Typically, Muslims have a tasbih at hand to remember God. A tasbih means to exalt, praise and glorify God; and the prayer beads used to aid this glorification are also called tasbih, subha or misbaha. Like Hindu and Buddhist malas and Catholic rosaries, their essential function is to concentrate the mind to count devotions, prayers, and divine attributes. Each religious tradition has its own local lore about the beads, their craftsman ship, and their talismanic powers. Tasbihs are made of ninety-nine beads that signify the asma al-husna, the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God mentioned in the Qur’an.

The ubiquity of tasbihs in mosques, homes, and around the wrists of Muslim men and women illustrates the importance of dhikr or constant recollection of God in Islam. Always in search of pictures and videos to use in class, I found one of President Hamid Karzai in a meeting with Afghan leaders holding prayer beads in his hands and another of Muslim men sitting in an Egyptian café talking while they fingered and counted their beads. A website called "Islam for Children" lists prayer beads among various essential Islamic artifacts including the prayer rug, prayer compass, and Qur’an stand (http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/caribh/islam/artefacts.html).

So much for simple descriptions and catalogues of religious symbols in Islam. Things matter. At times, things matter more than the ideas from which they take shape. This hit home when I heard an elderly Muslim woman instruct her husband not to carry his tasbih on their flight from Toronto to New York a year after the tragic events of 9/11. This unexpected precaution poignantly problematized the tension and ambiguity of reckoning with religious symbols and artifacts in different contexts. In between the idea (as in thought and desire) of the tasbih (to glorify God) and its materiality (prayer beads) is a constructive and deconstructive space, which continues to require critical reflection.

The focus of this issue of Spotlight on Teaching, guest edited by Vivian-Lee Nyitray, is material culture in religious studies. A longstanding debate in the field of religion has been the relationship between religious beliefs and practices or the classic philosophical problem of spirit and matter, essence and manifestation, noumenon and phenomenon. In pedagogical terms, the dilemma surfaces in terms of striking the right balance between teaching about a religious tradition’s ideas and principles versus teaching about its religious practices and artifacts. It is possible to do one to the exclusion of the other as well as to address both without theorizing the intimate yet ambivalent relationship between the two. For instance, until a few decades ago, occidentalist versions of Islam rooted exclusively in textual, normative sources managed to represent this cumulative historical tradition without any reference to how Muslims in different parts of the world actually expressed their faith in everyday life and practice. The pendulum now swings in the other direction as attention is drawn to the many discrete and varied cultural manifestations of Muslim life. This pedagogy is founded on the assumption that being Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and so on generates a particular type of material culture which embodies and replicates the teachings and requirements of a specific faith. It also emerges from the pressing need, voiced by our students, to understand other people’s religious symbols in a pluralist society.

Yet, how to tackle both descriptively and theoretically the visible aspects of religion remains. The edifice of disciplinary-specific language used to construct diverse explanations of religious objects itself requires constant re-examination. Terms used in the classroom to “handle” religious objects including manifestation, sacred, hierophany, representation and so on are themselves implicitly structured on a dualistic metaphysics of reality. Thus, within the context of coming to understand religious life through, not in spite of, material culture, there is both opportunity and necessity to draw attention to the limitations of epistemological notions constantly at work in the acts of explanation.
Teaching Religion and Material Culture

Vivian-Lee Nyitray

As an undergraduate student at Syracuse University in the early 1970s, I had the great fortune to enroll in several courses taught by H. Daniel Smith. A consummate teacher, he fostered in me (and countless others, without doubt) a lifelong fascination not just with "religion," but with the intellectual, emotional, and material totality of religious worlds. What Smith realized was that a student’s interest and attention span is fickle and fleeting — even in those pre-MTV days. To capture and maintain intellectual curiosity, we had to be fully unprepared for our initial class “meeting”: the classroom was closed and dark, and a shot of Professor Smith’s smiling face — which turned out to be a tape-slide combination — was all we got to see. In the moment of his explanation, those small twists of cloth were suddenly and palpably imbued with the sacrality of deep devotion and respectful friendship. Since then, although trained in the textual study of classical Chinese traditions, I have nonetheless come to practice the study of religion in a manner significantly influenced by anthropology, ethnography, art history, and archaeology. Perhaps not unlike other fields, the study of Chinese religions has long been divided into several camps: the historical, philosophical textualists, the anthropologists, and the art historians. The art historians were always in a class by themselves, but between the philosophers and the ethnographers, well, it was clear who claimed the superior discipline! Scholars whose “serious” textual work was paralleled by observations on paper goods, food offerings, or other “popular” artifacts were sometimes treated with that same disdain as symbols; their physical presence invoked and made warmly real the practice of bhakti devotionalism.

For me, in the moment of his explanation, those small twists of cloth were suddenly and palpably imbued with the sacrality of deep devotion and respectful friendship.

Their construction and orientation, their furnishings and adornment — now seems a natural subject for investigation. Even Buddhism, a tradition that rejects the material world as so much “dust,” nonetheless has been responsible for the production of a vast array of material goods, all of which provide significant keys to the interpretation of the tradition over time and across geographic space. Most importantly, the new consideration of materiality in Chinese tradition has facilitated conversations among scholars of diverse training and methodological orientation.

Scholars of the religions of indigenous peoples worldwide would find none of this newness unusual. They have long been at the forefront of material cultural studies, examining the ways in which textiles, furniture, architecture, personal adornment, music, dance, and the production of implements all reveal aspects of a particular religious worldview and its associated practices. Some of this focus was prompted initially by the perceived paucity or absence of the classic subject and/or object of study in religion, texts or scriptures. Doctrinal discourses were then discerned in oral tradition, and also in the overarching “narrative” of daily life. Belatedly but happily, these insights have now moved to the analysis of other religious traditions, notably the study of Christianity in general and its American variations in particular. In this issue of Spotlight on Teaching, a sampling of scholars and students share their diverse experiences in mediating material culture in the religious studies classroom.

An instructor desirous of shifting pedagogical attention beyond words on a page might reasonably turn the classroom gaze toward other aspects of the page, namely, photographs and illustrations — an entry to the field of visual culture. Recent scholarship on the relationship between visual culture and religion reveals much about what role that images play, not only in the imagination or in ritual implementation, but in the material reality of everyday religious life as well. Textual narratives also provide for ways of consideration of visual narratives in media as diverse as architecture and film. Contributor Vivian-Lee Nyitray encourages her students to move between the realms of visual and material culture in her course on American religion and film; in addition to screening films for discussion, she also directs student attention to the study of published catalog and movie memorabilia.

One might also bring the outside world into the classroom. Contributor Leslie Smith recalls a guest practitioner: a Wiccan who, in her choice of clothing and in the artifacts of The Coft that she brought along for the students’ examination, taught volumes about her tradition, about the local community “shared” by everyone present, and about the craft of teaching as well. But bringing the material culture of religion into the classroom carries certain challenges with it. Strenski asks: “Who lugs this stuff to class?” The answer is: I do, for one. I am the bag lady of Religious Studies. In addition to the music tapes and CDs that I carry to class for aural illustration, I bring Hindu and Buddhist images, Chinese paper funerary goods, Tibetan prayer flags, Soka Gakkai bumper stickers, Tasse merit books, and posters depicting everything from highly unpleasant Hindu hells to the Chinese sea goddess Mazu hovering protectively over pleasure craft out for a day’s sail. I bring...
Material Culture and the Varieties of Religious Imagination

Ivan Strenske

How, then, do we exploit the materiality of religious life for the study of religion? The first task before us is, I would claim, to provide a conceptual and theoretical framework within which to generate durable thinking about material religious culture. How should we begin, at least, to locate material religious culture within a larger conceptual and interpretive framework? And, how would we do that in such a way that it would put such thinking into fruitful relation with the other dimensions of religious culture, such as myth, beliefs, social organization, experience, ritual, and morality? Perhaps because of the bold that the visual has on our consciousness, the modality of the “arts” seems particularly to recommend itself as a place we might begin. For me, this natural affinizing affinity with the arts recommends that we begin to think about material religious culture as an arena for the production of the imagination. We speak readily of the aesthetic imagination and even of the moral, civic, sexual, commercial, and political imaginations and so on, why not take seriously the religious imagination? Why cannot religion be as much a locus in which the imagination can be seen to operate as many other domains of life?

In this light, the materiality of religious life presents no great mystery or puzzle. When people imagine things, they typically realize their imaginations in media. We can readily recognize how religious beliefs have been a medium in which creative religious thinkers have done a great deal of imagining. There are Four Noble Truths. But why four, and not eight, like the Noble Eightfold Path, or three, like the Three Body Doctrine, and so on? Similarly, in material terms, why are stupas made in great mounds and not four-square blocks? Why is it that in Buddhism one is to see its contents as the playing out of an imagination that is religious. What are its rules? Why do some imaginings work and others fail flat on their faces? Why do some things “capture the imagination” and other fail to do so — and for whom? Some sacred music gets sung year after year, and not, one supposes, just out of inertia, but because it resonates in some important ways with some folks. A celebrated new cathedral has risen in Los Angeles at the cost of many millions of dollars and under the direction of a world-class European architect. Some, however, have justly died on arrival, and will only resort to it because there is no alternative. Why? Many, therefore, are the ways that the religious imagination, but many as well are those that fall into oblivion. Which ones? Why these and not others, and so on? These are only some of the questions that seeing material religious culture in terms of the imagination might raise. Other theoretical “tickets” will raise other kinds of questions. That to me is all to the good.

Interrogating Material Religion with a “Proactive Mind”

Implied in my putting questions or “problems” to the front is that we must do much more than simply to present the data of religion’s materiality. Yet, since it would be easy to become seduced by the ravishing imagery of the religious imagination or grounded in place by contact with real religious objects, we must take care not to fall prey to the hereof of the Immaculate Perception. The theoretical and conceptual dimension of our work should go hand in hand with the empirico-critical. And, so, I am urging that we prepare students for coming to the data of material religious culture with a “proactive mind.”

Where teaching is concerned, we all recognize that students will unavoidably come to the data with their own “tacit” resources, with their own principles and/or prejuridical and preconceived sets of questions and problems that are by and large not to be suggested to them in advance. These sets of questions and problems are in some minor way the product of the “proactive mind” that has been formed in the students, and for whom? Some sacred music keeps getting sung year after year, and not, one supposes, just out of inertia, but because it resonates in some important ways with some folks. A celebrated new cathedral has risen in Los Angeles at the cost of many millions of dollars and under the direction of a world-class European architect. Some, however, have justly died on arrival, and will only resort to it because there is no alternative. Why? Many, therefore, are the ways that the religious imagination, but many as well are those that fall into oblivion. Which ones? Why these and not others, and so on? These are only some of the questions that seeing material religious culture in terms of the imagination might raise. Other theoretical “tickets” will raise other kinds of questions. That to me is all to the good.

OSPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING

Ivan Strenske is the Holistic Family and Community Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside. In addition to being the North American editor of Religion, he is the author of five books and approximately fifty articles. His most recent books are Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism and Social Thought (2002) and Durkheim and the Jews of France (1997).

Outside the venerable field of archaeology of religion, a relatively small number of my teaching colleagues have developed the field of study of the materiality of religious life. Here, I list the likes of Colleen McDannell, Thomas Kielman, Lionel Rothkugel, Rosalind Hackett, J. Z. Smith, Richard Hecht, Roger Friedland, Caroline Walker Bynum, Gary Lauffer, and Peter Brown, among others. I wish to pay tribute to them by pointing out some of what I take to be implications of their work, and to offer the beginnings of some theorizing of this work. I omit Eliade from this list, but certainly not because we cannot learn about certain modes of organizing time and space from him. We can, certainly not because we cannot learn about certain modes of organizing time and space from him. We can, cannot learn about certain modes of organizing time and space from him. We can, . . .

When people imagine things, they typically realize their imaginations in media. We can readily recognize how religious beliefs have been a medium in which creative religious thinkers have done a great deal of imagining. There are Four Noble Truths. But why four, and not eight, like the Noble Eightfold Path, or three, like the Three Body Doctrine, and so on? Similarly, in material terms, why are stupas made in great mounds and not four-square blocks? Why is it that in Buddhism one is to see its contents as the playing out of an imagination that is religious. What are its rules? Why do some imaginings work and others fail flat on their faces? Why do some things “capture the imagination” and other fail to do so — and for whom? Some sacred music gets sung year after year, and not, one supposes, just out of inertia, but because it resonates in some important ways with some folks. A celebrated new cathedral has risen in Los Angeles at the cost of many millions of dollars and under the direction of a world-class European architect. Some, however, have justly died on arrival, and will only resort to it because there is no alternative. Why? Many, therefore, are the ways that the religious imagination, but many as well are those that fall into oblivion. Which ones? Why these and not others, and so on? These are only some of the questions that seeing material religious culture in terms of the imagination might raise. Other theoretical “tickets” will raise other kinds of questions. That to me is all to the good.

Ivan Strenske

Material religious culture is composed of all the sensate entities and events of religion. Until recently . . . we have been spending most of our time thinking about thought. Concerning the body, sex, and all the rest. For Albert Réville, ritual, in general, was judged as dangerously “sensuous.” The nineteenth century Catholic cult of the sacred heart drove Réville into a perfect frenzy of sexual and psycho-physical causes. It represented to him a clear, rational “case . . .” of mana enrico-geistosus, superimposed upon a very hysterical constitution.” [Réville, “Contemporary Materialism in Religion: The Sacred Heart.” Theological Review 18 (January 1874): 138-156, see especially pp. 148-152.]

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Interrogating Material Religion: A Check-list

Let me refer the reader to the specific assignment that I use in a course on the sacred and taboo that I have taught for the past two years to undergraduates at the University of California, Riverside.

Students are required to do a field visit to a sacred site and to write a short paper addressed to the question of how its sacredness is engineered by the manipulation of space and selectivity of objects. (Students are also encouraged to supply their own questions.)

In terms of this specific interrogation of material religious culture, I first concentrate on getting students to “see” what material religious culture, I first concentrate on getting students to “see” what material religious culture is. Let me refer the reader to the specific site, its contents:

• What makes it obvious that this space is or place is a sacred space or place?

• What’s nearby? What’s conspicuously far away?

• What is the elevation of the site — far away? Any odors typical of the place? Tastes? Colors? Images? Tactile surfaces?

• What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior more sacred than it is now in its present condition?

• What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior less sacred — more profane — than it is in its present condition, even to the point of a total loss of sacredness?

Remarks on Some Results of Interrogating Material Religion

In their assignments, most students choose standard sacred sites such as the Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California mission sites, local temples, mosques, synagogues, cemeteries, and such. Others have gone on more original excursions, such as focusing on roadside accident shrines that are so common here in the Southwest. Another student explored the sacredness of the family dining table — a particularly charged site given the widespread practice today of individual family members drifting off with their individual trays of supper to sit alone gazing at their own individual TV sets.

Notable here is how the students displaying the most originality in selecting their projects revealed how fruitful it is to study religious materiality as a work of the imagination. Religion can emerge in unexpected and novel forms, and it is the creative endeavor of those who will observe it. This is the Spontaneous Shrines inventory, which was assembled and become the “sacredness of the site being observed. First are a series of questions about the overall site: its setting, location, and situation:

• What makes this site or some aspect(s) of its interior more sacred than it is now in its present condition?

• What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior less sacred — more profane — than it is in its present condition, even to the point of a total loss of sacredness?

Practical Problems: The Incredible Heaviness of Material Religion

Material religious culture can thus be so attractive as data, both for research and teaching, that it may be easy to overlook its drawbacks. This is to say that a major practical problem encountered in studying the products of the material religious imagination is, of course, its very materiality. As one who has ever seized on colleagues in art history or film studies for example, with their ability to transfix students with lectures enhanced by colorful images and cinematic drama, only needs to spend some time with them as they labor to map strategy about what makes their text or project “sacred” or “profane,” it bears repetition that the high school physics text books are keen to remind us? Who lugs it in class, and so on? We may be tempted to revert to simple talk, with all its blessed lightness of being, and to those tried and true, eminently portable texts. Some may even be tempted only to talk about religious talk (beliefs, texts, and so forth) and forget cumbersome material religious culture altogether. Various strategies will simply have to be devised to manage these problems, knowing full well that there is no way in advance to judge whether advantages outweigh problems. We will want to be alert and to plot how these two curves — advantages and drawbacks — intersect and veer off in their own directions.

One strategy to deal with the problem of the “incredible heavity of material religion,” is to transform it into a lighter medium. While there’s nothing quite like the “real” thing — in terms of ownership, the “real” is the best one can do. We sometimes need therefore to overcome the inconvenience of the very materiality of material religion that we seek to represent. If I cannot visit Hui Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California, because I am in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, I would at least like to be there “virtually.” If I do not have the Rustavi choir from Georgia around the corner, I would at least like to be able to hear them “virtually.” This, if anything, is a job for digital technology — for the digital camera and video, for MP3 technology, and for all the possibilities now being unleashed for web-based publishing. The Web includes an increasingly growing list of possible kinds of “sites” not only the standard “bulletin board” where information is posted, but digital media albums, where the sounds and images of material religion can be accessed, or “tours” of actual or imagined places, ideally in three-dimensions, whether immersive or not.

Overcoming the incredible heaviness (and, often, long distance) of material religious culture, my Spontaneous Shrines website and digital project may serve as an example of one way that I have tried to make things better for students of religious materiality. •

Resources


Teaching Religion and American Film

Judith Weisenfeld

The course is organized chronologically, beginning in 1915, to emphasize changing relationships between American religious institutions and sensibilities and the film industry. One of my primary goals in teaching students through this history is to convey the complexity of the interactions, not allowing them to assume that filmmakers and studios were uninterested in or scornful of religion, nor that religious institutions and individuals were unequivocally suspicious of the power of the medium and of the interests of filmmakers. To this end, we devote considerable attention to the use of film and film-related artifacts by religiously grounded social reformers and by churches. We consider the incorporation of films into the work of churches, both to provide informal entertainment and to complement or enhance ministers’ sermons. Along with viewing segments of early Bible films, we examine case studies, such as the 1923 Catalogue of Non-Theatrical Motion Picture, Inc., through which distributors marketed these films and used testimonials to argue for the inclusion of motion pictures in the religious practices of American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. We also look at brochures, like one for a Bible Chautauqua lecture in New Haven, Connecticut in 1926 at which the lecturers screened Martin Luther, His Life and Time; it promoted as offering “8 stupendous reels on the Reformation.” Social reformers also saw film as useful for highlighting social problems like crime, prostitution, corruption in the American legal system, and corporate greed, as in Moul WALSH’s 1915 film, Regeneration, based on the memoir of New York gang leader Owen Kildare and his story of transformation under the guidance of a settlement house worker, serving to introduce students to the genre of the social problem film.

At the same time that we acknowledge and explore some of the ways in which religious institutions and individuals made productive use of the movies in the period of early film, we also devote attention to censorship, arguably the most significant moments or characters in American religious history. Over the course of the semester, my students and I engage film as a case study for thinking about the history of relationships between religion and popular culture in America and examine a set of films as material artifacts of particular historical moments.

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Teaching with Food

Daniel Sack

EVERYONE EATS. It’s a truism, but it’s a truism useful in teaching about religion. Eating is essential for human survival, and thus about as close to a universal as we can get. But, as anthropologist Mary Douglas (a guru for material culture studies) points out, “Food is a field of action. It is a medium in which other levels of categorization become manifest.” (Douglas, 30) People show who they are and what they believe through their food. Eating is universal, but what people eat and the way they eat it reveals a culture’s significant particularities. Everyday acts display a community’s commitments, beliefs, and practices. All of this means that food is a great way to teach about religion.

I’ll illustrate a few of the advantages of teaching about religion. Given my background and teaching experience, most of my examples are drawn from Christian traditions, but you can probably come up with parallels in the tradition you are teaching.

Teaching with food provides a comparative perspective. As the truism notes, everyone eats. And just about everyone endows food with some religious meaning. That means you can compare and contrast religious traditions, with food as the common theme. How are the Christian Eucharist and Hindu offerings different? What do Jewish kosher law and African taboos have in common? What does it mean when Buddhists start having American-style potlucks? You can do the same thing across time as well — looking at how communion practices changed from the first century to the present, for instance. This comparative perspective shows our students that religion is of variety.

The topic also allows teachers to make their classes more experiential. Recent pedagogical practices call for engaging students through their own experiences. I have found that almost everyone has a story to tell about religion and food — a family potluck story, or something about communion. Encourage your students to tell their story. When they connect their experience with the theory and content of your course, they understand it in a deeper way. They can also connect with other people’s experience through observer participation exercises. Require them to attend a food-centered ritual. Ask them to analyze a family meal. Such assignments encourage your students to see religion in action. With food, as with other forms of material culture, learning becomes more immediate when it is directly experienced.

A food-centered perspective offers a thick description of religious life. Food has multiple roles in a religious community. It can be the center of a ritual, as with the Passover Seder. It can be part of an important community-shaping event, like a youth group’s pizza party. Its preparation can be an ethical action, in the form of vegetarian cooking or serving at a soup kitchen. A focus on food reminds our students that religion is more than just theology, ethics, ritual, or practice; it is a complex mixture of behaviors and beliefs.

Because food involves so much of religious life, it connects with a variety of issues. For instance, food has clear links to religion and gender concerns. Ask your students, who cooks and who eats? Traditionally, women have done most of the cooking in Christian churches. There has also been a great deal of recent scholarship about gender, body issues, and food — ranging from medieval nuns to contemporary teenagers. How does gender affect what we eat? Consider, for example, this passage from How to Plan Church Meals (1962), “Sandwiches for the tea table are quite a different thing from the ‘he-man’ sandwiches you want for a picnic, or the meal-in-one you serve to teenagers. They are delicate, made for nibbling and looking pretty is far more important that providing nourishment.” This paragraph reveals a worldview, full of gender relations and social expectations.

Similarly, food raises questions about religion and class. Many American religious communities are involved in some way in feeding the hungry. But what do they provide, and why? What do they expect of the hungry people that they feed? Some soup kitchens, for instance, require their clients to attend prayer services and go through Christian-based recovery programs. Others simply provide the food and hope that the guests pick up some faith from the atmosphere. There is also great variety in the menus. Many soup kitchens serve food gleaned from leftovers and donations, while others prepare meals to order from fresh ingredients. What do these differences tell us about those religious communities?

Obviously, food has implications for ethics as well. What do you eat and why? Even in Christianity, a tradition with few official food taboos, eating is fought with rights and wrongs. In the nineteenth century, food reformers like Sylvester Graham advised Americans to change their diets for the sake of their souls, and Good Housekeeping told readers “How to Eat, Drink, and Sleep as Christians Should.”

In the twentieth century, hunger activists urged Christians to become vegetarians so that the world’s hungry would have enough. Many religious traditions have similar systems of food taboos — formal or informal.

As Douglas says, food is a field of action. It reveals a great deal about who people are and what they believe. As a result, a focus on food can be a creative way to engage students in the study of religion. Food is ubiquitous, so there’s always something students can connect with. It’s no wonder that the study of food has become hot across academia, resulting in a rich scholarship. It also has real promise in the religion classroom.

Here are a few classic resources to start with.


Teaching Biblical Archaeology and Material Culture as Part of Teaching Judaism

Richard A. Freund

Archaeology, Material Culture, and Judaism

DO NOT WANT to miss the big picture about the use of archaeology and material culture in the study of the Bible and Ancient Judaism. If Judaism is a construct that has developed over the past two-to-three thousand years from biblical religion it is important to show how these developments take place. Often it is a fairly subtle interpretive literary journey that takes the students from a biblical institution to a post-biblical ritual or law. Biblical Judaism is not the same as post-biblical and simple forays into the material culture of the Bible and post-biblical Judaism can drive home this point much quicker than semester of literary analysis. In-class slides, videos, and Internet visuals help but lack the concreteness of demonstrative material culture.

Field excavation studies provide a different form of learning than can be experienced in the classroom. I have been teaching ancient Judaism using archaeology and field excavations for almost two decades with amazing results and enthusiasm from my students. My work has been almost exclusively in Israel, but I have toured with my students in Jordan and Egypt to fill out their educations.

Archaeology is an exciting and hands-on way to introduce often skeptical and jaded students to an exciting and “real” study of the Bible and Judaism. It is impossible to give them the same “feeling” for the reality of the history they study only through books and from sitting in a classroom.

For students, the fact that objects and writings from antiquity can be found in their original and pristine state means that they are “objective” objects, i.e., verifiable, quantifiable, and therefore true. Nothing could be farther from the reality of the situation in the study of material culture.

The “rocks, linens, wood, beads, metals” do not really “speak”; objects and writings are only intelligible through the process of subjective interpretation, and this process is open to speculation and reasonable hypothesizing. But alas, the “imagined” notion of archaeology is so much stronger than the actual study of archaeology that it gives archaeology a more objective feel than, say, the thousands of years of interpretation that biblical and rabbinic texts have enjoyed. As a teacher, I wish to exploit students’ inherent interest in the unknown (“mystery”) aspects of archaeology but at the same time to lower the expectation level by telling students that interpretation is a part of the process.

The other aspect is to realize that the main “nuts and bolts” of archaeology are not the big discoveries but the small pieces of evidence: research in ceramics, petrology, dating through paleography (when written materials are available), or C14 studies (for organic matter remains). All these are analyzed through comparative and complex mixtures of anthropology, sociology, biology, chemistry, and related sciences that add up, slowly, to a larger picture of group, a society, a city, a tribe, or an individual. The cumulative argument of archaeology, often missed by the cinema and popular culture, creates a picture that, unlike the interpreted model of the rabbi and later Jewish historians, is almost always an unknown to the archaeologist at the beginning but which ultimately becomes clear through hypothesis and evaluation. It is a wonderful model for teaching about religion and how religious research accumulates to give a picture of a whole group.

From Theory to Practice

Archaeology usually means the study of antiquities or ancient artifacts as ends in themselves. Biblical archaeology is the study of these artifacts in light of the literary texts that are associated with the Bible.

My definition of the “Bible” is somewhat unorthodox: I include in my course any texts that may affect our understanding of the Bible’s meaning and, especially, our understanding of the material culture at the sites at which we work. Our “archaeology” often involves anthropological and historical studies of local indigenous customs and life, but the main part of our study in the field involves teaching what artifacts tell us about our site. The sustained interaction—seven hours per day, five days per week—in close working environments in the field классment lends itself to teaching not only about the artifacts but also about how texts relate to artifacts.

While some archaeology is done in laboratories and some in libraries, the cornerstone of all biblical archaeology is field excavation. The whole sense of “discovering” that we try to animate our students to understand in our courses in the classroom is the goal of this process of field excavations. This is not the place to explore some of the traditional goals of archaeology but certainly into the very recent past, the goals of field excavation were geared more for pure research ends rather than teaching. Professional archaeologists would hire laborers and often just supervise the work in the field. They would take the finds back to a lab, analyze them with the help of experts who often were not with them in the field, and then write up the results for the archaeologist of record who ultimately would write a final report. These results were used in turn by literary scholars of the Bible.

This was a very inefficient way to get the results out to the public, and the workers/students were seen as one of the least important links in the chain of information collection. Even when massive numbers of volunteer student laborers have been used in some major archaeological projects of the past thirty years, such as the excavating of Masada, the City of David in Jerusalem, and Caesarea, often the educational or teaching possibilities were subordinated to the research goals of the excavation. Today the situation is different; the value of educated student laborers increases research goals. Archaeology is a tremendous opportunity for teaching and learning about the past and about the scientific method of how we know anything about anything in the modern world.

There is no misleading those of you who have never been on an excavation. Excavations are carried out by manual labor; we may be assisted by a tractor for heavy-duty jobs but the bulk of the work is done by individuals who lift, sift, clean, and sometimes remove rocks and dirt. Work in the field consists of excavating, recording, photographing, and surveying. With proper supervision and training, students can do any of these tasks. A tell (mound) is divided into a network of squares measuring five by five meters. Each square or architectural unit is known as a locus. As soon as architectural units are observed, the excavation is carried on accordingly. Walls, floors, etc., are carefully excavated and cleaned for reconstruction. Finds are collected in baskets. Preliminary analysis of finds is done daily at the site. Finds, baske rs, and the development of each locus are recorded on a locus card and a field diary. Individual students work their way through the different tasks so that at the end of a three-week session they have done almost every task from lifting rocks, excavating, measuring, recording, and surveying, to recording, pottery analysis, and explaining finds.

Three to five students are assigned to a locus. Each has an advanced student or staff member who is a locus supervisor. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor in addition to the student supervisors. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor in addition to the student supervisors. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor in addition to the student supervisors. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor in addition to the student supervisors. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor in addition to the student supervisors.

May 2003 AAR p.vii

SPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING

Work in the field consists of excavating, recording, photographing, and surveying. With proper supervision and training, students can do any of these tasks.

Richard A. Freund is Director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford and Professor of Jewish History. He has served as Director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project, the John and Carol Merrill Case of Later Excavations Project, and the Qumran Excavations Project in Israel. For the past six years (1996-2002), he was Editor in Chief of Spotlight on Teaching.
Biblical and Talmudic/Rabbinic Archaeology

While the word “Bible” or “biblical” in a course catalogue tends to bring students into an archaeology course, it is the on-going tradition of literary information such as “talmudic” or “rabbinic” that more accurately defines the relationship between biblical texts and the material culture we encounter underground. Biblical archaeology that has no parallel religious sites with Byzantine churches and monasteries attached. Bethsaida apparently was abandoned in the third century CE and in location lost for a variety of different geological and geographic reasons that we have been unraveling with our students over the past decade.

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BETHSAIDA: A “JEWISH” CITY BY THE NORTH SHORE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE

Bethsaida presents a case in biblical and rabbinic archaeology that has no parallel discovery not only of the site but of how one assesses the significance of material culture when a city has not been continuously occupied for nearly two thousand years. We have been bringing students to our Bethsaida Excavations Project since 1987 and one question that continues to be asked is “What makes this a Jewish city in antiquity?” The city is mentioned in the ancient Jewish historian Josephus Flavius’ writings, in the New Testament, in rabbinic writings from the Mishnah through the Talmud, and even perhaps the Hebrew Bible, so it is clearly connected to Jewish life. But what specific artifacts make a city Jewish? The answer to this question may help us understand the larger religious questions that are of interest to the academic study of Judaism and Christianity: how “Jewish” was early Christianity in Israel, and what was the nature of Jewish life in places far from Jerusalem in the Second Temple period?

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First, we always assumed that it was a “Jewish” city because of its location in close proximity to other Galilean and Golan Jewish cities of the same time period located along the Jordan River and pathways around the Sea of Galilee. Although there are non-Jewish cities in the area, our identification became a working hypothesis. We did not know whether Bethsaida ever had a Jewish majority population and therefore the search for its Jewishness was complicated. We asked basic questions of ourselves and of the students, such as what makes the material culture at Bethsaida “Jewish” or “pagan” (since there were presumably no “Christians” in the first-century city)? What type of Jews were these Bethsaida Jews? Were they “rabbinic Jews” who saw biblical law as the defining factor for their lives or were they a marginally Jewish population who rarely encountered rabbis? Were rabbis as we know them from the search for Jewish institutions such as synagogues and mikvehs an “edifice complex,” but it is an issue that students readily understand and which therefore presents an opportunity to teach about the existence of a synagogue or a mikveh site has become one “litmus test” for the Jewishness of a site; however, our students have told us through lectures and conversations with staff that the whole concept and terminology is anachronistic?

The development of the mikveh was an attempt to create a rather specific ritual for on-going, non-Temple-oriented Judaism and it succeeded. While I am sure that Bethsaida, I will often take students to other sites nearby with mikvehs and ask them to tell me what they understand their construction; I then ask them why they think we haven’t discovered one. In the past, some students have responded, “Perhaps because the archaeologists only excavated 10 percent of the site in fifteen years, and the mikveh is located elsewhere on the site.” Other students may respond that “...perhaps they just bathed in the nearby Jordan River, and that sufficed for ritual and non-ritual purposes.” In fact, that would have had sufficient water to explain the technological. This type of learning and discovery is impossible to achieve in the classroom, but it is the basic stuff of the academic study of religion. I never really teach all of this in a classroom, and it is for this reason that Bethsaida has been called “Jewish” Hellenistic and early Roman Jewish art that have taught us about the relationship between text and material culture. A few different geometric ornaments — identified at other very clearly defined Jewish cities as “Jewish” symbols — have been found at Bethsaida on lintels and massive stone pieces scattered around the site and on pottery. They may have been used for the inhabited double meander, and the five- or six-pointed star. An understanding of Jewish art in this period, its place in religious worship, and its relationship to literary provisions against pagan art allows us to teach about a key issue of Judaism’s religious identity. The use of a large雪花石 slate at a city gate religious cult location from the Iron Age level at Bethsaida stands next to an undecorated stele. While this city gate conveys up a types of biblical citations, it is the total context of material culture that teaches us about the relationship between the Bible and our archaeology: researchers have...
I will share with you my encounters with material culture as a student and as a graduate student instructor in a classroom. There is tremendous potential in using material culture as a pedagogical instrument for teaching religion at the university level. This fact has been made real to me as an undergraduate, as a graduate student, and as a graduate student instructor.

While an M.A. student at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), I was fortunate enough to be a graduate student instructor (GSI) in a classroom. There is tremendous potential in using material culture as a pedagogical instrument for teaching religion at the university level. This fact has been made real to me as an undergraduate, as a graduate student, and as a graduate student instructor. I had wanted to provide students with a way to experience the syncretic expression of Chinese popular religion in Chinese culture. In my show-and-tell, I presented paper [funerary] goods, gold and silver spirit money, hell dollars, incense, ritual divination blocks, and along with pictures of their use, all of which I passed around for everyone to examine. The Christian seminarians told me appreciatively that the slide show and artifacts gave them a better understanding of ancestral veneration, because it provided them a way of imagining it in fuller details in their own minds. The syncretic nature of Chinese popular religion is difficult to teach because it is full of contradictions and tensions, but this unique tendency is expressed in religious rituals and is manifest in the material expression of cultural artifacts. One can see the syncretic elements working together in practical harmony.

The last experience I want to share with you concerns the impact of using material culture in my current academic research and studies. While at the GTU, Professors Jonathan H. X. Lee is currently a doctoral student in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara; his fields of interest and research are East Asian Religions, and American Religions: the Chinese Diaspora. He is also a project photographer and archivist for the Religious Pluralism in Southern California Project, and be the author of several forthcoming articles on religion in Chinese and Vietnamese-American communities.

While at GTU, I was often asked to lecture on Chinese ancestral veneration. Sometimes I offered to present a slideshow lecture on Chinese popular religion to provide my classmates with a way to experience the syncretic expression of Chinese popular religion in Chinese culture. In my show-and-tell, I presented paper [funerary] goods, gold and silver spirit money, hell dollars, incense, ritual divination blocks, and along with pictures of their use, all of which I passed around for everyone to examine. The Christian seminarians told me appreciatively that the slide show and artifacts gave them a better understanding of ancestral veneration, because it provided them a way of imagining it in fuller details in their own minds. The syncretic nature of Chinese popular religion is difficult to teach because it is full of contradictions and tensions, but this unique tendency is expressed in religious rituals and is manifest in the material expression of cultural artifacts. One can see the syncretic elements working together in practical harmony.

The last experience I want to share with you concerns the impact of using material culture in my current academic research and studies. While at the GTU, Professors Jonathan Huoi Xung Lee

Teaching Religion and Learning Religion through Material Culture

Jonathan Huoi Xung Lee

I recall they were all “super-shocked” to find that the interior of the church looked exactly like a Protestant church, except that there was an image of the Buddha on the main altar instead of Jesus.

Nakasone and Yee took our class to San Francisco Chinatown to visit several temples. Because I have a long standing interest in the Chinese sea goddess widely known as Tianhou, or “the Empress of Heaven,” and I had heard that there was a Tianhou Temple in Chinatown, I asked Professor Yee to take us there. The temple was amazing. The smell of incense, the display of offerings, the multicolored shrines, the lanterns covering the entire ceiling, the images of Tianhou, Guanyin and other deities, and the crowdedness of the room, all compelled us to ask questions: Why are these red lanterns covering the ceiling? Why is the image so dark? Who is this? Why are there so many images of Guanyin? Why does Guanyin have a mustache in this picture? Why? Why? Why? This was an example of active, three-dimensional, fully sensorial, experiential learning at its best.

This temple provided a truly unique, engaging, and powerful learning tool on both historical and contemporary Chinese religious life. Professor Yee explained the symbolic use of architectural space and how it communicates Chinese religious, philosophical, social, and moral values. We all gained invaluable insight that day at the Tianhou Temple. I came out of the experience with more questions than answers. These questions fueled my ongoing research interests, including a project documenting the contemporary life of the Tianhou Temple. In the process of doing fieldwork at the Tianhou Temple, I discovered there was a second temple in San Francisco dedicated to Tianhou, who is also worshipped under an affectionate Taiwanese epithet, Mazu. Hence I started researching the Mazu Temple U.S.A., located several blocks away. It became the topic of my non-completed master’s thesis, but I feel that I have only just begun to appreciate the temple’s riches.

Using material culture as a pedagogical tool will be a key element in my future teaching. I have collected several artifacts in my travels: ritual implements, icons and other examples of religious art, pictures and videos of temples and monasteries, and clothing, in addition to taking many pictures of people engaged in rituals and worship. In Taiwan, I bought a paper model of a Walkman, and I collected temple booklets and merit cards, in Hong Kong I bought a pair of divination blocks and bamboo worshipping strips in a bamboo canister, in Burma the thought of illustrating their use in a future classroom. In Cambodia, I bought a Theravada saffron robe with a begging bowl, and in Thailand, I bought a pictorial representation of the life of the Buddha. I continue to collect religious-cultural artifacts as I travel, but one needs to travel abroad to buy these things, especially in California where ethnic communities thrive.

Teaching religion and learning religion requires more than memorizing facts about beliefs from a textbook. Images from art, material examples of religious rituals and other expressive practices—all provide important experiences in teaching and learning about religion as a lived experience. Religion is practiced. And I believe that the importance and sophistication of practice can only be fully taught and learned through the incorporation of material culture into the religious studies classroom.

Resources

Complicating Things: Material Culture and the Classroom

Leslie Smith

T HIS IS THE TALE of how all the participants in an "Introduction to Religion" course gained a new appreciation for pedagogy and learning through the use of material culture. Moreover, because of the simple efforts of one guest speaker, both students and instructor alike learned an important lesson on the complexity of social systems and how material culture can transform classroom analysis of these subjects.

The class to which I’ve alluded took place at a large, midwestern university where most students were overwhelmingly white and Christian. Of those who took religious studies classes, most did so for all of the typical reasons: it fulfilled their general requirements; it was offered at a time they liked; they had an interest in world religions, or at least an interest in the issues posed by their own religious commitments. In this sense, my class was probably like many other religious studies courses across the country.

With this particular class, however, a couple of things were noticeably different. First, as a graduate student-turned-brand-new teacher, I was hoping that my speaking skills and song-and-dance routines would compensate for the huge holes in my knowledge. As countless others have undoubtedly experienced, my first year teaching was filled with the heart-pounding realization that my students were requiring a knowledge I simply could not supply. Add to this a local community debate involving religion and the constitutionality of its expression that had gained national media attention; it would become a particularly volatile topic that framed the entire semester.

The circumstances inspiring the controversy involved a woman in a small, neighboring town who had challenged the use of a Christian symbol on the town’s flag, calling it an unconstitutional display. The subsequent uproar amongst the community’s members (who had no intention of removing the symbol) grew only more heated when it was discovered that this woman was a practicing Wiccan. The issue made its way boldly into the media and into our classroom. One day I returned from a weeklong trip to a town where this controversy raged, and consistently expressed strong opinions against the woman’s “right to assault” her community by “forcing her religious views” where they were not wanted. Many others commented that her challenge was nothing more than an attention-getting device, since the symbol, they insisted, wasn’t hurting anyone. Few spoke up to defend her actions, and few were willing to verbally question how things might have been different had the woman identified with any other religious group. My attempts to analyze media representations of this issue fostered further classroom tension.

I had already planned to discuss Wicca during part of the semester, and I had asked a local Wiccan priestess to be a guest speaker. More than one student approached me to indicate that they were uncomfortable with her planned visit. I was continually second-guessing my decision to have her come, as I wanted to avoid her marginalization at a time when she and others feared for their safety. I was also concerned that her religious beliefs and practices had been either exoticized or demonized, despite my best efforts to coach my discourse away from the class able to grasp a bit of Wicca and its historical/cultural context within a larger discussion on the processes by which dominant groups construct an “other.”

On the day of her presentation, the majority of the students were already in their seats as class began; this was one time when I was convinced that punctuality was not a positive trait. When the speaker arrived, several of the students were visibly surprised (and, they would tell me later, relieved) to find an intelligent, eloquent, funny woman who wore neither robes nor reminders of Wal-Mart. She had a set of runes, multiple decks of tarot cards, wands, and crystals. Chiming revealed that she was a mother, and that she worked for one of the city’s major employers. Some of the tension that existed dissipated when a class member asked where she had got her canes. Nervous laughter filtered through the room at her answer: “Wal-Mart.”

Special interest was directed toward the wands, runes, and tarot cards. A couple of students mentioned that they had experienced physical objects as purely symbolic ingredients in Christian ritual, heightening their sense of these implements to which physical, practical claims were attached. As the speaker described her use of each item, she provided us with a hands-on basis to broaden and further complicate our discussion on the problems involved in defining “religion.” We were no longer theorizing about purely ideological issues; we now had to wrestle with the significance of materiality in our discussions, and whether the distinction between the two was an artificial one.

The debriefing that followed the presentation reflected an interest in the speaker that did not wane. Her presentation initiated an ongoing dialogue between the class and members of a local coven, and a few of the class members used the data gathered from her presentation as a stepping stone for their final projects. The speaker’s visit thus allowed students to investigate some academic areas of interest while trying their hand at ethnography. From a pedagogical perspective, I was also pleased to have a context in which to engage the class in self-analysis, asking questions like the following: “Why did you feel relief when you saw her?” “What would you say to someone who was a skeptic?” “How might this conversation be different had she been wearing black robes?”; and — the question I could not ask before, “How would our responses to the ‘town flag’ controversy be different had the person speaking out been a Christian?” Does this experience inevitably, use generalization as an important tool? What we do. As a new teacher, I had expected that, at the end of the course, all students would have added substantially to their factual database via this textbook format. After the speaker’s presentation, however, I understood how my focus on facts obscured a much more important goal: my students should come away from the class able to grasp a bit of the complexity of society, the categories we use to describe it, and, in light of the “town flag” controversy, the various negotiations that go on between groups for the right to use its most valued monikers — “normalcy” being among them. The speaker provided me a context in which to evaluate my own expectations of student learning when I saw the ways in which she was able to make it happen. My most detailed lecture on Wicca could not compare to the confirming of social categories provided by her presence: she effectively equated “Wiccans” with a working mother who frequents Wal-Mart.

I am indebted, then, to one Wiccan priestess and to forty-five students for demonstrating how the use of material culture can provide a significant lesson on the utter intricacy of society while providing a forum to introduce and investigate some of the central questions of religious studies. Of all of the lessons I learned during those first few semesters of teaching, this was one of the most valuable.

Testamints™ and heat-sensitive yin-yang pencil! (Photo courtesy of V-L. Nylton)
Tactile teaching was a staple of our own early childhood education, introducing us to new worlds of experience; why now do we abandon it, particularly in “introductory” courses?

Over the years, as colleagues and students have turned to my predilection for religious objects, I have been helped to build up quite a collection. In addition to an heirloom Buddhist rosary of perfectly round hand-carved beads, I have vials of holy water and bags of healing soil, devotional cards, yarrow stalks, festival lanterns, holy water and bags of healing soil, a plastic Jesus image, heat-sensitive, color-changing yin-yang boards, and more.

In the next SPOTLIGHT on Teaching

Teaching about Peace and Violence in Religions


Buddhanet. Online at www.buddhanet.net/learning/history/buddhaart/monastery.htm. Provides basic introduction to structure and contents of a typical Chinese Buddhist temple. A link to www.buddhanet.net/learning/templetempletemples.html provides a detailed look at a particular temple in Singapore. Although the site is still under construction, it is a fine example of a virtual lesson in temple architecture and symbolic meaning.

Caldwell, Mark. “Church Signs 4 You.” Online collection of church signs (“We’re not dairy Queen but we have great Sundays!”) and billboards (“You think it’s hot here?”). (1997) www.members.truepath.com/churchsigns


Hartel, Heather. Online collection of gravestones, of which she notes a contemporary shift from images of the afterlife and reminders of the transience of this life, e.g., angels, a handshake, and various momento mori images to those that “celebrate the person’s life on earth, remembering them for the things they liked while alive,” including, it seems, Garfield and Mickey Mouse. angelfire.com/ny5/studiedaughter/project/gAES/ae1/index.html


Material History of American Religion project. materialreligion.org. Working from 1993 through 2001, this Lilly-funded Project investigated the history of American religion through examining material objects and economic themes. Although the project has concluded its work, the website has been maintained; it houses an archive of its e-journal, interviews with project participants, documents and objects collected by the project, and links to other internet resources. On the dangers of interpretation, see especially independent scholar Mary Ann Clark’s electronic journal article, “Seven African Powers: Hybridity and Appropriation,” for a discussion of the misinterpretation of devotionals candles.

Selected Resources

Bringéus, Nils-Arvid, ed. Religion in Taiwanese shamans to beat themselves in order to draw blood for the production of amulets and medicines. I treasure my treasures, but I am sometimes troubled when students admire them. How can I help them steer clear of the tendency to either exercise or trivialize a tradition, to caricature someone else’s faith as infantile or primitive? How are they to understand the use and misuse of the material cultural products of others’ religious imaginations?

Both Freund and Strenski pose useful questions for enabling students to examine their prior assumptions about material manifestations of religion.

Popular items and religious kitche yield different interpretive issues relative to naïve art, mass consumption, humor, and cynicism. My crowded office is home to musical Marys, garish Guanyins, and Buddha squeaky toys. I have soap bars that promise to “wash away sins”; votive candles dedicated to “Our Lady of Deadlines” and “Our Lady of Perpetual Housework”; light-up devotional shrines to Ganesh and to St. Anthony; Christian “testament” candles; heat-sensitive, color-changing yin-yang pencils; and yes, I do have a plastic Jesus sitting on the dashboard of my car. I am not always sure what Hindu students make of the Kali lunchbox I use to carry white-board markers to class, but perhaps when they notice my sparkly-red Jesus earrings — his visage embedded in acrylic that’s been poured into Diet Coke bottle caps — they can at least see that I am an equal-opportunity collector of such goods. I see these artifacts as evidence of the deeply rooted nature of religion in human culture. If the manufacture and use of tools are central to the definition of ourselves as human, it is natural for us to create tools for the expression — whether devotional, ritual, practical, or satirical — of our religious and spiritual realities, however we embrace or reject them. To leave the evidence of material culture out of the teaching of religion is, then, to eviscerate our humanity.

In the following pages, we hope to bring to life the culture and materiality of religion — discussing the material aspect of music, in the classroom. In the current “coverlets” to protect a woman’s modesty of “swooning in the spirit,” in which listening houses and tent revivals as sites for live religion.” I would add that an overlooked sensate perspective students gain into the social activity, Sack illustrates the multiple material culture of religion.

The importance of treating food, textiles, and doctrinal assumptions of a religious tradition and its institutions.

study of radio and religion in Appalachia, Howard Dorgan was led to describe meering houses and tent revivals as sites for live broadcasts; this led in turn to a discussion of “swooning in the spirit,” in which listen-
FREUND (from p.viii)

tried to connect the decorated stone to non-Israelite influences in a mined Iron Age settlement at the site, while the lack of symbols on the undecorated stone is seen as evidence of an Israelite population.

The most ubiquitous find at any archaeological site is pottery: cooking pots, storage pots, vessels for grinding, oil lamps, etc. At a site such as Bethsaida, pottery finds usually are not intact and require restoration but they are uncovered every day in every locus. They are the “nuts and bolts” of our material culture study, actually providing us with a window into the lives of the people that lived at a site. This is the most important lesson that we teach in different ways every day, from the moment that students begin working in the field log to the lectures in the evening. From the washing of the pottery find, the recording of each shard in the daily log, the designation of the find and its elevation on the site on the map grid, and the marking of location numbers of each shard in the lab, to the photographing and drawing of the piece, it is a full learning environment that involves many different skill sets that bring a student into encounters with multiple disciplines and faculty. At our afternoon “pottery readings,” we teach students how to “read” a piece of pottery like a text and how to distinguish every aspect of pottery production from elements used in the preparation of the clay to style changes and use-all crucial for dating a site since pottery types are so particular to time and place.

Limestone vessels and pottery become a major teaching opportunity, and the lessons go way beyond the standard archaeology classroom. Pottery seemed to us to be the place to actually engage the students in the larger questions of ethnicity and religion. Since purity laws are an important defining mark of a Jewish life, the discovery of white limestone vessel pieces and pottery types made from the clay and style of a rabbinic center of pottery in Galilee become enormously important. According to biblical and, especially, rabbinic texts, stone vessels are unlike pottery vessels in that they do not contract ritual impurity; therefore, basalt vessels and limestone vessels are seen as “Jewish.” Limestone vessels are particularly meaningful in this context; they are not easy to make and are impractical, breaking easily, so limestone ware “special” pieces at Bethsaida suggest a Jewish presence that cared about such matters. Daily ware pottery may also raise ritual purity issues. Our daily ware pottery finds suggest that a good proportion of these vessels were made at a well-known Galilean rabbinic site called Kefar Hanayya. If this is so, it would also suggest a Jewish rabbinic presence. We spend time in evening lectures discussing rabbinic texts and purity laws in the hopes that we can train students not only to “look” for subtle differences in pottery but to “see” the possibilities that even a minor discovery makes to scholarship. I often worry whether all of this work in the details of discovery makes students unable to see the larger perspective of “Ancient Judaism” in the midst of all of the details of pottery, architecture, coins, glass and metal studies, etc. I have not found this to be the case. In fact, I find that students can appreciate the larger questions even more by understanding how the collection process for data really does work. All of these experiences make field studies a unique learning environment.

In the past few years, planning for these expeditions has become more difficult as political and social conditions in the Middle East and Israel have become more complex. I have found that these complexities also provide important teaching and learning opportunities both before and after the expedition to the field is completed. One of the most significant additions I have made to the student assignments in field studies in archaeology has been the daily journal. Originally it was intended to mimic the site log and included excavation information, pottery readings, lab experiences, and lectures. Students are now told to record not only the scientific findings of every day at the site but also the experiences and learning opportunities that occur outside of the excavations. The moments of insight recorded in the student journals have convinced me that despite the complexities that field studies present, they are worth the effort that both students and faculty expend to make them successful.

Spotlight on Teaching Solicits Guest Editors and Articles

AAR members interested in guest editing an issue of Spotlight on Teaching are invited to submit the title of a theme focusing on teaching and learning in the study of religion, along with a succinct description (500 words) of the theme’s merit and significance, to Spotlight’s general editor, Tazim R. Kassam. In addition to issues devoted to specific themes, problems and settings, Spotlight on Teaching will also occasionally feature a variety of independent articles and essays critically reflecting on pedagogy and theory in the field of religion. Please send both types of submissions to:

Tazim R. Kassam, Editor
Spotlight on Teaching
Department of Religion
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13210
E-MAIL: tkassam@syr.edu
TEL: 1-315-443-5722