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

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Spotlight on Teaching
is published by the
American Academy of Religion
825 Houston Mill Road
Atlanta, GA 30329
Visit www.aarweb.org

spotlight on TEACHING

May 2003

Published by the American Academy of Religion
www.aarweb.org

Vol. 18, No.3

Teaching about Material Culture in Religious Studies

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Spotlight on Teaching Editor

TYPICALLY, MUSLIMS have a tasbih at hand to remember God. Tasbih means to exalt, praise and glorify God; and the prayer beads used to aid this glorification are also called tasbih, subha or misbaha. Like Hindu and Buddhist malas and Catholic rosaries, their essential function is to concentrate the mind to count devotions, prayers, and divine attributes. Each religious tradition has its own local lore about the beads, their craftsmanship, and their talismanic powers. Tasbihs are made of ninety-nine beads that signify the asma al-husna, the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God mentioned in the Qur'an.

The ubiquity of tasbihs in mosques, homes, and around the wrists of Muslim men and women illustrates the importance of dhikr or constant recollection of God in Islam. Always in search of pictures and videos to use in class, I found one of President Hamid Karzai in a meeting with Afghan leaders

holding prayer beads in his hands and another of Muslim men sitting in an Egyptian café talking while they fingered and counted their beads. A website called "Islam for Children" lists prayer beads among various essential Islamic artifacts including the prayer rug, prayer compass to determine the direction of Mecca, prayer caps, and Qur'an stand (<http://aschool.eduweb.co.uk/carolrb/islam/artefacts.html>).

So much for simple descriptions and catalogues of religious symbols in Islam. Things matter. At times, things matter more than the ideas from which they take shape. This hit home when I heard an elderly Muslim woman instruct her husband not to carry his tasbih on their flight from Toronto to New York a year after the tragic events of 9/11. This unexpected precaution poignantly problematized the tension and ambiguity of reckoning with religious symbols and artifacts in different contexts. In between the idea (as in thought and desire) of the tasbih (to glorify God) and its materiality (prayer beads) is a constructive and deconstructive space, which continues to require critical reflection.

The focus of this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, guest edited by Vivian-Lee Nyitray, is material culture in religious studies. A longstanding debate in the field of religion has been the relationship between religious beliefs and practices or the classic philosophical problem of spirit and matter, essence and manifestation, noumenon and phenomenon. In pedagogical terms, the dilemma surfaces in terms of striking the right balance between teaching about a religious tradition's ideas and principles versus teaching about its religious practices and artifacts. It is possi-

ble to do one to the exclusion of the other as well as to address both without theorizing the intimate yet ambivalent relationship between the two. For instance, until a few decades ago, occidental versions of Islam rooted exclusively in textual, normative sources managed to represent this cumulative historical tradition without any reference to how Muslims in different parts of the world actually expressed their faith in everyday life and practice. The pendulum now swings in the other direction as attention is drawn to the many discrete and varied cultural manifestations of Muslim life. This pedagogy is founded on the assumption that being Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and so on generates a particular type of material culture which embodies and replicates the teachings and requirements of a specific faith. It also emerges from the pressing need, voiced by our students, to understand other people's religious symbols in a pluralist society.

Yet, how to tackle both descriptively and theoretically the visible aspects of religion remains. The edifice of disciplinary-specific language used to construct diverse explanations of religious objects itself requires constant re-examination. Terms used in the classroom to "handle" religious objects including manifestation, sacred, hierophany, representation and so on are themselves implicitly structured on a dualistic metaphysics of reality. Thus, within the context of coming to understand religious life through, not in spite of, material culture, there is both opportunity and necessity to draw attention to the limitations of epistemological notions constantly at work in the acts of explanation. ■

Teaching Religion and Material Culture

Vivian-Lee Nyitray



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AS AN UNDERGRADUATE student at Syracuse University in the early 1970s, I had the great good fortune to enroll in several courses taught by H. Daniel Smith. A consummate teacher, he fostered in me (and countless others, without doubt) a lifelong fascination not just with “religion,” but with the intellectual, emotional, and material totality of religious worlds. What Smith realized was that a student’s interest and attention span is fickle and fleeting — even in those pre-MTV days. To capture it, an instructor’s material had to be vital, and it had to appeal to more than our intellectual curiosity. We had to be fully engaged with the subject. We were thus unprepared for our initial class “meeting”: the classroom was closed and dark, and a sign instructed us to report to the language lab and to request a particular item,

“For me, in the moment of his explanation, those small twists of cloth were suddenly and palpably imbued with the sacrality of deep devotion and respectful friendship.”

which turned out to be a tape-slide combination. As we viewed the first slide — a shot of Professor Smith’s smiling face — we heard a man’s voice on the tape welcome us to the course on Asian religious classics. As this gentle voice then guided us through the course manual, we saw illustrations drawn from the texts we’d be reading, saw photographs of sites relevant to the texts, and we listened to music, chant, and liturgy. Clearly, this would be — and was — a class like no other.

The impact that first “mediated” class had on me lingers still. In other hands, such a course would have been a straightforward reading and discussion of *The Analects*, *Ramayana*, and other “great books.” For Smith, texts were more than conceptual repositories: they were manifest inspiration for music, theater, art, sculpture, architecture — a seemingly endless array of

expressive cultural artifacts that could be seen, heard, and touched. Religion was neither solely cerebral nor an affair of the heart; it was thoroughly embodied; anyone who would hope to understand it had best be ready to study it in all its multifaceted glory. When the class read *The Bhagavadgita*, Smith brought in a set of bronze Vaishnava devotional images that he had acquired from friends in India. Oddly, at least to my eyes, each of the figures had a small piece of cloth wrapped around it. Smith explained that he’d been given the images on condition that he would treat them with respect; thus, even though the images had been cast to show the deities as clothed and bejeweled, they were not considered to be decently dressed unless real cloth at least partially enveloped them. For me, in the moment of his explanation, those small twists of cloth were suddenly and palpably imbued with the sacrality of deep devotion and respectful friendship. These images were not “gods,” but they were much more than symbols; their physical presence invoked and made warmly real the practice of bhakti devotionalism.

Since then, although trained in the textual study of classical Chinese traditions, I have nonetheless come to practice the study of religion in a manner significantly influenced by anthropology, ethnography, art history, and archaeology. Perhaps not unlike other fields, the study of Chinese religions has long been divided into several camps: the historical-philosophical textualists, the anthropologists, and the art historians. The art historians were always in a class by themselves, but between the philosophers and the ethnographers, well, it was clear who claimed the superior discipline! Scholars whose “serious” textual work was paralleled by observations on paper goods, food offerings, or other “popular” artifacts were sometimes treated lightly in years past. Recently, however, the historical, aesthetic, and ethnographic value of their collections has become obvious, and their publications on popular belief and practice are important source materials in their own right. Confucian traditions, for example, establish the family as the locus of religious identity, and thus the study of traditional Chinese homes

— their construction and orientation, their furnishings and adornment — now seems a natural subject for investigation. Even Buddhism, a tradition that rejects the material world as so much “dust,” nonetheless has been responsible for the production of a vast array of material goods, all of which provide significant keys to the interpretation of the tradition over time and across geographic space. Most importantly, the new consideration of materiality in Chinese traditions has facilitated conversations among scholars of diverse training and methodological orientation.

Scholars of the religions of indigenous peoples worldwide would find none of this new or unusual. They have long been at the forefront of material cultural studies, examining the ways in which textiles, food, architecture, personal adornment,

music, dance, and the production of implements all reveal aspects of a particular religious worldview and its associated practices. Some of this focus was prompted initially by the perceived paucity or absence of the classic subject and/or object of study in religion, texts or scriptures. Doctrinal discourses were then discerned in oral tradition, and also in the overarching “narrative” of daily life. Belatedly but happily, these insights have now come into the analysis of other religious traditions, notably the study of Christianity in general and its American variations in particular. In this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, a sampling of scholars and students share their diverse experiences in mediating material culture in the religious studies classroom.

An instructor desirous of shifting pedagogical attention beyond words on a page might reasonably turn the classroom gaze toward other aspects of the page, namely, photographs and illustrations — an entry to the field of visual culture. Recent

in the field, as contributors Ivan Strenski and Jonathan H. X. Lee suggest. Lee highlights the questions that arise as students navigate religion in three-dimensions, and he points out the rich paths that can lead onward from a single field experience. Strenski, in addition to adumbrating a theoretical perspective on the importance of material culture for the study of religion, shares the questions he has devised to guide his students’ forays into material religious spaces. In a somewhat different vein, contributor Richard A. Freund analyzes some of the pitfalls of both mis- and overinterpretation that await students and scholars alike in their encounters with the seemingly “objective” objects of biblical and rabbinical archaeology.

One might also bring the outside world into the classroom. Contributor Leslie Smith recalls a guest practitioner: a Wiccan who, in her choice of clothing and in the artifacts of *The Craft* that she brought along for the students’ examination, taught volumes about her tradition,



Japanese ema, displaying a Shinto kami or shrine on one side; the other side is left blank for the writing of petitions and wishes. (Photo courtesy of V.-L. Nyitray)

scholarship on the relationship between visual culture and religion reveals much about the role that images play, not only in the imagination or in ritual implementation, but in the material reality of everyday religious life as well. Textual narratives also pave the way for consideration of visual narratives in media as discrete as architecture and film. Contributor Judith Weisenfeld encourages her students to move between the realms of visual and material culture in her course on American religion and film; in addition to screening films for discussion, she also directs student attention to the study of published catalogs and movie memorabilia.

One might also move from sight to site, as it were, by engaging student attention out

about the local community “shared” by everyone present, and about the craft of teaching as well. But bringing the material culture of religion into the classroom carries certain challenges with it. Strenski asks, “Who lugs this stuff to class?” The answer is: I do, for one. I am the bag lady of Religious Studies. In addition to the music tapes and CDs that I carry to class for aural illustration, I bring Hindu and Buddhist images, Chinese paper funerary goods, Tibetan prayer flags, Soka Gakkai bumper stickers, Taoist merit books, and posters depicting everything from highly unpleasant Hindu hells to the Chinese sea goddess Mazu hovering protectively over pleasure craft out for a day’s sail. I bring

Material Culture and the Varieties of Religious Imagination

Ivan Strenski



Ivan Strenski is the Holstein Family and Community Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside. In addition to being the North American editor of *Religion*, he is the author of five books and approximately fifty articles. His most recent books are *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism and Social Thought (2002)* and *Durkheim and the Jews of France (1997)*.

OUTSIDE the venerable field of archaeology of religion, a relatively small troop of pioneering colleagues have developed the field of study of the *materiality* of religious life. Here, I list the likes of Colleen McDannell, Thomas Kselman, Lionel Rothkrug, Rosalind Hackett, J. Z. Smith, Richard Hecht, Roger Friedland, Caroline Walker Bynum, Gary Laderman, and Peter Brown, among others. I wish to pay tribute to them by pointing out some of what I take to be implications of their work, and to offer the beginnings of some theorizing of this work. I omit Eliade from this list, but certainly not because we cannot learn about certain modes of organizing time and space from him. We can. I omit him because his gaze was always fixed elsewhere than on this world, far over the horizon of “things.” While Eliade was particularly sensitive to religious space, and to a riotous array of concrete sacred objects, such as trees, ropes, rocks, and such, I would be prepared to argue that he never really accepted religious materiality on its own terms, in the *religiousness of its material historicity*. For Eliade, material things were religious in spite of being material — because they transcended their historicity and materiality in being symbols of divine archetypes. But for the present author, at least, the materiality of religion needs no external justification to affirm its religiousness. Religion is fully and legitimately material — whatever else it may be — because religion is, at the very least, part of being human for many, if not all, people. No excuses therefore need to be made to focus on material religious culture. Instead, we need aggressively to exploit the vast resources that exist for understanding religion by studying material religious culture. Within the brief compass of this essay, I shall attempt both to make some theoretical points about the study of material religious culture and to show some preliminary results of how I have tried to operationalize some of these theoretical viewpoints in the classroom.

Reluctance about taking seriously the materiality of religious life is furthermore

stunning when one considers the tremendous quantity and quality of these resources. Take first material religious culture of a *visual* sort. Consider the masses of data from the graphic, plastic, or electronic arts — both popular and “high,” the scads of artifacts of all sizes and shapes — the sculptures, scapulars, phylacteries, prayer rugs, and more, the masses of architecture — everything from the Cathedral of Chartres to the Ka’aba, from heiaus to stupas, the numerous sacred sites — whether “spaces” or “places” — the holy cities, holy lands, and holy territorial domains, the sacred springs, mountains, and precincts, the pilgrimage routes and their destinations, and so on.

Moreover, while *visual* materials and media have a way of pushing to the forefront of our perceptions, we also need to extend the notion of material religious culture to include all *tactile* or *sensate* religious entities and events. The study of material religious culture would therefore include all that we access by way of our auditory abilities, e.g., music or the sound of one’s breathing in Vipassana meditation; or by way of our olfactory capacities, e.g., the smell of incense, the “odor of sanctity”; or what we take in by means of taste and touch, e.g., the bite of bitter herbs, the slickness of sweet rice, the vapors of communion wine, the feel of the eternal stone of the Wailing Wall or the Ka’aba, or that sudden, if brief, chill of a ritual bath or baptism, or the sharp blow on the back as one sits in imperfect *zazen*. Material religious culture is composed of all the *sensate* entities and events of religion. Until recently, by contrast, we have been spending most of our time thinking about thought.

This neglect of a wholehearted embrace of the material dimension of religion is not surprising, given the somewhat iconoclastic, certainly intellectualist and textualist, Reformation roots of the modern study of religion. Linked as it naturally is and with a so-called “spiritual” — bloodless — conception of the nature of religion, most of the nineteenth century founders of the study of religion decried those religions in which materiality thrived. Albert Réville, that well-placed contemporary of Durkheim and founder of the “science of religion” in France, for example, would often rail against “religious materialism.” Any implication that “religious forms” were “indispensable receptacles of the divine reality” was to be rudely rejected. For Réville and other Protestant founders of the study of religion, this condemnation of the “religious materialism” of ritual really amounted to a theological polemic against Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and all the other “pagan” kindred religions that embraced ritual. Any expression of religious materialism, such as ritual, was always more or less “superstitious.” In the spirit of what sometimes seems like a still-vital Victorian moralistic religiosity, Réville argued that a really religious person would inform their sensibility with a religious “spiritualism,” which results from a “more elevated moral and religious sense.” “Real” religion was a matter of “spirit and truth.” An appreciation of material religious culture is, therefore, set totally against these spiritualist assumptions about the nature of religion. Tellingly, these condemnations of materiality in religion are sometimes linked explicitly with a familiar list of terrors

concerning the body, sex and all the rest. For Albert Réville, ritual, in general, was judged as dangerously “sensuous!” The nineteenth century Catholic cult of the sacred heart drove Réville into a perfect frenzy of sexual terror about its deviant psycho-physical causes. It represented to him a clear clinical “case . . . of mania erotico-religiosa, superinduced by a very hysterical constitution.” [Réville, “Contemporary Materialism in Religion: The Sacred Heart.” *Theological Review* 44 (January 1874): 138-156, see especially pp. 148-152].

“Material religious culture is composed of all the sensate entities and events of religion. Until recently . . . we have been spending most of our time thinking about thought.”

“Imagination Is Funny . . .” and Essential

How, then, do we exploit the materiality of religious life for the study of religion? The first task before us is, I would claim, to provide a conceptual and theoretical framework within which to generate durable thinking about material religious culture. How should we begin, at least, to locate material religious culture within a larger conceptual and interpretive framework? And, how would we do that in such a way that it would put such thinking into fruitful relation with the other dimensions of religion, such as myth, beliefs, social organization, experience, ritual, and morality? Perhaps because of the hold that the visual has on our consciousness, the modality of the “arts” seems particularly to recommend itself as a place we might begin. For me, this natural-seeming affinity with the arts recommends that we begin to think about material religious culture in terms of its being a product of the imagination. We speak readily of the aesthetic imagination and even of the moral, civic, sexual, commercial, and political imaginations and so on, so why not take seriously the *religious imagination*? Why cannot religion be as much a locus in which the imagination can be seen to operate as many other domains of life?

In this light, the materiality of religious life presents no great mystery or puzzle. When people imagine things, they typically realize their imaginings in media. We can readily recognize how religious beliefs have been a medium in which creative religious thinkers have done a great deal of imagining. There are Four Noble Truths. But why four, and not eight, like the Noble Eightfold Path, or three, like the Three Body Doctrine, and so on? Similarly, in material terms, why are stupas made in great mounds and not four-square blocks like the Ka’aba? And why then, in East Asia, are there not those familiar South Asian burial mounds, but those brilliant multistoried pagodas? When the monks of old Ireland fashioned their hermitages, they did so in beehive shapes, rather than in block houses or pyramids. Was this only an accident of limitations imposed by the building materials? Or, is something else going on? And, what might that be? The religious imagination is “funny” this way. It can be as amazing and unpre-

dictable, but nonetheless as effective as the imaginative choice of a cigar by Churchill or the three-cornered hat by partisans of the Enlightenment. A good place to start to understand material religious culture then is to see its contents as the playing out of an imagination that is religious. What are its rules? Why do some imaginings work, and others fall flat on their faces? Why do some things “capture the imagination” and other fail so to do — and for whom? Some sacred music keeps getting sung year after year, and not, one supposes, just out of inertia, but because it resonates in some important ways with

some folks. A celebrated new cathedral has risen in Los Angeles at the cost of many millions of dollars and under the direction of a world-class European architect. Some, however, have judged it dead on arrival, and will only resort to it because there is no alternative. Why? Many, therefore, are the creations of the religious imagination, but many as well are those that fall into oblivion. Which ones? Why these and not others, and so on? These are only some of the questions that seeing material religious culture in terms of the imagination might raise. Other theoretical “takes” will raise other kinds of questions. That to me is all to the good.

Interrogating Material Religion with a “Proactive Mind”

Implied in my putting questions or “problems” to the fore is that we need to do much more than simply to present the *data* of religion’s materiality. Yet, since it would be easy to become seduced by the ravishing imagery of the religious imagination or grounded in place by contact with real religious objects, we must take care not to fall prey to the heresy of the Immaculate Perception. The theoretical and conceptual dimension of our work should go hand in hand with the empirical. And, so, I am urging that we prepare students for coming to the data of material religious culture with a “proactive mind.”

Where teaching is concerned, we all recognize that students will unavoidably come to the data with their own “takes,” with their own principles and/or prejudices, with their own set of questions and problems, and at the risk of seeming pretentious, with their own *theories*. Their perceptions will not be pure and innocent, nor need they be. But, we must strive to make these a *prioris* explicit by expressing them in some objective form — a course journal entry, a short “reaction” paper, an in-class “brainstorming” assignment in which lists are made in order to elicit the preperceptual data of the *minds* of the students — as far as that is possible.

Exposing students to material religious culture, then, should not be like dumping

See STRENSKI p.iv

STRENSKI, from p.iii

them at the local antique shop, pleasingly cluttered with assorted curios. They should be sent in with a "shopping list" of some sort, whether of their own or of the instructor's making. We might as well accept that they will have a secret list anyway. So, we might as well train them to acknowledge and encourage the *proactive* mind. One way to do this would be to do an inventory that would require formulating questions about the data *before* the data are encountered.

Interrogating Material Religion: A Check-list

Let me refer the reader to the specific assignment that I use in a course on the sacred and taboo that I have taught for the past two years to undergraduates at the University of California, Riverside. Students are required to do a field visit to a sacred site and to write a short paper addressed to the question of how its sacredness is engineered by the manipulation of space and selection of place. (Students are also encouraged to supply their own questions.)

In terms of this specific interrogation of material religious culture, I first concentrate on getting students to "see" what they are "looking" at — carefully to observe the sites chosen by them. To do this, I simply pose a series of questions that force them to think in material terms about the places and spaces visited. This initial interrogation also invites students to incorporate the theoretical reading they will have already done — but at this stage in an informal way. Systematic thinking can be left until a little later. Here is a selection from the present list of over two dozen questions that I provide to students about the overall descriptive character of the site being observed. First are a series of questions about the overall site: its setting, location, and situation:

- What makes it obvious that this space or place is a sacred space or place?
- What's nearby? What's conspicuously far away?
- What is the elevation of the site — high ground, low ground? Mounded, depressed or flat?
- Is it bounded? How are boundaries marked? Against what do the boundaries protect? Are they (merely) symbolic or do they prevent entry/escape?
- Is the site open and public? Or restricted, private, closed? Free entry or an admission charge? If a charge, who gets the proceeds? If free, who subsidizes the site?

Then come questions about the insides of the site, its contents:

- How is the space within configured? Any contours?
- Is there decoration or lack thereof? How are these used, designed, situated?
- What is the social context of the contents of the space? Who is it for? Who is included, who excluded? Who owns it? What are the terms of ownership? What about the economic value of the contents — cheap, expensive?
- What senses are engaged? Is it quiet or noisy inside? Is it light or dark inside? Any odors typical of the

place? Tastes? Colors? Images? Tactile surfaces?

Finally, all students are required to answer two fundamental questions about the sacred status of the sites chosen. Here, of course, is where they are in effect being invited to employ and defend various theoretical viewpoints in answering this final pair of questions. I ask them to consider the following questions in terms both of their own idea of sacred, in terms of our society's general and common ideas of sacred, and in terms of any of the authors we have read:

- What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior more sacred than it is now in its present condition?
- What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior less sacred — more *profane* — than it is now in its present condition, even to the point of a total loss of sacredness?

Remarks on Some Results of Interrogating Material Religion

In their assignments, most students chose standard sacred sites such as churches, California mission sites, local temples, mosques, synagogues, cemeteries, and such. Others have gone off on more original ventures, such as focusing on roadside accident site shrines that are so common here in the Southwest. Another student explored the sacredness of the family dinner table — a particularly charged site given the widespread practice today of individual family members drifting off with their individual trays of supper to sit alone gazing at their own individual TV sets!

Notable here is how the students displaying the most originality in selecting their projects revealed how fruitful it is to study religious materiality as a work of the imagination. Religion can emerge in unexpected and novel forms, and it is the creative student who will observe it. Such a student grasps the way the religious imagination works and is open to its often unprecedented efflorescence. Indeed, religious folk themselves may be among the last to comprehend the fuller extent of much of what they are doing. Historians of Christianity, like Peter Brown, have shown how popular pre-Christian spiritual fashions for visions or care of the dead have at times had a great vogue, were then taken up by Christians and, as it were, "baptized" into respectability, only later to fade as the religious imagination turned towards other devices.

In this connection, let me draw the reader's attention to a project undertaken along with this course on the sacred and taboo. This is the Spontaneous Shrines website and digital project, located at www.shrines.ucr.edu. Funded by the University of California, Riverside's Information Technology grant, this site has begun to assemble and archive the data of what I call "spontaneous shrines," such as became so much a part of the national reaction to the attacks of September 11. Although the website is still under construction, major parts of it are ready for visits. There, readers will find not only World Trade Center images from New York City and Venice, California, but also a set of images of a spontaneous shrine from Honolulu in honor of a beloved local citizen. In coming months, in addition to links and interpretive tools, I shall also be adding a collection of images taken by one of the stu-

dents from my sacred and taboo course depicting roadside accident spontaneous shrines in the Inland Empire region of Southern California. The site is open and I invite interested parties to contribute postings to the site or just to visit the site to view our work as it progresses.

The main point to be noted in connection with popular material religious culture is again its often unpremeditated character. Just as there is a pop art or folk art that simply and spontaneously appears in public spaces — like certain fashions in dress and personal adornment (backwards hats, piercing, long or short hair, etc.), or the graffiti art of modern cities — so there is also a parallel phenomenon of spontaneous, mostly urban, popular folk religion. Like these representations of popular imagination, folk spirituality or religion just "happens" too.

One theoretical consequence of my approach in the spontaneous shrines project is to destroy the distinction, often touted popularly these days, between religion and so-called "spirituality." Thus, although "spirituality" is often opposed to "religion," their similarities strike one as far more prominent than their supposed differences. Both move in a world that honors reverence, sacredness, and holiness, or the transgressive, taboo, and forbidden; both suggest realms of being not exhausted by the world of everyday quantifiable life; both imagine a cosmic, rather than merely local, frame of reference for human action, whether that be the karmic realm of samsara and release from it, the universe, natural world, or some other vast reference of existence. For this reason, I consider "religion" and "spirituality" sufficiently related terms, and leave it to others to quibble about the differences.

A second distinction that this approach offends is that between the so-called "fine" religious artifacts from that abundance of the humble, often mass-produced artifacts of the "popular" religious imagination. I believe it is necessary to take seriously literally everything from the "fine" grave-stones or lavish shrines of "high" religious culture to their poor "cousins" such as "plastic Jesuses" or Kuan-yin playing cards. Each has a role to play in making up the sum of religious data, the tangible expression of the religious imagination. For these purposes, the distinction between "fine" and popular art, useful perhaps in other contexts, serves no purpose. By paying little or no heed to this distinction between "high" and "popular" religion, we are also well placed to exploit the insights of radical movements in the study of religion, such as the Collège de Sociologie, and its investigators of the "sacredness of everyday life," Michel Leiris or Roger Caillois.

Practical Problems: The Incredible Heaviness of Material Religion

Material religious culture can thus be so attractive as data, both for research and teaching, that it may be easy to overlook its drawbacks. This is to say that a major practical problem encountered in studying the products of the *material* religious imagination is, of course, its very *materiality*. Anyone who has ever envied one's colleagues in art history or film studies, for example, with their ability to transfix students with lectures enhanced by colorful images and cinematic drama, only needs to spend some time with them as they labor to map strategy about what materials to use, how to sequence them, how to shift between lecture and visual

presentation, and so on. Most of us are, of course, familiar with these issues. But, with the increased reference to material religious culture, the problems we already comprehend here will only magnify and proliferate in often unpredictable directions. With the data of material religious culture, unlike that of beliefs, for instance, we encounter *inventory* and *stocking* problems. Slides and videos may be problem enough. But what of family Bibles, censors, ghee, frangipani blossoms? Where do we stash this stuff that "has weight and takes up space," as our high school physics textbooks were keen to remind us? Who lugs it to class, and so on? We may even be tempted to revert to simple talk, with all its blessed lightness of being, and to those tried and true, eminently portable texts. Some may even be tempted only to talk about religious talk (beliefs, texts, and such) and forget cumbersome material religious culture altogether. Various strategies will simply have to be devised to manage these problems, knowing full well that there is no way in advance to judge whether advantages outweigh problems. We will want to be alert and to plot how these two curves — advantages and drawbacks — intersect and veer off in their own directions.

One strategy to deal with the problem of the "incredible heaviness of material religion," is to transform it into a lighter medium. While there's nothing quite like the "really real," sometimes the *virtually* real is the best one can do. We sometimes need therefore to overcome the inconvenience of the very materiality of religion that we seek to represent. If I cannot visit Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California, because I am in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, I would at least like to be there "virtually." If I do not have the Rustavi choir from Georgia around the corner, I would at least like to be able to hear them "virtually." This, if anything, is a job for digital technology — for the digital camera and video, for MP3 technology, and for all the possibilities now being unleashed for web-based publishing. The Web includes an increasingly growing list of possible kinds of "sites" — not only the standard "bulletin board" where information is posted, but digital media albums, where the sights and sounds of religion in material form can be accessed, or "tours" of actual or imagined places, ideally in three-dimensions, whether interactive or not. Overcoming the incredible heaviness (and, often, long distance) of material religious culture, my Spontaneous Shrines website and digital project may serve as an example of one way that I have tried to make things better for students of religious materiality. ♣

Resources

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Teaching Religion and American Film

Judith Weisenfeld



Judith Weisenfeld is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion at Vassar College, where she teaches courses on religion in America, African-American religious history, and religion and American film. She is at work on a project on African-American religion in American film, 1929-1950, to be published by the University of California Press.

IT GOES WITHOUT saying that most of our students respond favorably to the use of movies as part of their academic work and many instructors have incorporated films as a component of courses on religion in America. Our students can be sophisticated interpreters of visual culture and are eager to engage films both as entertainment and as objects for serious intellectual inquiry. In a course I have developed on "Religion and American Film," I have chosen to place film at the center rather than employing it simply to illustrate or raise issues about significant moments or characters in American religious history. Over the course of the semester, my students and I engage film as a case study for thinking about the history of relationships between religion and popular culture in America and examine a set of films as material artifacts of particular historical moments. While it is neither a conventional film studies course, nor a traditional survey of American religious history, I have structured the course so that my students become familiar with scholarly approaches to the study of religion and film, learn how to analyze and discuss films in historical context, and, most importantly, have an opportunity to explore ways in which representations of religion help to shape our understandings of Americanness, especially in relation to ethnicity, race, class, gender, and national origin.

The course is organized chronologically, beginning in 1915, to emphasize changing relationships between American religious institutions and sensibilities and the film industry. One of my primary goals in taking students through this history is to convey the complexity of the interactions, not allowing them to assume that filmmakers and studios were uninterested in or scornful of religion, nor that religious institutions and individuals were unequivocally suspicious of the power of the medium and of the interests of filmmakers. To this end, we devote considerable attention to the use of film and film-related artifacts by religiously grounded social reformers and by churches. We consider the incorporation of films into the work of churches, both to provide informal entertainment and to complement or enhance ministers' sermons. Along with viewing segments of early Bible films, we also examine catalogues, such as the 1923 *Catalogue of Non-*

Theatrical Motion Pictures, Inc., through which distributors marketed these films and used testimonials to argue for the inclusion of motion pictures in the religious practices of American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. We also look at broadsides, like one for a Bible Chautauqua lecture in New Haven, Connecticut in 1926 at which the lecturers screened *Martin Luther, His Life and Time*, promoted as offering "8 stupendous reels on the Reformation." Social reformers also saw film as useful for highlighting social problems like crime, prostitution, corruption in the American legal system, and corporate greed. Raoul Walsh's 1915 film, *Regeneration*, based on the memoir of New York gang leader Owen Kildare and his story of transformation under the guidance of a settlement house worker, serves to introduce students to the genre of the social problem film.

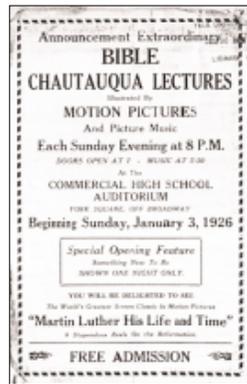
At the same time that we acknowledge and explore some of the ways in which religious institutions and individuals made productive use of the movies in the period of early film, we also devote attention to censorship, arguably the

“My students and I engage film as a case study for thinking about the history of relationships between religion and popular culture in America and examine a set of films as material artifacts of particular historical moments.”

topic most written about in film histories that engage religion. Here we consider the informal mechanisms of censorship employed in the 1930s by such groups as the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, the Legion of Decency, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, as well as the development of formal mechanisms of censorship in the National Board of Review, the Studio Relations Committee of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), and later the Production Code Administration of the MPPDA. We examine as well the influence of clergy and lay people in the development of censorship guidelines in this period. As a case study, I ask students to interpret Frank Capra's 1934 film, *The Miracle Woman*, which takes Pentecostal revivalist Aimee Semple McPherson as the model for its main character, in the context of discourses about "the fallen woman" film of the early 1930s.

Another theme that runs throughout the course is the contribution of American movies to the process of constructing of religion, race, and ethnicity. Such films as D. W. Griffith's 1919 *Broken Blossoms*, Alan Crosland's 1927 *The Jazz Singer*, King Vidor's 1919 *Hallelujah*, Leo McCarey's 1945 *The Bells of St. Mary's*, and Elia Kazan's 1947 *Gentleman's Agreement* serve well to encourage students to consider how filmic representations of the religious practices and lives of ethnic and racialized groups contributed to the process of making meaning of race and ethnicity in the American context and projected ideas about appropri-

ate and inappropriate religion. Older films like Spencer Williams's 1941 *The Blood of Jesus* and his 1944 *Go Down, Death*, both of which fall into the genre of race films produced for black audiences, and later films such as Charles Burnett's 1990 *To Sleep with Anger* and Julie Dash's 1993 *Daughters of the Dust* allow students to think about the responses of African-American filmmakers to mainstream Hollywood uses of black religious practices.



Poster to accompany the showing of *Martin Luther, His Life and Time*, touting "8 Stupendous Reels on the Reformation" (Photo courtesy of J. Weisenfeld)

The course also gives the students an opportunity to take up a number of other topics in the history of religion in American film, including changing approaches to filming biblical stories (from Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 *The Ten Commandments* to Martin Scorsese's 1998 *The Last Temptation of Christ*), the relationship between religion and horror films (Roman Polanski's 1968 *Rosemary's Baby*, William Friedkin's 1973 *The Exorcist*, and Richard Donner's 1976 *The Omen*), and the uses of film by contemporary evangelicals and Mormons to reach a new market audience (Robert Marcarelli's 1999 *The Omega Code*, Victor Sarin's 2000 *Left Behind*, and Richard Dutcher's 2001 *Brigham City*).

Teaching this course has presented a number of challenges. Although it is easy to grab students by placing film at the center of a course, I have found that they sometimes become frustrated in dealing with the demand that they think carefully about historical context, our primary methodological approach. In addition, some students have difficulty engaging films that rely on narrative and visual conventions that differ from those to which they are accustomed, particularly given the ubiquity of MTV style and pace in contemporary media culture. I have also encountered difficulty in finding readings that deal with the particular films in which I am interested and that situate the films in historical context as opposed to analyzing their mythic or archetypal religious structures. Nevertheless, it has been a rewarding experience developing and teaching the course; I have learned from my students as they have contributed a great deal to my own understanding, both of the history of religion in American film and of film in the history of American religion. ■

Past Spotlight on Teaching Topics

November 1992	General Issues of Teaching Religious Studies
May 1993	Teaching African Religions
February 1995	The Introductory Course
February 1996	General Issues of Teaching Religious Studies
November 1996	Alter(ed) Sexualities: Bringing Lesbian and Gay Studies to the Religion Classroom
May 1997	Cases and Course Design
November 1997	Insider, Outsider, and Gender Identities in the Religion Classroom
May 1998	Teaching Religion Using Film
November 1998	Teaching the Bible: Initiations and Transformations
May 1999	Syllabi Development
November 1999	Teaching for the Next Millennium: Top Choices of Significant Works on Teaching and Pedagogy
May 2000	Theory/Practice Learning: Models in Violence Studies and Conflict Resolution
September 2000	Teaching about the Holocaust
Spring 2001	Teaching Religion and Music
Fall 2001	Issues in Teaching Religion and Theology in Great Britain
March 2002	Multiculturalism and the Academic Study of Religion in the Schools
October 2002	Teaching Religious Studies and Theology in Community Colleges
May 2003	Teaching about Material Culture in Religious Studies

Teaching with Food

Daniel Sack



Daniel Sack is Program Officer for the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. He was the Associate Director of the Material History of American Religion Project (www.materialreligion.org) and is the author of *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (St. Martin's, 2000).

religion. Given my background and teaching experience, most of my examples are drawn from Christian traditions, but you can probably come up with parallels in the tradition you are teaching.

Teaching with food provides a *comparative* perspective. As the truism notes, everyone eats. And just about everyone endows food with some religious meaning. That means you can compare and contrast religious traditions, with food as the common theme. How are the Christian Eucharist and Hindu offerings different? What do Jewish kosher law and African taboos have in common? What does it mean when Buddhists start having American-style potlucks? You can do the same thing across time as well — looking at how communion practices changed from the first century to the present, for instance. This comparative perspective shows our students that religion is of variety.

The topic also allows teachers to make their classes more *experiential*. Recent pedagogical practices call for engaging students through their own experiences. I have found that almost everyone has a story to tell about religion and food — a family potluck story, or something about communion. Encourage your students to tell their story. When they connect their experience with the theory and content of your course, they understand it in a deeper way. They can also connect with other people's experience through observer-participation exercises. Require them to attend a food-centered ritual. Ask them to analyze a family meal. Such assignments encourage your students to see religion in action. With food, as with other forms of material culture, learning



Dinner, ushers association of St. Paul's Church, Chicago, 1940 (Photo courtesy of D. Sack)

important community-shaping event, like a youth group pizza party. Its preparation can be an ethical action, in the form of vegetarian cooking or serving of a soup

Obviously, food has implications for *ethics* as well. What do you eat and why? Even in Christianity, a tradition with few official food taboos, eating is fraught with

EVERYONE EATS. It's a truism, but it's a truism useful in teaching about religion. Eating is essential for human survival, and thus about as close to a universal as we can get. But, as anthropologist Mary Douglas (a guru for material culture studies) points out, "Food is a field of action. It is a medium in which other levels of categorization become manifest." (Douglas, 30) People show who they are and what they believe through their food. Eating is universal,

“Eating is universal, but what people eat and the way they eat it reveals a culture's significant particularities.”

but what people eat and the way they eat it reveals a culture's significant particularities. Everyday acts display a community's commitments, beliefs, and practices. All of this means that food is a great way to teach about religion.

I'll illustrate a few of the advantages of using food as a focus for teaching about

becomes more immediate when it is directly experienced.

A food-centered perspective offers a *thick description* of religious life. Food has multiple roles in a religious community. It can be the center of a ritual, as with the Passover Seder. It can be part of an

“A food-centered perspective offers a thick description of religious life.”

kitchen. A focus on food reminds our students that religion is more than just theology, ethics, ritual, or practice; it is a complex mixture of behaviors and beliefs.

Because food involves so much of religious life, it connects with a variety of issues. For instance, food has clear links to religion and gender concerns. Ask your students, who cooks and who eats? Traditionally, women have done most of the cooking in Christian churches. There has also been a great deal of recent scholarship about gender, body issues, and food — ranging from medieval nuns to contemporary teenagers. How does gender affect what we eat? Consider, for example, this passage from *How to Plan Church Meals* (1962), "Sandwiches for the tea table are quite a different thing from the 'he-man' sandwiches you want for a picnic, or the meal-in-one you serve to teenagers. They are delicate, made for nibbling-and looking pretty is far more important than providing nourishment." This paragraph reveals a worldview, full of gender relations and social expectations.

Similarly, food raises questions about religion and *class*. Many American religious communities are involved in some way in feeding the hungry. But what do they provide, and why? What do they expect of the hungry people that they feed? Some soup kitchens, for instance, require their clients to attend prayer services and go through Christian-based recovery programs. Others simply provide the food and hope that the guests pick up some faith from the atmosphere. There is also great variety in the menu. Many soup kitchens serve food gleaned from leftovers and donations, while others prepare meals to order from fresh ingredients. What do these differences tell us about those religious communities?

rights and wrongs. In the nineteenth century, food reformers like Sylvester Graham advised Americans to change their diets for the sake of their souls, and *Good Housekeeping* told readers "How to Eat, Drink, and Sleep as Christians Should." In the twentieth, hunger activists urged Christians to become vegetarians so that the world's hungry would have enough. Many religious traditions have similar systems of food taboos — formal or informal.

As Douglas says, food is a field of action. It reveals a great deal about who people are and what they believe. As a result, a focus on food can be a creative way to engage students in the study of religion. Food is ubiquitous, so there's always something students can connect with. It's no wonder that the study of food has become hot across academia, resulting in a rich scholarship. It also has real promise in the religion classroom.

Here are a few classic resources to start with.

Bynum, Carolyn Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Counihan, Carole and Penny Van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Douglas, Mary. "Standard Social Uses of Food," in *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984.

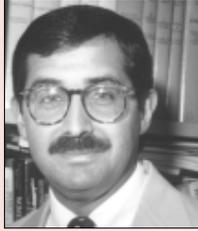
Feeley-Harnik, Gillian. *The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981. •



Church sign in River Falls, AL, September 1999. (Photo courtesy of James Hudnut-Beumler)

Teaching Biblical Archaeology and Material Culture as Part of Teaching Judaism

Richard A. Freund



Richard A. Freund is Director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford and Professor of Jewish History. He has served as Director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project, the John and Carol Merrill Cave of Letters Excavations Project, and the Qumran Excavations Project in Israel. For the past six years (1996-2002), he was Editor in Chief of Spotlight on Teaching.

Archaeology, Material Culture, and Judaism

DO NOT WANT to miss the big picture about the use of archaeology and material culture in the study of the Bible and Ancient Judaism. If Judaism is a construct that has developed over the past two-to-three thousand years from biblical religion it is important to show how these developments take place. Often it is a fairly subtle interpretive literary journey that takes the students from a biblical institution to a post-biblical ritual or law. Biblical Judaism is not the same as post-biblical Judaism, and simple forays into the material culture of the Bible and post-biblical Judaism can drive home this point much quicker than semesters of literary analysis. In-class slides, videos, and Internet visuals help but lack the concreteness of demonstrative material culture. Field (excavation) studies provide a different form of learning than can be experienced in the classroom. I have been teaching ancient Judaism using archaeology and field excavations for almost two decades with amazing results and enthusiasm from my students. My work has been almost exclusively in Israel, but I have toured with my students in Jordan and Egypt to fill out their educations. Archaeology is an exciting and hands-on

Work in the field consists of excavating, recording, photographing, and surveying. With proper supervision and training, students can do any of these tasks.

way to introduce often skeptical and jaded students to an exciting and “real” study of the Bible and Judaism. It is impossible to give them the same “feeling” for the reality of the history they study only through books and from sitting in a classroom.

For students, the fact that objects and writings from antiquity can be found in their original and pristine state means that they are “objective” objects, i.e., verifiable, quantifiable, and therefore true. Nothing could be farther from the reality of the situation in the study of material culture.

The “rocks, linens, wood, beads, metals” do not really “speak”; objects and writings are only intelligible through the process of subjective interpretation, and this process is open to speculation and reasonable hypothesizing. But alas, the “imagined” notion of archaeology is so much stronger than the actual study of archaeology that it gives archaeology a more objective feel than, say, the thousands of years of interpretation that biblical and rabbinic texts have enjoyed. As a teacher, I wish to exploit students’ inherent interest in the unknown (“mystery”) aspects of archaeology but at the same time to lower the expectation level by telling students that interpretation is a part of the process.

The other aspect is to realize that the main “nuts and bolts” of archaeology are not the big discoveries but the small pieces of evidence: research in ceramics, petrology, dating through palaeography (when written materials are available), or C14 studies (for organic matter remains). All these are analyzed through comparative and complex mixes of anthropology, sociology, biology, chemistry, and related sciences that add up, slowly, to a larger picture of group, a society, a city, a tribe, or an individual. The cumulative argument of archaeology, often missed by the cinema and popular culture, creates a picture that, unlike the interpreted model of the rabbis and later Jewish historians, is almost always an unknown to the archaeologist at the beginning but which ultimately becomes clear through hypothesis and evaluation. It is a wonderful model for teaching about religion and how religious research accumulates to give a picture of a whole group.

From Theory to Practice

Archaeology usually means the study of antiquities or ancient artifacts as ends in themselves. Biblical archaeology is the study of these artifacts in light of the literary texts that are associated with the Bible. My definition of the “Bible” is somewhat unorthodox: I include in my course any texts that may affect our understanding of the Bible’s meaning and, especially, our understanding of the material culture at the sites at which we work. Our “archaeology” often involves anthropological studies of local indigenous customs and life, but the main part of our study in the field involves teaching what artifacts tell us *about our site*. The sustained interac-

tion — seven hours per day, five days per week — in close working environments in the field-classroom lends itself to teaching not only about the artifacts but also about how texts relate to artifacts.

While some archaeology is done in laboratories and some in libraries, the cornerstone of all biblical archaeology is field excavation. The whole sense of “discovery” that we try to animate our students to understand in our courses in the classroom is the goal of this process of field excavations. This is not the place to explore some of the traditional goals of archaeology but certainly into the very recent past, the goals of field excavation were geared more for pure research ends rather than teaching. Professional archaeologists would hire laborers and often just supervise their work in the field. They then would take the finds back to a lab, analyze them with the help of experts who often

“The ‘rocks, linens, wood, beads, metals’ do not really ‘speak’; objects and writings are only intelligible through the process of subjective interpretation, and this process is open to speculation and reasonable hypothesizing.”

were not with them in the field, and then write up the results for the archaeologist of record who ultimately would write a final report. These results were used in turn by literary scholars of the Bible.

This was a very inefficient way to get the results out to the public, and the workers/students were seen as one of the least important links in the chain of information collection. Even when massive numbers of volunteer student laborers have been used in some major archaeological projects of the past thirty years, such as the excavating of Masada, the City of David in Jerusalem, and Caesarea, often the educational or teaching possibilities were subordinated to the research goals of the excavation. Today the situation is different: the value of educated student laborers increases research goals. Archaeology is a tremendous opportunity for teaching and learning about the past and about the scientific method of how we know anything about anything in the modern world.

There is no misleading those of you who have never been on an excavation. Excavations are carried out by manual labor; we may be assisted by a tractor for heavy-duty jobs but the bulk of the work is done by individuals who lift, sift, clean, and sometimes remove rocks and dirt. Work in the field consists of excavating, recording, photographing, and surveying. With proper supervision and training, students can do any of these tasks. A tell (mound) is divided into a network of squares measuring five by five meters. Each square or architectural unit is known

as a locus. As soon as architectural units are observed, the excavation is carried on accordingly. Walls, floors, etc., are carefully excavated and cleaned for reconstruction. Finds are collected in baskets. Preliminary analysis of finds is done daily at the site. Finds, baskets, and the development of each locus are recorded on a locus card and a field diary. Individual students work their way through the different tasks so that at the end of a three-week session they have done almost every task from lifting rocks, excavating, measuring, recording, and surveying, to recording, pottery analysis, and explaining finds.

Three to five students are assigned to a locus. Each has an advanced student or staff member who is a locus supervisor. Each area in the mound has a faculty area supervisor skilled in the techniques of keeping the daily log, supervising the actual digging, and doing on-site evaluations of the thousands of pottery pieces found every day. Pottery is cleaned and sorted daily and students take part in this task also. Students with more years of experience and training are assigned square and architectural unit responsibilities under the direction of faculty area supervisors. Students leading other students may seem to some of us as a very poor model for work, but having students involved in decision-making and role modeling for other students is a very effective tool in the field. Above the area supervisor is the chief archaeologist or director of excavation. The expedition staff also includes a photographer, a surveyor, an architect, a recorder, a restorer, and a variety of experts from different disciplines including geography, geology, botany, zooarchaeology, history, and biblical scholarship. The project director oversees all of the different disciplines, research agendas, faculty and student assignments, and frees the director of excavation to assess archaeology rather than monitor educational and research assignments.

In the excavations in which I have been involved, first as staff and later as director, education of students has been the primary issue, with the research agenda ultimately served by this new method. Weekly surveys of work on the tell are made, during which the current progress in each area is summarized by student representatives of individual loci. Students are often trained to do even the “crucial” daily log. It is the detail-oriented jobs that give the students the sense of what material culture is and how archaeology is an interpretive discipline that starts with an objective assessment of the piece under examination. It is also a new type of “discovery.” I often tell students that their field excavation locus is a laboratory unlike any other lab that they will ever encounter. It is a lab where the experiments may never be run again: the moment that a piece of physical evidence is uncovered is the only moment that it will be in that position for interpretation ever again. So they must learn to get it right the first time. We do not require that student volunteers have previous training in archaeology, and trained students or professionals are welcome as long as they are able to work in the collaborative atmosphere with untrained students.

See FREUND p.viii

FREUND, from p.vii

Biblical and Talmudic/Rabbinic Archaeology

While the word “Bible” or “biblical” in a course catalogue tends to bring students into an archaeology course, it is the on-going tradition of literary information such as “talmudic” or “rabbinic” that more accurately defines the relationship between biblical texts and the material culture we employ in understanding Judaism at sites around Israel and the Middle East. The Bible and archaeology have an unusual relationship. The Bible gives literary information that describes a material culture and time period and talmudic/rabbinic archaeology attempts to do the same thing through the lens of literature that may be hundreds (or thousands) of years later than the original “biblical” period. It is the lens that is both misleading and enormously important to understanding the development of Judaism. Biblical archaeology stretches over thousands of years of changing literary texts and influences; talmudic archaeology is Roman period archaeology (in Israel) reflected through the lens of later literary references in post-biblical rabbinic settings of Babylonia, Egypt, North Africa, and elsewhere as the rabbinic texts were edited, redacted, and placed into their final form. Post-biblical Judaism is the interpretive exercise of later rabbinic figures commenting on earlier biblical traditions and attempting to define biblical material culture in this new interpretive setting.

I first read about talmudic archaeology in the paperback book *Archaeology, the Rabbis and Early Christianity* by Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange (1981). It is a small book that attempts to systematically explain the archaeological method in relation to the development of rabbinic Judaism. In the early twentieth century, Samuel Krauss had produced his two-volume *Talmudische Archäologie* (1910-1911) and his *Synagogue Altertümer* (1922), and Samuel Klein had published *Beiträge zur Geographie und Geschichte Galiläas* (1909), but in these works, one finds a familiar problem also found in biblical archaeology, viz., the linkage of exact talmudic stories and information with places and artifacts identified at a site or vice-versa. This type of identification system proves to be inadequate or theologically weighted in the case of the Bible and is even more problematic in the case of talmudic information.

The importance of the comparison is that it allows for the student to see for him- or herself the possibilities of how traditions may be retrojected into the past to give a later development in Judaism greater authority. Sometimes it does the opposite, by preserving a significant piece of information about an artifact that is only maintained within the later literature. An example from my own excavations at Bethsaida will clarify my position and show how it has provided us not only with excellent teaching moments in archaeology but also a pedagogic model for how archaeology and especially field studies allows students to participate in the greatest gifts that the academic study of religion can provide: discovery, and the critical reasoning skills for interpreting the discovery.

Bethsaida: A “Jewish” City by the North Shore of the Sea of Galilee

Bethsaida presents a case in biblical and rabbinic archaeology that has no parallel

thus far. We rediscovered the site in 1987 and have spent the past sixteen years trying to understand its significance. At the start of the excavations we discovered large quantities of Roman pottery, indicating that this was an active site in the first century. It is perhaps the best example of a village — later a city — in which most scholars believe Jesus had been active, that has been accessible to total archaeological investigation. Many other sites that have such a close relationship with Jesus and the apostles were identified by the Church in the fourth century CE and made into “religious sites” with Byzantine churches and monasteries attached. Bethsaida apparently was abandoned in the third century CE and its location lost for a variety of different geological and geographic reasons that we have been unraveling with our students over the past decade.



Bethsaida excavations: site overview (Photos courtesy of R. Freund)

It is a city that may have been critical to the rise of the early Jesus group since, by some accounts, as many as six of the apostles are placed there in the first century, and the New Testament places many of the miracles and Jesus’ earliest activities there. Our rediscovery of the site has been a wonderful opportunity to have students share in the

First, we always assumed that it was a “Jewish” city because of its location in close proximity to other Galilean and Golan Jewish cities of the same time period located along the same roads and pathways around the Sea of Galilee. Although there are non-Jewish cities in the area, our identification became a working hypothesis. We did not know whether Bethsaida ever had a Jewish majority population and therefore the search for its Jewishness was complicated. We asked basic questions of ourselves and of the students, such as what makes the material culture at Bethsaida “Jewish” or “pagan” (since there were presumably no “Christians” in the first-century city)? What type of Jews were these Bethsaida Jews? Were they “rabbinic Jews” who saw rabbinic law as the defining factor for their lives or were they a marginally Jewish population who rarely encountered rabbis? Were rabbis as we know them from the

texts even distinguishable in this region during the Hellenistic and Roman period when Bethsaida flourished, or is this terminology anachronistic?

These became issues not only for the researchers but also questions posed to students, who every year are asked to choose a

the search for Jewish institutions such as synagogues and mikvehs an “edifice complex,” but it is an issue that students readily understand and which therefore presents an opportunity to teach. The existence of a synagogue or a mikveh site has become one “litmus test” for the Jewishness of a site; however, our students quickly discover through lectures and conversations with staff that the whole concept and terminology of standard categories such as “the synagogue” and “the mikveh” are not as standard as they thought. Therefore the lack of a synagogue or “Jewish” building on the site should not rule out the possibility that Jews lived there. In fact, all indications are that Bethsaida may have ceased to be active when formal synagogue structures came into fashion in the third and fourth century CE in the Golan. [For more on the synagogue and mikveh problems, see D. Urman, “The House of Assembly and the House of Study: Are They One and the Same?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 44.2 (1993); and Jacob Neusner, *The Judaic Law of Baptism* (University of South Florida, 1995).]

The development of the mikveh was an attempt to create a rather specific ritual for on-going, non-Temple-oriented Judaism and it succeeded. When we are at Bethsaida, I will often take students to other sites nearby with mikveh structures and ask them to measure and understand their construction; I then ask them why they think we haven’t discovered one. In the past, some students have responded, “Perhaps because we have only excavated 10 percent of the site in fifteen years, and the mikveh is located elsewhere on the site.” Other students made the argument: “. . . perhaps they just bathed in the nearby Jordan River, and that sufficed for ritual and non-ritual purposes.” In fact, that would have sufficed according to rabbinic texts. This type of learning and discovery is impossible to achieve in the classroom, but it is the basic stuff of the academic study of religion. I could never really teach all of this in a classroom, and it is for this reason alone that I advocate taking students out into the field for this experience.

Smaller artifacts can help us determine ethnicity as well. Hebrew inscriptional information (we have some at Bethsaida but very little) is also important for the determination of “Jewishness,” but again, may not be decisive in a location so far from Jerusalem. No obviously Jewish symbols such as menorahs, Temple images, or biblical scenes have been discovered at the excavations at Bethsaida but again only 10 percent of the site has been uncovered. We have identified other types of what has been called “Jewish” Hellenistic and early Roman Jewish art that have taught us about the relationship between text and material culture. A few different geometric ornaments — identified at other very clearly defined Jewish cities as “Jewish” symbols of the Second Temple period — have been found at Bethsaida on lintels and massive stone pieces scattered around the site and on pottery. They include the rosette, the inhabited double meander, and the five- or six-pointed star. An understanding of Jewish art in this period, its place in religious worship, and its relationship to literary prohibitions against pagan art allows us to teach about a key issue of Judaism’s religious system. Similarly, a uniquely decorated stone stele at a city gate religious cult location from the Iron Age level at Bethsaida stands next to an undecorated stele. While this city gate conjures up all types of biblical citations, it is the total context of material culture that teaches our students about the relationship between the Bible and our archaeology: researchers have

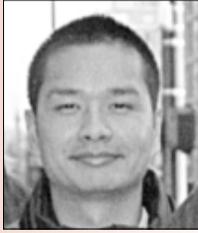
“What specific artifacts make a city Jewish?”

discovery not only of the site but of how one assesses the significance of material culture when a city has not been continuously occupied for nearly two thousand years. We have been bringing students to our Bethsaida Excavations Project since 1987 and one question that continually has been asked is “What makes this a Jewish city in antiquity?” The city is mentioned in the ancient Jewish historian Josephus Flavius’ writings, in the New Testament, in rabbinic writings from the Mishnah through the Talmudim, and even perhaps the Hebrew Bible, so it is clearly connected to Jewish life. But what specific artifacts make a city Jewish? The answer to this question may help us understand the larger religious questions that are of interest to the academic study of Judaism and Christianity: how “Jewish” was early Christianity in Israel, and what was the nature of Jewish life in places far from Jerusalem in the Second Temple period?

topic for a research paper. They can choose almost anything and throughout the years we have had standard research papers on individual finds, thematic papers on the larger social and religious issues, as well as photo essays, movies, audiotapes, and even poetry and songs evoked by the experience. One research question that has been the subject both of scholarly and student papers has to do with the obvious absence of standard Jewish institutions such as a synagogue (a singular and significant “Jewish building” for worship and study) and a mikveh (a uniquely Jewish bath and building complex used to fulfill ritual purity statutes in biblical and rabbinic texts) at a “Jewish” city such as Bethsaida. While I generally tell students that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” the absence of a synagogue structure and a mikveh at the site raises the pedagogical question of defining “Jewish” in the period of Bethsaida’s existence. I sometimes call

Teaching Religion and Learning Religion through Material Culture

Jonathan Huoi Xung Lee



Jonathan H. X. Lee is currently a doctoral student in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara; his fields of interest and research are East Asian Religions, and American Religions: the Chinese Diaspora. He is also a project photographer and archivist for the Religious Pluralism in Southern California Project, and he is the author of several forthcoming articles on religion in Chinese and Vietnamese-American communities.

WILL SHARE with you my encounters with material culture as a student and as a graduate student instructor (GSI) in a classroom. There is tremendous potential in using material culture as a pedagogical instrument for teaching religion at the university level. This fact has been made real to me as an undergraduate, as a graduate student, and as a graduate student instructor.

While an M.A. student at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), I was fortunate enough to be a graduate student instructor at the University of California, Berkeley in Asian-American Studies. In my first year teaching in Asian-American History, I brought in Ansel Adams's *Born Free and Equal*, a collection of his photographs depicting Japanese Americans in their daily life at Manzanar. I mentioned to my students that the book, published amidst wartime prejudice against Japanese Americans, received a negative reaction and was burned in public displays of anti-Japanese sentiment. In addition, I presented replicas of government documents ordering the internment of Japanese Americans, e.g. Executive Order 9066 and Civilian Exclusion Order No. 108, and I presented photo-postcards produced by Roger Shimomura, a Japanese-American artist who depicted his memories and representations of life in the camps.

My students engaged with the artifacts at once. They may have known the facts of internment, but these documents and images gave those historical facts an immediate reality. Through the artifacts, we were transported back in time and beyond the confines of our real surroundings. History was not in the past; it was in our classroom. I had wanted to provide students with tools to negotiate the past with the present, to provide them with a way to synthesize textbook information with lecture and discussion, and it worked.

After this lesson, I took my students on a field trip to the Berkeley Buddhist Church on Channing Way, to show physical cultural changes and adaptation in Japanese Buddhism in America after World War II. I recall they were all "super-shocked" to

find that the interior of the church looked exactly like a Protestant church, except that there was an image of the Buddha on the main altar instead of Jesus. The architectural display and traditional images in the Berkeley Buddhist Church provided me with a compelling narrative space in which to explain the role of Japanese Buddhism in the construction of Japanese-American community and in the (re)configurations of a Japanese-American identity.

While at GTU, I was often asked to lecture on Chinese ancestral veneration. Sometimes I offered to present a slideshow lecture on Chinese popular religion to provide my classmates with a way to experience the syncretistic expression of Chinese popular religion in Chinese culture. In my show-and-tell, I presented paper [funerary] goods, gold and silver spirit money, hell dollars, incense, ritual divination blocks, along with pictures of their use, all of which I passed around for everyone to examine. The Christian seminarians told me appreciatively that the slide show and artifacts gave them a better understanding of ancestral veneration, because it provided them a way of imagining it in fuller details in their own minds. The syncretistic nature of Chinese popular religion is difficult to teach because it is full of contradictions and tensions, but this unique tendency is expressed in religious rituals and is manifest in the material expression of cultural artifacts. One can see the syncretic elements working together in practical harmony.

The last experience I want to share with you concerns the impact of using material culture in my current academic research and studies. While at the GTU, Professors

"I recall they were all 'super-shocked' to find that the interior of the church looked exactly like a Protestant church, except that there was an image of the Buddha on the main altar instead of Jesus."

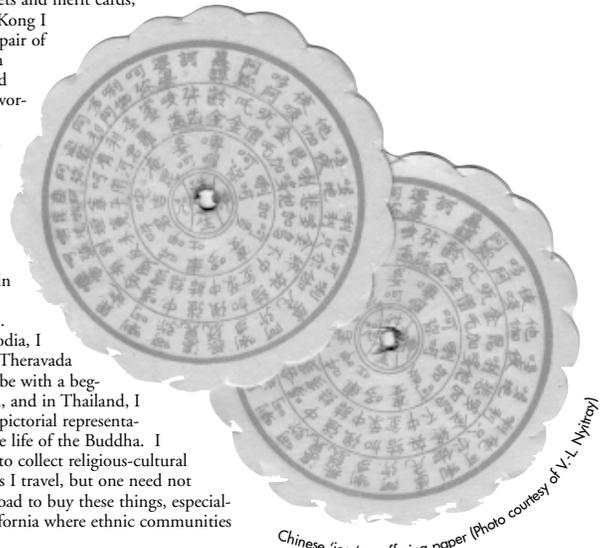
Nakasone and Yee took our class to San Francisco Chinatown to visit several temples. Because I have a long standing interest in the Chinese sea goddess widely known as Tianhou, or "the Empress of Heaven," and I had heard that there was a Tianhou Temple in Chinatown, I asked Professor Yee to take us there. The temple was amazing. The smell of incense, the display of offerings, the multicolored shrines, the lanterns covering the entire ceiling, the images of Tianhou, Guanyin, and other deities, and the crowdedness of the room, all compelled us to ask questions. Why are there red lanterns covering the ceiling? Why is the image so dark? Who is this? Why are there so many images of Guanyin? Why does Guanyin have a mustache in this picture? Why? Why? Why? This was an example of active, three-dimensional, fully sensorial, experiential learning at its best.



Chinese offering paper in the form of a note from the Bank of Hell. (Photo courtesy of V.-L. Nyitray)

This temple provided a truly unique, engaging, and powerful learning tool on both historical and contemporary Chinese religious life. Professor Yee explained the symbolic use of architectural space and how it communicates Chinese religious, philosophical, social, and moral values. We all gained invaluable insight that day at the Tianhou Temple. I came out of the experience with more questions than answers. These questions fueled my ongoing research interests, including a project documenting the contemporary life of the Tianhou Temple. In the process of doing fieldwork at the Tianhou Temple, I discovered there was a second temple in San Francisco dedicated to Tianhou, who is also worshipped under an affectionate Taiwanese epithet, Mazu. Hence I started researching the Mazu Temple U.S.A., located several blocks away. It became the topic of my now-completed master's thesis, but I feel that I have only just begun to appreciate the temple's riches.

Using material culture as a pedagogical tool will be a key element in my future teaching. I have collected several artifacts in my travels: ritual implements, icons and other examples of religious art, pictures and videos of temples and monasteries, and clothing, in addition to taking many pictures of people engaged in rituals and worship. In Taiwan, I bought a paper model of a Walkman, and I collected temple booklets and merit cards; in Hong Kong I bought a pair of divination blocks and bamboo worshipping strips in a bamboo canister, with the thought of illustrating their use in a future classroom. In Cambodia, I bought a Theravada saffron robe with a begging bowl, and in Thailand, I bought a pictorial representation of the life of the Buddha. I continue to collect religious-cultural artifacts as I travel, but one need not travel abroad to buy these things, especially in California where ethnic communities thrive.



Chinese 'joss' or offering paper (Photo courtesy of V.-L. Nyitray)

Teaching religion and learning religion requires more than memorizing facts about beliefs from a textbook. Images from art, material examples of religious rituals and other expressive practices — all provide important experiences in teaching and learning about religion as a lived experience. Religion is practiced. And I believe that the importance and sophistication of practice can only be fully taught and learned through the incorporation of material culture into the religious studies classroom.✪

Resources

Adams, Ansel. *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans, Manzanar Relocation Center, Inyo County, California*. Spotted Dog Press, 2002.

Complicating Things: Material Culture and the Classroom

Leslie Smith



Leslie Smith taught for four years as an adjunct instructor at two Midwestern universities before beginning her doctoral work in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research emphasizes social theory, gender, and American culture.

THIS IS THE TALE of how all the participants in an "Introduction to Religion" course gained a new appreciation for pedagogy and learning through the use of material culture. Moreover, because of the simple efforts of one guest speaker, both students and instructor alike learned an important lesson on the complexity of social systems and how material culture can transform classroom analysis of these subjects.

The class to which I've alluded took place at a large, midwestern university where most students were overwhelmingly white and Christian. Of those who took religious studies classes, most did so for all of the typical reasons: it fulfilled their general requirements; it was offered at a time they liked; they had an interest in world religions, or at least an interest in the issues posed by their own religious commitments. In this sense, my class was probably like many other religious studies courses across the country.

With this particular class, however, a couple of things were noticeably different. First, as a graduate student-turned-brand-new teacher, I was hoping that my speaking skills and song-and-dance routines would compensate for the huge holes in my knowledge. As countless others have undoubtedly experienced, my first lecture was met with a barrage of questions that I simply could not answer. Adding to this was a local community debate involving religion and the constitutionality of its expres-

sion that had gained national media attention; it would become a particularly volatile topic that framed the entire semester.

The circumstances inspiring the controversy involved a woman in a small, neighboring town who had challenged the use of a Christian symbol on the town's flag, calling it an unconstitutional display. The subsequent uproar amongst the community's members (who had no intention of removing the symbol) grew only more heated when it was discovered that this woman was a practicing Wiccan. The issue made its way boldly into the media and into our classroom. One student hailed from the town where this controversy raged, and consistently expressed strong opinions against the woman's "right to assault" his community by "forcing her religious views" where they were not wanted. Many others commented that her challenge was nothing more than an attention-getting device, since the symbol, they insisted, wasn't hurting anyone. Few spoke up to defend her actions, and few were willing to (verbally) question how things might have been different had the woman identified with any other religious group. My attempts to analyze media representations of this issue fostered further classroom tension.

I had already planned to discuss Wicca during part of the semester, and I had asked a local Wiccan priestess to be a guest speaker. More than one student approached me to indicate that they were uncomfortable with her planned visit. I was continually second-guessing my decision to have her come, as I wanted to avoid her marginalization at a time when she and others feared for their safety. I was also concerned that her religious beliefs and practices had been either exoticized or demonized, despite my best efforts to couch my description of Wicca and its historical/cultural context within a larger discussion on the processes by which dominant groups construct an "other."

On the day of her presentation, the majority of the students were already in their seats as class began; this was one time when I was convinced that punctuality was not a positive trait. When the speaker arrived, several of the students were visibly surprised (and, they would tell me later, relieved) to find an intelligent, eloquent, funny woman who wore neither robes nor any other garb that might distinguish her from anyone else in our campus community. A number of students gathered around her during the break, eager to ask questions

about and handle the artifacts she brought for their viewing, including books, candles, a set of runes, multiple decks of tarot cards, wands, and crystals. Chatting revealed that she was a mother, and that she worked for one of the city's major employers. Some of the tension that existed dissipated when a class member asked where she got her candles. Nervous laughter filtered through the room at her answer: "Wal-Mart."

Special interest was directed toward the wands, runes, and tarot cards. A couple of students mentioned that they had experienced physical objects as purely symbolic

change things, and if so, in what way(s)?" On a much simpler level, the presence and discussion of material objects sparked questions that a straight lecture would not have, and we spent weeks e-mailing with her about the significance of the objects she brought for our viewing.

Because the class was able to interact with a religious participant and the material aspects of her practice, we were afforded an excellent confrontation with the complexity of social labels. This is, perhaps, the most important point. Textbook representations of social groups are just that; we must all,

"We were no longer theorizing about purely ideological issues; we now had to wrestle with the significance of materiality in our discussions, and whether the distinction between the two was an artificial one."

ingredients in Christian ritual, heightening their interest in these implements to which physical, practical claims were attached. As the speaker described her use of each item, she provided us with a hands-on basis to broaden and further complicate our discussion on the problems involved in defining "religion." We were no longer theorizing about purely ideological issues; we now had to wrestle with the significance of materiality in our discussions, and whether the distinction between the two was an artificial one.

The debriefing that followed the presentation reflected an interest in the speaker that did not wane. Her presentation initiated an ongoing dialogue between the class and members of a local coven, and a few of the class members used the data gathered from her presentation as a stepping stone for their final projects. The speaker's visit thus allowed students to investigate some academic areas of interest while trying their hand at ethnography. From a pedagogical perspective, I was also pleased to have a context in which to engage the class in self-analysis, asking questions like the following: "Why did you feel relief when you saw that she appeared, as we've called it, 'normal,' and what's at stake in that word?"; "How might this conversation be different had she been wearing black robes?"; and — the question I could not ask before, "How would our responses to the 'town flag' controversy be different had the person speaking out been a Christian? Does this experi-

inevitably, use generalization as an important part of what we do. As a new teacher, I had expected that, at the end of the course, all students would have added substantially to their factual database via this textbook format. After the speaker's presentation, however, I understood how my focus on facts obscured a much more important goal: my students should come away from the class able to grasp a bit of the complexity of society, the categories we use to describe it, and, in light of the "town flag" controversy, the various negotiations that go on between groups for the right to use its most valued monikers — "normalcy" being among them. The speaker provided me a context in which to evaluate my own expectations of student learning when I saw the ways in which she was able to make it happen. My most detailed lecture on Wicca could not compare to the confounding of social categories provided by her presence: she effectively equated "Wiccan" with a working mother who frequents Wal-Mart.

I am indebted, then, to one Wiccan priestess and to forty-five students for demonstrating how the use of material culture can provide a significant lesson on the utter intricacy of society while providing a forum to introduce and investigate some of the central questions of religious studies. Of all of the lessons I learned during those first few semesters of teaching, this was one of the most valuable. ■



Testaments™ and heat-sensitive yin-yang pencil (Photo courtesy of V.-L. Nyitray)

NYITRAY, from p.ii

slides and videos as well, but, as Smith's essay documents, the physical presence of actual objects is often supremely catalytic for class discussion. Tactile teaching was a staple of our own early childhood education, introducing us to new worlds of experience; why now do we abandon it, particularly in "introductory" courses?

Introductions come through a variety of media. The Spring 2001 issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* focused on *awality*, in the form of music, in the classroom. In the current issue, contributor Daniel Sack focuses on a material aspect of *onality* — discussing the uses of food and notions of eating in teaching the material culture of religion. Through the study of this most basic human activity, Sack illustrates the multiple perspectives students gain into the social and doctrinal assumptions of a religious tradition and its institutions.

The importance of treating food, textiles, toys, music, and so forth is also asserted by Strenski: "Material religious culture is composed of all the *sensate* entities and events of religion." I would add that an overlooked aspect of these entities and events is their interlocking nature. For example, in a

order to draw blood for the production of amulets and medicines. I treasure my treasures, but I am sometimes troubled when students admire them. How can I help them steer clear of the tendency to either exoticize or trivialize a tradition, to caricature someone else's faith as infantile or primitive? How are they to understand the use and misuse of the material cultural products of others' religious imaginations? Both Freund and Strenski pose useful questions for enabling students to examine their a priori assumptions about material manifestations of religion.

Popular items and religious kitsch yield different interpretive issues relative to naive art, mass consumption, humor, and cynicism. My crowded office is home to musical Marys, garish Guanyins, and Buddha squeaky toys. I have soap bars that promise to "wash away sins"; votive candles dedicated to "Our Lady of Deadlines" and "Our Lady of Perpetual Housework"; light-up devotional shrines to Ganesh and to St. Anthony; Christian "testament" candies; heat-sensitive, color-changing yin-yang pencils; and yes, I do have a plastic Jesus "sitting on the dashboard of my car." I am not always sure what Hindu students make of the Kali lunchbox I use to carry whiteboard markers to class, but perhaps when

Everyday Life: Papers Given at a Symposium in Stockholm, 13-15 September 1993. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets, 1994.

Buddhanet. Online at www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/buddhist-art/monastery.htm. Provides basic introduction to structure and contents of a typical Chinese Buddhist temple. A link to www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/templec-temple.html provides a detailed look at a particular temple in Singapore. Although the site is still under construction, it is a fine example of a virtual lesson in temple architecture and symbolic meaning.

Caldwell, Mark. "Church Signs 4 You." Online collection of church signs ("We're not Dairy Queen but we have great Sundays!") and billboards ("You think it's hot here?" -God) www.members.truepath.com/churchsigns

Chester, Laura. *Holy Personal: Looking for Small Private Places of Worship*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000.

Cort, John E. "Art, Religion, and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (Fall 1996).

Dorgan, Howard. *The Airwaves of Zion: Radio and Religion in Appalachia*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993.

Hartel, Heather. Online collection of gravestones, of which she notes a contemporary shift from images of the afterlife and reminders of the transience of this life, e.g., angels, a handshake, and various momento mori images to those that "celebrate the person's life on earth, remembering them for the things they liked while alive," including, it seems, Garfield and Mickey Mouse. angelfire.com/ny5/mediamedusal/projects/gravestones/index.html

Kieschnick, John. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Knapp, Ronald G. *China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornatmentation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

Lee, Jonathan H. X. "Journey to the West: Tianhou in San Francisco." Unpublished M.A. thesis, Graduate Theological Union, 2002.

Macaulay, David. *Motel of the Mysteries*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979. An illus-

trated, tongue-in-cheek cautionary tale of future archaeologists who discover a "motel," whose sealed chambers ("Do Not Disturb") reveal personal altars and ablation chambers containing sacred papyrus (folded into a "sacred point") and a "musical instrument" that relies on periodic flushes of water.

Material History of American Religion project. materialreligion.org. Working from 1995 through 2001, this Lilly-funded Project studied the history of American religion through examining material objects and economic themes. Although the project has concluded its work, the website has been maintained; it houses an archive of its e-journal, interviews with project participants, documents and objects collected by the project, and links to other internet resources. On the dangers of interpretation, see especially independent scholar Mary Ann Clark's electronic journal article, "Seven African Powers: Hybridity and Appropriation," for a discussion of the misinterpretation of devotional candles. materialreligion.org/journalcandles

McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.

McKee, Susan. *Material Culture of Religion Glossary*, ed. 6 (August 1998). Online at www.religionatlas.org/TeacherResources/Glossary. A work of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture at the Polis Center at Indiana University-Purdue University Indiana (itself a good resource); only one section is operational at present, providing definitions of architectural terms relevant to religious sites, from abutment to zendo.

Morgan, David. *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Strenski, Ivan. "Why It Is Better to Have Some of the Questions Than All of the Answers." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14 (in press, Winter 2002).

Judith Weisenfeld's syllabus can be reviewed online at the AAR Syllabus Project: www.aarweb.org/syllabus/syllabi/w/weisenfeld/re160/film_site.html. Teaching religion and film was also the theme for the May 1998 issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, archived online at www.aarweb.org.

“Tactile teaching was a staple of our own early childhood education, introducing us to new worlds of experience; why now do we abandon it, particularly in “introductory” courses?”

study of radio and religion in Appalachia, Howard Dorgan was led to describe meeting houses and tent revivals as sites for live broadcasts; this led in turn to a discussion of “swooning in the spirit,” in which listeners fall to the ground, bodies frozen in place; this introduced the topic of carpets upon which to fall and of the need for “coverlets” to protect a woman's modesty once she's hit the ground — and thus were woven together everything from AM radios to portable organs to squares of velvet.

Over the years, as colleagues and students have tumbled to my predilection for religious objects, I have been helped to build up quite a collection. In addition to an heirloom Buddhist rosary of perfectly round hand-carved beads, I have vials of holy water and bags of healing soil, devotional cards, yarrow stalks, festival lanterns, shadow puppets, and, most dramatically, a ball studded with nails — used by Taiwanese shamans to beat themselves in

they notice my sparkle-red Jesus earrings — his visage embedded in acrylic that's been poured into Diet Coke bottle caps — they can at least see that I am an equal-opportunity collector of such goods. I see these artifacts as evidence of the deeply rooted nature of religion in human culture. If the manufacture and use of tools are central to the definition of ourselves as human, it is natural for us to create tools for the expression — whether devotional, ritual, practical, or satirical — of our religious and spiritual realities, however we embrace or reject them. To leave the evidence of material culture out of the teaching of religion is, then, to eviscerate our humanity. ♣

Selected Resources

Bringéus, Nils-Arvid, ed. *Religion in*

In the next Spotlight on Teaching

Teaching about Peace and Violence in Religions



FREUND, from p.viii

tried to connect the decorated stone to non-Israelite influences in a mixed Iron Age settlement at the site, while the lack of symbols on the undecorated stone is seen as evidence of an Israelite population.

The most ubiquitous find at any archaeological site is pottery: cooking pots, storage pots, vessels for grinding, oil lamps, etc. At a site such as Bethsaida, pottery finds usually are not intact and require restoration but they are uncovered every day in every locus. They are the “nuts and bolts” of our material culture study, actually providing us with a window into the lives of the people that lived at a site. This is the most important lesson that we teach in different ways every day, from the moment that students begin working in the field loci to the lectures in the evening. From the washing of the pottery find, the recording of each shard in the daily log, the designation of the find and its elevation on the site on the map grid, and the marking of location numbers of each shard in the lab, to the photograph-

ing and drawing of the piece, it is a full learning environment that involves many different skill sets that bring a student into encounters with multiple disciplines and faculty. At our afternoon “pottery readings,” we teach students how to “read” a piece of pottery like a text and how to distinguish every aspect of pottery production from elements used in the preparations of the clay to style changes and use—all crucial for dating a site since pottery types are so particular to time and place.

Limestone vessels and pottery become a major teaching opportunity, and the lessons go way beyond the standard archaeology classroom. Pottery seemed to us to be the place to actually engage the students in the larger questions of ethnicity and religion. Since purity laws are an important defining mark of a Jewish life, the discovery of white limestone vessel pieces and pottery types made from the clay and style of a rabbinic center of pottery in Galilee become enormously important. According to biblical and, especially, rabbinic texts, stone vessels are unlike pottery vessels in that they do not contract ritual impurity; therefore, basalt

vessels and limestone vessels are seen as “Jewish.” Limestone vessels are particularly meaningful in this context; they are not easy to make and are impractical, breaking easily, so limestone ware “special” pieces at Bethsaida suggest a Jewish presence that cared about such matters. Daily ware pottery may also raise ritual purity issues. Our daily ware pottery finds suggest that a good proportion of these vessels were made at a well-known Galilean rabbinic site called Kefar Hananya. If this is so, it would also suggest a Jewish rabbinic presence. We spend time in evening lectures discussing rabbinic texts and purity laws in the hopes that we can train students not only to “look” for subtle differences in pottery but to “see” the possibilities that even a minor discovery makes to scholarship. I often worry whether all of this work in the details of discovery makes students unable to see the larger perspective of “Ancient Judaism” in the midst of all of the details of pottery, architecture, coins, glass and metal studies, etc. I have not found this to be the case. In fact, I find that students can appreciate the larger questions even more by understanding how the collection process for data really does

work. All of these experiences make field studies a unique learning environment.

In the past few years, planning for these expeditions has become more difficult as political and social conditions in the Middle East and Israel have become more complex. I have found that these complexities also provide important teaching and learning opportunities both before and after the expedition to the field is completed. One of the most significant additions I have made to the student assignments in field studies in archaeology has been the daily journal. Originally it was intended to mimic the site log and included excavation information, pottery readings, lab experiences, and lectures. Students are now told to record not only the scientific findings of every day at the site but also the experiences and learning opportunities that occur outside of the excavations. The moments of insight recorded in the student journals have convinced me that despite the complexities that field studies present, they are worth the effort that both students and faculty expend to make them successful. ♣



Buddhist/Hindu Mala (Photo courtesy of V.-L. Nyitray)



Tasbeeh (Photo courtesy of Online Islamic Store, www.store.talkislam.com)

Spotlight on Teaching Solicits Guest Editors and Articles

AAR members interested in guest editing an issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* are invited to submit the title of a theme focusing on teaching and learning in the study of religion, along with a succinct description (500 words) of the theme’s merit and significance, to *Spotlight’s* general editor, Tazim R. Kassam. In addition to issues devoted to specific themes, problems and settings, *Spotlight on Teaching* will also occasionally feature a variety of independent articles and essays critically reflecting on pedagogy and theory in the field of religion. Please send both types of submissions to:

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