But as anyone who has tried to arrange a local mosque visit knows, results will vary, or more pointedly, undertake at your own risk.

Through these various points of engagement students are prompted to think about how they can best foster or facilitate diversity and equity within their target mosque communities as well as establish strong community relations with their surrounding neighbors and the city or town at large.

With regards to logistics, I spread the project out over the course of the entire semester. Simulated town hall hearings, zoning meetings, and donor presentations as well as written submissions like opinion editorials, budgets, and mission statements are staggered every few weeks to allow students to deliberate over different aspects of the project in a well-paced manner. I also have my students work collaboratively in small groups. As can be well imagined, students come to the task with a wide variety of strengths, talents, and ideas. To bring all this together and to facilitate well-balanced groups I have each student fill out a survey where they indicate the skills or tasks with which they are most comfortable taking on (public speaking, art & design, writing, or planning & programming) and then balance groups accordingly.

The mosque design project allows students to build upon their strengths while learning to work in concert with their peers throughout a semester. Furthermore, it pushes the students to look at the issues confronting everyday Muslims from the inside out. As students work through the assigned materials, the needs facing their particular Muslim communities invariably become more tangible and relatable. In fact the students' sense of ownership and investment in their chosen communities increases as they work to develop and revise their respective mosque projects so that by the end of semester what they have learned about Islam is not merely knowledge content. Rather, what they depart with is an understanding of Islam informed by the real, lived challenges faced by Muslim communities of faith today.

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