

**Courtney Bender, Columbia University
Departments of Religion and Sociology
“Religion and the City”**

Teaching context:

Columbia University, founded in New York in 1754, is a large private institution consisting of several undergraduate colleges and a dozen professional and graduate schools. Its main arts and sciences campus in Morningside Heights (Columbia’s home since the 1890’s) is bounded by Manhattanville and Harlem to the north and east, and the Hudson River to the west. The neighborhood is also home to Union Theological Seminary, Barnard College, and the Jewish Theological Seminary, each of which have differing but long-standing formal affiliations with Columbia. Many Columbia faculty live in the neighborhood, and the majority of Columbia and Barnard undergraduates live in campus housing as well. Thus, while Columbia students frequently sing the praises of the city and are relatively intrepid in their explorations most of their daily activities and commitments keep them in the neighborhood. Columbia is unquestionably in and of New York City, yet the immediate area and its social life and politics is relatively self-contained. It is in many senses an “urban village.”

Columbia’s undergraduate programs and Barnard have very different degree requirements but share an integrated course catalogue, so I (like most professors at Columbia and Barnard) regularly teach students from each of these colleges. My students are consistently highly motivated and very well prepared to read and discuss whatever I throw their way. Columbia College, Barnard College, and the School of General Studies are all very selective. Columbia College admitted 10% of its applicants this year, Barnard admitted under 25%. The School of General Studies attracts “non-traditional” students with varied and rich life experiences (GS students in my classes have included retired professional ballerinas and single mothers from Queens). The student populations of these schools are diverse: Columbia College reports that 40% of its undergraduate students are minorities, Barnard reports roughly 30%; 10% at each college are international students.

Columbia is an interesting, invigorating, and sometimes challenging place to teach about American religion. One of its most exciting and exacting aspects is the undergraduate population’s religious diversity. I have come to expect that my students will also be religiously diverse and have widely divergent knowledge of various religious traditions. As a consequence, I frequently learn an enormous amount about religious lives and history from my students and often find myself in the position where I am not the “expert” that students assume that I will be.

“Religion and the City” rationale

The main purpose of this course is to teach students to look closely and analytically at American urban contexts, and to help them develop or strengthen their abilities to observe and interpret religious lives and religious difference therein. I take seriously C. Wright Mills’ call to engage the sociological imagination. I believe that the city and city living can fruitfully spark questions (even as it sometimes demands answers) about the possibilities and necessities of living in globalized, cosmopolitan, and culturally heterogeneous worlds. It is part of my goal as a teacher to call attention to the kinds of questions that rise to the surface in city interchanges, and to provide them with tools, stories and analytical skills with which they can profitably and seriously engage them. The readings and lectures present useful if general sociological concepts and historical narratives about religion in America (themes of globalization, community organization, the power of memory, and so on) on which future observations might rest.

This course is designed with particular curricula in mind. In the last five years, my department has been strengthening its upper-level course offerings in religions in urban contexts. We offer three advanced, limited-enrollment seminars suitable for fourth year students and beginning graduate students on a regular basis, including “Religion in New York” (taught by Prof. Randall Balmer), an ethnographic and historical course titled “Hinduism Here” (taught by Prof. John S. Hawley) and an ethnographic seminar titled “Religious Worlds of New York” (taught by Prof. Hawley and myself). Despite the success of these seminars, it has been increasingly clear to Professors Hawley, Balmer, and myself that seminar students would be well served by an introductory lecture course that presents main themes and issues in urban religions. Similarly, this course adds an important lecture-level course to our department’s offerings in North American religious traditions and sociological approaches to religion.

I expect that this lecture course will draw between 40-60 undergraduates, and that roughly one-quarter will be Religion majors and concentrators. I will have teaching assistants for this course, who will lead weekly discussion sections and help maintain the course website.



RELIGION AND THE CITY

Religion and the Modern World, Religion V2800

Professor Courtney Bender (cb337@columbia.edu)
Fall 2006 Monday-Wednesday 11-12.15

The city holds a complex and storied place in the American religious imagination. While some religious groups have cast cities as sinful, vice-filled and their inhabitants ever in need of redemption, other groups envision cities as natural places for building community and religious identity, or even as ennobled sites for religious engagement. Sociologists and historians have also represented the city and its religious inhabitants in surprisingly divergent ways. Generations of sociologists for example have looked to the city as the vanguard of secularization, given its pluralism, heterogeneity, and ability to cultivate sophisticated cosmopolitan citizens, and have overlooked the continued religious experiments that its denizens pursue. Stories like these often tell us more about what Americans imagine religious life to be in cities than about how religious lives are actually cultivated.

This semester we will investigate the ways that practical concerns of daily living in the city as well as fears, desires, and nostalgia shape religion in the city. We begin by addressing *how religious groups and institutions shape neighborhoods or districts*, and analyze the contributions of religious institutions, histories and theologies to these urban regions. We will then address the ways that *religious communities interact with each other as they share space* or contest the boundaries of neighborhoods, analyzing how religious groups can foster both civic participation and social violence and disruption. Next, we will *consider the various public settings wherein religious language, practice, and performance take place*. We will then turn to the ways that religions in the city are shaped by *new patterns of migration and globalization*. Finally, we turn to focus specifically on the ways that “the city” is *imagined, “read” and remembered through religious memory and social action*.

We will investigate these topics using anthropological, historical and sociological concepts and approaches. Of particular interest to us through this semester are the ways that religions take place in place, and an emphasis on what we can learn about religions by focusing on place, location, and context.

New York City is an important frame in which to explore broader questions that lie at the heart of the social scientific study of religion. With the city as our frame, you will be encouraged – indeed, required - to understand the living realities of religious life within the context of the city in which we live. Many, but not all, of the readings assigned focus on New York, and class assignments will require you to venture out into the city.

Readings:

The following books are available at Labyrinth Books (112th between Amsterdam and Broadway).

Goldschmidt, Henry. *Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*. Rutgers University Press 2006.

Guest, Kenneth. *God in Chinatown*, NYU Press 2003.

McGreevy, James. *Parish Boundaries*. University of Chicago Press 1996.

McRoberts, Omar, *Streets of Glory*. University of Chicago Press 2003.

Orsi, Robert, ed. *Gods of the City* Indiana University Press 1999

Tweed, Thomas. *Our Lady of the Exilei*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

In addition, a course reader is available at the Village Copier (119th and Amsterdam). All readings are also on reserve in Butler library.

Assignments:

Careful reading of all of the required texts, **attendance at lectures**, and regular **participation in discussion sections**. These will meet once weekly, and will be scheduled during the first week of the term. (20%).

Completion of a three-part assignment on a religious site of your choosing on which you will conduct historical and sociological observation of it during the term. Your assignments will contribute to a multi-year multi-class project to map various types of religious organizations and activities ongoing in the city, and important sites in New York's religious pasts and present. This project will be divided into three distinct parts:

a. A **4 page paper** about your site due on September 18 (10%).

b. A **6-8 page paper** on the history and change of your site through time, due on October 16 (25%).

c. A **6-8 page report** on the current life of your site, due on November 20 (20%).

A **final paper**, 8-10 pages on your site incorporating observational and historical research on your site that will be suitable for addition to the course map. This will be due on the Registrar's examination date. (25%).

Office hours, contact information and fine print:

Professor Bender: Wednesday 9-11, 80 Claremont Room 202

Mr.

Ms.

Work handed in late will be graded down one-letter grade each day.

Plagiarism is a serious offense, and one that we view as an action against the scholarly community of which we are all a part. If you have questions about how to properly cite things, please ask us before your assignment is due.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Sept 6, 11

Beginning points: Religions and cities, religion in space.

Cox, Harvey. "The Epoch of the Secular City," in *The Secular City*. Macmillan 1967.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Excerpts.

Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 1938.

Religious communities in American cities

Sept. 13, 18, 20, 27

Cultures, neighborhoods, religious urban landscapes

McGreevy, James. *Parish Boundaries*. University of Chicago Press 1996.

McRoberts, Omar. *Streets of Glory*. University of Chicago Press 2003.

Oct 2 Oct 4

Inter-religious and inter-cultural interactions and cooperation

Sanjek, Roger. "The New Multicultural Geography of Elmhurst-Corona" and "Bonds of Interracial Cooperation" in *The Future of us All*. Cornell University Press 1998.

McCaa, Robert. "Intermarriage and Gender in New York City" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24 (1993): 207-231.

Wood, Richard. "Faith-Based Organizing in Action: The Local Organizing Committee and St. Elizabeth Catholic Church" in *Faith in Action: Religion, Race and Democratic Organizing in America*. University of Chicago Press 2001.

Wedam, Elfriede. "If We Let the Market Prevail, we Won't Have a Neighborhood Left:" Religion Agency and Urban Restructuring on Chicago's southwest side." *City and Society* 2005.

Oct 9, Oct 11

Religious conflict and the city

Goldschmidt, Henry. *Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*. Rutgers University Press 2006.

Religion in the streets

Oct 16, Oct 18

The spaces of daily encounter

Oldenburg, Ray. "The Problem of Place in America" in *The Great Good Place*. Marlowe and Co. 1989.

Whyte, William H. "The Design of Spaces" and "The Sensory Street" *City: Rediscovering the Center*. Doubleday 1975.

Bender, Courtney "What we Talk about when we talk about Religion" in *Heaven's Kitchen* University of Chicago Press 2003.

Smith, Elta and Courtney Bender. "The Creation of an Urban Niche Religion: South Asian Taxi Drivers in New York City" in *Asian American Religions*, NYU Press 2004.

Oct 23, Oct 25

Public performances and protests

Winston, Diane. "The Cathedral of the Open Air: The Salvation Army's Sacralization of Secular Space, New York City, 1880-1910" in *Gods of the City*

Ashley, Wayne. "The Stations of the Cross: Christ, Politics, and Processions on New York's Lower East Side" in *Gods of the City*.

Slyomovics, Susan "The Muslim World Day Parade and 'Storefront' Mosques of New York City" in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. University of California Press 1994

Religions and cities in global networks

Oct 30

Migration and globalization

Levitt, Peggy. "You Know, Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant," *International Migration Review* 2003.

Sassen, Saskia. "The Impact of New Technologies and Globalization on Cities." In *The City Reader*, Routledge 1996.

Nov 1, Nov 8

Guest, Kenneth. *God in Chinatown*. NYU Press 2003.

Nov 13, Nov 15

Tweed, Thomas. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

The city in the religious imagination: vice, nostalgia, cosmopolitanism

Nov 20

Nostalgia and movement

Wenger, Beth. "Memory as Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side" *American Jewish History* 1997.

Kugelmass, Jack. "Moses of the South Bronx: Aging and Dying in the Old Neighborhood" in *Gods of the City*.

Moore, Debra Dash. "Entering Heaven" and "Permanent Tourists" in *To the Golden Cities*. Harvard University Press 1994.

Nov 27, Nov 29

Saving the city

Orsi, Robert. "Introduction" to *Gods of the City*.

Chambre, Susan. "The Changing Nature of "Faith" in Faith-Based Organizations: Secularization and Ecumenicism in Four AIDS Organizations in New York City." *Social Service Review* 2001.

Lang, Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang. "Decisions for Christ: Billy Graham in New York City," in *Identity and Anxiety; Survival of the Person in Mass Society*. Free Press 1962.

Dec 4, Dec 6

Public memorials, architecture, religious traces, and sacralization

Linenthal, Edward and David Chidester, "Introduction" to *American Sacred Space*. Oxford University Press.

Parker, Betsee. "Send Thou Me": God's Weeping and the Sanctification of Ground Zero," in Hawley and Patton, eds. *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*. Princeton University Press 2004.

"World Trade Center Memorial Jury Statement for Winning Design"

Dec 11

Conclusions

White, E.B. *Here is New York*

Whitman, Walt. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

Mapping New York City Religions¹

Purpose and goals

The main goals of this assignment are to (a) engage students in guided explorations in religious lives of the city and (b) introduce students to several disciplinary approaches (sociological, literary, historical) as they do so. Given that religious studies is a multi-disciplinary project, and the study of religions in America benefits from multi-disciplinary approaches, these interlinked assignments will hope to make the most of both.

In addition to these local pedagogical aims, a second goal is to use these assignments to gradually build models and templates for a larger New York City religions mapping project that will, some day in the future, become a stable but not static set of interlinked (and hopefully imaginative) maps of religions in the city. It is my expectation that students will take their assignments and products more seriously (and be more engaged in them) with this possibility and promise of contributing to a larger, ongoing public project.

Assignment #1 due 18 September CHOOSING A SITE

Your first assignment **is to locate a religious site** on which the rest of your assignments will be based. You can choose a congregation/religious building (Marble Collegiate Church, Eldridge St. Synagogue), a neighborhood (4-8 blocks, e.g. a stretch of 125 St.), a monument or cemetery (e.g. Grant's Tomb).

Ideally you should choose to site with which you are not intimately familiar. This is a chance to do some exploration, and you are encouraged to be adventurous! Take a walk in an unfamiliar neighborhood, consult walking tour guides for "landmark" religious organizations that might be interesting, and pay attention to the newspapers.

The field is open, with the following restrictions:

(a) you must choose a place that has some *explicit* religious content or activity. For example, you should not choose "Central Park" on the grounds that people who love nature and feel connected with the transcendent when they go there (this is interesting, but choosing a site like this will make it very difficult for you to complete the project). In contrast, however, if you have learned that a group gathers on Great Hill in Central Park to regularly practice tai chi or yoga, or to meditate you might consider that site. If you are doubt about whether your choice is a good one, please talk to one of us.

(b) you must choose a site **in Manhattan** that you can visit without too much difficulty during the semester and (if your choice is a religious organization) one that you will be able to visit or observe during its liturgical/worship events.

¹ Inspiration for these assignments comes from several sources, including Ann Spirn's undergraduate MIT course titled "The City" (this site is accessible through MIT's OpenCourseware portal), ethnographic assignments described in various syllabi by R. Stephen Warner, Wendy Cadge, and Lowell Livezey, and through conversations with YSAR colleagues Tracy Leavalle and Lila Corwin Berman.

(c) no more than two students in the class can study the same site/place. (We don't want to read 40 papers on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine!). Post your site on Courseworks as soon as you have decided (and check to make sure that no more than one other person else has already chosen your site).

The 4 page report. After you have chosen a site and posted your intention on Courseworks, write a report reflecting on why you find the site interesting and the kinds of questions that your site raises or might raise for you. Your short paper should introduce us to your site and its surroundings. Describe your site, including its neighborhood characteristics, how you think it connects to the rest of the city (does it feel like an "urban village" or part of a "religious district" or not, and why so?). Provide some brief details about the religious significance of the site, including the specific religious group(s) that use or shape the site.

Reports can include photographs of the building/site, or other sketches or "maps." Indeed, we encourage it! Images do not count toward your page total, however.

Please submit a copy of your report on the class website/courseworks (drop it in the assignment folder) on 18 September, no later than 3 p.m.

Assignment #2 due 16 October YOUR SITE THROUGH TIME

In this assignment you will explore the changes that your site has undergone through time. How do religious sites change through time, and how do larger changes in the city influence or impact the ways that religions are experienced?

This assignment will ask and allow you to analyze how the site and its uses may change through time. For example, when was the church/synagogue/temple that you are looking at founded? What was on the property/area before then? What kind of neighborhood changes has the site experienced? You should try to contextualize these changes as much as you can: what changes in immigrant populations, or what kinds of changes in New York's local economies, what changes in your religious group's organization might have impacted the founding and longevity of the site you are studying?

Choose two other periods/dates in which to explore change over time, and do what you can to learn about interesting and important changes in the neighborhood or in the religious group to provide some background and assessment of change.

In order to complete this assignment, you will need to do some exploring in on-line and library resources. For example, consult historical maps of New York City available on line and at the Columbia and New York Public Libraries, look for "historical" photographs of your site on time, or consult nineteenth century guidebooks to the city of New York for descriptions of buildings in an earlier era. Some religious groups (churches, synagogues) have their own websites or even published histories that might provide an insider's history, which you might also wish to consult (and properly site) Likewise, you will need to familiarize yourself with some of the history of your site's religious group(s) in New York or the U.S.

The 6-8 page report. After you have conducted some research on your site in time, you should write a paper that describes some of these changes and the way that your site has changed over time. Your paper should contextualize your religious site within the city, so that we can sense the dynamic relationships between city life and your site's life.

You should consult at least three non-web-based sources (histories, or otherwise) and cite them in your paper. In addition, we encourage you to reproduce (and properly acknowledge) photographs and maps of your site through time, if such exist.

Please submit a copy of your report on the class website/Courseworks (drop it in the assignment folder) on 16 October, no later than 3 p.m.

Assignment #3 due 20 November FIELD REPORT ASSIGNMENT

By this point, you should have spent some time observing the neighborhood around your site, and have some familiarity with its history and change in time, and perhaps also have a bit of background reading on the religious practices and community that exists there. You should draw on this knowledge as you go forward with this more intensive part of the larger assignment: observing religion in action.

Religious groups relate to their urban environments and express these connections in various ways. In this assignment, you will observe a public religious event and write a 6-8 page field report that reflects on the following question: What relations does your site and the people who engage religion there express through rituals, liturgies, or other activities?

The assignment has two discrete steps.

First, you will observe public events at two different times and write "field notes" on what you observe.

Second, you will write a field report that answers the questions above by presenting examples from your observations.

We will discuss both the nuts and bolts of observing and the important ethical issues that are involved even in passive observations of public religious events in sections.

The 6-8 page report. After you have made your observations and written your field notes, you should write a 6-8 page paper that engages the question set forth above about the current life of the site you are studying. More details are given below.

Although you are strongly encouraged in other assignments to add visuals and photographs, in this assignment you are asked to focus on writing and reporting. You should not take photographs of community religious events under any circumstance.

Please submit a copy of your report on the class website/Courseworks (drop it in the assignment folder) on 16 October, no later than 3 p.m.

A. Choosing what to observe

You should plan on observing one public event at your site. “Public religious events” include most publicly advertised and announced worship services to which the general public is welcome, religious processions and festivals that occur on the streets, and other outdoor events such as revival meetings, street preaching, and pamphleteering. If you are unsure of whether the event you’ve selected is public or open to the public, please consult with one of us.

You should plan on attending an event that lasts for 1-2 hours and your notes should cover everything you observe during that period. It is always a good idea to double-check the time and date of the events that you plan to observe, and/or to call ahead.

A word to the wise: It is important that you treat the people you meet at your site with respect and civility. At the same time you are under no obligation to do anything (praying, chanting, etc.) that you do not feel comfortable with during your visit. As a sign of respect, it is generally appropriate to dress up a bit (no jeans or sneakers). Keep in mind that you may have to remove your shoes or cover your head when you visit. Watch what other people are doing and do likewise!

B. Writing preliminary field notes for your report

The first step in this assignment is to write “field notes” on the event you have observed. The best field notes are written immediately after the fact and you should plan for several hours of uninterrupted time to write field notes after your observation is finished. In general it is NOT appropriate to take notes during religious services. Remember as much as you can and take a few minutes on the subway or bus back to jot notes that will prompt you to remember details when you return to campus.

A good field note will “show” rather than “tell” what has happened. This is VERY IMPORTANT. For example, instead of writing:

“the minister gave an intercessory prayer”

you might write:,

“a middle-aged white woman wearing a blue robe [identified as the assistant pastor] stood at the raised podium and told us to stand. She then read a prayer that was printed in the bulletin. The prayer was for peace of the nation, city leaders, our neighbors, the health of the congregation ...”

Try not to take things for granted as you write up these notes. As you read over your notes, think about whether they unnecessarily “summarize” the meaning of actions rather than “showing” us what is going on.

The main reason for showing rather than telling is that while you might think that you have an answer to the question about how the group relates to the city after observing part of the service. But as you reflect on the event or read other material, you may decide that your preliminary ideas were incorrect or that you now think something else is more important or interesting. The richer your field notes, the better a tool they will be to write your report.

When you are finished, consult the “checklist” (attached) to make sure you haven’t forgotten anything.

C. Interpreting field notes for your report

Your field notes are the “primary data” on which you will draw to write a report. Your report should draw upon and include important sections of your field observations to show us how you have come to understand this particular religious group’s expressed relationships to the city. Likewise, your report should make use of class readings where appropriate.

There are numerous ways that a religious group might express an understanding of its relations with the city. For example, you might find explicit reference to the city a variety of liturgical elements and rituals, announcements, and so on made during a service. You might find references to social service groups or community action meetings listed in announcements. You might reflect on the ways that the group’s building (architecture) or use of public space, its signage, and so on also express a relation. There are other possibilities as well.

Keep in mind that your findings are *preliminary* and *provisional*. When sociologists conduct field research they observe numerous times, speak to participants and amass a much larger body of data. Observing over time allows sociologists to evaluate what is anomalous and what is central in the groups that they study. We do not have that luxury in this project, but this assignment nonetheless provides a little taste of what sociologists do when they go about their work.

Final Report Due on [the Examination Date] PRESENTING YOUR SITE

Your final project assignment is to write a comprehensive narrative of your site based on the research and reporting you have done through the term. This final project can and should integrate the materials that you have already developed to begin to tell a story about the ways that religions are at work in the city. In this final project, you are encouraged to draw also upon literary or artistic sources and resources, for example you might think about the ways that others (New Yorkers past and present, or non-New Yorkers) have represented or presented your neighborhood.

Your final project should be a polished piece of writing suitable for presentation to a larger public. We hope that many of the final projects for this course will be both suitable for publication on a map of New York City that will be available as a resource in other Columbia classrooms and serve as model reports for future students who take “Religion and the City.”

CHECKLIST FOR OBSERVATIONS (for observation project):

Your field notes should cover whatever you think is important and provide rich observational data. When you have finished writing your notes, use this checklist to make sure that you have taken note of all of the following:

1. Demographics

- Age, sex, social class, race-ethnic composition of the population, also whether the "congregation" differs from "leaders" in demographics

2. Physical setting

- The building or physical space -- large or small, plain or ornate, a building devoted purely to religious functions or also used for other things (such as a home)
- Dress of participants -- leaders and led both
- "Props" -- tables, chairs, benches; ritual or musical implements

3. Description of events

- Duration of time of whole event and of particular sub segments
- Number and order of segments: announcements, songs, prayers, speeches, chants, testimonies, and so on
- Description of activities - speaking, chanting, singing, clapping, marching, touching, eating, drinking, gesturing, standing, kneeling and so on
- Who participates and how?
- Tone and style of speech: uses of informal (vernacular) and ritualized/stylized language, different languages used, and so on.

4. Content of message (if applicable – and it might not be!).

Be careful here. Listen more than ask. Don't get "snowed" and likewise don't be hypercritical. Don't take everything literally, but --

- look for "doctrine," which might be articulated in the conception of how the "sacred" and "secular" worlds interact. Are the relationships close or distant, warm or cold, comforting or threatening? Keep in mind that doctrine can be expressed both through word and action (ritualized action and common interaction).
- What "morality" is proclaimed? Are people expected to care about the wide world or the home front? People who are similar to them or people who are different? Are rules set or negotiable and relative? How are these expressed (by story, metaphor, doctrine, gesture, etc.)
- What feelings do you think people leave the event with? (what feelings did you leave with?)

5. Other activities that occur

Carefully look around the building or site for signs of other activities that occur there. Does the group have social services that it runs in the building (daycare, soup kitchen, food pantry) or do other groups use the building/site (Alcoholics Anonymous, another religious group, etc.). Does it provide cultural or language classes? A music program? Many religious groups provide weekly bulletins or calendars with this information (or you can find it on the website). What other ways does the group appear to be related and linked to its "communities?"