

AAR

IN THIS ISSUE

Teaching with Site Visits

Unexpected Learning
Opportunities of the Site
Visitii
Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

An Insider Perspective
from the Templeiii
P. Ravi Sarma

Site Visits and Epistemological
Diversity in the Study of
Religioniv
Jeffrey Carlson

The Nuts and Bolts
of Site Visitsv
Grace G. Burford

Native American Site Visits
in the Context of Service
Learningvi
Michael D. McNally

Site Visits to Synagogues .. .vii
Michael S. Berger

Site Visit to a Mosqueviii
Amir Hussain

Integrating Field Research
in the Introductory
Religion Courseix
Sheila E. McGinn

Integrating Site Visits in
the Pluralism Project at
Connecticut Collegex
Patrice C. Brodeur

Site Visits from a
Journalist's Perspectivexi
Gustav Niebuhr

Temples of Culture: Using
Museums for Site Visits .. .xii
Lisa Bellan-Boyer

The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Eugene V. Gallagher, Chair) sponsors *Spotlight on Teaching*. It appears twice each year in *Religious Studies News—AAR Edition* and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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TEACHING WITH Site Visits

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, Emory University
Guest Editor

From the Editor's Desk



Tazim R. Kassam
Spotlight on Teaching Editor

Ground: World Religions in America (1997), eloquently, vividly, and impressively document the transformation of the religious landscape of the U.S. Dotted across urban and rural America are places of worship, community centers, and cultural festivals that underscore the stunning fact that “the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth.” The implications of this are many, least of which is the need for enlightened mutual recognition, a prerequisite for civil society.

However, as the cartoon illustrates, understanding requires far more than just seeing. In a world saturated with images (still and moving) that function as the primary medium for the message, Marshall McLuhan’s prediction that “The future of the book is the blurb” is not far off the mark. Modern communication technologies have intensified the use of and (often exclusive) reliance upon the visual senses as a source of information. Ironically, while students may assume that reading a book or journal article is harder to do than watching a video or attending a religious festival, the rigors of checking facts and sources, analyzing multiple perspectives, assessing logic, and asking critical questions are intellectual tasks applicable to both. Hence, the training of perception and visual intelligence is a crucial part of developing students’ thinking skills. To rephrase the Chinese proverb: A picture’s not worth a thousand words unless one knows all them words!

“A picture’s not worth
a thousand words
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them words!”

The articles in this issue of *Spotlight* carefully examine the complexity of Site Visits (broadly defined) and the risks and opportunities involved in using them. Wide-ranging in scope, they address the practical nuts-and-bolts of organizing site visits as well as their pedagogical, ethical, and intellectual dimensions. Readers will learn why the contributors use site visits in their teaching; how they prepare their students for them and integrate them into course assignments; the types of challenges their students and hosts face during site visits; and alternatives or substitutes to site visits (for example, museums and Web sites). Embracing the opportunity to learn from the dynamic and multifaceted religious landscape of America, the articles also signal the pitfalls of mere sightseeing, and chart ways to making these encounters truly transformative and educational. ■

FORTUNATELY, the study of religion offers much occasion for humor. This issue on Site Visits, shaped and produced with the expert assistance of guest editor Joyce Flueckiger, reminds me of a cartoon I once stuck on my office door. In a dimly lit restaurant, family members are kneeling on the carpet around their table as diners look on astonished. A customer asks, “Religious ceremony?” Waiter replies, “Lost contact lens!” A delightful way to cast doubt on the WYSIWYG principle (what you see is what you get).

Diana Eck’s *A New Religious America* (2001) and the myriad projects she has undertaken under the Pluralism Project, including the CD-Rom *On Common*

Unexpected Learning Opportunities of the Site Visit

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, Emory University
Guest Editor



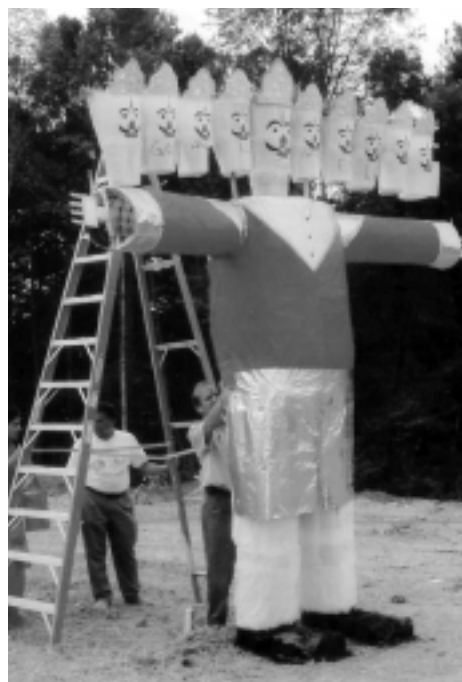
Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger is Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Director of Asian Studies, Emory University. She is the author of *Healing at the Crossroads: Sufi Practice, Gender, and Religious Identities at the Crossroads in South India* (forthcoming) and *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

FOR A SITE VISIT to be successful, it will have specific pedagogical goals, the students will prepare for what they will see, hear, and otherwise experience, and the experience will be integrated into class discussions rather than tacked on as an “extra” (touristic) activity. But fieldwork, of which the site visit is one genre, is serendipitous and often cannot be “contained” within the pedagogical parameters that we as professors might set. It is important for us to try to account for and address what students may learn that we may *not* have intended — some of these unexpected learnings are positive and others may have more subtly negative consequences. For example, in visiting sites that are new to them, students often reflect on and may question aspects of their own traditions. When the site visit presents and/or requires unfamiliar body language and position, students may learn about cultured, bodily ways of being in the world. They may learn as much about different modes of hospitality or child-raising as particular rituals or sacred texts. These are positive lessons, albeit unintended.

However, students may also consciously or unconsciously draw other conclusions from the site visit that we do not want them to or that may be unwarranted. They may make false generalizations about a religious tradition, or “religion” more generally, based on a single experience or series of experiences at one site. Or students may make unconscious conclusions about what kinds of sites and experiences are worthy of study at all. For example, for pragmatic reasons, site visits are usually made to public, institutional spaces of religious traditions, not domestic or private spaces of worship. As Karen McCarthy Brown has so passionately argued (2003), when students visit institutional spaces of religion, they may identify and limit the study of religion generally, or particular religious traditions more specifically, with those kinds of institutional spaces. Domestic practices of a tradition and/or entire religious traditions that take place outside of institutional spaces may be left out altogether from “what counts.” The site visit may also mask multiple religious affiliations of those worshippers whom students meet at a particular site.

Every site visit will generate different kinds of unexpected learning opportunities for different kinds of students. Here I will describe just a few (initially) unintended consequences of site visits to Hindu temples that my students and I have experienced over the last decade. First, however, let me describe very briefly what some of my pedagogical goals are in sending students to Hindu temples, how some of these goals have changed over the years because of the unexpected learnings I have witnessed in students, and the kinds of preparation I give my students before visiting the temple.

My primary pedagogical goal in the temple site visit has been to enable students to witness or experience the ritual of worshipping the deity through making offerings to his/her image/*murti*, i.e., *puja*. I also want students to experience the seeming informality and individuality of worship in Hindu temples. I encourage Hindu students to visit a temple that they do not regularly attend or whose traditions represent those of a different region than that from which the student’s parents come. Here the pedagogical purpose is to expose Indian-American Hindu students to the diversity of traditions within Hinduism. I prepare students for the temple site visit by discussing at length the *puja* ritual,



An effigy of the demon Ravana being burned outside the Hindu Temple of Atlanta during the Dasher festival, October 2003 (Photo courtesy of Joyce B. Flueckiger).

introducing key terminology of the ritual, showing slides of *puja* in a wide spectrum of contexts (home, temple, roadside shrine), and showing the Smithsonian video titled *Puja* (1996), which both shows *pujas* in India and the U.S. and gives commentary on the meanings of *puja* by both first- and second-generation Indians in the U.S. So, theoretically, students have been exposed to a wide range of *puja* practices and know that it is both a domestic and temple ritual.

A major challenge in teaching Hinduism in American universities, however, is the need to continually remind students of the rich diversity of Hindu traditions and to remind them that Hindu traditions they see or experience in the United States represent only a small segment of the vast spectrum of Hindu traditions. We need to

find ways to keep students from overgeneralizing about Hindu practices and communities based on a single site visit. We are fortunate in a large urban context like Atlanta to have several Hindu temples, and in any given class, small groups of students usually visit several different temples. After their fieldwork, members of each group report orally about their visits and we discuss the differences between the various temples. Hindu students often report the differences they see in the sites they have visited in Atlanta compared to their home temples elsewhere in the U.S. and those they have visited in India. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of ritual practices (including those of various regions, castes, and classes of India) that are *not* represented by the diversity of temples here in the U.S.

Single site visits may result in other generalizations that are not accurate. For example, students may conclude from their site visits that women have little participation in Hindu ritual practices as direct officiates, since temple rituals in the kinds of temples that are present in the U.S. are officiated by Brahmin men only. Students would not know of women’s prominence in domestic Hindu ritual life, including daily rituals at domestic *puja* shrines. On the other hand, women in temple commu-



“However, students may also consciously or unconsciously draw other conclusions from the site visit that we do not want them to or that may be unwarranted.”

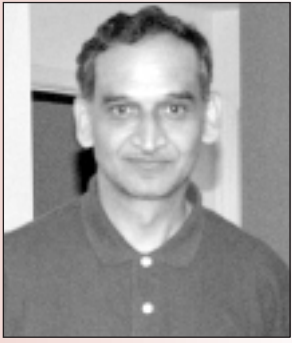
U.S., and temple communities, are continually shifting and more flexible than may meet the eye on a single visit. It is important to remind ourselves that religion is not static and thus what students observe in a single site visit needs to be contextualized in time and place, with a realization that institutions, communities, and individuals in those communities change. I myself was caught unaware by some shifts in the temple that many Emory students visit, shifts that I needed to know about when I gave suggestions to the class about appropriate behavior in the temple. I’ll tell the story here, as it brings up several general points about site visits, as well as illustrating the dynamism of religious sites to which we may send our students.

In telling my students what to expect in a site visit to a Hindu temple, I include a discussion of whether and how they can accept the food offered to a Hindu deity (*prasad*). For observant Jews and evangelical Christians, I explain that their own tradition may dictate that they should not accept *prasad*; but I also explain to them that, for the Hindus, the offering of *prasad* and its acceptance may mean something quite different from how some Jewish or Christian traditions have interpreted it. From a Hindu point of view, acceptance of *prasad* is not necessarily a theological statement of belief, but can simply be an acceptance of hospitality being offered by the priest. It is his duty to offer it. However, I assure my students, there are gracious ways to refuse *prasad*, including stepping back from the circle of those accepting it, gently indicating with one’s hands that one does not want to accept it (and I show them appropriate gestures, including a *namaste* hand gesture and shaking one’s head).

After having been abroad once in India for a year’s research, I began teaching a large “Introduction to Religion” class at Emory and sent members of the class to the Hindu Temple of Atlanta before I myself had had time to visit. I gave the explanation above about *prasad* and an explanation of how to “refuse *prasad*” that had always worked in earlier years. But several students returned from the temple visit and reported that my suggestions did not work. One student said with a rather trembling voice, “But Dr. Flueckiger, they made me take *prasad*.” The students said that they had gone to the back of the temple to step aside from the group being offered *prasad*, but that the priests had followed them to the back. This seemed uncharacteristic, but I understood what had happened when I myself went the next weekend with my children. We spent several hours at the temple, so there were several occasions when my children could have accepted *prasad*. By the end of the morning, they were no longer interested in

An Insider Perspective from the Temple

P. Ravi Sarma, Hindu Temple of Atlanta



P. Ravi Sarma is secretary of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta and one of its trustees. He is a medical oncologist with a private practice in Atlanta. Dr. Sarma is a leader in the Indian community and actively supports the arts as founder and current chair of the Indian American Scholarship Fund.

THE HINDU TEMPLE of Atlanta is a traditional South Indian temple, both in its architecture and in the liturgy of worship services conducted there. It has been operational since December 1990. Installation of *murthis* and their consecration was performed in

May 1992. The principal deity is Lord Venkateswara. However, the temple follows both Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions. In fact, a Siva temple has been constructed and the consecration ceremonies took place in May 2004.

The temple is very busy during the weekends. Even though Sunday is not particularly a sacred day in Hindu tradition, and there is no day of Sabbath in Hinduism, in most of the temples in Western countries, Sundays have become the days when most people come to worship. This is due to secular reasons of convenience and scheduling of activities around school-age children's curricular and extracurricular needs.

Over the years, the temple has welcomed many visitors, both Hindu and non-Hindu. Of particular note are the students and faculty from various institutions of higher learning, as well as groups from the various metropolitan Atlanta and Georgia churches. Students come because of a class assignment, usually in their religion class, South Asian studies course, or interfaith/intercultural studies course. Churches come to understand other religions, many times as fieldwork for their interfaith seminars. Recently the temple

was host to one of the meetings of the Metro Atlanta Interfaith Alliance. Often, speakers from the temple also visit churches and synagogues, by invitation, to talk about the Hindu faith and its traditions.

There are no restrictions that are specific to a non-Hindu. Everyone follows the same rules inside the temple. The temple priests are trained in the worship and service traditions of South India. They speak one or more of the South Indian languages. They do not have a very good command of English language. However, they do understand when someone speaks to them in English. In Hindu tradition, the temple priest is a functionary, rather than a minister or a pastor. They supervise and perform the temple rituals.

People visit the temple for *darshan*, that is, to see and be seen by God. The priest performs a *puja* (ritual during which offerings are made to God), generally emphasizing the glory of God and asking for forgiveness and blessings on behalf of the devotees. There is no sermon and there is no preaching. When a non-Hindu visits the temple, he or she will observe the *puja* and may be offered *prasad* (food or flowers offered to the deity and returned to worshippers as blessed) along with other devotees attend-

ing the worship service at that time. The priests are well aware that some people may not want to accept these offerings and they respect that decision. They are gradually learning to communicate in English and, as time goes on, they may be able to explain the meaning of the various rituals in English.

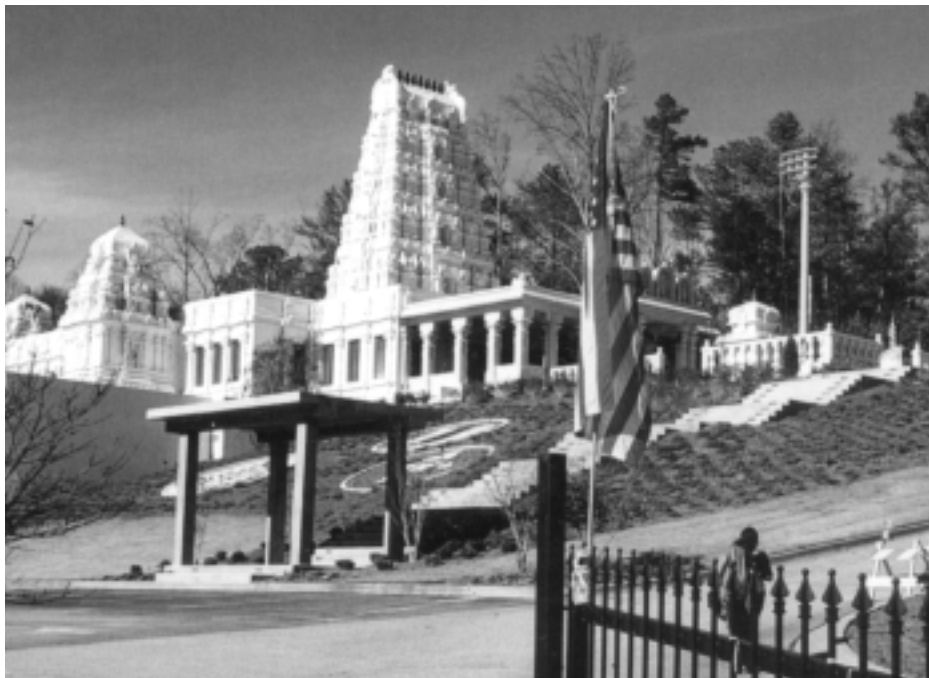
Given the intense interest in learning more about the temple and its traditions and practices, the executive committee and the education committee have decided to put together scheduled tours of the temple, when a trained volunteer will give a brief introduction and then take the visitors on a guided tour. Materials are being prepared for this project and volunteer training will take place in the near future. In the beginning, scheduled tours will be offered twice a month. Depending on the response and the need, they may be offered on a weekly basis. This will not preclude a visitor coming to the temple during regular hours to observe the happenings and talk with worshippers and priests informally.

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta has been trying to be truthful to the requirements of a traditional South Indian temple, while mindful of the needs of a community that is in a Western society. 🌺

the ritual activities and were playing at the back of the main temple room. And then I heard one of the priests call out to them, "Come, come; eat, eat." And I knew what had happened. In my year-long absence, the priests had learned minimal English — enough to know that the imperative in Telugu could be translated as "come, eat," but not enough to know that English imperatives do not have the connotation of invitation that they do in Telugu: "Won't you please come and eat?" We have since had many class discussions about cultured ways of asking and receiving *prasad*.

I have subsequently met with the temple priests to explain to them why someone might *not* want to accept *prasad*. I opened the discussion by asking the priests whether there had been any problems with Emory students visiting the temple. They did not report any and were anxious to convey that it was their duty to be hospitable to anyone who came to the temple. They were extremely interested in possible non-Hindu perceptions of *prasad*; my explanation of the students' refusal of *prasad* as being the equivalent of their refusal to eat meat (i.e., as an internal rule, rather than a judgment of those who eat meat) seemed to resonate with the priests. The chief priest ended the discussion by saying our students were welcome, and when they refuse *prasad*, he mentally blesses them anyhow.

Rather than taking classes as a group to Hindu temples, I have chosen to send students in small groups, encouraging Hindu students to offer to accompany some groups, or asking students to ask their own Hindu friends to accompany them. This enables students to have conversations with peers and practitioners, and I am not the primary interpreter of what they are seeing at the site. Students have often been invited to observe family rituals in the temples (such as baby-naming ceremonies) and each group reports back a range of narratives and experiences. However, not visiting the



Hindu Temple of Atlanta. The American flag was put up for a few months following September 11, 2001 (Photo courtesy of Joyce B. Flueckiger).

temple as a "class" has its own drawbacks. Students may not meet individuals with whom to speak, or may be too shy to do so. Sometimes Hindu practitioners have felt awkward in "speaking for their tradition," when they feel untrained. The Hindu Temple of Atlanta is talking about training volunteers to meet and interact with visitors. This would take away from the multiplicity of experiences and explanations the students receive through chance meetings they have with lay worshippers, but with more and more visitors from various universities in Atlanta coming to the temple, it would provide some structure for the temple community and would assure that students find someone with whom to speak.¹

Other positive unexpected learnings from site visits to Hindu temples can be listed more briefly, although they are equally significant. Many non-Hindu students report that watching devotees lying fully prostrate to a deity, being reminded to use their right hand only to accept *prasad*, learning to

keep their feet from pointing at the deities, and sitting on the floor for extended periods have all taught them about the cultured learnings of their own bodies. What their bodies are experiencing cannot be equated to that of the Hindu worshipper doing the same gesture, but the students are at least aware of their own bodies' knowing in different ways. I now directly address the issue of "how we know what we know," including through our bodies. Students are often amazed at the multisensory experience of the temple, which some of them find lacking in their own non-Hindu traditions. Although they have been told about the lack of formal communal service in the temple, many students are still surprised by the coming and going of worshippers, the low-level conversations among them, and the variety of individual devotional practices they witness. Many students are especially struck by the number of children running around the temple and the positive attitudes shown towards them.

Finally, students visiting temples here in Atlanta are almost uniformly impressed by the openness and hospitality with which they have been received. And we often speak in class of ways in which we can reciprocate this hospitality. It can rarely be direct (as it often is not in fieldwork in India), but students learn that reciprocity can take many forms, even if not the same form in which hospitality has been given. Sometimes the only reciprocity is listening and engaging in conversation; we sometimes send site visit reports back to those worshippers with whom students have exchanged e-mails. Emory has also invited community members to the university for India-related events, and has made space available for various community-sponsored events that are relevant to our curriculum and students.

While we give up control and bounded pedagogy when we send our students out into the community on site visits, such fieldwork has the potential to teach us in unpredictable ways and to change what and how we teach.

¹ One of the oldest "international" mosques in Atlanta, Al-Farooq Masjid, has requested that we send our students to the mosque at particular open houses held for non-Muslims, as students were often taking up space on Fridays that kept Muslims from prayer.

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Site Visits and Epistemological Diversity in the Study of Religion

Jeffrey Carlson, Dominican University



Jeffrey Carlson is Dean of the Rosary College of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Theology at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. He is co-author of *Jesús and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan* (Orbis Books, 1994) and has published on religious pluralism and teaching and learning in higher education.

IN SOME CURRICULA, “diversity” or “multiculturalism” is relegated to a single course on the so-called non-Western or “minority” communities in the United States. I would argue that a central and abiding curricular goal should be to move from episodic moments of diversity within the curriculum to an epistemology of diversity across the curriculum, wherein our challenge is to engage multiple perspectives (cultural, national, religious, ideological, methodological, etc.) in our courses and curricular design, and to develop effective strategies for teaching a diverse curriculum within a diverse learning community. Using site visits in the study of religion can become an important means of achieving this goal.

One context in which I have used site visits is a course I taught several times at DePaul University that began with a one-week “immersion” immediately preceding the official start of the academic term. The course was called “Sacred Spaces, Powerful Places.” It asked *how is it that some physical locations have deeper meanings than others — becoming symbolically powerful, sometimes “sacred,” in persons’ experiences?* Who comes to these spaces/places, who does not, and why? To explore these questions, we visited an array of places, including the Chicago Historical Society, the Indo-American Cultural Center, the Sousa Homeless Shelter, St. Sabina Catholic Church, the Cook County Department of Corrections, Division 10 (maximum security), the Baha’i House of Worship, Gillson Park, the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, a farmers market in the Richard J. Daley Center Plaza, the Chicago Board of Trade, the Chicago Loop Synagogue, and the North Park Village Nature Center. We reflected on the importance of place in a time of rootlessness, the role of memory and ritual, pilgrimage and worship, the stories of immigrants and the dispossessed, our craving for nature, the role of public spaces, and a host of other ways that people experience places as particularly significant. Each day of this immersion week, we began early in the classroom, explored sites in Chicago, and returned to the classroom in the early evening.

It is particularly important in such a course to devise strategies for relating classroom discussions and readings to the site visits. Too

often when we employ site visits in the study of religion, the danger is that the “experiential” is not brought into intentional and explicit relation with the “traditional” classroom work and reading. Disconnected “field trips” can become moments of hiatus from the course, rather than an expression of it (not unlike films shown in class, which may allow students to tune out). Ironically, many of our “experiential” courses may, in fact, exacerbate unwittingly the bifurcation between the classroom and the so-called “real world” — a bifurcation the instructor presumably hopes to overcome precisely by incorporating site visits. Students and faculty may have rich and rewarding experiences outside the classroom, but what, after all, do they have to do with the readings? Thus, it is imperative that we devise specific methods for bringing these realities into intentional, sustained, and mutually critical dialogue. Two principal methods have been effective in my own practice: first, to use prompts from yet-to-be-read texts prior to site visits; and second, to have students take digital photos at the sites, so that these can be revisited later and “reread” through the lenses of the course texts.

“The danger is that the ‘experiential’ is not brought into intentional and explicit relation with the ‘traditional’ classroom work and reading.”

In terms of the prompts

After the immersion week for “Sacred Spaces, Powerful Places,” students read, among other things, Winifred Gallagher’s book *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions*. In a classroom session before departure to a site, I presented students with brief introductions to some of Gallagher’s ideas, such as the importance of “nature” in contemporary urbanized society, and the importance of territorial symbols and “personal space.” Then, when students entered some of the sites mentioned above, or others I had used in previous years, such as the Lincoln Park Zoo, Graceland Cemetery, the Gurdwara Sahib of Chicago, the Harvey Islamic Center, or Niketown Chicago, they had some conceptual tools to bring into dialogue with their experiences.

Other “preunderstanding” prompts were selected and introduced from other readings, such as Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*; Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*; and Lucy R. Lippard’s *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. Tuan’s book raises questions about perception, scale, segmentation, spatial ethnocentrism, maps and power, visitor vs. native, explorer vs. settler, a critique of tourism, the relation of the visual to aesthetic distancing, dynamics of city/countryside/wilderness, the relation of notions of afterlife to environmental ideals, the vertical cosmos vs. horizontal land-



Gillson Park, Wilmette, August 2001 (Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Carlson).

scapes, and the changing meanings over time of “nature,” “landscape” and “scenery.” Lippard’s book explores, among others, notions of multicenteredness, displacement, gendered landscapes, immigration, hybridity, assimilation, deterritorialization, maps, the commodification of history, museums and decontextualization, feminist archaeology, homelessness, theme towns, recreational apartheid, urban vs. suburban parks, and yard art.

By providing prompts that introduce some of these concepts in the morning classroom time, during breaks in the day, and in the evening classroom session, I hoped to enable students to interpret the site visits, at least in part, through the readings they would consider in-depth later in the course. The bifurcation between text and experience was, I hope, lessened, and the experiences themselves deepened. We did not, however, allow these textual concepts to dominate our “readings” of the sites, and as a class we generated our own questions and observations. These observations were brought into an intentional dialogue with ideas from the texts we read. The resulting multiplicity of possible interpretations was itself an explicit manifestation of an epistemology of diversity.

In terms of the photos

At site visits, students took digital photos in order to attain a literal and metaphorical snapshot of significant facets of the experiences. I asked them to take photos of a person, place, object, or event they deemed worth noting at the time and, perhaps, worth remembering later. What makes one of these examples worth noting? In part, if it exemplifies, challenges, or extends some of the textual concepts already introduced, as well as the students’ own preunderstandings, some of which had also been voiced in class. At the end of each long day during the immersion week, these photos were loaded on a course Web site. Weeks later in the term, when we read books and discussed them in class, we revisited the photos and our field notes taken throughout the immersion week. In this way students interpreted the readings, at least in part, through the site visits, although we did not allow our photos, selective memories, and reconstructions of the site visits to dominate our “readings” of the texts.

One concrete way of using the photos is as the basis of more formal writing assignments. In such an assignment, students might be asked to (a) identify a theme about place from one of the books; (b) explain how the author might illustrate this particular theme through a concrete aspect of the immersion week, using at least one photograph from the week to aid in the student’s analysis; and (c) develop and defend the student’s own position on the specific theme under consideration, again, using a site photograph. Another similar assignment might ask students to imagine how Eliade, Tuan, Gallagher, and Lippard would engage in a dialogue with each other about the meaning of a site, again via the person, place, object, or event depicted in a particular photograph. Through these assignments, students learn to interrogate the “real world” through texts, and to interrogate texts through the “real world.” Site visits embody an epistemology of diversity and foster an enquiring habit of mind and heart worthy of the liberal and lifelong learner.

I have shared one worry about site visits already; namely, that they might exacerbate the bifurcation between the classroom and the so-called real world. Site visits might also embolden students to articulate negative stereotypes of the community they visit. Some non-Muslim students who, for example, have never been to a mosque might resist voicing anti-Muslim views, reasoning that “since I’ve never been there, I cannot comment.” Then they take a religion course somewhere, go to a mosque on a field trip, and have what they consider to be a “bad experience,” which reinforces their preexisting stereotype. Now, since they have in their own minds attained a kind of “credential,” they may feel unconstrained in voicing their previous stereotypes. In one sense, the limited, single-week “immersion” course I have been describing is particularly prone to this pitfall. One strategy to counter this negative potential is to anticipate and address potential negative stereotypes about the sites before visiting them. Another strategy could be to visit multiple sites from the same tradition, and/or the same site multiple times. Let me illustrate this in relation to another variation of this “single visit” problem.

See CARLSON p.xiv

The Nuts and Bolts of Site Visits

Grace G. Burford, Prescott College



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TEACH AT PRESCOTT COLLEGE, a private, four-year, liberal arts college in north-central Arizona that defines itself in terms of commitments to environmental concerns and to experiential, student-directed learning. The residential program enrolls 450–500 students, and employs approximately 40 full-time faculty members. Our typical class size, 10–14 students, is determined, in part, by the size of the vans we use for taking students out into the field. At Prescott College almost everyone uses site visits for teaching everything from ecology to playwriting, from rock climbing to economics. But before you dismiss my comments here as irrelevant to your teaching situation, note that I began teaching 20 years ago, and I mainly learned to use site visits in the far less supportive context of courses I taught at a private university, a state college, and a state university — before I came to Prescott seven years ago.

Reasons abound for *not* using site visits. They require a lot more work — planning and conducting a site visit involves much more time and effort than planning a lecture or class discussion, or showing a video, or inviting a guest speaker to come to class. They involve communicating with strangers; figuring out what relevant sites or events an entire class of undergraduates can visit, and how to do that appropriately to both the course and the site/event visited; arranging transportation; designing good assignments to get the most out of the visit; learning about appropriate behavior and other site-specific expectations; preparing the students; spending substantial time with students outside regular class meetings; and always following up, both with the students and with the people who made the visit possible.

Site visits expose us, our students, our institutions, and the religious individuals and groups we visit to risks that simply do not arise when we stay safely in our classrooms. Site visits — so much harder to control than classroom situations — can prove pedagogically scary, especially when we teach about a tradition outside our “comfort zones” of previous training and experience. The element of surprise such activities introduce often becomes a pedagogical good news-bad news scenario, as when a local expert says or does something we could never have predicted, much less said or done ourselves. In addition, like

the scientist running an experiment on nuclear particles, we must anticipate and take into account our own influence on the event we study, and — more like a psychologist than a nuclear scientist — we must consider the ethical issues inherent in our study of religious people. Finally, site visits take us out into the world, where we encounter unforeseen delays, often in vehicles with dubious safety records (e.g., 15-passenger vans) that use a lot of irreplaceable planetary resources.

In comparison, lectures, class discussions, videos, and guest speakers begin to look easier, safer, and cheaper — and certainly can be pedagogically effective. So why bother with site visits?

Site visits provide learning experiences that could never be achieved in the classroom. The very reason site visits pose greater risks than classroom activities — less control over what happens — provides a powerful

“Although this approach to a site visit requires that you temporarily let go of pedagogical control, you will resume the seat of authority soon enough.”

Theravada Buddhists. When I co-teach “Religion and Science” with a geologist, we spend two days at the Grand Canyon interweaving activities that introduce the students to how humans interact with the canyon religiously and scientifically. All of these site visits provide the participants in each class (faculty and students alike) shared experiences to draw on as these courses proceed.

I offer here a basic three-part model, and then some specific practical advice, for using site visits in religious studies courses.



Grace Burford with students enrolled in a “Religion and Science” class, at the Desert View Watchtower, Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona (Photo courtesy of Lou Abbott).

rationale for doing them. This element of unpredictability generates excitement and encourages the kind of active and interactive involvement that energizes a class not only during the site visit itself, but throughout the rest of the course. One colleague of mine takes her students to Mesa Verde National Park, where they sit in the middle of a large wildfire-burned area and the students make observations and argue about fire ecology. Another takes his “Image and Power in Mass Culture” students to Las Vegas to do “proletarian shopping,” and says this kind of hands-on experience “seals the enthusiasm” in a way that discussion from a distance can never accomplish. I take my “Studies in Buddhism” classes to the Thai temple west of Phoenix, where we spend two days and a night participating in a traditional seasonal celebration. The students take food to donate, learn how to dress and behave at a Buddhist temple, and chant, eat, and converse one-on-one with

First, before the site visit, choose and then discuss with the students one or two problems, or specific topics or questions, to focus on during the visit. Don’t worry that students will see only what they will look for specifically. But do know that if they do not look for some specific things, they will not discern much of anything. Second, during the site visit, collect data; this is what the visit itself is all about. This aspect of the site visit will go more smoothly if you have discussed with the students beforehand specific ways to collect useful data at the kind of site you will be visiting. Third, after the site visit, use the topic-focused data you collected. You can do this in many ways, such as through a formal written follow-up assignment, or a freewrite at the beginning of the next class, and/or a group discussion of the experience. However you do it, be sure to do it. If you omit this part, you might as well have stayed in the classroom.

Begin by incorporating one site visit into a course you have taught before. Do not expect it to be the best site visit ever. Every site visit contributes something, and you can build up and improve your repertoire at your own pace. If at all possible, personally reconnoiter the site you want to use, to assess how and to what degree it might enrich your course. I have broken this rule a few times without disaster, but doing so certainly ramps up the potential for surprise during the actual site visit.

Whenever possible, arrange to have someone else guide the students through the site visit, even if that site falls within your field of expertise. That way the students will interact with someone other than you, which gives them a different base of authority. Model the kind of open-minded enquiry you want the students to experience; dare to be a student yourself during the visit, but avoid dominating the experience with your questions. Although this approach to a site visit requires that you temporarily let go of pedagogical control, you will resume the seat of authority soon enough, and nothing someone else tells the students will permanently ruin their understanding of the subject at hand. Avoid taking the class somewhere just to look at or watch something; on-site interpretation, especially by a local expert — or, even better, by several such informants — reinforces the important difference between site visits and sightseeing. Once the course is under way, involve students in planning the specifics of the site visits as much as possible, especially if the trip will require meal preparation, since group eating always promotes group bonding. You will probably need the students’ involvement to schedule activities outside of regular class times anyway, so let them solve that type of difficulty as much as possible. They can also help with carpool planning, and can effectively critique each other’s proper clothing and behavior before the trip.

Last fall I took a group of world religions students to the Scottsdale Islamic Community Center (mosque), as part of our study of Islam. I first arranged with the Islamic Speakers Bureau for a speaker (Dilara) to meet us there on a mutually available day, and then reserved a Prescott College van. On the morning of the trip, the students appeared, sleepy but dressed appropriately (per our previous discussions in class), each having typed up two questions concerning our focal themes (modernization, gender roles, interreligious relations) to ask at the mosque, and carrying notebooks and pens, lunches, water, some money for unforeseen needs, and head scarves (women only).

Road construction in Phoenix delayed our arrival, but we were still able to meet for an hour with Dilara before the midday prayer service. Dilara discussed Islam, answered some of the students’ questions, and taught

See **BURFORD** p.xiv

Native American Site Visits in the Context of Service Learning

Michael D. McNally, Carleton College



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SITE VISITS are crucial to my aims in my courses on Native American religious traditions, but not site visits in isolation. They fit my pedagogical purposes insofar as they are elements of academic service-learning projects that give students more reason to be at the sites than their education alone. In this brief consideration of my experience at Carleton, a rural, liberal-arts college town one hour's drive from Minneapolis/St. Paul, I will outline how I understand academic service learning and the rewards and challenges of site visits to Native American community centers in the Twin Cities and on northern reservations. Even for readers not contemplating the service-learning component, what follows can be helpful in thinking through the pedagogical aims, practical challenges, and rewards of site visits for courses on Native traditions.

Service-Learning Courses in Native Traditions

Educators use various working definitions of academic service learning; for my purposes, service learning involves some measure of commitment to community service at the behest of Native community organizations, and structured reflection on that service experience such that it becomes integrated into the core learning of the course. It is the structured reflection that quickens such experiences, making them more than simply supplementary to the course.

I have used community service and structured reflection on it with considerable success in two courses over three years. In "Native American Religious and Cultural Freedom," an upper-level course that explores the historical, legal, and cultural contexts in which Native Americans have practiced their religions within the U.S., students engage in service projects generating public scholarship by researching pending claims to sacred lands, free exercise, and treaty rights (www.pluralism.org/affiliates/mcnally/index.php). Here, though, I will focus on my introductory "Native American Religions" course, which aims to appreciate how religious traditions have served the region's Lakota and Ojibwe communities in their efforts to live well in the context of colonization and dispossession. The course tries to confront stereotypes and to think reflexively about the category of "religion" as applied to what

Native people describe as "ways of life." I use service learning for at least three related reasons discussed in greater length elsewhere (McNally, forthcoming). The first is consonant with a distinctive Ojibwe pedagogy as I came to know it through the direction of my teacher, the late activist and poet Larry Cloud Morgan, and a group of elders on the White Earth Reservation. In part because of its rooting in an oral tradition, and in part because of its community orientation, Ojibwe tradition emphatically weds the transmission of cultural to communal responsibility. While

"way of life" to the label of "religion," and while this is something of a truism as applied to the devout of any tradition, it makes particular sense to indigenous people (Martin 1999). What is more, Ojibwe people are broadly vigilant in maintaining that cultural and religious knowledge belong to the oral tradition and not to the fixed text with its perceived attendant orthodoxies. Although term-long service-learning projects hardly create sustained, deep encounters with oral traditions, the very gesture can equip students with a critical purchase on the authority of the

1978, Deloria 1988). While I strive in my course designs, book selections, and lecture outlines to interrupt the dehumanizing way that many dominant representations of "real Indians" (along the lines of *Dances with Wolves*) obscure the realities of contemporary Native peoples' lives in the context of colonization and racism, such efforts amount to little in comparison with what's experientially possible in service learning. In these contexts, students encounter firsthand both the harsh economic, social, and physiological realities of Native life, as well as the artful ways that religious traditions inform, empower, and beautify lives lived amid such realities.

In short, my goal through service learning is to take my students' interest in Native spirituality that is often as heartfelt as it is misguided, to immerse it briefly through service into the lived realities of Native communities, and, thus politicized, to redirect and reshape student interest through structured reflection on the shape and contemporary vitality of Native American religions.

Site Visits in the Context of Service Learning

Translating such lofty theoretical aims into practice is hard work, with admittedly varying and often unpredictable success; but what does result is often refreshingly more real and consequential. Students bring varying levels of commitment and energy to the class, so I require a good faith effort towards at least ten hours of service per semester, and offer richer possibilities for service to the many students who want more. For a class of 30, I prearrange five to six service-learning projects, one or two of which involve connecting with Native communities through the Web and campus education/organizing (e.g., the Gwich'in Steering Committee's efforts on behalf of the Alaska Native Wildlife Refuge). Most students, however, want to make a deeper commitment to projects that involve site visits. These have included:

- White Earth Land Recovery Project (White Earth Reservation, MN), where students traveled six hours for a three-day combination of field labor and helping out with an antiracism rally in a community adjacent to the reservation.
- Waadookadaading Ojibwe-Language Immersion Charter School (Hayward, WI), where students assembled computer books with Ojibwe texts to integrate the computer stations into the Ojibwe-language world of the immersion classroom.
- "Feast for the Dead" (Minneapolis Indian Center), where students spent a long day setting up, serving, and taking down a feast to the urban Indian community, following a pipe ceremony and an All Soul's mass led by Dakota and Ojibwe elders and a Catholic priest.



Carleton College students engage in a service-learning project with an elder on the board of the White Earth Land Recovery Project on Minnesota's White Earth Indian Reservation (Photos courtesy of Theresa Engel).

there is nothing anti-intellectual about Ojibwe pedagogy, there is a conviction patterned in teacher-student relationships that cultural knowledge must be earned by students committed to use the knowledge for the betterment of the community. Student service-learning projects are by no means grand, but the admittedly small gestures can reorient a student's learning accordingly.

Second, service learning helps close the marked distance between much of the "book knowledge" on Native religions and the contextual realities to which Native religions have ministered in actuality. Ojibwe people broadly resist reducing their

books and lectures they're encountering in the classroom — and vice versa.

Third, and perhaps most important, experiences with real Native communities and their very real needs are crucial because learning about Native American religious traditions involves as much unlearning as learning. Many students come to these traditions with images of and desires for "noble savagery," and in particular for Native American "spirituality." As cultural historians have shown, these images, projections, and desires run so deep in both popular and intellectual culture that they often go unrecognized by even the most critical thinkers among us (Berkhofer

Site Visits to Synagogues

Michael S. Berger, Emory University



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ONE OF THE MANY challenges of modern religious studies in Western universities and colleges is the breathtaking diversity of the phenomena we try to help our students understand. No matter how much we qualify, nuance, or shade our descriptions and analyses, the very format of the semester or quarter course forces us, and therefore our students, to simplify, generalize, conflate, and reduce the realities of religious thought and practice. Site visits can, therefore, not only vividly bring to life what we must frequently flatly describe in the classroom; they can also render the reality “messier” than the more simplified impression students receive from readings and class presentations.

My course “Modernization of Judaism” exposes students to the emergence of denominations in Judaism since the Emancipation of the Jews in the 19th century. This process of denominationalism, which began in Europe and accelerated in the United States from the 1840s to the present, was in many cases driven by ideological debates as to how Judaism should best adapt to the modern period. Part of the Jews’ assimilation over the last two centuries often meant adopting the Western cultural norm of religion “happening” in the house of worship; indeed, many of the initial changes to traditional practice involved synagogue practice, and so I want students to see (or notice) these changes and to link them back to their ideological underpinnings. For instance, the direction the cantor faces, the amount of Hebrew in the service, or the subject of the sermon are often easily related to what the students have been studying. This understandably requires placing the site visit in the syllabus after we have covered sufficient material about each American denomination, which is usually *after* the midterm. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to include a site visit (I require attendance at Friday night or preferably Saturday morning services, as that is when most congregations hold services). Students are encouraged to attach to their reports any materials that might be distributed at the synagogue — flyers about upcoming events, homiletical messages, or other writings — and to discuss these handouts in relationship to what we have been studying.

Timing the site visit halfway through the

semester has the added advantage of allowing students to think for several weeks about Jewish traditions as they are presented in historical and ethnographic texts — only to discover that many people in the pews do not conform to the students’ expectations. These discrepancies can often only be ascertained through actual conversations with congregants. This personal interaction is probably the most challenging part of site visits. I realize not every student can do this, so I simply set out for them what makes a site-visit report an “A,” one criterion of which is conversations with congregants. Conversations are made easier if students visit the synagogues either alone or in very small groups. I encourage them to strike up conversation with congregants by asking them for assistance and by sticking around after services for some questions and answers. To be honest, in the ten years I have been living in Atlanta, this has become easier because more Jews are either familiar with me or are acquainted with this assignment, and so I now tell students to mention that they are there for Professor Berger’s course, and most often, the conversation begins immediately.

As responsible neighbors, we must prepare our students to act appropriately on site visits. In most cases, this means alerting students to the sensibilities of congregants of particular denominations. Thus, I tell students that if they attend an Orthodox congregation, they should be aware of the modest dress code and should avoid writing or using tape recorders during the Sabbath, when Orthodox Jews forbid such activities. Students should be informed of the general structure of what they will see, and the length of services. I have had students who allotted only an hour for a synagogue visit and therefore did not really see the bulk of the service, which lasted over two hours. While I have found serendipity to be a good thing about site visits — sometimes students “stumble” into a bar mitzvah or special weekend for a congregation — I do suggest students call up a congregation in advance to ascertain the time services begin, precise directions on how to get there, and any other information that might help them act respectfully. As more congregations in the last five years have set up Web sites, I encourage students to check these out for information about the synagogue.

One phenomenon that I have encountered and have had to address is students’ preconceptions about the various Jewish denominations. Courses like “Modernization of Judaism” tend to attract many Jewish students who are either eager to learn more about their own heritage, or feel (mistakenly!) that this course will be easy because they attended Hebrew school and are likely familiar with the material. Given the large number of Jewish students at Emory College, usually more than half the students registered for this course are Jewish. I have also found that many non-Jews have attended the bar or bat mitzvah celebrations of Jewish friends, and thus they, too, have prior notions of Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism. I therefore ask that students attend services at a congregation of a denomination they have not visited before, so that they are able to observe with fewer preconceptions. There is usually little resistance to this, but on one occasion it presented a difficulty when an Orthodox Jewish student

told me her rabbi had prohibited her from attending non-Orthodox services. In this case, I asked her to attend an ultra-Orthodox (Hasidic) congregation that she had not attended in the past, and to read up on the differences between Hasidism and non-Hasidic Orthodoxy. However, this, too, proved difficult, as there were not many women at that congregation, and the student did not feel comfortable conversing with the men, given that in Hasidic society, men and women do not generally mingle.

Although students begin to make their site visits after midterm exams, I encourage them not to begin writing their reports until I have covered more material in the course. (We finish up to World War II by midterm and then spend the rest of the semester inspecting developments in the denominations over the last 60 years.) In this way, they are more sensitive to a variety of subjects that are primarily results of more recent trends. For instance, noticing synagogue architecture requires a deeper understanding of the functions of a synagogue and habits of attendance in order to interpret the building’s design properly. Thus, in the 1950s synagogues began adding education wings to their facilities, as houses of worship were also seen to be the place for teaching the children Judaism after public school. More significantly, the move of many Jews to suburbia in mid-century required two major adaptations: the addition of large parking lots, and the construction of sanctuaries whose capacity could be “extended” for the increased attendance on the High Holy Days. This is something most students would not likely notice on their own, and so I point it out to them in a class session specifically on the mid-century trends, and ask that they observe this in their site visits, or think back to what they saw when they visited.

Because I have several pedagogical intentions for site visits, I give students a list of standard informational questions they need to answer regarding their visit. I then ask them to recount aspects of the service that they found to be consistent ideologically within the denomination, as well as details of the service or conversation that they

thought were not in keeping with their understanding of that particular denomination. I ask them to offer an explanation of the inconsistencies they found.

I devote one class session to reporting on and discussion of these site visits. Student reactions vary. Given the student population at Emory, many students have never been to an Orthodox service, and with the proximity of several Orthodox congregations to campus, a large number of students attend these services. Understandably, non-Jews find visiting Orthodox services, where the entire service is lengthy and in Hebrew, an overwhelming challenge, and some even leave after just a few minutes. In some cases, the entire experience depends on the first people they encounter at the synagogue. If the congregants they meet are gracious and welcoming, it is usually a positive experience that they remember for a long time; if the experience is negative, students may be left with a bitter taste in their mouth. Students may also take their experience of the site visit and have it overwhelm all other data. For example, one time some of my students who attended a sparsely attended Reform service predicted the movement’s demise, based on that single morning’s attendance. It is important to mention to the class that site visits are only one experience with one congregation, and often with only a few congregants; they must be careful not to generalize about an entire denomination or all its members simply from one encounter with that form of Judaism.

The site visit is a powerful pedagogical tool that I have refined over time and learned to use more wisely. It can be a healthy corrective to generalizations and stereotypes about Jewish traditions, but it should not be presented as the most authentic source of knowledge. Instructors help students most by placing the site visit in the syllabus at an appropriate time, structuring what students should look for, preparing them to avoid embarrassment, and finally, giving them time to process and even hear other experiences, so that the site visit does not overwhelm what they learn from the rest of the course. ■



The sanctuary at Temple Emmanuel, University Heights, Ohio, November 2000 (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).

Site Visit to a Mosque

Amir Hussain, California State University, Northridge



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MANY OF US COME to the site visit through the “back door,” so to speak; that is, through necessity or contingency rather than through conscious pedagogical choice. For example, when I moved to Northridge from Toronto in 1997, I was preassigned a teaching schedule for my first semester, since the schedule had to be printed before I was hired. The time given to my Islam course was Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 12:00 to 12:50 PM. Normally, this would be a good time slot for an upper-division course. However, many observant Muslims could not take this class, as it conflicted with the time for the Friday afternoon congregational prayer. To try and accommodate them, I arranged site visits to the local mosque on Fridays as part of the course. I may not have chosen to include site visits that first semester had the circumstances of the timing of the course been different.

I had first been involved in site visits a few years earlier as a teaching assistant to a world religions class at the University of Toronto, conducted magisterially by Peter Beyer. It was a large course, divided into several tutorial groups, and each of us assistants would take our groups on a couple of site visits (mine were to a Taoist temple). In that course, Peter did all the work making arrangements. I simply had to show up with the students at the appropriate time and place. Now at Northridge, teaching my own courses, it was my turn to do the work.

With time to plan ahead, including timings for courses, there are many mundane and not-so-mundane issues that need to be carefully thought through. One must decide ahead of time not only where the class will visit, but what the students will examine when they get there and why, and whether they will be encouraged to participate or observe. That first semester, I brought students to the mosque on two successive Fridays. In order to do this, I exposed my Southern California students to another novel tradition: the car pool, which allowed people (like me) who did not own a car to get a ride to the mosque, about two miles away. We got to the mosque before the rush of people coming for the Friday prayers. This allowed me a few minutes to point out some of its basic features. Those Muslim students who wanted to pray were then excused from the trip and allowed to pray. In this particular mosque there are separate rooms, on the same level, for men and women to pray. I stayed with the male students in the male area, while a Muslim female student accompanied female students to the women’s area. We stayed for the prayer and for part of the *khutba* (sermon, which was given in English) before it was time to leave. The second Friday, I participated in the prayer and allowed the students to observe on their own. For these two visits, I did not ask the students to write anything about their experiences, but we did discuss them in class the following Mondays.

The dynamics of site visits will change according to whether or not the person leading the students is a member of the community. When I went to the Taoist temple, for example, it was my first visit to such a site. However, because I am a Muslim as well as someone who teaches courses on Islam, things were somewhat easier for me, I suspect, when I took classes to the mosque. I knew the mosque closest to my university, had prayed there, and had met the *Imam*. I did not need to rely on an informant, for I could explain to my students what they were witnessing when they watched the Friday prayer.

Site visits raise many ethical and legal issues. After my initial site visits to the mosque, I discovered that I had violated my university’s policies by not getting the appropriate clearances from my department

“For some years into the future, post-9/11, visits to mosques will, for the non-Muslim students, have a different ‘feeling’ than visits to, say, Taoist temples or Catholic monasteries.”

chair and college dean for a class to meet off-campus. That’s just one of the many issues associated with a site visit to a mosque. First, make sure you know the appropriate rules and regulations at your university. Sometimes there are institutional “risk management” issues with field trips. Second, you need to locate a mosque, make contact with the *Imam*, and get permission to bring visitors. Third, you need to decide when you want to attend. Do you want to show students a mosque that might be empty? Do you want to show a mosque at a time when few people are praying? Do you want to take students for the Friday afternoon prayer when the mosque is full? Some mosques may, in fact, discourage visitors on Fridays and instead ask that visitors attend a mosque open house. This, of course, gives a very different “feel” to the site visit. Fourth, as with any site visit, you need to work out the logistics as to how you will get students to and from the site, and what you expect them to do while they are there.

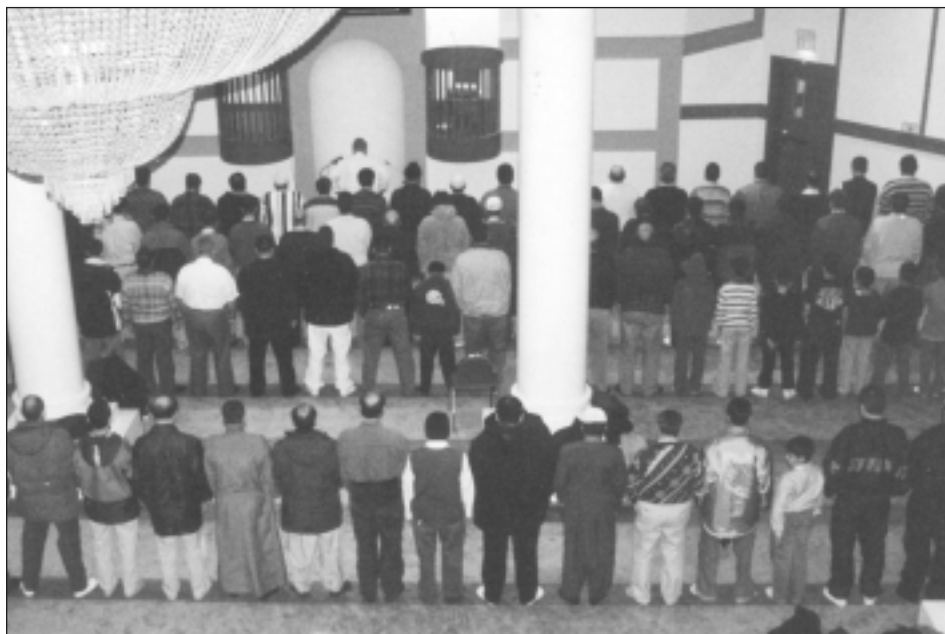
Finally, you need to be aware of gender issues. Is this the rare mosque that is female-friendly? Where are the spaces for women and men? Will women be asked to go to a basement level and hear the *Imam* via a speaker, thereby giving male and female students very different experiences? Are students wearing appropriate clothing (long sleeves and head scarves for women, no shorts, etc.) for that mosque? In none of my site visits have female students expressed any problems with head covering, however some female students may refuse to do this. At my first site visit, the only problem related to clothing was when a male student wore a t-shirt with explicit words and a photograph promoting a trash metal band. Although he put on jeans that were not ripped, the student simply forgot about his t-shirt. Fortunately, one of the other students had a spare shirt that he loaned to this student so he could visit without incident. Since then, I have always brought a few plain t-shirts “just in case.”

Background information, such as local political contexts and controversies, can add unexpected richness to a visit. In later visits, I brought students to the same mosque referred to above, but this time primarily to show them the architecture. I had learned that there had been local opposition to the construction of the Islamic Center of Granada Hills. When it was finally built, it was not allowed to look like a “traditional” mosque with a dome and/or minarets, due to neighborhood opposition. In an August 2000 article on this mosque in the *Los Angeles Times*, Margaret Ramirez wrote, “A building permit was granted, but with 44 restrictions, the most conditions ever placed on a house of worship in the San Fernando Valley. In addition to the neighborhood concerns about traffic and parking, city officials pressured the Islamic Center to build the mosque without the traditional Islamic dome and insisted on a Spanish-style structure to fit the Granada Hills neighborhood.

That design was publicly lamented by then-mayor Tom Bradley, who accused the City Council of religious intolerance.”

This, of course, raises a basic question. Why do we want our students to visit a mosque, or any other Islamic site? After the horrors of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, some instructors took students to mosques to show them what “happens” in a mosque. This was necessary, they thought, to counter the voices of hate and ignorance about Muslim lives that were reported in the American media. And many mosques in the months after September 11 hosted open houses in the hope of relieving the fears of those who were concerned about a Muslim presence in their neighborhood. Ironically enough, the mosque that I visit is only blocks away from the North Valley Jewish Community Center, which in August 1999 was the location of a widely publicized hate-crime shooting where a white supremacist killed one person, injured five others, and forced the evacuation of children and staff.

For some years into the future, post-9/11, visits to mosques will, for the non-Muslim students, have a different “feeling” than visits to, say, Taoist temples or Catholic monasteries by non-Taoists and non-Catholics. Mosques will be more than exotic; there will be special questions and fears that shade expectations and perceptions. For example, some students have asked me, “Will I be put on a government watch list for going to a mosque?” and “Will the sermon be anti-American?” Perhaps the instructor will want to bring those feelings out in the classroom before and after the visits. Also, because of all the media exposure, much of it “positive,” students may think that they know more about Islam and Muslims than about other religions, although many of these preconceptions may be faulty. Local hosts at mosques may also be more tempted than usual to engage in apologetics. At the mosque that I visit, the host community has been delighted with the student attendance, and genuinely pleased that non-Muslims want to learn more about Islam. With sufficient forethought, all these factors can be used to engender insightful discussion back in the classroom. ■



The beginning of Friday prayer at Cleveland’s Grand Mosque, Parma, Ohio (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).

Integrating Field Research in the Introductory Religion Course

Sheila E. McGinn, John Carroll University



Sheila E. McGinn is Professor of Biblical Studies and Early Christianity at John Carroll University. Her publications include *The Montanist Oracles*, *The Acts of Thecla*, *studies of Paul's letter to the Romans*, a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, and a bibliography of 20th-century research into the Book of Revelation.

I have used field research as an integral part of my "Introduction to Religious Studies" course for over a decade. Three students are in each research group, and the project includes several components, with at least one site visit. The description of the assignment is as follows:

Field Research Project:

Student groups engage in a three-part Field Research Project on one of the five major world religions, focusing either on an unfamiliar religious tradition or an unfamiliar ethnic community within their own religious tradition. The three parts include:

1. Library research regarding the tradition's beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices
2. Observation of a religious ritual in that tradition
3. At least one interview with a minister or other leader of this religious community regarding the tradition's beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices and how they are related to one another.

As an optional extracredit activity, the

group may participate in four hours of community service (not proselytizing nor "outreach") with this religious community.

The group writes a three-part Field Research Report. As co-authors of the report, each group member is expected to have input on each section of the report and to make corrections to each other's work where necessary. The three parts of the report include:

1. A research paper outlining the tradition's beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices
2. A descriptive analysis of the religious ritual the group observed
3. A transcript of the interview with the religious leader.

If the group chooses to include the community service component, the write-up must include both journal entries contemporaneous with the activity and a reflective essay analyzing how this particular community service activity illustrates (or goes counter to) the beliefs and ethics of the religious community.

At the conclusion of the project, the research group gives a 20–25 minute class presentation that includes: (1) a basic survey of the tradition's central beliefs, ethics, and ritual practices; and (2) an interactive demonstration of one key ritual and exposition of what key beliefs and ethical values it conveys. Both components must actively involve the class in the presentation, and the ritual demonstration in particular should appeal to as many of the senses as possible; use of authentic dress, music, and foods is encouraged.

Class presentations are graded both by the instructor and by the students. The group is assigned an overall project grade for the written work, itemized according to each component of the field research report; group members then decide together how to allocate the points awarded for the project.

Students visit the site at least once to gather the data to write a "verbatim" (i.e., descriptive) analysis of the ritual space and

of a particular religious ceremony. The directions for the verbatim analysis are as follows:

Constructing a Verbatim Report:

Part I: Observation

1. Prepare yourself mentally, emotionally, and physically for your observation. Ensure that you will be able to be alert and attentive to the situation, not distracted by physical needs. Practice taking note of your own emotional responses without getting caught up in them. Remember that your goal for the observation is to report as completely and accurately as possible the details of the event. Be sure to arrive at the site early enough to have time to take notes about the physical surroundings for the event you are observing.
2. Begin your observation notes before the actual event by describing the background of the event. Note where it will take place, who will be involved, when, what you know of its purpose, etc. If it is permitted, I recommend taking photographs of the setting and of the activities before, during, and after the event. The photos provide helpful reminders of details you may not have had time to jot down during the event. If you plan to take photographs during the ceremony itself, use high speed film (ASA 400 or higher) or a low lux digital camera, so you will not need a flash.
3. During the event and immediately following, write as complete and accurate a description of the event as you can. Include every factor you see as relevant, while omitting extraneous ones.

“The ritual demonstration in particular should appeal to as many of the senses as possible; use of authentic dress, music, and foods is encouraged.”

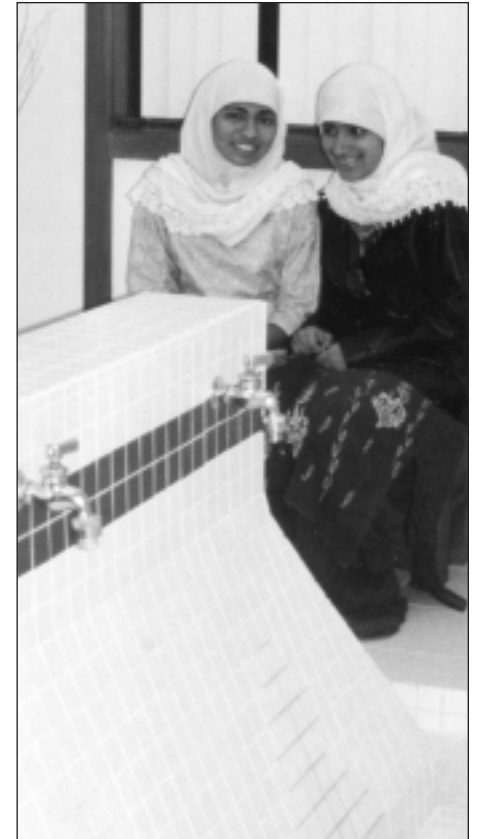
Include descriptions of:

- a. The architectural features of the site or building
- b. Physical arrangements, colors, and ornamentation of any furnishings
- c. Leaders and participants in the event (their sex, age, dress, location, speech, actions)
- d. What the ritual means to the participants you are observing
- e. Whatever else you think is of importance.

Part II: Analysis, Reflection & Evaluation

Analysis: As soon as possible after the event, even while you or your group are/is still on the way home, begin your analysis of the event.

1. What actions, persons, places, and things seemed to you to be the most important? Why? (E.g., they occupied more time, had a more prominent physical location, etc.) Did the participants you consulted agree with your assessment?



Facilities for ablutions before prayer, Cleveland's Grand Mosque, November 2000 (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).

2. What actions, persons, places, and things seemed to you to be the least important, or even superfluous? Why? (E.g., they occupied more time, had a more prominent physical location, etc.) Did the participants you consulted agree with your assessment?
3. What connections do you see between specific verbal and ritual "moments" or aspects of this event?

4. What connections do you see among the various ritual actions?
5. Outline the basic "ritual process" for this event.

Reflection:

6. What signs can you identify in this ritual? What key symbols can you identify?
7. What does each of these signs and symbols mean/convey?
8. What kind of ritual is this? Why would you classify it this way?
9. What does this ritual teach (e.g., about human nature, the divine, the natural world, the assembly of believers)? How does your reflection compare and contrast with what the participants said it means?
10. How (i.e., by what means) does this ritual event convey a sense of the meaning of life to its participants? What is the meaning it conveys? How does your view compare and contrast with what the participants said it means?



Communion during Sunday Mass at Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, December 2000 (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).

Integrating Site Visits in the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College

Patrice C. Brodeur, Connecticut College



Patrice C. Brodeur is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College. His academic interests include contemporary Islam and globalization, the academic and applied study of religion, and the role of interreligious dialogue in the promotion of democracy and pluralism.

This essay describes and analyzes two pedagogical usages of site visits as part of the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College (PPCC), an integrated teaching, research, and service project affiliated with the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. PPHU has begun to map the new religious landscape of the United States at the turn of the 21st century, with particular focus initially on the newer Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities. PPCC has contributed towards the larger Pluralism Project in two ways: by articulating an integrated methodology, at the heart of which lies the use of site visits, and by using a more inclusive approach to the contemporary religious landscape of New London, possible because of its small population concentrated within five square miles. In an effort to include a broader religious diversity, PPCC extended into the neighboring towns of Groton (where the only local mosque is now located), Waterford (where the second largest synagogue is located), and Middletown (where the only Hindu temple in Connecticut is located). Site visits were central to PPCC's two phases of development over the last five years (1999–2004): they were first incorporated into "Religion 101" courses and then made integral to an advanced course entitled "Religions in New London."

The Introductory Religion Course

Although site visits had been used at one time in Connecticut College's introductory "Religion 101" course, they had been dropped by the time of my arrival in 1998. Site visits were reintroduced the second semester I team-taught the course with my departmental colleague Lindsey Harlan. Our aims were not only pedagogical, that is, to introduce students to a religious community of their choice so as to bring alive the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic historical and contemporary descriptive information about contemporary religious communities in New London.

The site visits assignment included attending two consecutive weekly services at one of over 40 different religious communities in New London. Due to the large size of this class (over 80 students), each student was assigned to a group of four students and each group was assigned to a specific site. Multiple class site visits over the course of the semester created a sense of equality between students, because everyone experienced at least once a visit to a religious community radically different from their own, if they had any. For example, an American Muslim student brought up locally had never visited a church, nor had most of her nonreligious, agnostic, Christian, or Jewish classmates visited a mosque.

The first year, students covered half of New London's religious communities. Over the next two semesters, all religious sites in New London were covered, as well as several others in neighboring towns. To consolidate the collected research information, each group was given a binder that was clearly labeled by number and site name. This binder included several items: four copies of a one-page description of PPCC on letterhead; one leaflet about PPHU; six sets of PPHU's basic survey questions (one to keep blank, one to be filled out by each member of the group, and one to give back to me with a compilation of the group's answers); the two-sided American Anthropology Association ethnography code of ethics; and eight blank sheets for note-taking during the visit. Each binder was to be returned within one month, and

one class session was devoted to discussing the results of the students' research. This discussion revealed the diversity of sites and experiences the students encountered within only one small town such as New London.

“Within the academic study of religion, insider/outsider questions are literally embodied, rather than simply intellectualized, when conducting a site visit.”

The next academic year, I coordinated the PPCC site visits segment of the "Religion 101" course (taught by other colleagues). Although these site visits were different in destination, their tasks were the same as the previous year. After the spring 2000 semester, I gathered the results of the three collections of data and created the PPCC Web site (oak.conncoll.edu/%7Eppcc/), with descriptions of the 40+ New London-area religious communities. The public availability of this Web site has provided a useful service not only to the religious communities of New London but to other agencies too, public and private, answering their needs to communicate with part or all of these religious communities for one reason or another — for example, from zoning to health to education. It has also helped the Connecticut College Office of Religious and Spiritual Life strengthen its links with a broader spectrum of religious communities. The first phase of the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College was thus completed within two years.

The Advanced Undergraduate Research Seminar

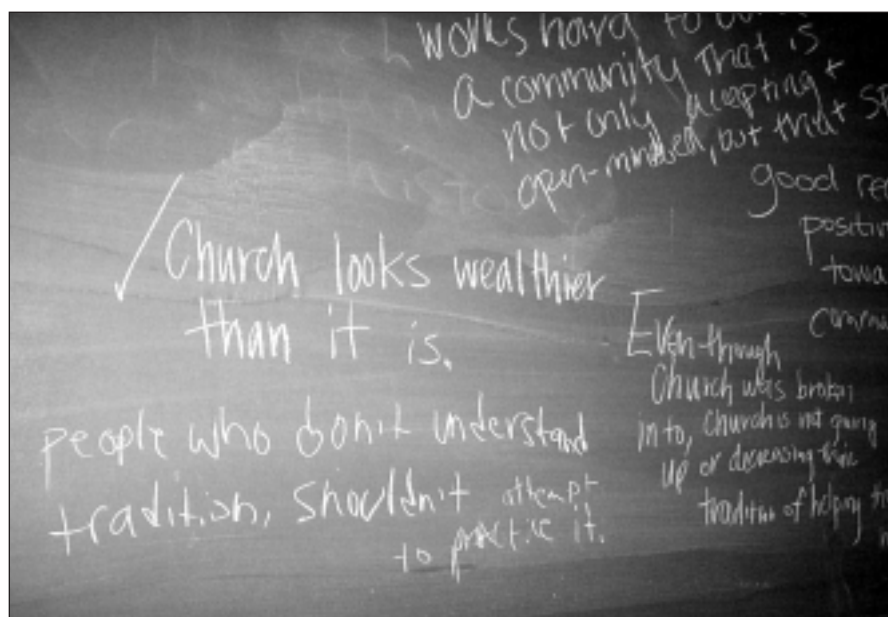
The second PPCC phase also aimed to integrate research, teaching, and service, this time through the creation of a 300-level interdisciplinary research seminar entitled "Religions in New London." The course has focused on service learning, the ethnographic approach to site visits, and active learning created through a tangible research agenda. The PPCC site visits of "Religions in New London" took on new dimensions after September 11, 2001, the second time I taught this course. The service-learning approach initially used in the fall 1999 semester suddenly became of immediate practical purpose two years later. After September 11, my students and I chose to investigate one single question: How do the events of September 11, 2001, affect your community? We explored six religious communities and compared site visit results in a public academic conference held in late December 2001.¹ One unexpected post-September 11 finding from our site visits that year was that the few small, lower-class, evangelical African-American and Latino religious communities did not seem to be affected by the terrorist events. This gap clearly raised questions about the nature of American identity across the spectrum of this small sample of six very different New London religious communities.

Two years later, the third edition of "Religions in New London" included a completely new goal: to map the religious diversity of nine religious communities in New London using the powerful GIS (Geographical Information Systems) software that allows for a two-dimensional visual representation of different kinds of data. After sociological census data (income, language, and race/ethnic distribution) had been downloaded to the GIS New London map prior to the beginning of the course, the students' first-week assignment was to map the religious diversity of New London from the PPCC Web site data. The next week, from this new GIS map combining different layers of data, the students were able to deduce two important conclusions: first, older communities were closer to the old historical section of the city, despite the changing nature of that section of town over the centuries; second, African-American and recent Latino immigrant communities were found almost exclusively in poorer neighborhoods. This quick demonstration of the power of GIS to help us interpret data launched a discussion of what was important to learn about religious diversity in New London. This helped hook the students psychologically to GIS despite its many later challenges. Because of its steep learning curve, I recommend practicing teaching with site visits several times before adding a GIS component: then the use of site visits as a research tool to input religious data into GIS format is not only possible but highly useful to help complement missing information from U.S. census data, for example.

In addition to GIS, three other aspects of the use of site visits in this advanced research seminar are worth discussing for potential adaptation in a broader variety of religious studies courses: the degree of faculty and student identity self-disclosure, the organization and choice of site visits, and the class vs. team site visit methodology.

Within the academic study of religion, insider/outsider questions are literally embodied, rather than simply intellectualized, when conducting a site visit. The students and teacher must learn to what degree they want to disclose their own subjectivities, by way of religious and ideological identities in particular, prior to, during, and upon return from site visits. The degree to which this self-disclosure is carried out on the part of the teacher influences how comfortable the students will be with their own degree of self-disclosure. For example, I used my own set of identities to exemplify several identity construction processes and the politics of identity at play in site visits.

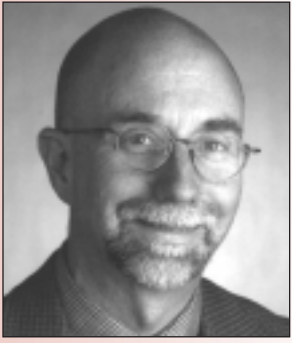
Site visits in which the entire class went every week were selected based on four pedagogical criteria: student familiarity (making the familiar unfamiliar before introducing the more minority traditions); chronology (oldest to most recent communities); size (largest to smallest); and geography (closest to furthest away). Team site visits — that is, where the students had a choice — were guided by three principles: history, diversity, and progressive acquisition. The principle of history refers to



Student reflections upon return from a site visit to a Roman Catholic church, New London, Connecticut (Photo courtesy of Patrice Brodeur).

Site Visits from a Journalist's Perspective

Gustav Niebuhr, Syracuse University



Gustav Niebuhr is Associate Professor of Religion and Media in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University. His acclaimed coverage of American religion has appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He is working on a book about religious pluralism and interfaith relations in America.

On a spring day nearly a decade ago, I paid a visit to a small religious community that lived on a wooded property several miles up an undulating dirt road in the Ozarks. Two rather serious-looking young men met me as I emerged from my car and, with a minimum of small talk, escorted me to meet the group's patriarch. The interview focused mostly on the community's unique beliefs: that people of Northern European ancestry primarily comprised biblical Israel's true heirs, and that apocalyptic events lay in store for the United States. At one point, he suggested that someone had the community under surveillance; not long before, he said, a "black helicopter" had been spotted hovering low overhead. Local law enforcement officials later told me they knew nothing about this. But it had been an exceptionally violent month in that particular region. Four weeks earlier, Timothy McVeigh had bombed the Oklahoma City federal building. The same day, the state of Arkansas had executed a white supremacist for the murder of a state trooper.

I cite this experience not for its details, which still strike me as exotic as I read through my report of that visit, but rather because its essential elements typify my work as a journalist, which involved visiting religious sites around the country. Before I came to Syracuse University in January 2004, I spent much of the previous 20 years working as a newspaper journalist, covering religion in America in all its great diversity. From 1994 until the end of

2001, I worked for the *New York Times* and, prior to that, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Visiting religious sites was an important part of my job. I was expected to interpret for a general audience the varied forms religion takes in the United States. My visits were not random, but occurred after my editors and I agreed that the places and people I would see had value as "news" — such as, if a community were engaged in some legal or political issue, or if the site in question represented part of a major trend. Often, as in my visit to the group in the Ozarks, I had a relatively short time to gather information at the site itself. But there were times when I had the luxury of a longer visit, such that I could return to the site over the course of two, three, or more days, asking follow-up questions, noting details I had missed, and gathering printed material to read in the off-hours.

I write this essay as I prepare to teach a course on religious pluralism. I expect to include visits with my students to local houses of worship. My journalistic experiences ought to prove useful, but I expect to make changes in my approach, as I will note below.

One practice I will certainly retain is calling ahead before visiting a site. As a journalist, I found it far better to establish a cursory relationship with the primary person or people I wanted to interview before I arrived. Rarely, I believed, would I gain anything by taking someone by surprise. I recall trying it once in 1988 and found it unproductive, to say the least. At a minimum, not making contact in advance runs the risk of wasting time, since one ends up negotiating to arrange interviews at the scene.

The articles I wrote always required some description of the site itself, as well as the activities carried out there, written to be accessible to a general reader. But I rarely thought my own observations ought to stand alone. I relied on the people I encountered to interpret from their own experience the spiritual dimensions of the place and to describe the value of the activities occurring there. Once, at the *Times*, I proposed a series of stories on the rise of evangelical Protestant megachurches, which typically attract upwards of 2,000 people a week to services. I wrote three stories, which focused on the clergy, the congregations, the activities within those churches, and the organizational ideas that fostered their growth. My editors asked the *Times* lead architecture critic to write a fourth story, describing the physical styles of



The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya was initiated in 1988 and consecrated in August of 2001 (Photo courtesy of Shambhala Mountain Center).

some of these new buildings. Our stories complemented one another. [Gustav Niebuhr, "Where Religion Gets a Big Dose of Shopping Mall Culture," *New York Times*, April 16, 1995, p. 1; "The Minister as Marketer: Learning from Business," *New York Times*, April 18, 1995, p. 1; "Protestantism Shifts Toward a New Model of How 'Church' Is Done," *New York Times*, April 29, 1995, p. 12; and Paul Goldberger, "The Gospel of Church Architecture, Revised," *New York Times*, April 20, 1995, Section C, p. 1.]

But otherwise, I worked on my own and tended to be most interested in how people experienced a given site. This required me to give their words a standing equal to my own observations. In August 2001, when I attended the consecration of an imposing Buddhist *stupa* in an alpine meadow tucked among the high peaks of the Colorado Rockies, I wanted to include as many voices as I could, while bearing in mind I would be describing a structure utterly unfamiliar to most *Times* readers. The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya contained the ashes of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan exile who had spent two decades teaching in the West, during which time he founded Naropa University in Boulder. Despite the site's remoteness, two hours' drive west of Fort Collins, the ten-day event had a richly cosmopolitan feel, with 2,000 people attending, some from as far away as Britain and India. The ceremony stood as a rite of passage for Tibetan Buddhism in the United States, in its emergence as an established faith, and this, too, had to be noted. What follows is a brief passage from my story:

For some, the stupa symbolizes a new stage in Buddhism's American development. "It seems to me," said Judith Simmer-Brown, chairwoman of Naropa's religious studies department, "in the 70s, Buddhism was more of a sect." But by creating such monuments, she said, "we're moving into a culture and a civilization." A stupa is a traditional monument, and in this form is a highly stylized rendering of the Buddha seated in meditation. "A stupa represents the heart of the Buddha," said Zurmang Gharwang Rinpoche of Sikkim, India, who was among more than 50 monks who traveled to the consecration from Asia. "That means," he said, "when you're close to the stupa, you're close to the Buddha." (Gustav Niebuhr, "Towering Buddhist Shrine Is Consecrated in the Rockies," *New York Times*, August 20, 2001, 12.)

I spent two days at the consecration and thus had the opportunity to look carefully at the structure, to check my initial notes, and to make new ones. More typical was the experience I had seven weeks later — post-9/11 — when I paid a nearly spur-of-the-moment visit to a tiny mosque in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I was one of several *Times* reporters dispatched around the country to write about military communities on the eve of soldiers' deployment to Afghanistan, and I had just finished spending a week outside of Fort Bragg. The mosque I visited, housed in a small, neatly kept building, was called the Masjid Omar ibn Sayyid. It served a largely African-American community. That several of those who attended were either soldiers or army veterans struck me as the sort of information *Times* readers might not expect, especially given the widespread cultural unease about Islam itself that was so evident that autumn. My visit was of necessity short, as I was expected to file a story by late afternoon. I attended Friday prayers and interviewed the *Imam*, along with four or five other men who had come by (there were hardly any women present that Friday). Given the 700-word limit I faced that day, I had to be very selective in what I could include. But in addition to quoting from the sermon, including comments from individual Muslims about their relationship to the army and their thoughts on the coming war, I wanted to include at least one physical detail I thought salient — that the mosque's lobby contained a table stacked with copies of an American Muslim newspaper bearing the headline "G-d Bless America." It also seemed relevant to understanding this particular mosque's identity to mention that it had been named after an American figure, a North Carolina slave who wrote an autobiographical letter in 1831 describing his upbringing as a Muslim in West Africa.

When I teach my upcoming course on religious pluralism, I expect to make considerable adjustments in my approach to visiting religious sites. I will certainly want to step back from the central role I've had to take as a journalist. I want to encourage my students to make their own observations and to ask the questions they believe most necessary to understanding the places we visit. Rather than being the arbiter of what available information about a site is presented to a wider audience, I look forward to a more collaborative experience of discovery and learning. ❧



The Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche and His Holiness Penor Rinpoche performing the Consecration Ceremony with a Flower Garland which is connected to the Stupa and all of its statues (Photo courtesy of Shambhala Mountain Center).

Temples of Culture: Using Museums for Site Visits

Lisa Bellan-Boyer, Hudson County Community College



Lisa Bellan-Boyer is an Adjunct Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies at Hudson County Community College, consultant for the Art Gallery at the American Bible Society and the Newark Museum, and a volunteer chaplain at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of New York.

Visitor surveys frequently reveal that people regard museums as something like a church. When asked if a museum is like a list of other institutions (church/temple, school, university, department store, library, etc.) more people answer “church” than any other choice. This is a particularly interesting phenomenon for the joint fields of religious studies and museum studies.

Though frequently underutilized, museums are an excellent resource for religious studies pedagogy. They steward dazzling and exciting collections, have their own educational mission, and provide a secular “safety zone” for learning about religious traditions that might otherwise be inaccessible, for geographic or ideological reasons, to many students. They are also able to offer a framing, historical perspective that is unlikely to be as fully developed in an active religious site, with perhaps some notable exceptions.

Some religious institutions are also museums, such as the California Spanish missions, which are chapels as well as National Park sites. For example, the three-century-old Trinity/St. Paul’s Episcopal parish in Lower Manhattan has been a place where history, religion, and civic life have interacted since the time of George Washington. It received renewed significance as a civic and religious landmark after surviving the World Trade Center collapse, when it served as a respite center for workers at the site.

Virtually every museum of any size has an education and public programs department. In the ’80s, this became a growth area for museum development — grants could be obtained for education departments when they were not available for other museum programs and conservation agendas. Consequently, larger museums offer off-site as well as on-site programs, such as Internet resources, in-class teaching aids, curriculum support kits, museum staff that travel for classroom presentations and workshops, and, as in the case of the Newark Museum, a collection of objects and artifacts of museum quality available for institutional loan — enough offerings to thoroughly debunk the false notion that if the school cannot afford field trips, then museums are not useful to them.

Every school, college, and university, no matter how remotely located, can make use of museum Web sites and off-line resources of museum education departments all over the world. They should not neglect to utilize these vast free or low-cost resources. Local schools and public libraries can help play a

vital role in this partnership. Incorporating the riches of the art world into curriculum planning is not so much a matter of creating new systems as it is of more intelligent and strategic use of resources that are waiting to be utilized. Nearly every city and town has museums, historic sites, and/or National and State Park systems in their region. In these settings, religious studies classes can find experiential introductions to the effect of religious ideas on architecture and of visual culture on societies in different historical periods and cultural contexts.

The resources of museums work best for religious studies courses when used to expand and augment student experiences with actual worshipping communities. They allow students to understand something about the visual culture and practice of faith traditions, giving them a wider set of tools for observing modern adaptations of tradition in active, contemporary com-



Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University, Atlanta (Photo courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum).

munities. Viewing museum exhibits is an excellent way to prepare for a site visit to an actual house of worship.

Having seen Chola-period bronzes of Shiva from a museum, students are more apt to notice miniature versions in store windows, restaurant niches, or at the local *mandir* (temple) on a site visit. Museums can often teach and interpret symbolism with a wider and more comparative perspective than that which is given by interpreters from a single-faith community on a single site visit. When students experience more than one kind of explanation for a symbol or an artifact, it helps them understand that symbols evolve with shifting historical, political, and cultural contexts.

Students often get excited about reading about a subject after they see, hear, smell, and feel a place that relates to that subject. Drawing on recent examples from a “Religions of the West” course I taught this past spring, after visiting New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage, students made statements such as “It seemed as if ‘the Jewish Tradition’ section of our textbook had come to life.” An African-American male from an urban working-class background wrote in his site visit report, “My time there became more than a detached academic viewing and became more of a human experience.”

“Museums can often teach and interpret symbolism with a wider and more comparative perspective than that which is given by interpreters from a single-faith community on a single site visit.”

Perhaps one of the most important resources the museum offers to religious studies is a safe space for dialogue — providing representations of the sacred in spaces that are framed as secular. This is a challenge for museum exhibit designers, planners, and educators, in that they must simultaneously present the topic with integrity for believers, neutrality for non-

believers, and breathing space for that lively population of people who say they are “spiritual but not religious.”

In 2001 and 2002, the Newark Museum’s African Art Galleries featured the temporary exhibit “Faces of Worship: A Yoruba God in Two Worlds.” This exhibit displayed altars to the *orisha* (deity) Shango, in Yoruba traditions of Nigeria, Brazil, Trinidad, and modern-day New Jersey/New York. The opening reception included John Mason, a Yoruba diviner and priest of Obatala, offering prayers and pouring a libation to honor the ancestors. The exhibits were authentic enough that devotees felt it appropriate to pray and leave money offerings at the altars. At the same time, Evangelical Christians were able to observe and learn from the exhibits with much less opprobrium than they likely could have if taken to a Yoruba ceremony outside the secularized “border zone” of the museum walls. Further, the museum’s historical focus on the African diaspora provided a perspective on Shango not likely to be as fully developed in any single practicing community. Contextualized history contributed to creating a “safe space” to learn about Yoruba practices for students outside the traditions.

Museums are often places where students

feel free to ask questions about a religious practice they might feel inhibited asking in the presence of believing hosts at a religious site. This helps the task of encouraging student analysis and critical thinking. Some students who do not feel comfortable in the worship space of another religion can make the acquaintance of other traditions — and the ethics and traditions of tolerance — through a museum visit. From an ethnic Roman Catholic background that had shaped him to say that “the Jews killed Jesus,” one of my students chose to visit the Museum of Jewish Heritage, rather than visit a synagogue service, because he wanted to “avoid compromises with religion.” He reported after his visit that “anti-Semitism does not look very attractive after viewing the many relics and exhibits there.”

While museums are frequently experienced by students as “safer” than houses of worship, they also can be frightening and traumatic. Several students in the class reported that the exhibit floor of the Museum of Jewish Heritage focusing on the Nazi period made them feel that they were in a haunted space. After visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one student, an immigrant from Ecuador, thanked me because he had only ever been to one museum in his life: Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum. He had been quite worried about going into another museum, since that first experience had frightened him and given him nightmares. Religious studies teachers can perform a valuable reciprocal service to museums, introducing them to the uninitiated as an important and enriching part of civic and community life.

Another student, a young woman of Cuban background, reacted negatively to the Cloisters, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s landmark building. Located in Manhattan’s Fort Tryon Park, the Cloisters are constructed of European architectural elements dating from the 12th to the 15th centuries, and house gardens featuring period horticulture and the bulk of the Met’s collection of Medieval and Gothic art and artifacts. The student said, “It was like a ‘Chamber of Horrors!’ — dark and dank, and all the artwork had blood in it.” When asked to talk more about her experience, she mentioned that she was there alone on a rainy, dreary day, which heightened this impression. Asked to identify something she liked, she mentioned that she thought the Unicorn Tapestries were beautiful, and wondered why the people in the tapestries wanted to kill the unicorn. This became an opportunity to discuss symbolism in allegories of Christ. She later went back to the Cloisters on a brighter, sunny day.

Museums do have some shortcomings as alternate site visit options. Like textbooks, exhibition labels and brochures from a museum often must omit important information, due to practical constraints of accessibility for gallery visitors. Museum curators and educators who have expertise in their specializations can sometimes be deficient in their religious studies knowledge. They may make errors with regard to the diversity of denominational traditions and historical developments, or incorrectly use terms with rather precise religious definitions, such as “sect” or “sacrament.” Museum staff can be unaware of current understandings in religious studies about gender dynamics in religious history and culture. Even major museums are subject to these pitfalls. In the 1999 Gustav Moreau

exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a label next to one of his fabled paintings of Salome stated that “the New Testament describes Salome as a seductive femme fatale.”

And although the museum field has done much to culturally diversify exhibit materials and programs, the legacy of colonialism can still be discerned in the halls of many an institution. I regularly ask my students to consider why there are Halls of Native American, African, and Asian Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History, complete with sacred objects and religious artifacts from those cultures, yet there is no Hall of European Peoples, treating them with the same ethnographic, anthropological hand. Coordination of museum resources with educational opportunities and building collaborative networks between museum professionals and religious studies educators would be helpful to both fields, and to the evermore diverse public that they serve.

Despite these pitfalls and drawbacks, visit-

ing a museum exhibit offers the potential to bring out the fullness of human experience for students. The “shadow side” of cultural history can find a teachable focus, fostering empathy and critical questioning. At the same time, a people known by outsiders for being oppressed and persecuted can be seen in another light, in terms of ingenuity, humor, and resilience. After going through the Museum of Jewish Heritage, a student wrote, “Now I can understand and appreciate the traditions and celebrations as well as their major tragedies, and this is uplifting.”

Students who are familiar with the history of their own people’s oppression may be jolted into an awareness that this has not been solely their own people’s lot. I revel in hearing the exclamatory question “Why didn’t they teach us any of this history in high school?” This is the power of empathy, in all its pain and glory, a quality of experience that introduces students into the wider human community. 🌱



Tibetan Buddhist Altar, consecrated by His Holiness, the XIV Dalai Lama (Photo Courtesy of the Newark Museum).

MCNALLY, from p.vi

- Anishinaabe Academy, a Minneapolis magnet school focused around Native cultures, where students committed to three hours of classroom assistance for each of eight weeks.

As most readers should appreciate, exchanges between Native communities and scholars and the institutions of higher learning that employ them are charged with long histories of exploitation of power inequalities (Miheuah 1998). I don’t propose that modest service learning does much to address these inequities, but it does importantly reconfigure misguided expectations about who has what and how much to teach and to learn. I make arrangements for these projects based on relationships and trust I have developed over many years. I clarify the modest nature of the service that my students will offer and acknowledge that I don’t wish to burden already understaffed, overworked people with another group of outsiders to “train in.” I think it is crucial to place students with community leaders who are conversant with the students’ collegiate world, but it is also crucial to surround my students with Native community people whose distinctive cultural idioms challenge students to think differently about the world. Finally, I emphatically do not accompany the students in their work to mediate their experience for them. This has had the refreshing result of giving students a truer sense of critical purchase on my authority, course texts, and classroom priorities. My logistical workload is particularly heavy in the first four weeks of the course; I can’t make precise commitments to Native organizations, raise money, or make all arrangements until I know who my students are and how far their interest and commitment will carry. This is important, given that this process involves placing faith not only with my friends and contacts in the Native community, but more challengingly still, placing faith in my students to comport themselves with respect.

Structured Reflection Is the Key

Without structured reflection, field experiences alone do not generate articulate experience sufficient to transform learning in the course. Carleton’s location ensures that groups have at least an hour in vans to process their experience, and I am convinced

“Without structured reflection, field experiences alone do not generate articulate experience sufficient to transform learning in the course.”

this alone does as much to begin the process of structured reflection as anything formally stipulated by me, no doubt justifying the considerable expense of such trips — usually about \$2,000 for a 30-student course, generously supported by Carleton. Student journaling can be helpful, but in my view that process encourages students to do their reflection in their own heads, without benefit of dialogue. For this reason, I structure reflection through formal group presentations and integrative take-home final essays that prompt students to reflect on the connections and disconnections between service-learning experiences and books, films, lectures, and visits from the course. Increasingly, I have come to appreciate the stipulated office-hour discussions with each student midway through the service or the week following a visit. It is here I can best help students identify frustrations — typically that they aren’t finding or haven’t found enough “Native religion” in their experience — and convert those frustrations into learning moments about their deep-seated preconceptions, or about the ways that Native “religion” has been nowhere and everywhere at once.

Trusting in Seeds and Reaping the Rewards

Not all students emerge as changed as I would hope by service learning and site visits. For some, there are simply too many other priorities in a term to delve deeply into this kind of work. For others, projects only confirm what remains for them the vast and disappointing distance between the Native people they meet and the “pristine” spiritualities they’d hoped to find. But for others, such jarring experiences succeed in reorienting them in ways that gratify me deeply when I hear them articulated in classroom presentations and final integrative essays. There was the physics major (whose photographs appear here) who was so moved by her service at White Earth and encounters with an elder there that she has committed to a year of Jesuit Volunteer Corps, to teach science on a Montana

reservation. There were the students who worked through considerable frustration that they were getting too little exposure to Ojibwe “culture” in a magnet school preoccupied with meeting the basic needs of pupils with the city’s highest concentration of poverty, and who extended their commitment to weekly classroom assistance for another six months.

Then there were the students who took a stroll outside the Minneapolis American Indian Center during a break in their work for the Feast for the Dead. A Native man who was sleeping on the ground outside the center arose to confront them, asserting they had no business being there “on Indian land.” Some were admittedly concerned for their safety, but when one student assured the man they were volunteering to help out with a feast and ceremony honoring the previous year’s dead, he tearfully confessed that he had been drinking out of loneliness after his mother’s recent death and asked them to go in and “say hello to her” for him. One could hear a pin drop as the group told this story in their class presentation. Their expectations for an authentic “Native American ceremony” were interrupted by the harsh realities of the street. They spoke with an awakened sense of urgency of how they had learned that most of the year’s deaths memorialized in the ceremony had been violent, including a victim of fatal police brutality.

I suspect that this final story sheds light on how service learning can address one presenting problem we perhaps share in religious studies: how to arrange visits to places of other peoples’ ceremony that are meaningful for students and respectful of the practitioners. In the case of visits to Native American sites, added to the customary risk of voyeuristic academic tourism in the spiritual field of the “other” is the risk of posing as pilgrims seeking the presumed authenticity of “Native American spirituality.” Service learning does not resolve the challenge of simultaneously try-

ing to respect the very boundaries we often wish to cross for the purposes of learning. It doesn’t guarantee students will be more than academic tourists or less than needy pilgrims. But service learning’s modest discipline and structured reflection, in my experience, helps students earn their keep, emboldens them to participate when invited and where appropriate, and promotes a view of Native religions that is not divorced from the realities of Native ways of living. In this, it has proved worth the risks.

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www.pluralism.org/affiliates/mcnally/index.php 🌱

MCGINN, from p.ix

- 11. In what ways did you, as an observer, find this ritual meaningful? In what ways did you find it lacking?
- 12. What did this observation teach you about your own beliefs (about human nature, the divine, the community of believers, etc.)?

Evaluation:

As a group, evaluate your observation according to the following four criteria:

- 1. What were the objectives you had set for this observation, and to what degree did you accomplish each of them?
- 2. Do you think your observation strategy was an appropriate one? How might you adapt this strategy to make the observation more effective/efficient?
- 3. Did all of the group members fully participate in this observation? How might you improve the group dynamic?
- 4. What questions did this observation raise for further research or discussion?

Each group analyzes not only the site,

but also their own group dynamics. I do early, midway, and summative assessments of the group work, based on assessment forms from CECAT (Collective Effort Classroom Assessment Technique), by Charles Walker and Thomas Angelo. Members of the group assess themselves and one another. In a concluding evaluation session, they discuss how to allocate the group grade among the various members of the group (based on value of contribution, amount of effort, etc.). Barring any unusual and extenuating circumstances, I use their figures for allocating the project points among the various group members.

The final course evaluation asks specific questions about the value of the field research project. One initially surprising result of site visits was that students overwhelmingly responded that the field research reduced their prejudice toward “other” people, particularly people of other religious traditions and ethnic backgrounds. I have not yet tested for a prejudice-reduction effect in a systematic way, to check the validity of these self-report data, but it seems safe to say that site visits at least have the potential to break down religious and ethnic prejudice in a way that the typical in-class readings and assignments do not. ♣

BURFORD, from p.v

us how to do the prayers. As usual, prior to this visit I had reminded the students that I expected them to learn how to do all of the practices we would be taught there, but that whether they actually did them was up to each of them to decide. On this occasion, the male students joined the other men up front, the female students and I joined the women in the back, and we all participated in the prayers. After the prayer service, Dilara showed us around the mosque. Despite the fact that our delayed arrival at the mosque shortened our site visit considerably, the experience proved pedagogically worthwhile. In the site-visit response-essays they wrote for the following class meeting, and in subsequent class discussions, the students recounted and incorporated in our study of Islam specific points of practice and belief that they learned at the mosque, many of which they would never have read in an academic book on Islam or learned from me. In addition, these students — many of whom were taking their first religion course — demonstrated notable sophistication in their reflections on the experience itself. Several raised thoughtful questions about the influence of our presence on the activities we went there to study. Others brought up the possibility of commodification or exploitation of a religious tradition through site visits, and we discussed how to avoid this potential pitfall.

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:

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CARLSON, from p.iv

A frequent scenario is the uncritical, romantic “yes” students sometimes express when they visit a site for the first time. Once my class and I visited a Japanese Zen center. Most of the students were enamored with “the mystical East,” speaking openly about the profound “spiritual presence” they felt they encountered. However, on the walk to the elevated train to take us back to campus, two of the students were shaking their heads, grumbling among themselves. I asked these two recent immigrants from Vietnam why they were so troubled, and they replied, “That’s not real Buddhism.” As we talked, a possibility emerged: Later in the week we would be nearby another temple, one these two students themselves frequented. They knew the monk personally and volunteered to contact him and to arrange for us to visit. It meant shifting a few things and having a shorter lunch break/discussion time that day, but we went. It was indeed a very different experience than our earlier one at the Zen center. The class came to appreciate the diversity of “Buddhism.” Furthermore, they realized that two sites did not exhaust this diversity. The two Buddhist students helped teach and exemplify, again, an epistemology of diversity wherein multiple perspectives might be discerned and engaged, even as these two students experienced in a new way the diversity of their own tradition. As Jonathan Z. Smith has put it, in the classroom, “nothing must stand alone.... [E]very item encountered ... [must] have a conversation partner, so that each may have, or be made to have, an argument with another in order that students may negotiate difference, evaluate, compare, and make judgments” (Smith 1988, 735). The same holds true for courses using site visits.



Gurdwara Sahib, Chicago, August 1999 (Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Carlson).

Integration of site visits in the study of religion can foster and exemplify an epistemology of diversity, wherein the critical and integrative thinker is one who learns enough to be able to consider multiple views, multiple approaches to a problem, and multiple applications of a theory or concept; to adjudicate between them in a deliberate and reflective manner; and to develop a coherent, informed, and ethically responsible vision.

References:

Smith, Jonathan Z. “‘Narratives into Problems’: The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 727–739. ♣

BRODEUR, from p.x

the need to include at least two of the oldest New London religious communities in order to ensure that the students take history seriously in their search for understanding contemporary religious life. The principle of diversity calls for the need to select site visits that collectively reflect the diversity of the religious life of New London. The principle of progressive acquisition means that, because students progressively acquire their ethnographic skills through firsthand experience in the class site visits before they embark on their own team site visits, their choices cannot be finalized until the end of the first third of the course.

This first third of the seminar focused exclusively on teaching students how to distinguish between description, analysis, and interpretation, the three sections into which I divided the blackboard after returning from each class site visit. Through an inductive process of trial and error, which I guided every step of the way, the students developed their descriptive, analytical, and interpretative skills collectively. During the second third, they continued honing their skills not only through the collective process developed around the class site visits, but also through their new team site visits. Upon their return from class site visits, I allowed more and more time for the teams to share their own site visit stories. Discussion of both class and team site visits strengthened the acquisition and quality of the students’ ethnographic skills. During the last third of the course, each team collected their survey results, discussed them in class, and finally presented them during the final public academic conference.

Conclusion

The PPCC integrated site visit methodology is not only fun to teach, it results in higher research output as the quality of ethnographic skills increases exponentially over the course of one semester. By using a progressive collective reflection process, students become aware of how fine the line is between commodification of superficial relationships with religious communities for research purposes only and, on the other hand, legitimate production of knowledge that serves some of the needs of the religious communities engaged in reciprocal relationship with Connecticut College. The challenges of a service-learning methodology, let alone one embedded in a serious research agenda that also aims to serve community needs, are not easy to carry out satisfactorily. The PPCC integrated approach requires a great deal of time to build personal relationships with each religious community leader, subsequently allowing for the development of a mutually beneficial research agenda. In the second PPCC phase, in particular, I came to discover how much the site visits were embedded in a complex set of relationships that included overlapping political circles, from the classroom to the college to the city to broader national and international historical and contemporary contexts. These multiple circles have constantly influenced, in ways positive and negative, known and yet unknown, the results of PPCC’s two phases as an integrated research, teaching, and service project.

¹ Video clips of these and other student presentations during the symposiums of 2000, 2001, and 2004 are available on the PPCC Web site under the section ‘Resources’: oak.conncoll.edu/%7Eppcc/. ♣