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Rebecca Alpert

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METHODS AND TEXTS

“RELIGION IN PHILADELPHIA” FOR GENERAL EDUCATION

REBECCA ALPERT

A few years ago Temple University restructured its general education program, and faculty members were all encouraged to design new courses, especially those that would incorporate “the Philadelphia experience.” Why not Religion in Philadelphia, then? Schools in Chicago and New York were teaching equivalent courses, and surely Philadelphia would lend itself to such a project. Philadelphia was founded on the principle of religious freedom, thanks to William Penn and his Quaker tradition. It was home to the first free African American churches in the United States. George Washington prayed here, as did our own saint Benjamin Franklin. (In his later years Franklin himself followed the work of itinerant evangelical preachers, with their messages about morality and salvation.) Immigrant Catholics and Jews of various ethnic backgrounds were both welcomed and reviled when they arrived en masse in the nineteenth century and built strong communities including institutions and edifices that still survive. Temple University was founded by a Baptist preacher who was one of the early proponents of the gospel of prosperity. Later immigrants brought vibrant Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist cultures. Religion plays a part in many dimensions of civic life, from commerce to popular culture, social services to the arts, politics to the school system. Philadelphia, past and present, is saturated with sacred places and stories. You just need to look for them.

As I began the work of syllabus creation, I used students’ desires to explore their new urban environment to help them discover where religion lives. In the classroom they would learn about how religious people carved out lives, created communities, and integrated themselves into broader social networks. Outside the classroom they would discover for themselves what those lives and communities and networks looked like, how they worked, and what they contributed to life in the city.

The course would also broaden their view of where religion resides in urban areas beyond houses of worship and beyond the Christian traditions most of them grew up with. It would have them explore the different ways religion may appear in unexpected places and see how religious symbols connect to the landscape and neighborhoods of the city. Projects would develop students’ skills in observation and their capacity to be curious (rather than judgmental) about unfamiliar religious spaces, practices, and practitioners. As students worked through the course, they would become better observers. They would better understand the role

religiosity plays in a community. From those goals a three-stage project evolved: an introductory group mapping exercise, individual and class visits to local “sacred” sites, and a closing project where each student presents an ethnographic snapshot of a religious institution he or she has chosen and visited on multiple occasions.

Most students in the class are in their first year. They come to North Philadelphia from surrounding suburban areas and other small cities in Pennsylvania. Many students find the city intimidating. So their first project gave them the opportunity to work in groups in order to share and use skills they already possessed. They filled out a brief questionnaire asking them to evaluate their strengths in photography, map making, Powerpoint creation, oral presentations, and their knowledge of Philadelphia neighborhoods and comfort with its transportation systems. Each small group of three or four chose a four-by-four block area, went out to discover what religion looks like there, and presented their findings to the class. Before they begin, I show examples I created to help them to be on lookout for signs of religion beyond the obvious houses of worship—how religion can manifest in window displays, street signs, historical markers, hospitals, schools, murals, restaurants, bumper stickers, markers on people’s bodies, and many other ways. Students are then better able to find an inexhaustible variety of manifestations of religion: In the seven years I’ve been teaching this course there has been almost no repetition in the religious maps that students present, even when they’ve chosen the same neighborhood. Students find the project approachable. Using the skills they have, they get over their initial intimidation, get out into the city, and explore a range of ways to see religion that they hadn’t considered before.

Mapping an area whets their appetite to explore religion in the city more deeply. In the first theme of the course, “religious roots,” we examine a few highlights of Philadelphia’s religious history. This includes several trips during class time to historic sites, including Christ Church (where George Washington prayed) and Mother Bethel, the first African Methodist Episcopal Church: here the students meet the tour guides who are members of religious communities. The guides introduce them to the history of these sites and share their commitments to the religious tradition and the community. The students ask questions and develop their curiosity and their skills at interacting with the public. They are then prepared to do the second stage of the project: a visit on their own to another of Philadelphia’s historic sacred sites. Because sacred sites are an important part of Philadelphia’s tourist industry, this project is straightforward and raises the students’ awareness that religion is neither private nor a thing apart, but plays a critical role in Philadelphia’s economy.

Students research potential sites on Philadelphia tourist websites such as HolyPhilly, VisitPhilly, or Holy Experiment, or consult Roger Moss, *Historic Sacred Places of Philadelphia* to find options.¹ The assignment is to visit as a “tourist.” To view the sites from the perspective of tourism, they

1 www.whyy.org/tv12/HolyPhilly/index.html;
www.visitphilly.com/museums-attractions/sacred-places/;
<http://www.holyexperiment.org/>

investigate the website to see how the sacred space is presented to the public. At the physical site they take the official tour, take photographs (or learn why they're not permitted to), and focus on some aspect (history, architecture, art, the landscape, or the gift shop) that interests them. Their written report is a description of the experience. In class they are then positioned as "experts" on their particular sacred space. So when we discuss the 1844 anti-Catholic riots, for example, the students who have visited one of the historic Catholic churches can talk about how they were built without stained glass windows at pedestrian level for fear of the rocks that would be thrown at them. In another case, a student visited the Church of the Advocate. This Episcopal Church, located in the neighborhood around Temple, was the site of the first ordination of Episcopal women priests and played a key role during the civil rights movement. The student wrote about what the church meant to the neighborhood and also to herself as an African American woman. She observed how the murals in the church included a "brown angel" and how she saw that as both a source of pride and tranquility. When the class took our field trip to the Advocate and the tour guide was unable to meet us, the student took on the tour guide role, sharing her insights about the Church, bringing a helpful perspective to her peers. These firsthand experiences make history (and the city itself) come alive in the classroom, in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Before we explore the course's two other major themes—a study of different religious "routes" taken by groups and individuals (conversion, the changing demographics of city and suburb, transnational passages, and the class-shifting of the prosperity gospel), and an exploration of how religion is incorporated into other dimensions of the urban environment, students prepare in class for the final stage of their project: writing their own mini ethnographies of a religious institution of their choice. Since choosing a tradition they're already familiar with is off limits, often the site students choose is one they discovered in their mapping project, a religious tradition that one of the readings has made them curious about, or a house of worship attended by a friend they've been discussing the course with.

While the other projects and readings have prepared them to make a site choice, students also need to learn how to conduct ethnographic research. They begin by reading ethnographic texts—a chapter on religious life from W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Philadelphia Negro* where Du Bois chronicles the religious life of the African American community in Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century. They also read excerpts from three more recent ethnographies of Philadelphia area religious institutions: David Watt's *Bible Carrying Christians*, a chronicle of three evangelical churches; Josh Dubler's *Down in the Chapel*, a study of religious life at Graterford Prison, and Katie Day's *Faith on the Avenue*, a study of the variety of churches and mosques found today on Germantown Avenue. Watt and Day are local, so they are able to visit the class and talk to students about their work and answer questions about the participant-observer

vation research process, and about what excited and/or frightened them. These sessions prepare students to enter their chosen sites, introduce themselves, observe with all their senses, and take good field notes that they can later turn into a thoughtful final project.

Students are required to make only two visits as part of their ethnographic work—one for a religious service and another for some other event (bible study, yoga class, soup kitchen, choir practice), but occasionally they go more than the required number of times. Religious communities are almost always welcoming. Students frequently report that they began the project with great fear and reluctance and ended it with a new respect for religious institutions, their openness, passion, and commitment to welcoming strangers. Overall, these assignments give students a deeper understanding of the role religion plays in urban cultures and a new appreciation of the variety and complexity of religious experience. That they also learn how to observe their surroundings more thoughtfully, write up their observations with clarity and occasional wit, and navigate through new experiences reinforces my sense that this course has value not only for the English and anthropology students but for the nurses and engineers too. After completing the course, a number of students reminisce about what stood out for them in the experience. Whether they recall the kosher Chinese restaurant, the murals at the Church of the Advocate, the friendly Muslim tour guide, or the loquacious participant in the Quaker meeting, they recognize through these projects that their encounters have changed the way they see the city and the world of religious life. Research suggests that students don't retain much from what they learn in the classroom, especially if they come without intrinsic interest in the topic, as is frequently true for a general studies course. I hope the course makes students more open to ideas and people who are different from them and aware of religion in the world around them. I won't bet that they'll remember what they read in class, but I know they remember what they experienced.

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