



Religious Worlds of New York Summer Institute for Teachers

Sacred Gotham: Mapping the Religious Life of a New York Neighborhood

The Basics

In the last week of the *Religious Worlds of New York* summer institute, we will pursue a collaborative field research project. Using ethnographic research methods (to the extent one can in a week-long project) and a multimedia wiki platform, we will document the religious life of the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights. We will explore the religious life of the city from the bottom up, looking for “religion” wherever it may be found, and however we may define it – in houses of worship and religious institutions, but also in murals and graffiti, statues and shrines, parks and parking spots, bookstores and businesses, yoga studios and movie theaters, grocery stores and restaurants, and so on, and so on.

We will highlight patterns in the geography of religious life, by pinning accounts of some of the sites we explore to a shared Google Map. We will look for parallels and contrasts in our data, by tagging many of our photos, recordings, and other media files to allow for micro-level comparisons. And we will write brief reports on our experiences in the field, highlighting whatever catches our eyes – and imaginations – during fieldwork.

We will try to do all of this in about a week (what are we, nuts?) and we might not fully realize every aspect of our research. But our work together will give our summer scholars the training and tools they’ll need to do similar projects with their own students. In the years after the institute, we hope to see teams of students – armed with notepads, cameras, smartphones, and sheer curiosity – fanning out across the United States to document and interpret the religious diversity of their own communities.

The Final Products

You will do field research for the Sacred Gotham project in teams of three. By the end of the week, on August 3rd, each research team will produce three distinct forms of analysis based on their fieldwork:

1. A body of relatively raw but well organized data – potentially including photos, video or audio recordings, written descriptions, vignettes, or quotes from your field notes, scans of printed materials collected in the field, etc. Each team will collect as much fieldwork data as it can, upload it onto a digital platform (first Google Drive and then WikiSpaces), and eventually “tag” these files with identifying characteristics, to facilitate comparison and analysis.
2. About a half-dozen “pins” placed on our shared Google Map. Each pin will include one or more data file (like a photo, video, or scanned document), and some pins will also include brief ethnographic, historical, or analytical notes.
3. A brief multimedia report on your research team’s experiences in the field. These reports will typically include an introduction to the research team, a number of captioned fieldwork photos or other data files, some brief reflections on any patterns you found in local religious life, and perhaps some personal reflections on the fieldwork process.

Each of these final products will be based on the same body of research and data – the same experiences in the field, and the same files uploaded to the wiki – but each requires a somewhat different form of analysis, writing, and reporting. Looking ahead to the fieldwork you might ask your students to do, you can replicate any combination of these three projects (or assign even more ambitious research papers), depending on your students’ research and writing skills, the amount of time they have for fieldwork, etc.

The Research Teams and Fieldwork Areas

Our thirty summer scholars will be divided into ten research teams of three people each. For some aspects of your fieldwork, each research teams will be assigned to a specific area of the Upper West Side or Morningside Heights. Specifically:

- Groups 1 and 2: 77th to 86th Street, from Riverside to Central Park
- Groups 3 and 4: 86th to 94th Street, from Riverside to Central Park
- Groups 5 and 6: 94th to 102nd Street, from Riverside to Central Park
- Groups 7 and 8: 102nd to 110th Street, from Riverside to Central Park
- Groups 9 and 10: 110th to 123rd Street, from Riverside to Morningside Park

The Fieldwork Process – Daily Assignments

Before Friday, July 27th

Before we begin our work on the Sacred Gotham project, you will need to create a gmail account (if you don't already have one) and give us your gmail address. Using this address, we'll invite you to join a shared Google Drive, Google Map, and wiki. You'll need to register on these platforms before the 27th.

If you have an iPhone or Droid smartphone, you might want to download (and register with) the free "Soundcloud" app, which turns your phone into a web enabled digital voice recorder – allowing you to record, edit, and share audio fairly easily.

Friday, July 27th

On Friday afternoon, July 27th, institute faculty members Henry Goldschmidt, Courtney Bender, and Mark Phillipson will lead a discussion of the Sacred Gotham project, the fieldwork process, and wiki-assisted collaboration.

Following this discussion, you will meet with the other members of your research team. You'll have two main goals:

With help from Mark Phillipson and Paul Stengel, you will create a page for your team and (eventually) its final report on the Sacred Gotham wiki. The page should include a photo of the research team, and brief descriptions of its members. This material can all be edited later – the goal at this point is to gain a basic familiarity with the wiki.

You'll then discuss your preliminary thoughts about your fieldwork. What kinds of sites, themes, or issues do you want to explore? Of course you won't *really* know until you hit the streets the following Monday, but it might be helpful to reflect in advance on the kinds of things you're all interested in.

Saturday and Sunday, July 28th and 29th

There are no required research activities over the weekend, but you may want to attend a weekly service at a house of worship in your research area. You definitely do not need to do so, but it might be nice – especially if there's a specific congregation or tradition you're interested in.

You can learn more about houses of worship (and other sites) in your research area with a few simple google searches, and/or by taking a look at the books *From Abyssinian to Zion: A Guide to Manhattan's Houses of Worship* and *The Spiritual Traveler, New York City: A Guide to Sacred Spaces and Peaceful Places*. Both are available in our little institute lending library, but please don't take them out for too long.

If you do attend a service over the weekend, you should not try to take any photos, make recordings, etc – this is probably not appropriate during a worship service. But you should definitely write some field notes and reflections on your experience afterwards. And you might want to introduce yourself to clergy or members of the congregation, tell them about your research, and see if they're available to chat later in the week.

Monday, July 30th

Field Research, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm: Surveying the Neighborhood

On your first day of fieldwork, each research team will conduct a visual/spatial survey of religious life and expression in its assigned area. In other words (minus the jargon) you will walk the streets of New York, looking for religion – whatever that is, and wherever you may find it – then bring back data to document and map its presence. At this point in the process, you will not focus in detail on any one site or sites. There will be time for that on Tuesday and Wednesday.

You should document local houses of worship and religious institutions, but you should *not* limit your investigation of religious life to impressive buildings with ties to established religious traditions. We've learned that *lived* religion means far more than stained glass and steeples! Keep your eyes (and ears and minds) open for:

- the architecture and social life of local houses of worship, and other religious institutions
- the work of faith-based social service providers and other community organizations
- museums and other cultural institutions with collections of religious art, artifacts, or ceremonial objects
- bookstores, restaurants, and other businesses (whether religiously affiliated or not) selling religious literature, art, ritual objects, food, or other products
- yoga studios, alternative medical offices, movie theaters, and other businesses providing religious or spiritual practices or experiences
- religious (whatever that means) texts, themes, imagery, and iconography in murals, graffiti, statues, monuments, advertising, etc.
- sites for spiritual (whatever that means) experience and reflection in local parks or elsewhere

And so on, and so on. When you're in the field gathering data, please be as inclusive as possible in looking for evidence of religious life and expression. Please do *not* limit your investigation to sites and symbols associated with clearly defined religious traditions (Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, etc). We can debate later (if we feel we need to) whether or not the sites, practices, and experiences you document are "authentically" religious.

At this point, please don't spend too much time on any one site in your fieldwork area. You should pop inside houses of worship, religious institutions, and businesses whenever

possible, to take photos of their interiors (if appropriate), collect literature (if available), and chat with people (if they have time) or make appointments to stop by and chat later in the week. But at this point in the process you shouldn't get too caught up in any one site. You are absolutely *not* expected to explore every single block in your research area, but you should cover as much as you can in a day. There will be more time to focus on sites you're particularly interested in later in the week.

You should record your fieldwork data in whatever ways you think will be useful – both for uploading onto a digital platform, and for reflection/discussion in your research report. Definitely take photos, and possibly video or audio recordings. Collect printed materials (which can be digitized later). Take notes on your experiences in the field, and on any conversations you're able to have with local community members. Write down direct quotes from these conversations if possible.

Very important: Be sure to note the street address, or at least the approximate location, of any sites you document. You will need this location data to create pins for some of these sites on our Google Map.

And finally, please discuss your findings and experiences as you go. Help each other see things more carefully by unpacking the imagery and symbolism you encounter. And above all, discuss the underlying question of what counts as “religion” for the purposes of your research. Your research team should be a roving seminar on the nature of religion and its place in public life.

Working with Digital Data, 3:00 to 4:00 pm: Naming Files and Google Drive

When you return to Union Theological Seminary on Monday afternoon, you should have a fairly large amount of fieldwork data. With help from Henry, Mark, and Paul, you will move your digital data onto a computer (copying files, scanning documents, etc).

You'll need to give these files descriptive names – a crucial step for the organization, analysis, and presentation of data from all ten research groups – and then upload them to a shared Google Drive. (At this point in the process we will not be using the more powerful, but more complicated, file management system on the wiki.)

Preliminary Findings, 4:00 to 5:30 pm: A Quick Slide Show

At the end of the day, each research team will present a small selection of its data to the entire institute. You should plan to present and discuss two photos, or other forms of data: one documenting the presence of religious life in a place we might expect to find it (a house of worship or religious institution), and one documenting the presence of religious life in a place where you were surprised to find it.

In addition to these brief presentations, Henry and Courtney will facilitate a more general discussion of your experiences in the field.

Tuesday, July 31st

Field Research, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm: Exploring Sites in More Detail

On your second day of fieldwork, each research team will explore a smaller number of sites in greater detail. You will continue the rambling search for “religion” you started the day before – keep your eyes open for religious life and expression as you make your way around the neighborhood – but your exploration will now be driven, to a larger extent, by your team’s particular interests.

In some cases, you may want to spend the entire day exploring one very large or complex site, like the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine or the American Museum of Natural History. In other cases, you may want to focus on two or three related (or entirely unrelated) sites, like a neighboring church and synagogue, a Jewish bookstore and a Barnes and Nobles, or a few local yoga studios with different forms of practice. And in other cases, you might want to examine a larger number of sites unified by some kind of common theme, like a survey of religious symbolism on local statues and monuments, or on the walls of local kosher restaurants. It’s entirely up to your research team! Just follow your sense of what’s interesting and important. But keep in mind (as these examples make clear) that a religious “site” does not necessarily mean a house of worship.

Whatever sites you choose to examine on Tuesday, you should explore them in greater detail than the day before. For example you might want to:

- schedule informal conversations with clergy, community leaders, or community members (You are *not* expected to conduct formal interviews for this project. You don’t even *need* to have any of these informal conversations, but it would be nice if possible. You are *not* expected to record these conversations, but that would also be nice if possible, and above all if the person you are talking to is comfortable with the idea. If you can’t record these conversations you should take notes during them, or immediately afterward – carefully rendered quotes from your conversations can add just as much depth and texture to your research as audio clips.)
- conduct a series of brief “person on the street” interviews to gauge public reactions to a work of art or advertising with religious themes (You probably would be able to record these, as many people are accustomed to the idea of brief conversations like this with journalists.)
- attend weekday or weeknight prayer services, Bible studies, meditation sessions, or other programs at a house of worship you are interested in (Needless to say, we will be flexible about attendance for our late afternoon Sacred Gotham sessions if it will allow you to attend a service or event like this.)
- conduct a detailed survey of the interior space of a house of worship or religious institution, examining the architecture, art, and iconography, as well as the organization of the space, and the types of social practice it seems designed to support (An interior map or floor-plan of a site would be a very valuable piece of data – even one drawn freehand and informally.)

- volunteer your time at a faith-based social service organization, if this is possible on short notice
- look for comparative cases that might new shed light on a particular site you are interested in – for example, if you’re interested in a local Orthodox synagogue why not compare it to the Reform synagogue around the corner

And so on, and so on. These are just a few examples of research techniques you might use to deepen your understanding of sites you’re particularly interested in.

Very important reminder: Again, please be sure to note the street address or approximate location of any sites you document. You will need this location data to create pins for some of these sites on our Google Map.

At this point in the process you do not need to stay within the borders of your research team’s assigned fieldwork area. You should stick to these borders as much as possible, so we can ensure more-or-less equal coverage of different parts of the neighborhood (and don’t worry, there are plenty of fascinating sites in each area). But if you are interested in a particular type of site (yoga studios, kosher restaurants, a church from a specific denomination, etc) you should feel free to roam throughout the neighborhood.

At this point in the process your research team may want to split up, for part of the time, to examine a wider range of sites, or make specific appointments at different sites. You should stick together as much as possible – to keep your roving seminar on religion and public life in session – but if you need to split up occasionally that’s okay.

Working with Digital Data, 3:00 to 4:00 pm: Creating Pins on our Google Map

When you return to Union Theological Seminary on Monday afternoon, you should have a fairly large amount of fieldwork data, perhaps including audio or video recordings. With help from Henry, Mark, and Paul, you will move your digital data onto a computer (copying files, scanning documents, etc). As on Monday, you’ll need to give these files descriptive names and upload them to our shared Google Drive.

Your research team will then take the next step in our analysis of local religious life, by creating one or two pins on our Google Map to mark some of the sites you are particularly interested in. With help from Mark and Paul, you’ll learn to drop pins on the map, and build a description and analysis of each site into its pin. At this point in the process, each pin will most likely include a photo or video, and a very brief explanatory text. Later in the week (on Thursday) each research team will create a few more pins and incorporate more data and analysis into them.

Preliminary Findings, 4:00 to 5:30 pm: Exploring our Google Map

At the end of the day, each team will share its new pins. Henry and Courtney will facilitate a discussion of the map, and of the fieldwork process more broadly.

Wednesday, August 1st

All Sorts of Research, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm: Placing Your Fieldwork in Context

On your third day of fieldwork, the research teams will most likely split up to accomplish a range of different tasks. One or two members of each team will probably continue doing field research at those sites the team is particularly interested in, just as they did the previous day. This extra day of fieldwork will be particularly important if it allows you to schedule conversations with community leaders or members, or to attend a weekday service or other event at a local congregation.

Meanwhile, one or two members of each research team will work to place your field research in broader social, historical, and intellectual contexts through online, archival, and/or library research. Your field research is the heart of the Sacred Gotham project, but it is often impossible for an ethnographer to understand his or her experiences in the field without additional research in other sources, as well as back-ground readings in relevant scholarly texts.

You will find links to a wide range of online or easily accessible sources on the Research Resources page of the Sacred Gotham wiki. And you will find extremely helpful librarians at Butler, Burke, the JTS library, and the local history division of the New York Public Library (if you're up for a trip to the lion library – the famous main branch of the NYPL on 5th Avenue and 42nd Street). You can use these sources (and of course your own clever Google searches) to find:

- overviews of the history and/or beliefs of local houses of worship and religious institutions (Many large congregations have basic information about their history and beliefs on their own websites – a very useful source, though remember it may not be the whole story.)
- overviews of the social and/or intellectual history of a tradition or denomination (Try the *Encyclopedia of Religion* or the *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* for basic information on, say, Methodism or Zen Buddhism.)
- scholarly books and journal articles with more subtle analyses of religious traditions and relevant social, cultural, or political issues
- demographic information about the communities surrounding a house of worship, religious institution, or other site (Although keep in mind that congregations are not always drawn from the geographic area surrounding a house of worship – it's a good idea to ask community leaders where their congregation lives.)
- archival photographs and documents illustrating the history and development of a house of worship, monument, or other site
- biographical information about the artists or architects responsible for an artwork, monument, or building
- the narrative and interpretive context of a scriptural text (from whatever scripture) that appears at a site, or came up in a conversation

And so on, and so on. These are just a few of the ways that a day spent online, or in local libraries, can help you place your field research in broader contexts.

Of course, you won't be able to take in all this information in the very limited time-frame of the Sacred Gotham project – you are *not* expected to read and absorb a stack of books and journal articles overnight! But some basic information (and maybe some juicy quotes) from your online, library, and archival research will help to deepen the descriptions and analyses of specific sites that your research team will write for its pins on our Google Map, and deepen your team's reflections on fieldwork in its final report.

In addition to the scholarly sources and background information discussed above, your online research may turn up additional photos or videos of the sites your research team has explored. You are welcome to copy these and add them to our data files if they complement your own fieldwork in valuable ways, but with two important qualifications: 1) The data that *you* produced is inherently more interesting than other people's photos (even if they're beautiful shots by great photographers) as your data reflects your own engagement with the religious life of the community. You should only use someone else's photos if they add a specific point or dimension to your research team's analysis that you weren't able to capture yourselves. And 2) If you do decide to copy someone else's photos or videos into our Sacred Gotham data files, please make sure you are not violating their copyright. Ideally, you should only use photos or videos made available to the public under a "Creative Commons" license.

Working with Digital Data, 3:00 to 4:00 pm: Tagging Files in the Wiki

With help from Henry, Mark, and Paul, you will move any new data files onto a computer, then upload these files to the Sacred Gotham wiki (rather than the Google Drive we've been using thus far).

Henry will then demonstrate the tagging capabilities of the wiki's file management system. This brief demonstration will set the stage for the longer conversation about tagging and classification we will have Thursday morning.

Preliminary Findings, 4:00 to 5:30 pm

You will not need to present any new data on Wednesday afternoon, but Henry will facilitate a general conversation about the progress of your research.

Thursday, August 2nd

Your last day of work on the Sacred Gotham project will be focused on analysis, writing, and reporting, rather than research. Some teams may still have a member doing additional fieldwork or background reading/research, but most of your time will be spent working with your existing data on the wiki and the Google Map.

From 9:00 to 10:30 Henry, Courtney, and Mark will facilitate a detailed conversation about tagging and classification. We will all work together to establish a common vocabulary for tagging the photos and other data files in the wiki – a set of shared descriptive terms like (for example) “Jewish,” “Hindu,” and “Buddhist” or “architecture,” “commerce,” and “ritual” that will allow us to group our fieldwork data for comparative analysis. In essence, we will work together to decide the most interesting ways to classify, organize, and interpret our data.

After this conversation, you will have the rest of the day to work on the three distinct projects/products discussed above (on pages 1 - 2). Specifically:

- A member or members of each research team will need to go through all of the team’s data files and add appropriate tags. You will also be welcome to view and tag other research teams’ data files, but you will be *responsible* for carefully tagging your own team’s files.
- A member or members of each research team will need to create additional pins on our Google Map, then add data files, links, and in some cases descriptive texts to flesh out your descriptions/analyses of these sites. Each team will probably create about a half-dozen pins, but the number of pins (and the amount of detail in each one) will depend on the number of sites you have examined in depth.
- A member or members of each research team will need to write up the team’s multimedia report on its experiences in the field. These brief reports will be done on pages in the wiki. They will typically include an introduction to the research team (created the previous week), a number of captioned fieldwork photos or other data files, some brief reflections on any patterns you found in local religious life, and perhaps some personal reflections on the fieldwork process. They do *not* need to be rigorous research papers, but they should be thoughtful reflections on your experiences in the field.

There will be no presentations or discussion at the end of the day on Thursday, as you will be getting ready for final presentations the following morning.

Friday, August 3rd

On the last morning of the institute, each research team will give a brief presentation of its multimedia report, and we will work together to analyze any patterns that may emerge in mapping and tagging our data about local religious life.