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 transform these encounters truly transformative and educational.
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 last few 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 parentage comes. 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, finding 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 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 come from their site visits that women have little participation in Hindu ritual practices as direct officiants, since temple rituals in the kinds of temples that are present in the metropolitan 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 communities who 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 religiously generic, 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.

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 offerings (prasad). For observant Jews and evangelical Christians, I explain that their own traditions 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 seem something quite different from how some Jewish or Christian traditions have interpreted it.

From a Hindu point of view, acceptance of prasad is not a religious 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 Nutrition 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 I 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, “Dr. Flueckiger, they made me take prasad.” The students said that they had gone to the temple to offer prasad 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

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 visit may be recontextualized in time and place, with a realization that institutions, communities, and individuals in other countries continue to 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.
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 murthi and their consecration was performed in May 1992. The principal deity is Lord Venkateswara. However, the temple follows both Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions. The temple has been constructed and the consecration ceremonies took place in May 2004.

The temple is very busy during the weekdays. 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 church- es 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 attending 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 deliberately 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?” they would chant in many class discussions about cultural ways of asking and receiving puasad.

I have subsequently met with the temple priests to explain to them why some might not want to accept puasad. 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 puasad, my explanation of the students’ refusal of puasad 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 puasad, he mentally blesses them anyway.

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 students in small groups, encouraging Hindu students to offer to accompany some students find someone with whom to speak.1 Students find someone with whom to speak.

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 in 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 in the same form in which hospitality has been given. Sometimes the only reciprocity is listening and engaging in conversations; 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 important ways to and change what and how we teach.

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.

References


Spotlight on Teaching

Site Visits and Epistemological Diversity in the Study of Religion

Jeffrey Carlson, Dominican University

In some curricula, "diversity" or "multiculturalism" is relegated to a small course on so-called "other" 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," its preunderstanding immediately preceding the official start of the academic term. The course was called "Sacred Spaces, Powerful Places." It asked how it is that some physical locations have deeper meanings than others — becoming symbolically powerful, sometimes "sacred," in people's experience. 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 Society, the Chicago Loop, the Chicago Historical Society, the Harvey Islamic Center, or Niketown Chicago, they had some conceptual tools to bring into dialogue with their experiences. Other "preunderstandings" prompts were selected and introduced from other readings, such as Mireia Eliaño's "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion."" Yufu Tuan's "Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values" and Lucy R. Lippard's "The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicultural Society." Tuan's book raises questions about perception, scale, representation, spatial ethnocentrism, maps and power, visitor versus native, explorer versus settler, a critique of tourism, the relation of the visual to aesthetic distance, notions of country/city/distance/wilderness, the relation of notions of afterlife to environmental ideas, the vertical cosmos vs. horizontal landscape, and the changing meanings over time of "natural," "landscape," and "sacred." Lippard's "Lure of the Local," among others, notions of multicaentredness, displacement, gendered landscapes, immigration, hybridity, assimilation, deterritorialization, maps, the commodification of history, museums and decontextualization, feminist archaeology, homelessness, themes, towns, recreational apartheid, urban vs. suburban parks, and yard art.

By providing prompts that introduce some of these concepts in the morning class time, during breaks in the day, and in the evening class 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 not an exclusive manifestation of an epistemology of diversity.

In terms of the prompts

After the immersion week for "Sacred Spaces, Powerful Places," students read, among other things, Windfred 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 "natures" in contemporary urbanized societies, 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, Gar clandey Cemetery, the Garwood Sahib of Chicago, the Harvey Islamic Center, or Niketown Chicago, they had some conceptual tools to bring into dialogue with their experiences. Other "preunderstandings" prompts were selected and introduced from other readings, such as Mireia Eliaño's "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion." Yufu Tuan's "Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values" and Lucy R. Lippard's "The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicultural Society." Tuan's book raises questions about perception, scale, representation, spatial ethnocentrism, maps and power, visitor versus native, explorer versus settler, a critique of tourism, the relation of the visual to aesthetic distance, notions of country/city/distance/wilderness, the relation of notions of afterlife to environmental ideas, the vertical cosmos vs. horizontal landscape, and the changing meanings over time of "natural," "landscape," and "sacred." Lippard's "Lure of the Local," among others, notions of multicaentredness, displacement, gendered landscapes, immigration, hybridity, assimilation, deterritorialization, maps, the commodification of history, museums and decontextualization, feminist archaeology, homelessness, themes, towns, recreational apartheid, urban vs. suburban parks, and yard art.

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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 class, 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. A "set" of photos for a particular theme might be asked to (a) identify a theme about place from one of the books; (b) express their own position on the theme of the photos; and/or the same site multiple times. Let me illustrate this in relation to another variation of this "single visit" problem.

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

"The danger is that the experimental is not brought into intentional and explicit relation with the 'traditional' classroom work and reading."

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See CARLSON.pptx
The Nuts and Bolts of Site Visits
Grace G. Burford, Prescott College

Grace G. Burford is Professor of Religious Studies at Prescott College in Prescott, Arizona. She is the author of Desire, Death, and Goodness: The Conflict of Ultimate Values in Theravada Buddhism (Peter Lang Publishing, 1990) and is currently researching the life and work of British scholar of Buddhism Isaline B. Horner.

I 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 enrolls 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 conservation. 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 replaceable 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 sites visits pose greater risks than classroom activities — less control over what happens — provides a powerful 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 “prolitteration 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 two nights 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 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. And 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.

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 on 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, who 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 alter their understanding of the subject at hand. Avoid taking the class somewhere just to look at or see something, or simply for a group bonding experience; the event we study, and 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 replaceable planetary resources.

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ITE 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 inssofar 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 heart of Native community organizing, 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 an upper-level course that “Freedom,” Native American Religious and Cultural Studies News, AAR Edition

Native American Site Visits in the Context of Service Learning

Michael D. McNally, Carleton College

Native American Site Visits in the Context of Service Learning

Michael D. McNally is Assistant Professor in the Religion Department at Carleton College. He is the author of Ojibwe Singers: Evangelical Hymns and a Native Culture in Motion (Oxford University Press, 2000), and he is currently writing a cultural history of Ojibwe eldership and religious authority.

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 wedds 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

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 Engell)

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. Students service-learning projects are by no means grand, but the admittiedly small gestures can resonant 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 image 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 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 amid such realities.

In short, my goal through service learning is to take my students’ interest in Native spirituality that is often as heart-felt 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 admitably 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.
• Waadookodaading Ojibwe-Language Immersion Charter School
(Anchorage, 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 for the urban Indian community, following a pipe ceremony and an All Soul’s mass led by Dakota and Ojibwe elders and a Catholic priest.

So MCNALLY p.451
Site Visits to Synagogues

Michael S. Berger, Emory University

One of the many challenges of modern religious studies in American universities and colleges is the breathtaking diversity of the phenomena we try to help our students understand. No matter how much we quintessentially modernize our questions and analyses, the very format of the semester or quarter course forces us, and therefore our students, to simplify, generalize, confound, and reduce the realities of religious thought and practice. Site visits can, therefore, not only vividly bring to life what we must frequently flatteringly describe in the classroom; they can also render the reality “messier” than the more simplified impressions 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 Jewish assimilation movement of the last two centuries often meant adopting the Western cultural norm of religious “hap-pening” 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 plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam. I notify students of this at the outset of the semester, so that they can plan their weekends after the midterm to study for the exam.

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 only be articulated 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 striking 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 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 wearing t-shirts or sleeveless shirts. As an extended example, I tell students that when participating in 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, I sometimes students have to “squeeze” into a bar mitzvah or special weekend for a congregation—I do suggest students call up congregations 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 that have 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 have a background in 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 their 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 the last century required two major adaptations: the addition of large parking lots, and the construction of sanctuaries whose capacity could accommodate 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, and 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 ask of any congregation they 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 had 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 congregations 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 in site visits are usually only one experience with one congregation, and often with only a few congregations; it is more careful 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 have other experiences, so that the site visit does not overwhelm what they learn from the rest of the course.

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The sanctuary at Temple Emmanuel, University Heights, Ohio, November 2000 (Photo courtesy of Sheila E. McGinn).
ANY OF US COME to the site visit through the “back door,” so to speak; that is, through necessary or contingency rather than through conscious pedagogical choice. For example, when I moved to Northridge from Toronto in 1997, I was preassigned a teaching slot for my Islam course in 1997, I was preassigned a teaching slot for my Islam course. 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. In conjunction with Peter Beyer. It was a large course, divided into several tutorial groups, and each of us assistants would take one group 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 course, it was my turn to do the work.

With time to plan ahead, including tim- ing 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 what the class will visit, but what the students will examine when they get there and why, and whether they will be encouraged to partici- pate 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, or car-pool. It was a large course, divided into smaller groups, and the details of the site visit were handled there. Two or three students each met at the mosque and prayed together. 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 the mosque without incident. Since then, I have always brought a few plain t-shirts “just in case.”

The dynamics of site visits will change according to whether or not the students leading the students is a member of the community. When I went to the Taoist temple as an 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 stu- dents 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 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, you must get approval from 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 whether you want students to actually 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 visi- tors 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, 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 the mosque 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 thought students to the last 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 minarettes, due to neighborhood opposition. In an August 2000 article on this mosque in the Los Angeles Times, Margaret Ramirez wrote, “A building per- mit 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 struc- ture 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, for the non-Muslim students, have a different “feeling” than visits to, say, Taoist temples or Catholic monasteries. For some years in 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. For some years in 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.

For example, some students have asked me, “Will I be put on a government watch list for going to a mosque?” and “Will the ser- mon be anti-American?” Perhaps the instructor will want to bring those feelings out in the classroom before and after the visit. Also, because of all the media expo- sure, 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 fore- thought, all these factors can be used to engender useful discussion back in the classroom.

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Religious Studies News — AAR Edition
Site Visit to a Mosque
Amir Hussain, California State University, Northridge

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For some years in 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.

The beginning of Friday prayer at Cleveland’s Grand Mosque, Parma, Ohio (Photo cour- tesy of Sheila E. McGhee).
As soon as possible after the assignment is due, the students are in each research group, and 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, 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.

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?
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?

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

- **Conclusion:**

   4. What connections do you see among the various ritual actions?
   5. Outline the basic "ritual process" for this event.
   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 in 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?
Integrating Site Visits in the Pluralism Project at Connecticut College

Patrice C. Brodeur, Connecticut College

The Introductory Religion Course

Although site visits had been used at one time in Connecticut College’s introductory “Religion 101” course, they had dropped by the time of my arrival in 1998. Site visits were reintroduced the second semester I 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 keep the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic data on the site, and also 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 notes-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, as well as the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic data on the site, and also 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 notes-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, as well as the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic data on the site, and also 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 notes-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, as well as the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic data on the site, and also 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 notes-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, as well as the study of religion; they were also research-oriented, that is, to collect basic data on the site, and also 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 notes-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, as well as

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

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. PPCC has contributed towards the larger Pluralism Project at Connecticut College was thus completed with a broader spectrum of religious communities. The public availability of 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 degree to which students disclose their own subidentities; 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 subidentities, by way of religious and sociological data, the students were able to deduce two phenomena: the Pluralism Project of New London was thus completed within two years.

The second PPCC phase also aimed to integrate research, teaching, and service 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. 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 System) 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 visits, and determine what this GIS map combining different layers of data, the students were able to deduce two important conclusions: first, older commu- nities were closer to the city center; second, African-American and recent Latinx 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 pedagogically to GIS despite its many later challenges. Because of its steep learning curve, I recommended practicing 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 degree to which students disclose their own subidentities; 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 subidentities, by way of religious and sociological data, the students were able to deduce two phenomena: the Pluralism Project of New London was thus completed with a broader spectrum of religious communities. The public availability of 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 degree to which students disclose their own subidentities; 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 subidentities, by way of religious and sociological data, the students were able to deduce two phenomena: the Pluralism Project of New London was thus completed with a broader spectrum of religious communities. The public availability of 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 degree to which students disclose their own subidentities; 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 subidentities, by way of religious and sociological data, the students were able to deduce two phenomena: the Pluralism Project of New London was thus completed

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

See Brodeur option x
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 belief that people of Northern European ancestry primarily composed biblical Israel’s true heirs, and that apocalyptic events lay in store for the United States. At one point, he suggested that someone had bombed the Oklahoma City federal building. I rarely thought my visits were not random, but occurred after my editors had come to the consecration from Asia. He is working towards creating a community under surveillance; not long before, 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 exception to the rule that I was to note in this 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 notes. 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 me to lead architecture criticism to write a fourth story, describing the physical styles of some of these new buildings. Our series complemented one another. [Gustav Niebuhr, “Where Religion Gots 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 contains 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 its small remoteness, two hours’ drive west of Fort Collins, the ten-day event had a richly cosmopolitan feel, with 2,000 people attending, some as far as 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 Judah Simon-Brown, chairwoman of Naropa’s religious studies department, “in the ’70s, Buddhism was more of a sect.” But by creating such monasteries, she said, “we’re moving into a culture and a civilization.” A stupa is a traditional monument, and in this form it is a highly stylized rendering of the Buddha seated in meditation. “A stupa represents the heart of the Buddha,” said Zuzum Changwun Rinpoche of Sikkim, India, who was among more than 50 monks who traveled to the consecration from Asia. “That means,” he said, “when you close to the stupa, you close to the Buddha.” Gustav Niebuhr, “Towering Buddhist Shrine Is Consecrated in the Rockies,” New York Times, August 20, 2001, 12.)
Temples of Culture: Using Museums for Site Visits

Lisa Bellan-Boyer, Hudson County Community College

“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 feel free to ask questions about a religious practice they might otherwise be uncomfortable asking in the presence of other religious or non-religious visitors. 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 Met to attend a museum visit to visit a synagogue service, because he wanted to “avoid compromises with religion.” He reported, the Metropolitan Museum 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 traumatizing, sometimes perceived as 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 Met, 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’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 about her museum 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 religious visitor sites. Take 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 understanding of religious knowledge. They may make errors with regard to the diversity of denominational traditions and historical developments, or incorrectly use terms with which another religious can be unfamiliar. 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
Without structured reflection, field experiences alone do not generate articulate experience sufficient to transform learning in the course.
11. What were the objectives you had set for this observation, and to what degree did you accomplish each of them?

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 CECAAT (Collective Effort Classroom Assessment Techniques), 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 fear of meeting “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 students reported that they found an unexpected freedom to break down religious and ethnic prejudices in a way that the typical in-class readings and assignments do not.

**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 editor general, Tazim R. Kasam. Tazim R. Kasam, Editor, *Spotlight on Teaching*, Department of Religion, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13210 Tel.: 1-315-443-5773 E-mail: rtkasam@syr.edu

**References:**


**Conclusion**

The PPCC integrated site visits 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 super-

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