Teaching Religion and Material Culture in Religious Studies

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Guest 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, and Qur’an stand (http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/caribb/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 possible 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, occidentalist 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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A
S AN UNDERGRADUATE student at Syracuse University in the early 1970s, I had the great 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, 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 genial 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 lingered 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, these texts were more than conceptual repositories: they were manifest inspiration for music, theater, art, sculpture, architecture — a seemingly endless array of 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 tradition has facilitated conversations among scholars of diverse training and methodological orientation.

Scholars of the religions of indigenous peoples worldwide would find none of this unusual. They have long been at the forefront of material cultural studies, examining the ways in which textiles, food, architecture, personal adornment, and its American variations in particular. 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 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 paved the way for consideration of visual narratives in media as diverse as architecture and film. Contributor Keith 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 catalog and movie memorabilia. One might also move from site 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 religions 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, Tsaii metis 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

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.

How, then, do we exploit the materiality of material 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 relations 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 afﬁliation 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 aesthetic, erotic, sexual, emotional, and political imaginations and so on, but 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 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 imaginations 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, where not those familiar Sino-Asian burial mounds, but those brilliant hysterical constitutions? 

Material religious culture resonates in some important ways with the Enlightenment. A good place to start 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 fail that on their faces? Why do some things ‘capture the imagination’ and other fail to do so — and for whom? Some sacred music is getting sung year after year, and not, one supposes, just out of inertia, but because it resonates in some important ways with the religious imagination.

Interrogating Material Religion with a “Proactive Mind”

Implied in my putting questions or “problems” to the foe is that we will do much more than simply to present the data of religious 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 herey of the Immaculate Perception. The theoretical and conceptual dimension of our work should go hand in hand with the empiri
cal. 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 views, with their own principles and/or prej
dices, with their own set of questions and problems. We must teach them to present their theories with their own theories. Their perceptions will not be pure and innocent, nor need they be. But, we must strive to make these precise the means of expressing them in some objective form — a course journal entry, a short “reaction” paper, an in-class “brainstorming” assignment, or which lists are made in order to elicit the preperceptual data of the minds of the students — as far as that is possible.

Exploiting spirituality in material religious culture, then, should not be like dumping some facts onto the student’s heads and expecting him to learn from the facts. Rather, spirituality is an active, emergent, and dynamic quality. We must teach students to be proactive in their religious imaginings. This is an active mind, a proactive mind.

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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 the 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 writing a string of queries that 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 visual material 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 twenty questions that I provide to students about the overall descriptive character of the sites 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?
- Is it bounded? How are boundaries marked?
- Is the site open and public? Or restricted, private, closed? Free entry or 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? What is the site’s history?
- What are the terms of ownership? What about the economic value of the contents — cheap, expensive?

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 it’s 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 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 shrines, churches, mosques, California mission sites, local temples, sacred groves, fountain sites, and so on. Others have gone on more original directions, such as focusing on the everyday practices and meanings of roadside accident shrines that are so common here in the Southwest. Another student explored the sacredness of the family dinner table — a particularly charged site used by a 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 endeavor of the students who will observe it. Such a student grasps the way the religious imagination works and is open to its often unanticipated eloquence. The students of Christianity, like Peter Brown, have shown how popular pre-Christian spiritual furnishings for visions or care of the dead have reappeared, with a fresh sound. Artists of religious folk themselves may be among the last to comprehend the fuller extent of the “religion” that we seek to represent. If I cannot visit “happens” too. Like these representations of popular material religious culture is not to view our work as it progresses.

A second distinction that this approach offers is that between the so-called “fine” religious artifacts from that abundance of humble, often mass-produced artifacts of the “popular” religious imagination. I believe it is necessary to take seriously literally everything from the “fine” grave stele to the wilderness shrines of “high” religious culture to the poor “cousins” such as “plastic Jesus” or Kuan-yin playing cards. Each has a role to play in making use of 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” religious culture we are also well placed to exploit the insights of radical movements in the study of religious culture, such as the College 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 our 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. With the increased reference to material religious culture, the problems we already comprehended here will only magnify and proliferate in a variety of additional problems. With the data of material religious culture, unlike that of beliefs, for instance, we encounter issues of the obvious. Slides and videos may be problem enough. But what of family Bibles, censers, ghee, frangipani blossoms? Where do we stand this up, put that up, and take it up, as our high school physics textbooks were keen to remind us? Who lugs it to class, and so on? We may 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 advantage outweighs problem.

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 “real” (when it is), the “real” is the best one can do. We sometimes need need therefore to overcome the inconvenience of the very materiality of material religion that we seek to represent. If I cannot visit Hui 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 Rastau 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 sounds and sights of material religion can be accessed, or “tour’s” 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


Teaching Religion and American Film

Judith Weisenfeld

The course is organized chronologically, beginning in 1915, to emphasize changing relationships between American religious institutions and popular culture 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 audiences were uninterested in or scornful of religion, nor that religious institutions and individuals made productive use of the movies in the period of early film, yet I also devote attention to censorship, arguably the most written about in film histories of American 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 MPPDA, and the Production Code Administration. 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 its main character, in the context of discussions 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 race and ethnicity. Such films as D. W. Griffith's 1919 Broken Blossoms, Alan Cradock's 1927 The Jazz Singer, King Vidor's 1919 Hallelujah, Leni Riefenstahl's 1945 The Battle of St. Mary's, and Elia Kazan's 1947 Gentlemen's Agreement serve well to encourage students to consider how filmic representations of 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 appropriateness, 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 1995 Daughters of the Dust allow students to think about the responses of African-American filmmakers to mainstream Hollywood uses of black religious practices.

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 1993 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 (Richard Marx's 1999 The House of the Dead, 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.
Eating is universal, but what people eat and the way they eat it reveals a culture’s significant particularities.

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 context of your course, they understand it in a deeper way. They can also connect with other people’s experience through observers’ 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 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 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 at a soup 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 that 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 menus. 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?

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 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.


Teaching Biblical Archaeology and Material Culture as Part of Teaching Judaism

Richard A. Freund

Archaeology, Material Culture, and Judaism

I 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-thousand years, for example, 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 our "sacred" objects 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 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, lines, 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 subjective 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 paleography (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 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 rabbinic 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 text 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 interaction — 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 the work in the field. They would not take the finds back to a lab, analyze them with the help of experts who often 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 some 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 out accordingly. Walls, floors, etc., are carefully excavated and cleaned for reconstruction. Finds are collected in baskets. Preliminary analysis of finds is done almost daily in the site. Finds, baskers, 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 and field supervisors with responsibility for teaching about religion and how religious evidence is open to speculation and reasonable hypothesizing.

The cumulative argument of archaeology, often missed by the cinematic and popular culture, creates a picture that, unlike the interpreted model of the rabbinic 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.

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

The “rocks, lines, 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.

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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 encounter underground 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 (with less emphasis on the “talmudic” part). This inter-relation is thousands of years long and has provided us not only with excellent interpretations of the Bible, but also with material culture for which we can provide an interpretation. Biblical and rabbinic archaeology are particularly important in understanding the development of Judaism. Biblical archaeology stretches over thousands of years of changing literary texts and unlike many other archaeological traditions, biblical and rabbinic archaeology is Roman period archaeology (in Israel) reflected through the lens of later literary traditions. It is a much more 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 Rabbi and Early Christians by Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange (1981). It is a small book, but it attacked an interesting question in the archaeological method in relation to the development of rabbinic Judaism. In the early middle ages, a rabbi named Eliezer ben Samuel Kraus has produced his two-volume Talmudic Archaeology (1910-1911) and his Synagogue Architecture (1921). Unfortunately, I have never read them, but the linkage of exact talmudic stories and information with places and artifacts identified at a site or via visits to those places is quite intriguing. This type of identification system proves to be inadequate or theological-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 provide 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 with respect to the later literature. An example from my own excavations at Bethsaida will clarify my position and show how it has been proposed with excellent teaching moments in archaeology but also a pedagogical 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 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 continues to be asked is “What makes this a Jewish city in antiquity?” The city is mentioned in the ancient Jewish historian Josephus Flavius’s writings, in the New Testament, in rabbinic writings from the Mishnah through the Talmud, 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?

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 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 topic for a research paper. They may 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 conventions with keynote speakers. 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 what is its absence (in the Second Temple period) to teach about a key issue of Judaism’s religiosity? We have identified as many as six of the apostles at Bethsaida but again only 10 percent of the site in fifteen years, and the mikveh is located elsewhere on the site.” Other students may respond, “Yes, we have discovered a 10 percent of the site in fifteen years, and the mikveh is located elsewhere on the site.”

The development of the mikveh was an attempt to create a rather specific ritual for ongoing, non-Temple-oriented Judaism and it succeeded. While Bethsaida, I will often take students to other sites nearby with mikveh structures and ask them to tell me about their construction; I then ask them why they think we haven’t discovered one. In the past, some students have responded, “Perhaps because of the different time period, the mikveh is not heavily weighted in the case of the Bible and is more problematic in the case of talmudic 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 that we have 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 pottery. They can be associated with 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 and artistic traditions is impossible without pilgrimage to Bethsaida. The mikveh is a “litmus test” for the Jewishness of a site; however, our students have to go through lectures and conversations with staff that the whole concept and terminology of the 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 synagogues became fashionable in the third and fourth century CE in the Golan. For more on the synagogue and mikveh problems, see D. Ussishkin. Law of Baptism (University of South Florida, 1995).] The development of the mikveh was an attempt to create a rather specific ritual for ongoing, non-Temple-oriented Judaism and it succeeded. We have been bringing students to our Bethsaida Excavations Project since 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 “city – later a city in — 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 in location lost for a variety of different geological and geographic reasons that we have been unraveling with our students over the past decade.

Biblical and rabbinic archaeology that has no parallel
Teaching Religion and Learning Religion through Material Culture

Jonathan Huoi Xung Lee

I 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 as a graduate student, as a graduate student instructor 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 My First Year Teaching in Asian-American Studies. He is also a project photographer and archivist for the Religious Pluralism in Southern California Project, and be the author of several forthcoming articles on religion in Chinese and Vietnamese-American communities.

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.

After this lesson, I took my students on a field trip to the Berkeley Buddhist Church on Channing Way. I showed them 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 syncretic expression of Chinese popular religion in Chinese culture. In my show-and-tell, I presented paper (funerary) goods, gold and silver spunk 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 syncretic 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 most evident 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 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? Why? Why? This was an example of active, three-dimensional, fully sensorial, experiential learning at its best.

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 Wakanman, and I collected temple books and merit cards, in Hong Kong I bought a pair of divination blocks and bamboo worshipping strips in a bambooCanister, and in Thailand, I bought a Theravada saffron robe with a begging bowl. 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.

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


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SPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING
Complicating Things: Material Culture and the Classroom

Leslie Smith

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 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 expression 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 thing that town where this controversy raged, and consistently expressed strong opinions against the woman’s “right to assault” her 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 coach my classmates to avoid stereotypes. I had found an opportunity to discuss “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. Charting 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 canes. 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 ways? Or what we didn’t. 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 confronting of social categories provided by her presence: she effectively equated “Wiccans” 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.
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 2003 issue of Spotlight on Teaching focused on availability, in the form of music, in the classroom. In the current issue, contributor Daniel Sack focuses on a material aspect of reality — 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 Srenski: "Material religious culture is composed of all the sensory 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

In the next Spotlight on Teaching

Teaching about Peace and Violence in Religions

 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 "swimming in the spirit," in which listen- ers fall to the ground, bodies frozen in place; this introduced the topic of carpets upon which to fall and of the need for "coverings" 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 velveteen.

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 stuffed with nails — used by Taiwanese shamans to beat themselves in order to draw blood for the production of amulets and medicines. I treasure my treas- urs, but I am sometimes troubled when students admire them. How can I help them steer clear of the tendency to either exercise or trivialize a tradition, to carica- ture 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 ques- tions for enabling students to examine their a priori assumptions about material mani- festations of religion.

Popular items and religious tchotchkes yield differ- ent interpretive issues relative to naive art, mass consumption, humor, and cyni- cism. My crowded office is home to musi- cal Marys, garish Guanyins, and Buddha squeaky toys. I have soap bars that promise to "wash away sins"; votive candles dedicat- ed to "Our Lady of Deadlines" and "Our Lady of Perpetual Housework"; light-up devotional shrines to Ganesh and to St. Anthony; Christian "testaments" candles; 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 white- board markers to class, but perhaps when

Selected Resources


Buddhanet. Online at www. buddhanet.net/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/learning/temples/tem- ple.html provides a detailed look at a partic- ular temple in Singapore. Although the site is still under construction, it is a fine exam- ple 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


Hartel, Heather. Online collection of gravestones, of which she notes a contem- porary 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 state of the cosmos," e.g., stars and the sun, and various reminders of the fragility of human life. If the site is still under construction, it is a fine exam- ple of a virtual lesson in temple architecture and symbolic meaning.


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


McKe, Susan. Material Culture of Religion Glor- iety, ed. (August 1998). Online at www.religionandglory.org/TeacherResources/ Gloriety. A week of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture at the Polis Center at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (a good resource); only one section is operational at present, providing definitions of architectural terms relevant to religious sites, from abutment to zendo.


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 to the lectures in the evening, from the teaching of 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 Hanaya. If this is so, it would also suggest a Jewish rabbinic presence. We spend time in evening lectures discussing the complexities that field studies present, they are worth the effort that both students and faculty expend to make them successful.

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 the effort that both students and faculty expend to make them successful.

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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