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Exploring Religion (REL 153) City as Classroom Project Report

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CITY AS A CLASSROOM
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Religion 153: EXPLORING RELIGION
Theme of the course for the Fall semester 2010: Religion and Migration



Course Description of Religion 153

This course introduces the students to the various religious symbols and rituals, as well as ideas about God and gods, salvation, death, evil, human suffering, and myths. This course also explores how religion affects social values, ethics, economics, and politics, as well as the positive impact religions can exert to encourage people to work for justice and the common good (La Salle University catalogue).

For this semester, the course is tailored to understanding how religious symbols and sacred spaces are used in immigrant communities in Philadelphia, and how religion functions in the lives of immigrants.

Project description

Students were organized into seven groups with five members. They were required to visit a place of worship or meditation place that was organized by immigrants in the Philadelphia area. Based on their visit and interview with members of the community, students had to answer questions grouped under three headings:

1. About the community
 - a. The religious group visited; location, composition, number of members
 - b. Country of origin of the members
 - c. Why they came to the United States
 - d. The role and place of religion in their lives as immigrants; Whether the community helped them as they settled into the new country

2. About the sacred space (Church, temple, place of worship)
 - a. Whether the sacred space was a transformed space (like storefront mosques) or built by the community
 - b. What motivated them to create their own sacred spaces
 - c. Describe the features of the spaces, the symbols, objects, art and architecture; their functions and what these objects convey about the community and the religion

3. Assessment of the activity
 - a. What students learned from the site visit; whether the visit is helpful for understanding religious pluralism in the Philadelphia area
 - b. What are the students' suggestions for promoting inter-religious understanding

Students visited the following places and presented their findings to the class.

1. Our Lady of Hope Church, 500 North Broad St. Phila. PA. 19141
2. Won Buddhist Temple, 432 Abington Ave., Glenside, PA.
3. Soryaransky Buddhist Temple, 5415 Rising Sun Ave., Phila., PA. 19120-3008
4. Bawa Muhaiyadeen Mosque, 5820 Overbrook Ave., Phila. PA. 19131
5. Chua Bo De Temple, 114-20 South 13th St., Phila., PA 19147
6. Samarpan Hindu/Jain Temple, 6515 Bustleton Ave., Phila., PA.19149-2906
7. Mount Airy Ashram/Radakrishna Temple ISKCON, 41 West Allen's Lane, Phila., PA. 19119

Outcomes

As seen from the student responses above, the activity gave students the opportunity to meet, learn and engage other religions in the Philadelphia area. I believe that even if this activity affected only 31 students, this is a major step in our efforts at promoting inter-religious understanding. The activity also allowed students to know about other sections of Philadelphia.

Lessons Learned

There were about 3 students who indicated in the evaluation that they did not like the idea of having to go to an unfamiliar place and meeting people from different places, some of whom did not look friendly.

I think it would be helpful if the instructor go with the student to these places. Although I believe that students need to be independent in doing these assignments, I learned that there are some places where the hosts asked about the teacher. When I spoke with two persons from different temples, asking for permission for my students to visit the temples, they expressed disappointment that the teacher was not coming. I realized that this is a culture thing. In Asia where generally, teachers are given respect, it would have been an honor for them to host a teacher. This is something to consider next time.

Student Feedback/Comments (These came from their group report)

- ***What students learned from the site visit***

“Our group learned much from the visit, not only seeing a completely different religion but also seeing the rituals in action...the fact that they allowed us to enter the mosque, despite being from possibly different religions, and had a multicultural community to the mosque gave us a better understanding of religious pluralism in Philadelphia.”

“Overall,. Our visit to the Chua Bo De temple was enlightening. This gave us an upper hand on what keeps this religion strong, and what the religion morals and values are of the people who practice Buddhism, along with getting a taste of the culture within the religion.”

“We learned a lot from our visit. This religious experience was new for us and it opened our eyes to the different ways in which people worship. Through our participation in their community, we were able to learn more about what it means to be Hindu than we would have learned from reading a book. The site visit was definitely helpful for understanding religious pluralism in our area.”

“While in class many complained about the project they were given, we were grateful. We got to step outside of our comfort zone and learn about something that can catch any one’s interest if given the chance. Thank you for the opportunity.”

“The visit to the Won Buddhist Temple was a remarkable experience. It gave us all an opportunity to have a real bird’s eye view of other religions from our own practice their religions, thus helping us to open our eyes to the fact that there are many different ways of worship.”

“When we had finished our tour, we took several pictures and thanked the host for his hospitality and kindness, and in return, he seemed so happy to have had us for a view. He invited us back to visit at any time, gave us each a pamphlet and a calendar and walked us out. Overall, the trip to the ISKCON temple was an enlightening and fruitful experience because it opened up a whole new world of religion to each member of our group...”

“From our project, we learned much about the Buddhist community and Cambodian culture. We now understand how seriously they take their religion and how much it means to them. Although we got very little interaction from the members of the community, it was evident from our short glimpse into their temple how important their religion is and how much it affects their everyday life.”