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Exploring Christianity (REL 150) City as Classroom Project Report

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City as Classroom Project
REL 150: Exploring Christianity
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Course Description
This course is intended to introduce students to the dynamic tradition of Christianity. The course articulates and unpacks a working definition of tradition, which provides students with a framework for exploring the diversity and unity, as well as the continuity and change that have characterized the historical development and everyday practice of Christianity. At the foundation of this definition are the following elements: (1) authoritative voices and texts, (2) core beliefs, (3) historical development and change, (4) community, and (5) practices. In addition to the text book, the course utilizes fiction, film, music, contemporary news articles, and podcasts to explore each of these dimensions of Christianity. Most importantly, each student is encouraged to reflect critically and openly on the contemporary cultural, academic, and personal relevance of Christianity, regardless of her or his personal religious beliefs or academic focus.

Project Description

The "Photographic Essay and Presentation" project allowed students to choose either to explore several important religious sites in Philadelphia or to visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Students were placed in small groups (3-4 students) according to the option they chose. Each option included the following elements: a photographic documentation of the small-group trip, focusing on elements provided in the assignment description for the option students chose; a group Power Point presentation of their photographs, observations, and reflections to the rest of the class; and a 1-2 page personal essay written by each student individually.

Project Outcomes

Both the museum and religious sites trips provided students the opportunity to engage with and reflect upon major themes of the course. Students visiting the museum were provided a "scavenger's list" of types of works that emphasized the historical and reciprocal relationship between Christianity and Western culture. Students visiting religious sites were provided a list of possible sites representing different historical periods and Christian denominations. Students were asked to select at least four sites and to identify and reflect upon points of comparison and contrast among the sites. Taken together, these trips—and the subsequent in-class presentations and personal reflections—enriched our study of Christianity as a lived tradition comprising the dynamics of continuity and change, as well as unity and diversity.

Student Feedback

In their personal-reflection essays, students were given the opportunity to assess for themselves the extent to which they thought the assignment contributed to their understanding of Christianity. The great majority of students found the opportunity to engage real examples of material culture helpful in understanding the more conceptual aspects of the course. Many of the students, including those from Philadelphia and the surrounding area, had never been to either the museum or the historical religious sites (e.g. Christ Church). The most significant and repeated complaint was that it was often difficult to schedule a time for the trip that was convenient for all members of group.