

## Religious Worlds of New York Fall 2003

Wednesday 2:10-4pm  
Professor Tanya Erzen

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Office hours: Wednesday 10:30-12:30pm and by appointment

### Seminar Goals:

**OBSERVING RELIGION:** Much work in the Religion department at Barnard and Columbia is text-based. In this course, we will read examples of ethnographic writing on urban religious formations, but a major objective here is to learn to "read experience" and analyze religion as it is lived.

**NEW YORK RELIGION:** New York presents residents with one of the most exciting and diverse religious landscapes available in the United States. We expect, through readings and through opportunities for direct observation, to learn something of the complex texture of religious life in New York City.

**URBAN/METROPOLITAN RELIGION:** The argument is sometimes made that urban religion is characteristically very different from religion as it appears elsewhere. New York provides numerous ways to explore this idea because the city encompasses a variety of ethnic and immigrant groups and individuals and encourages the generation of complex, transnational and hybrid forms of cultural life that are less possible in smaller populations.

**METHOD:** The aim of this class is for students to become versed in ethnographic research methods such as interviewing, fieldwork, field notes, and critical analysis. Throughout the course, we will emphasize the self-reflective nature of fieldwork and the issues of ethics, reciprocity, power, participation and politics that arise in the course of research. In the reading and research projects, we will examine religion in relationship to material culture, popular culture, gender, consumer culture, race and community, immigration, diaspora and ethnicity.

### Readings:

The following texts will be on reserve in the Barnard library, and available for purchase at Labyrinth Books, 536 W. 112<sup>th</sup>, 865-1588.

Other required readings are available at Broadway Copy, 3062 Broadway (call ahead to order 865-6501).

- Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*
- Robert Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*
- Samuel Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church*
- Lis Harris, *Holy Days: The World of A Hasidic Family*
- Robert Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City*
- Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*

In addition, the following books on ethnographic practice may be of interest. They are also on reserve at Barnard.

Julia O'Connell Davidson and Derek Layder, *Methods, Sex, Madness*

H. Wolcott, *The Art of Field Work*

Lofland and Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings* (Wadsworth)

G. McCracken, *The Long Interview* (Sage)

John van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago)

Robert Emerson, ed., *Contemporary Field Research* (Waveland)

Preliminary website of religious organizations and resources in New York:  
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/religion/erzen/rwny.htm>

### **Seminar requirements:**

- **Attendance and participation in class discussions** (20 points)
- **Fieldwork:** four projects of increasing difficulty, with accompanying write-ups

#### *1. The Interview (10 points)*

**Due: September 10<sup>th</sup>**

This exercise will provide you with a basic introduction to interviewing techniques that will aid you in your final projects. Interview one person who is of a different religious background than yourself. Ask five open-ended questions of this person such as “How do you describe your religious background?” or “Describe a holiday, ritual or other significant event that your family or community participates in that you believe upholds your particular religious values.”

**Assignment:**

Prepare your written list of questions in advance. The interview should last 20 minutes maximum. Type up a 1-2 page report of your interview including your own reactions to the process. In addition, attach your interview questions.

#### *2. Mapping the Religious Landscape/ Learning to See Religion (20 points)*

**Due: September 17<sup>th</sup>**

The exercise should raise questions about definitions of religion and about the times, places, and means through which New Yorkers engage in religious behavior. You and a partner will canvass a discrete area of New York City for public expressions of religion.

**Assignment:**

- visual map
- written analysis (3-4 pages)
- reflection on partner's field notes (1-2 pages).

#### *3. Initial religious investigations: Institutional Portrait (groups of 4-5) (20 points)*

**Due: October 1 and October 8**

This exercise moves you from observation and analysis of religion in the external spaces of New York City to a brief exploration of religious life inside a particular institution. You will write field notes and a short field report based on our visits to a religious institution on Bowne Street in Queens/Abyssinian. You will also read others' reports and generate reflections on the differences or similarities in field reports based on the same events. This project will provide you with some excellent experience in "the field," and a chance to think specifically about the ways that different styles and pre-existing assumptions influence the field research project.

The purpose of the exercise is to:

- (1) experience the space that sets the stage for a religious community's activities;
- (2) to observe some aspect of the religious life of a community,
- (3) perhaps even to meet members of that community.

**Assignment:**

- Xeroxed copy or typed transcription of your field notes (no page limit)
- Field report (3-5 pages)
- Written discussion of the process (4-5 pages)

#### *4. "In-depth" religious encounters: the Final Project (30 points)*

You will select a religious community or site to visit individually on an ongoing basis throughout the term. To best facilitate learning in this course, we ask that you choose to investigate a religious community in which you have not previously participated in any

extended way. Your visits to this site or community will form the backbone of your seminar paper.

**Assignment:**

- Research Topic Proposal- due September 24
- Ongoing fieldwork journal
- Seminar paper (10-15 pages) due December 10
- Class presentation due December 3

**“My Computer Crashed” and Other Issues:**

- All assignments are marked down one-third of a letter grade (5 points) for every late day.
- Since class meets only once a week, it is important and expected that you will be at every session. Any absence will detract from your participation grade.
- I expect students to be active participants in their educations. This means that each student should come to class having carefully read the assigned readings and be ready to discuss them.
- If you have any special needs or concerns with this course, please feel free to come and talk with me.

**Schedule:**

**September 3: Introduction**

fill out questionnaire  
pick partner

**September 10: Orientation**

**Interview project due with questions**

**Handout map assignment**

- Kenneth T. Jackson, "Religion," in *Encyclopedia of the City of New York*
- Robert A. Orsi, "Crossing the City Line," Intro to *Gods of the City*
- Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City,"
- Diana Eck, "The Multireligious Public Square," in *One Nation Under God*

**September 17: Who Makes Religion? What Counts? Where Do We Find It?**

**Mapping Project due**

**Handout research proposal guidelines**

**IN class- 1-2 page reflection on memorials, religion and memory due**

- Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, chapter 1
- John T. McGreevy, "Bronx Miracle"
- William H. Whyte, "The Social Life of Streets"
- Missing: Streetscape of a City in Mourning [http://www.citylore.org/exhibits\\_misshome.html](http://www.citylore.org/exhibits_misshome.html)
- Sonic memorial project <http://sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html> (#7 Impromptu Shrines of 9-11)
- \*\*\*Tony Carnes, "Religion in the City: An Overview," in Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis, eds., *New York Glory: Religions in the City*

**September 21 or 28 class visits to Abyssinian Baptist Church**

**September 24: Field Work: Time, Space, Ethnographer**

**1-2 page independent research project proposal due**

**handout bender guidelines**

- Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* chs. 1-3
- Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork* ch. 5
- Simon Coleman, "But Are They Really Christian? Contesting Knowledge and Identity in and out of the Field"

•Shawn Landres, "Being in the Field"

**October 1: Fieldwork discussions and dilemmas**

**Fieldnotes and field report for institutional portrait due**

**Compare notes in class**

- Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, chapters 4 and 6 (recommended: ch. 5)
- Gary Alan Fine, "Ten Lies of Ethnography"
- Robert Orsi, "Have You Ever Prayed to St. Jude?"
- Jim Birkhead, "There's Power in the Blood: Writing Serpent Handling as Everyday Life"

**October 8: Public Religiosity**

**Critical reflection on field report and notes due**

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

?Bruce Robbins, *The Phantom Public Sphere*

- Susan Slyomovics, "New York City's Muslim World Day Parade"
- Joseph Sciorra, "We Go Where the Italians Live": Religious Processions as Ethnic and Territorial Markers in a Multi-ethnic Brooklyn Neighborhood," in Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City*
- Wayne Ashley, "The Stations of the Cross: Christ, Politics, and Procession on New York City's Lower East Side," in *Gods of the City*
- David H. Brown, "Altered Spaces: Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the United States," in *Gods of the City*

OPTIONAL:

- Michelle Caswell, "Hindu Sacred Space on American Soil: The Divya Dham Temple of Woodside, Queens," paper for "Religious Worlds of New York," Columbia University, 1996. <http://www.barnard.edu/religion/pages/students.html>
- Diane Winston "The Cathedral of the Open Air," in *Gods of the City*

**Midterm time**

**October 15: Congregation and community: religious people adapt to the American urban context**

- R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in American Religious History"
- Nancy Ammerman, "Bowling Together"
- Scott Cormode, "Churches and Secular Voluntary Associations in the Turn of the Century City"
- Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, "Structural Adaptations in an Immigrant Muslim Congregation in New York"

**Reading New York's Religious Worlds**

**October 22: The Politics of Religion in the Home**

**Field notes, analytical notes and "theme" due**

Lis Harris, *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family*

**October 29: Religion and Gender Politics**

Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*

**November 5: Religion and the Politics of Race**

**Share fieldwork journal with partner in class**

Samuel G. Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church*  
God in Chinatown

**November 12: Vodou in New York**

**Field notes and analytical writing due**

Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*

Karen McCarthy Brown, "Writing about the Other Revisited"

**November 19: Diasporic Religion**

- Prema Kurien, "Becoming American by Becoming Hindu: Indian Americans Take Their Place at the Multicultural Table"
- Elizabeth McAlister, "The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism"
- Randal L. Hepner, "The House that Rasta Built: Church-Building and Fundamentalism Among New York Rastafarians"

**November 26: - NO CLASS MEETING**

*Draft of project due 12 noon*

**December 3: Final class presentations**

**December 10: Final draft of independent project due**