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Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Rachel Dudley

Candidate for B.A. Degree
and Renée Crown University Honors

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Honors Capstone Project in Religion

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Thomas V. Wolfe

Honors Reader: _____
Gustav Niebuhr

Honors Director: _____
Samuel Gorovitz

Date: _____

Abstract

The United States of America is now the most religiously diverse country in the world. Living side by side are not only Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people from a multitude of other religious groups as well. However, while Americans inevitably encounter religious diversity every day, very few take the time to engage in it. There is a lot of ignorance surrounding the multitude of religious traditions present in America, and this ignorance can easily lead to fear, hatred, discrimination, and violence.

The course “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” tries to put a stop to this downward spiral by allowing students to learn about different religions as lived human experiences from those who practice them. The course, which was taught at Syracuse University in the fall of 2008 to ten undergraduate students, was centered on visits to different houses of worship every other week. At these houses of worship, the students were met by religious leaders or community members who spoke about the community, gave the students a tour of the building, and explained some of their beliefs, rituals, and practices. These visits were introduced the previous week with lectures and readings providing background information on the faith tradition, and were followed by written reflections and class discussions.

During the semester, the students visited the Society of Friends (Quaker) Meetinghouse, the Conservative Jewish synagogue Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, the Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church, Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, and the Islamic Society of Central New York. At the end of the semester, each student visited a worship service at a faith community of their choice, and presented their experience to the rest of the class. These visits included a variety of Catholic churches, the Syracuse University student Pagan association SPIRAL, Orthodox and Reform Jewish communities, the Syracuse University Buddhist chaplaincy, and a return visit to the Islamic Society of Central New York. These visits, and the critical reflections that followed, had a very great impact on the students. At the beginning of the semester, many students had only been able to reflect upon our visits in terms of what they did or did not like about each religion. However, by the end of the semester, these students were able to appreciate the value of certain beliefs or practices, even if those beliefs or practices were not ones the students would want to incorporate into their own lives. In addition to their increased appreciation of diversity, the students also became more comfortable speaking to others about religious differences and stepping into the religious worlds of others.

This thesis tells the story of “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” and the students that participated in it. In doing so, it emphasizes the need for interfaith work in America and the impact that intentional interfaith encounters can have. As is clearly shown by the students' reflections, “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” succeeded in increasing interfaith understanding, bringing us one step closer to a society where a multitude of diverse faith traditions can constructively coexist.

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Second, I would like to thank my students. This project would have ended before it even really began if there had not been anyone to teach. However, you did far more than simply show up to class and allow yourselves to be taught. Throughout the semester, you really wrestled with the different things you saw and heard. You were incredibly reflective in your journals and comments during class discussions, and as a result of all of this, you changed and grew. Thank you for all of your hard work, and for reminding me and everyone else that interfaith work really can change lives.

I would also like to thank the incredible network of teachers, family, friends, mentors, religious leaders, and advisors that I am incredibly blessed to have. This project is the result of years of studying world religions and coming to

terms with my own place in a religiously diverse world. Every professor, rabbi, minister, and friend who has ever discussed religion and its role in society with me contributed to this project. Although all of you helped me immensely, I would especially like to thank two individuals here.

Professor Gustav Niebuhr, from my very first semester at Syracuse University, you woke me up to the great religious diversity present in the United States, and you made me realize how important it is to learn about other faith traditions. I have greatly appreciated your constant encouragement and your thoughtful advice, both inside and outside of the classroom. I am especially thankful for the help and advice you have given me in writing this thesis. Studying with you has made me a much more thoughtful person. You increased my awareness of religious diversity and its impact on society, and I am incredibly grateful for all of this.

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Lastly, and most importantly, I want to thank everyone who has ever participated in or created intentional interfaith experiences. I honestly believe we must all work together and learn how to embrace our differences if we want to successfully coexist with each other. The work you have done and continue to do inspires me every day, because this work will truly change the world. Thank you.

Chapter One

Inspiration

Three Faiths, One Humanity

In the spring of 2007, I embarked on an intellectual, spiritual, and physical journey that changed my life. Hendricks Chapel, the interfaith chapel at Syracuse University, organized an interfaith travel study experience to Turkey entitled “Three Faiths, One Humanity,” in which I participated. This experience brought Christian, Muslim, and Jewish students and faculty together to study each other's religions, and to learn about Turkey and its religious diversity during the fall of 2006 and the spring of 2007. This led up to a one-week trip to Turkey to see religious sites, and talk to Turks about the religious landscape of Turkey and their lives as people in a religiously diverse, secular country.

I learned and grew immensely from this experience, as did the other participants. My understanding of other religions changed, as did my approach to interfaith encounters. I came to our first meeting with the desire to learn about Christianity and Islam from others, share what I knew about Judaism, and engage in interfaith dialogue, with the hope that gaining an understanding of other religions would help me nourish and become part of a more tolerant society. I was not disappointed. I learned about Christianity and Islam, and discovered similarities and differences between the three faiths, similarities and differences which I eventually came to appreciate. I gained insights from discussions about what it means to be committed to one particular religion in a diverse society, and became aware of some of the challenges people of faith face in their day-to-day

lives.

Most importantly, I learned something I had always known, but never quite identified: religion is a lived human experience. While this may seem trivial, remembering this fact is crucial to both the study of religion and the creation of interfaith communities. Prior to participating in “Three Faiths, One Humanity,” I had learned most of what I knew about other religions from books or classes. While I had friends who adhered to religions different from my own, I only occasionally engaged in conversations about their religious lives. Religion was, for the most part, a series of dogmas and rituals which could be summed up in statements such as “Roman Catholics believe in the Trinity,” or “Muslims observe the five pillars of Islam.” During “Three Faiths, One Humanity,” I participated in many conversations, both formal and informal, which centered on our beliefs and practices. I heard first-hand about what others thought and did, and how that impacted their lives. Sometimes these beliefs agreed with the official stance of that person's religion, and other times they did not. It is technically accurate to say, for example, that “Roman Catholics should go to confession” or “Jews are supposed to keep *kosher*” (follow Jewish dietary laws), but the reality is that not every Roman Catholic or Jew does these things. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to step inside of churches and mosques and observe prayer services or other rituals taking place.

This made me realize that no matter how much one has studied the rituals, scriptures, holidays, and theologies of a religion, it is impossible to understand that religion without talking to adherents or stepping inside their religious world

and observing practices in action. It is a very different experience to read about Muslim prayer than it is to actually observe Muslims communicating with God. Religion, though it is often believed to be of divine origin, is a human experience; as such, people must learn about religion in a human context in order to gain an understanding of the people who make up our religiously diverse world.

Seeing different mosques, churches, and synagogues while in Turkey had a huge impact on me. However, I realized that it was not being in Turkey that changed the way I understood people of other religions. It was visiting unfamiliar houses of worship and speaking with people whose beliefs differed from my own that affected me the most. I didn't need to travel thousands of miles to experience that. In my own back yard of Syracuse was a community not just of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, but of Buddhists, Hindus, Pagans, Unitarian Universalists, and others as well! It would be so wonderful, I thought, to expose others to the things I had learned during "Three Faiths, One Humanity," and explore the religious diversity of Syracuse.

When it came time to choose a Capstone Project, I thought again about the possibilities a diverse city like Syracuse has to offer. The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) identified 58 different religious groups in Onondaga County in the year 2000 ("County Membership Report: Onondaga County, New York"). Even within a couple of miles of the Syracuse University campus, there are dozens of houses of worship with communities of Jews, Muslims, Roman Catholics, Quakers, Unitarian Universalists, and more. I thought of how wonderful would it be to bring other students to some of these different local

houses of worship, and teach them about religion and religious diversity in a way that few other classes do. I formulated a plan for a one-credit course involving trips to local faith communities where students could see different worship spaces and hear from religious leaders and community members about their religious experiences. The possibilities of increasing interfaith understanding through a class like this seemed unbelievable. As Gustav Niebuhr says, “the way to a constructive common life is through conversation and collaboration among people of different faiths” (27). I decided this was something I had to do. “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” was born.

Chapter Two

Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse

I was committed to my idea of creating a course that would increase interfaith understanding and dialogue in America. However, I still had many details to work out. After much careful thought, I came up with a model for the course, which would be entitled “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse.” Since my goal for the course was to facilitate an experience where students could learn about different religions from a personal perspective, the course would be centered on six visits to local faith communities, with a visit to a different site every other week. At each site, either a religious leader or a community member – or both – would meet with us to give us a tour of the house of worship, speak with us about the different activities that go on in the community, and explain what happens at a worship service. In this way, students could hear and see first-hand what different religions have to offer.

I wanted the students to learn from adherents of each faith tradition, but I also thought it was important for them to develop their religious literacy by learning some basic, background information on the history, beliefs, and practices of each community we visited. Therefore, the week before each visit, I would assign the students a reading about the religious community we would be going to. Then, during the class before each visit, I would present a brief lecture on that religion. I believed this would not only give the students a broader knowledge of each religion with which they could frame their experiences, it would also make them feel more comfortable at each house of worship because they would have an

idea of what to expect. Additionally, it would allow them to learn more from each visit because they would know what to look for and have a better idea of what questions to ask.

In addition to preparing for each visit through readings and lectures, I felt there also had to be a forum for discussion, reflection, and dialogue after each visit. In my own personal experience, the reflection and dialogue processes have been just as meaningful, if not more so, than the encounters I have had with other faiths. Reflection is a critical element of intentional interfaith encounters for several reasons. Reflection helps one think analytically about what he or she has experienced and what insights were gained; then, one can begin to consider how those insights influence his or her life. Individual reflection often facilitates the articulation of tacitly held ideas. It can also become the platform for a sort of dialogue between the ideas one formerly held and those that were presented during an interfaith encounter, in order to figure out how the two sets of ideas can coexist. Group reflection gives one the opportunity to hear different reactions to the experience, which then affects his or her own understanding. Because of the importance of the reflection and dialogue process, I decided to incorporate it into “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” in two different ways.

First, students would be asked to keep a reflective journal. Following each visit, students would be expected to write at least one or two pages of their thoughts on and reactions to the visit, including questions they might have. This would give the students a chance to process what they had experienced on their own time, without the fear of having others interrupt or pass judgment. While the

journal entries were turned in and graded, their primary purpose was to help each student process his or her experience.

Second, we would spend time discussing our visit in the class following each trip. This would be an opportunity not only for group reflection, but for interfaith dialogue as well, since the students would be coming from a variety of religious backgrounds. In class, each student would be asked to speak about his or her initial reactions or thoughts. Then, using their journals (which would be turned in the day before class) and their comments, in addition to my own reactions, I would facilitate a class discussion that would encourage students to talk about similarities and differences they saw in the religions we had encountered, things that made them uncomfortable or that they didn't understand, things they had learned from the trip, the impact that religious diversity in America has on faith communities, and other similar topics.

I wanted to expose the students to as many different faith communities as possible, a goal I knew would be difficult to achieve because of the limited amount of time we would have. Additionally, I envisioned this course as a gateway to participation in interfaith understanding – a beginning, not an end. It was my hope that “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” would inspire students to continue participating in interfaith community development and dialogue for the rest of their lives. Because of that, I not only wanted to educate the students, I wanted to empower them to engage in the religious diversity of Syracuse on their own as well. With these things in mind, I decided to incorporate a personal site visit and presentation into the class. At the end of the semester,

each student would be asked to select a faith community that he or she had not grown up in and to visit a worship service there. Then, during the final class meetings, each student would give an informal presentation to the rest of the class about his or her site visit. This would accomplish two goals: it would expose all of the students to a larger number of faith traditions, and help empower students to continue interfaith exploration on their own after the semester ended.

While the journal entries, classroom discussions, and personal site visits and presentations created an opportunity for reflecting on each individual trip, I thought it was also important for students to reflect on the semester as a whole. Therefore, the students' final assignment would be a reflection paper, to be written after all of the site visits, both with and without the class. By the end of the semester, it was my hope that they would approach encounters with other faiths in a different manner. My own approach to interfaith encounters had changed as a result of my participation in “Three Faiths, One Humanity,” and other interfaith initiatives. I wanted the students to look back over the entire semester and consider what effect the course had on them, and whether or not they had changed. I thought a reflection paper would facilitate this review process well.¹

Once the different elements of “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” had been decided upon, it was time to organize the course. One of the most important tasks I faced was to select communities for the class to visit. This had to be done carefully. I wanted our visits to represent a wide variety of different faith traditions, and hoped to expose students to religions they had not

¹ A copy of the syllabus, including the course structure and assignments, can be found in Appendix A.

yet encountered. However, I knew we would only have time to visit six different communities. I had to narrow the long list of local houses of worship down to the ones that I thought would have the greatest impact.

From the beginning, I knew I wanted to include at least one house of worship from each of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). In the hopes of exposing students to as wide a variety of communities as possible, I also decided that including a Buddhist community and a Hindu community would be an asset to the course. I composed a list of over fifteen local faith communities to choose from. I eventually narrowed this list down to six communities, based on the goals I had for the class and the proximity of the communities to the campus. The communities were the Hindu Mandir of Central New York, the Islamic Society of Central New York, the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, the Society of Friends, Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and Temple Society of Concord. Each one of these communities had something different to offer our class. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the five largest religious groups in America—were all represented. These six houses of worship in no way were completely representative of the religious diversity of Syracuse. The absence of a visit to a Roman Catholic church in a city whose population is approximately 50% Roman Catholic was unfortunate. However, the students would have the option of visiting a Roman Catholic church on their own for their final projects, and furthermore, I thought the communities I had selected would offer a new experience to most, if not all, of the students.

Once these six communities were selected, I sent a letter to them

explaining my capstone project and the details and goals of “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse.” The letter also asked a religious leader or active member of each community for their participation in the project.² I got very positive responses from the Society of Friends, Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Islamic Society of Central New York, and the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji. Because of the time of the class, we were unable to visit the Temple Society of Concord, and so I contacted Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, another local Jewish community, who agreed to participate.

I was not so lucky with arranging a visit to the Hindu Mandir. After trying to contact a few different community members without response, I had to change my plans. There were no other local Hindu communities, and so I thought about other experiences the students might benefit from. In preparation for our trip to Turkey, I had visited the Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church with the other participants of “Three Faiths, One Humanity.” This church was very different from any Roman Catholic or Protestant church I had ever visited. While I had wanted to avoid visiting three Christian communities, I decided that most of the students would be unfamiliar with the Eastern Orthodox Church, and contacted Father Branko Postolovski, who immediately welcomed us to visit. With the site visits lined up, “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” was ready to begin.

² A copy of this letter can be found in Appendix B.

Chapter Three

The First Class

Ten students sat in front of me as I prepared to begin teaching my very first class. I was very aware of the fact that this first session was possibly the most important one of the semester. The trips to different religious communities were certainly going to be the main focus of the course. However, it would be this meeting in which the students, my advisor Thomas Wolfe, and I would have our first encounter. The relationships we would begin to establish that day would set the tone for the rest of the semester. Because of this, I devoted half of the first class to introductions of myself, the students, and the course.

After introducing myself and Thomas Wolfe, who would be assisting me in the course as my advisor, it was time for the students to introduce themselves³. I told them I hoped we would really get to know each other, since this class would involve a lot of dialogue among ourselves. The students were asked to share several things with everyone else: their name, year, major, personal religious background, previous encounters with other religions, and reason for registering for “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse.” Their responses were in some ways very similar, and in others quite different. Almost all of them had been raised Christian. The exceptions were Emily, who was Jewish, and Jillian, who had been raised with no religion but had become a Baptist Christian in recent years. However, of those who were raised Christian, there was much diversity among their religious upbringings and current identifications. While six of the

³ The names of the students have been changed in order to respect their privacy. The names of everyone else involved in the course, including religious leaders, remain unchanged.

students had been raised in various Protestant denominations, Lindsey was raised (and continues to identify) as a Roman Catholic, and Katelin was raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, while her beliefs are currently agnostic. Two other students, Joshua and Dan, had also moved away from the religions they were raised in. Joshua had been raised Presbyterian, and currently does not identify with any religion. Dan was raised in a very religious Methodist family, but is questioning his religious identification. The remaining four students, Amy, Sara, Brianne, and Michelle, were both raised and currently identify as Protestants, although they identify with a variety of denominations.

They had all had encounters with other religions as well. Some students said they had not spent a lot of time engaging in other religions prior to this class. For several students, that was in fact their reason for registering for the course. Other students talked about significant encounters they had experienced throughout their lives. For instance, Joshua, although raised Presbyterian, had gone to a Quaker school for several years, and several members of Sara's family were Roman Catholic. Still other students felt that they had met people of other religions, and maybe even attended a religious service such as a bar mitzvah or a confirmation, but had never really engaged in religious diversity. Everyone was at a different place on his or her interfaith journey. I hoped these differences would contribute to the class and help the students learn from each other.

Once we had gotten to know each other a little bit, I took some time to speak about respect and the importance of creating a safe space where everyone could feel comfortable. We were there to try and learn about others' religions and

beliefs, and to react to what we had learned. However, I wanted to make it clear that we should all avoid passing judgment on others. I also wanted the students to understand that while it was our task to try and put ourselves in other people's shoes and experience things that people of other faiths experience, this course was not about trying to convert anyone. In this class, nobody should ever feel like their beliefs were being threatened or attacked.

I also pointed out that while I wanted everyone to feel safe in the class, they would not always feel comfortable, per se. This class, as with any cross-cultural experience for that matter, was designed to bring people outside of their comfort zones and expose them to new things. I encouraged the students to be open to any discomfort they might feel, and try to learn from it.

Once we had introduced ourselves and gone over different elements of the course, I thought it was important to spend time discussing why we should even be there in the first place. I wanted the students to understand the importance of engaging in religious diversity. In the brief amount of time we had left, I tried to get two main points across. First, America has become “the world's most religiously diverse nation” (Brodeur and Patel 2). The 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) received over 100 different answers for the question, “What is your religion, if any?”, and the Association of Religion Data Archives has identified over 400 religious denominations present in the United States (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar; “County Membership Report: Onondaga County, New York”). In Onondaga County alone, there are Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, Sikhs, Jains, Muslims,

Mennonites, Mormons, Quakers, Hindus, and Unitarian Universalists, not to mention the plethora of different Mainline and Evangelical Protestant communities (“County Membership Report: Onondaga County, New York”). Second, while diversity exists in America, it is rarely engaged in, and this can lead to hatred and violence.

My remaining task was to emphasize that, while we do live in a diverse society, we do not live in a pluralistic one. As Diana Eck says, “religious diversity is an observable fact of American life today. ... But the diversity alone is not pluralism. ... Pluralism requires participation, and attunement to the life and energies of one another. [Additionally,] pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other” (70). Using Eck's concepts of diversity and pluralism, I asserted the idea that very few people engage in diversity by encouraging them to think about their own lives. “How many of you know someone of a different religion?” I asked. Every student raised his or her hand. “How many of you talk about religion and religious differences on a somewhat regular basis?” Most students lowered their hands. Our task in this course was to change that, and to get a little closer to creating a pluralistic society.

While I had explained the difference between diversity and pluralism, I still had to explain why pluralism is important. I shared with them the chain of cause and effects that I see: lack of interaction leads to ignorance, ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hatred, and hatred leads to violence. Religious hate crimes and acts of intolerance are far more frequent in America than they should be. However, by educating ourselves and interacting with people of other faiths, we

have the opportunity to break that chain which ultimately leads to violence.

Hoping I had inspired my students and convinced them of the importance of what we would be doing, I concluded this portion of the class. It was time to get down to business – our first visit was only a week away, and I still had to give the students some background information on the Religious Society of Friends, whose meetinghouse we would be visiting. “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” was now well under way.

Chapter Four

Inner Light

Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends

The Religious Society of Friends – or Quakers, as they are commonly called – is a Christian denomination with unique practices. It was founded in England in 1649 by George Fox who, after wandering England for four years searching for a way to reform the Church, had a revelation from God that led to the founding of what is today known as the Religious Society of Friends. Fox's revelation inspired his doctrine of the Inner Light (also called “the Inward Light,” “the Inward Teacher,” or other similar names), which is central to the Society of Friends. The Inner Light is “an element of God's spirit [that] is implanted within every person's soul” (Robinson par 2). This idea is based on the concept that each person has a direct connection with God, and should look inward to find his or her own religious inspiration and understanding of the Divine.

Many of the Friends' beliefs and practices are based upon this doctrine of the Inner Light. For instance, there are very few stated creeds or beliefs that are shared by all Friends. Rather, each person is supposed to look to their Inner Light and develop their own personal theology (“Information about Quakerism”). This differs greatly from Roman Catholicism, and even many other Protestant denominations.

Because of the belief that everyone has equal access to the spirit of God through the Inner Light, the Society of Friends has fought for equal rights for all throughout its history. Women have always had the same status as men within the

community, and Friends have protested slavery and racial inequality, defended the rights of Native Americans, and fought for equality of the sexes. This has left a legacy of social activism, which is also apparent in the work that Friends do in caring for the poor, improving prison life, and other similar causes. Unfortunately, this has also led to the persecution of Quakers by those who did not want their societies critiqued.

The belief in the Inner Light has also led to unique approaches to worship and community organization among the Society of Friends. There are no religious leaders or presidents of the communities. Every decision that is made must be made by consensus, a process in which the Friends meet and discuss any issues until they all reach agreement on what should be done. Their weekly worship services, called meetings, traditionally have no leader either. In unprogrammed meetings, people sit silently until a person is inspired by the Inner Light to share something with everyone who is present. While some Quaker communities now have programmed meetings led by a minister, the Syracuse Friends continue to worship in the traditional style of unprogrammed meetings.

The Society of Friends is currently a small religious minority in the United States and, for that matter, in the world. However, they are present. In fact, there is a Friends meetinghouse less than half a mile away from the Syracuse University campus. It was there that “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” went for our first site visit. During the second half of our first class, I had given a brief lecture on the Society of Friends, which included many of the points that are outlined above. I also gave the students a selection from the book “Communities

of Dissent,” which gave a little more background information on the early years of the Society of Friends.

Since the Syracuse Friends Meeting was so close to campus, we all walked there together. The weather was absolutely beautiful that day, which I took as an auspicious sign. After about 15 minutes, we stopped in front of a plain white house, with a sign on the front lawn. We had arrived at the Syracuse Friends Meeting. As we entered the meetinghouse, we were offered cider by Ann Tussing, the Clerk of Ministry and Counsel for the Syracuse Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, and another member of the Syracuse Society of Friends.

After giving us some time to drink our cider, the Friends gave us a tour of the building. The room we had entered was plain, furnished with several benches and chairs arranged in a circle. There was very little on the walls, except for a few pictures, and a large quilt. This was the room in which the meetings were held, along with other large gatherings. Ann Tussing called us all over to the quilt that was hanging on the wall, something many of us had been looking at since we entered the building. She explained that the quilt had been a community effort – each square had been made by a different Friend, and depicted something about the Society of Friends. Both Ann Tussing and her children had taken part in making this quilt, and it was clear that it had great significance to the community.

Besides the room we were in, the kitchen was the only other room on the first floor, so we made our way upstairs. There was one room designated for children, which had storybooks and toys. This was where the children had their

religious school. Another room served as a library and a smaller meeting space, where some business meetings were held.

We then returned to the main room and sat down, while Ann Tussing told us about the history and traditions of the Quakers and different causes that the Syracuse Friends Meeting had been involved in, such as prison reform and defending the rights of members of the Onondaga Nation. Ann shared stories of herself and her family. She herself had relatives who were Friends during the mid-17th century in England. One of her relatives had even been imprisoned there because of her beliefs. Ann showed us a few pictures, and even passed around one of her ancestor's bonnets. Ann had been very involved in the Syracuse Society of Friends, and shared some personal stories with us. She had been to many protests, including one when she stood with members of the Onondaga Nation to protest construction on their land. It was a wonderful experience to hear these stories.

We were then told what the meetings were like. The Friends came into the main room and sat down. They continued sitting in complete silence, waiting to be inspired to say something by their Inner Light. When someone became inspired to speak, they were supposed to wait until they could wait no longer, and then they would share what they wanted to say with the group. This could be anything, whether it was what we consider to be religious or not. When a person had finished speaking, they would return to sitting quietly and wait for inspiration. Nobody would respond to what they said, unless they felt that the Inner Light was urging them to do so. Sometimes, nobody would be inspired to speak, and the meeting would continue in complete silence. At a certain point, whether someone

had spoken or not, a Friend might feel the urge to end the meeting. He or she would say so, and if everyone present came to consensus, the meeting would conclude. Afterwards, people would mill around, and might talk about what had been said during the meeting, or simply catch up with each other.

Ann then explained to us some of the other aspects of the Society of Friends. There are committees to discuss certain issues (for example, the Committee on Ministry and Counsel, for which Ann serves as clerk). However, if there is a decision to be made about something, the committee must bring the issue to the Monthly Meeting as a Concern for Business, where everyone present must come to consensus. Even my request for the class to visit had to be discussed by the Committee on Ministry and Counsel, and presented to the Monthly Meeting.

After Ann answered some of our questions, it was time to conclude our visit and return to campus. During that next week, I received the students' reflections on our trip in the form of their journal entries. It was clear that our trip had made a large impact. Amy had called it a "mind-blowing experience," saying that "this visit was like visiting another country." Lindsey wrote in her journal, "I didn't even realize Quakers still existed." The students commented on the style of worship, the simplicity of the building, the importance of social activism, and the strong sense of community, among other things. Their reactions were quite varied, and served as great starting points for our discussion in class.

I started off our discussion by asking everyone to share some of their thoughts or reactions with the rest of the class. We then jumped right into talking

about the Friends worship meetings. A silent, unprogrammed meeting is very different from most other worship services, and this made it difficult for some students to understand. Some had difficulty comprehending the purpose of the meetings, especially if the things that were said were not discussed during the worship. Sara had written, "I can sit in silence in my house and say something that may have some importance, but it's not a religion to me." I think this statement resonated with a lot of students. Others had difficulty with the fact that Friends could say either religious or non-religious things during the meetings. Dan wrote that he was "confused as to why something ... irrelevant and random would be deemed worthy of revealing," while Lindsey stated that she was "not exactly sure what the point of the Quaker religion is because they can talk about anything non-religious or not talk at all."

There was certainly a lot of confusion and doubt around the table; however, other students interpreted the meetings differently. Some of them were even attracted to the idea of silent meetings. "I especially felt that when you take out the traditional worship activities such as singing hymns or lighting candles there is more time to reflect on what is truly important," Michelle wrote. She and other students like her understood the meetings as time to breathe, meditate, and gain focus and clarity in their lives. Joshua was even a little bit frustrated by the negative reactions of his fellow classmates, saying that they seemed to have inaccurate ideas about the Society of Friends.

I took this struggle as a perfect opportunity to emphasize that we were there to step into the religious lives of others, and look for the possible value in

different religious experiences, even if a practice or belief is not something that would work for every one of us on a personal level. We then commenced with a discussion of what we thought the positive and negative aspects of an unprogrammed meeting were. Students noted that the meetings could serve as a time to reflect and think about what is truly important. It was also noted that sitting silently and waiting for inspiration can take quite a bit of discipline. Several students had been critical of the fact that often when a person says something during a meeting, nobody responds; however, during our conversation, someone made the point that this gave people time to really think about their responses, instead of just reacting. By the end of the class, some students still did not recognize any purpose in unprogrammed meetings. However, other students began to consider the fact that there are good elements of this style of worship, even if it was still a style of worship that was not for them.

We spoke about other points that the students had made in their journals as well. Joshua had written that he was amazed by Quakerism because of their acceptance of others, and that he believes “Quakers are ahead of their time, because they see what is truly important beyond the minor differences each sect chooses to value.” We discussed the ways in which the Society of Friends might be seen as “ahead of their time,” and tried to reconcile that statement with the fact that Quakers are often considered an archaic religion. We also spoke about the idea of equality and how it can fit into a religious belief system. Several students saw the possibility for great change in this belief. In her journal, Katelin wrote, “The concept that everyone had God inside of them and should be treated

accordingly is something that could really have a positive impact on the world if everyone decided to follow that belief.” All of the students seemed to agree with this idea.

Two other topics took precedence during our class reflection. Many students had noted the emphasis on community activism, and several commented that this was something they respected about the Society of Friends. I wanted the students to dig deeper into this observation, and so I asked them to think about whether or not activism should be part of religion in general, and also to consider whether or not there are ways in which activism ties into the ideology of the Society of Friends. Most of the students came to the consensus that activism should be a part of religion, but should not be limited to religion. Several students noted the connection between social activism and the idea of the Inner Light. If everyone has the spark of the divine within him- or herself, then each person should be treated equally. Furthermore, the recognition of the Inner Light within everyone leads to a sense of responsibility towards others. It is these beliefs that encourage social activism within the Society of Friends.

Our final point of discussion was the simplicity of the architecture and decoration of the building, and the style of worship. Many students had been surprised when they realized that the meetinghouse was simply a house, and were even more surprised when they saw how little decoration there was inside. A few students said they themselves were used to worshipping in plain, simple spaces; however, many were expecting a space that looked more like the traditional Protestant conception of a church with a steeple, pews, and a pulpit. Keeping in

mind our visit to the meetinghouse and other houses of worship that students had seen, we discussed the pros and cons of worshipping in a simple space. Some students said they thought it might be easier to concentrate without any distractions. Others expressed the idea that decorations can be inspiring, or that it just wouldn't feel like worship if they were in a house just like the one they live in. It seemed, however, that everyone came to the conclusion that both simple and highly decorated worship spaces had their value, and that it all depends on personal preference.

Our trip to the Syracuse Friends Meeting was an experience that certainly pushed the students. Quaker beliefs and practices are unique, and for some students, their encounter with the Society of Friends was their first encounter with anything other than the religion they had grown up with. This visit and the ensuing reflections had challenged the students and their ability to understand things from a different perspective. In all, it was a great start to a great semester.

Chapter Five

Ritual and Practice

Conservative Judaism and Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas

Our next visit promised to be a very different experience. We were going to Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, a Conservative Jewish synagogue. Judaism, with its focus on ritual and practice, contrasts greatly with the Religious Society of Friends. While Quakers do not perform sacraments, Judaism has rituals for almost every aspect of life; where the Syracuse Friends Meetinghouse is very simple, the synagogue has many decorations and ritual objects; and while the meetings of the Syracuse Society of Friends are unprogrammed, *Shabbat* (Sabbath) services at Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas consist of nearly three hours of prescribed prayers. We were about to step into another world.

The main difference between Judaism and Christianity is the importance of faith versus practice. Christianity is an orthodox religion – a religion that is focused on right belief (from the Greek *orthos*, meaning right or true, and *doxa*, meaning opinion or praise). Judaism, on the other hand, is an orthopraxy, or a religion focused on right action (from the Greek *orthos*, and *praxis*, which means practice or action) (Harper). The main focus of Judaism is the observance of commandments; faith and even belief in God is secondary. This is part of what makes Judaism, like many other religions, a way of life. There are commandments not only about prayers and holidays, but about what to eat, how to dress, how to do business, and virtually every other aspect of life as well. I emphasized these elements of Judaism in class because it would both help the students understand

Judaism and challenge them to think differently about religion.

I had assigned the students a reading from “World Religions Today,” edited by John Esposito, Darrell Fasching, and Todd Lewis, that gave a detailed background on the early history and development of Judaism. Beginning with stories from the *Torah*, or first five books of the Bible, about Abraham and his covenant with God, slavery in Egypt, and the journey to Israel, the chapter also spoke about Temple Judaism and the age of sacrifices, the exile from Israel, and the evolution of Rabbinic Judaism. We discussed these things in class, where I also explained the differences between the three main Jewish denominations in America: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Orthodox Jews are typically the most strict and observant when it comes to fulfilling the commandments, Reform Jews are the least so, and Conservative Jews are somewhere in between. Most Conservative synagogues, including the one we would be visiting, are egalitarian, meaning that men and women have equal rights within the congregation. Women can lead services, read from the *Torah* scroll, and be religious leaders. In fact, the synagogue we would be visiting has a female rabbi and a female president.

Before we ended our class, I wanted to prepare the students for some of the things they would see when we visited the synagogue. I told them that there would be many different ritual objects, and that the synagogue would be much more decorated than the Syracuse Friends Meetinghouse. I asked the students to observe as much as they could while we were at Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas.

When we arrived at the synagogue, Gwen Kay, the president of the

congregation, greeted us. The rabbi, Rachel Ain, unfortunately was not able to meet with us for more than a few minutes. I was also able to help lead this visit, as I personally am a member of this community. We stood in the foyer as Gwen greeted us and explained some Jewish customs. She showed us a basket of *kippot* (head coverings), and asked all of the men to put one on. She explained that the *kippah* is traditionally worn whenever a man is praying or in the synagogue as a sign of respect and a reminder that there is something between himself and God. As the congregation was an egalitarian community, women were welcome to do so as well, although they were not required.

Gwen also explained to us some of the other things we could see in the foyer. First, she noted the *mezuzah* on the door, which we had passed by as we entered the synagogue. A *mezuzah*, she explained, is a small box that encases several passages from the *Torah*. It is traditionally found on every doorpost of a Jewish home or other Jewish space, since in one of the passages from the *Torah*, God commands the Jewish people to “inscribe them [the instructions that God has given] on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, Deuteronomy 6:9). Jews take this passage very literally. These words are written on a scroll and placed inside the *mezuzah*. Every time a Jew enters or exits a room, he or she traditionally kisses a finger and then touches the *mezuzah*, both out of respect and to ensure that the person is reminded of the commandments.

This same passage includes an injunction to “bind them [the instructions of God] as a sign on your hand, and ... between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 6:8). Every weekday morning, during the morning prayers, Jewish men (and today,

some women as well) wrap *t'fillin* (phylacteries) around their arm and place *t'fillin* on their head. *T'fillin* are two small leather boxes containing the same passages from the *Torah* that are in the *mezuzah*. I had brought my *t'fillin* with me, and put them on so the students would have the opportunity to see what they looked like. Gwen also explained the tradition of wearing a *tallit*, or prayer shawl, since there was a rack of *tallit* in the foyer as well. These are just some of the ways in which ritual is emphasized in Judaism.

After learning about these ritual objects, Gwen led everyone into the school wing, where the children's' religious school is held. She explained to the class that beginning in kindergarten, the children attend religious school once or twice a week, where they learn Hebrew (the language of the *Torah* and most Jewish prayers, with its own alphabet), in addition to learning about the prayers, Israel, Jewish history, the Bible, holidays, music, morals, and Jewish customs. We sat inside the kindergarten and first grade classroom, where Gwen pointed out the Hebrew letters hanging up around the room, explaining that the children start learning the letters' shapes and sounds at such a young age so that by 8th grade, the students can read Hebrew from the *Torah* scroll, where it is written without vowels or punctuation. The students of "Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse" were surprised by this. Many of them later wrote in their journals that they were amazed at how much Jewish children learned starting at such a young age, and they couldn't imagine reading a foreign language without vowels or punctuation! This certainly had an impact on the students.

Gwen explained that she brought us to the school wing first, because she

wanted to emphasize that the synagogue is more than a place to worship. It is a place for the community to gather, and a center for Jewish life. However, the synagogue was of course also a place for prayer, and so at this point, we moved into the sanctuary. The students were instructed to pick up one each of the two books that were used during *Shabbat* services. One contains each weekly *Torah* portion, organized with its corresponding *haftarah* (selection from the books of the Prophets or Writings, read on *Shabbat* mornings after the *Torah* reading), in addition to commentary. The other is a prayer book that contains all the prayers in both Hebrew and English.

We were then given an explanation of what happens on an average *Shabbat*. Friday night, the community gathers for services to welcome *Shabbat*. Psalms and prayers are recited, and the rabbi usually gives a short sermon. There are also Saturday morning services. Although this service also includes psalms and prayers, the focus is when the *Torah* is read. This is so important, Gwen explained, that there is an entire service surrounding the reading of the *Torah*. The *Torah* scrolls are kept in an ark at the front of the room, and are adorned with silver and velvet. We were told that everyone stands whenever the ark is open or the *Torah* is being carried. Gwen then asked us to rise while she took out one of the *Torah* scrolls, so we could see it. She explained that normally, the *Torah* is paraded around the room so everyone has a chance to show it respect by touching their prayer book or *tallit* to it and then kissing the book or prayer shawl. She carried the *Torah* scroll to a table in the front of the room and laid it down, carefully removing the silver and velvet. The scroll was then rolled open, and the

students had the opportunity to see the inside. Gwen explained that every scroll is handwritten on parchment by a scribe, and that there can be no mistakes made.

Torah scrolls cost thousands of dollars, and are very precious to the congregation.

Gwen explained to us that each week, a different portion of the *Torah* is read. Every Jewish community in the world reads the same portion each week, and these portions are divided so that the entire *Torah* is read from beginning to end every year. After the *Torah* is read, someone reads the *haftarah*, a selection from the books of the Prophets and Writings that has a thematic connection to the *Torah* portion. The rabbi gives a *d'var* (sermon) every week, and then the *Torah* is paraded around the congregation and placed back in the ark. A final set of prayers is recited, and the service concludes after approximately two and a half hours.

The students marveled at everything they had heard and seen. I could tell many of them were just trying to take it all in. Amazed, intrigued, intimidated, and contemplative, we returned to campus and went our separate ways until the following week.

As the students sent their journals to me, I noticed that a lot of them commented on the same things. Several students asked questions about what keeping *kosher* (observing Jewish dietary laws) means, and so after each student had shared their main reactions with the other students, I began the class by explaining what observing Jewish dietary laws entails. Several students noted how child- and family-friendly the community seemed to be, and many were impressed (and sometimes intimidated) by the fact that young children are taught to read Hebrew. Some even expressed the desire to have had a similar religious

education growing up. Katelin had been raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, where “about half the church services are in Greek.” She wrote in her journal, “I really wish that they had had something like that to teach me.” It was great to see her making connections between the religion she was raised in and the religion whose community we were visiting.

The aspect of Judaism that was most intriguing to the students, however, was the emphasis on rituals and ritual objects. I had anticipated this, since it is one of the main differences between Protestant Christianity and Judaism. It was very interesting to hear the specific ways in which students responded. Several students seemed to be in awe of the emphasis on rituals, having respect for people who committed themselves to rituals but at the same time doubting if they themselves would be able to live their lives like that. Michelle wrote in her journal, “I have a lot of respect for those who stick to their ways of worship because I do not know if I could be that rigorous with my faith.” Amy wrote that she had trouble understanding the observance of all the commandments, since “there are so many commandments that I feel like I would forget them all the time.”

Hearing these responses, I felt as if this class had already had an impact. It would have been easy for the students to simply state that Judaism is too rigorous, or that there are too many commandments. However, instead, they were able to acknowledge that although this was something that might not work for them, the rituals and commandments can have value for other people. Being able to make that distinction is so important when trying to understand people of other cultures, and I was very happy that some of the students had already made that step.

Several students viewed the emphasis on rituals in a different way. Joshua wrote, “I began to understand that many of the rituals, which often may seem extreme and lack modernization, are not simply about praising God, but sustaining a culture, people, and way of life.” This ability to see a deeper layer of meaning in rituals not only changed the way he understood Judaism, but also indicated that he was able to shift his perspective. Another student also viewed the emphasis on ritual and ritual objects as a positive, or at least neutral, element of worship. Jillian had written that “the presence of God is exalted so much more, in physical terms. ... In a church, the presence of God is not diminished but felt less physically, the relationship with God is more casual.” She certainly felt something significant in the emphasis on rituals and ritual objects, and saw it as something that could contribute to prayer and to a personal relationship with God.

Other students were not as convinced. Some wrote that the rituals seemed too strict. Others were unsure if they actually drew one closer to God. Katelin expressed the concern that some people might simply go through the motions, in which case the ritual would become meaningless. However, she qualified this statement, saying that rituals can lose their significance in any religion, and that “as long as you are truly thinking about what you are doing when focusing on these symbols or carrying out these actions, it has much more meaning.” Without knowing it, Katelin had alluded to the concept in Judaism that in order for a commandment to truly be observed, one must have the right intentions when performing any ritual act.

Since so many students had commented on the ritual objects and elaborate

decorations in their journals, I emphasized this topic in our classroom discussion. I asked the students whether or not they thought the objects and decorations added to religious experiences or detracted from them, and then asked them to think of this in relation to what we had seen at the Syracuse Friends Meeting. Some students said that they thought the decorations at Congregation Beth Shalom-Chevra Shas would inspire prayer, and certain objects would help separate everyday life from time spent in the synagogue. Other students said they didn't think it should matter where anyone prays, and that a classroom or an auditorium is an equally appropriate space for worship. Most students, however, saw the pros and cons of both types of prayer space, and concluded that the question of decorations and ritual objects mostly comes down to the individual's taste.

There were several other deep, provocative things that the students had written in their journals. Dan was completely at a loss for the reason that anti-Semitism has been “such a recurring theme throughout history,” since he saw “no reason for it.” Joshua noticed the irony in the fact that “religion, in all its good intentions to unite people, still separates us.” He continued by saying, “I sometimes wish I could take all the religions in the world, mash them together like clay, and call it a day.” I could tell these questions came from some very deep searching, and I wished that I had answers, or at least that we had time as a class to discuss these questions. Unfortunately, I had neither the answers nor the time, and so these questions had to be left unanswered for the time being. We had had a great conversation about not only Jewish worship, but the benefits of different worship styles in general, and our discussion had to be left at that.

Chapter Six

Sacred Images, Sacred Space

Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church

Our upcoming visit to the Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church was going to be a nice continuation of our interfaith journey so far. Without having intentionally planned it, the sites we visited had gotten progressively more ornate and more hierarchical. The Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church is far more ornate than either the Syracuse Friends Meetinghouse or Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church has a hierarchy of leadership unlike anything within Quakerism or Judaism, which starts with each church's priest, and eventually moves up to the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople (a figure whose status is sometimes compared to the Roman Catholic pope). These differences were interesting to see, and got the students thinking about these aspects of religion in a critical way.

This visit was also important in other ways. Eastern Orthodox beliefs and practices are very different from what most of the students were used to. Our visit challenged the students to open themselves up to different beliefs and practices in ways they had not been challenged before. Although at times difficult and frustrating, our visit to the Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church would be one of the most powerful experiences we would have all semester.

The Eastern Orthodox Church is one of the three main branches of Christianity, alongside the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches; yet most Americans learn very little about it. Until the 11th century, the Eastern and

Western (or Roman Catholic) Churches were united; however, several different events ultimately lead to the Great Schism of 1054, when the Eastern and Western Churches split from each other. Since then, these two branches of Christianity have developed differently, and today, while their shared origins are still recognizable, their beliefs and practices are different.

One point of contention between the Eastern and Western Churches has to do with belief. The Nicene Creed of the 4th century stated that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father” (Joncas 161; Wilhelm par 1). Furthermore, the members of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 stated that “we take away nothing and we add nothing” (quoted in Joncas 162). However, in the 11th century, the Roman Church added the word *filioque* (Latin for “and the Son”) to the Nicene Creed, therefore stating that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and* the Son. Not only was this addition made after the Nicene council agreed that nothing would be changed, but it was also made without consent from Eastern Church leaders. The Eastern Church refused to add the word *filioque* to the Nicene Creed, therefore also refusing to recognize a decision made by the pope as binding. This event, and other questions of faith and practice, contributed greatly to the separation of the Eastern and Western Churches.

There are several features that make the Orthodox Church distinct today. One of the most obvious is the veneration of icons. Orthodox churches are generally filled with beautiful gilded paintings of Jesus, Mary, and other Biblical or religious figures. Orthodox Christians light candles or incense before the icons, kiss them and prostrate before them in order to give them honor. The veneration

of icons is not worship of the icons themselves; rather, the icons are understood as a window through which the worshiper can communicate with the figure depicted.

Orthodox worship services are also different. The Orthodox follow the Byzantine liturgy, which consists of prescribed hymns, prayers, and responses. During the service, the priest and other officiants process around the church with incense, and when it comes time to sanctify the Eucharist, an ordained clergyman enters a special area of the church called the Holy of Holies, a space which is closed off from any non-ordained person.

In the brief amount of time I had in class the week before our visit, I went over all of this information, and more. I enhanced this lecture with pictures of icons in Orthodox churches, since I wanted to give the students a glimpse of what they would see. Before we ended class, I asked everyone to dress modestly, with their shoulders and knees covered, since modesty is valued in the Orthodox Church, and we wanted to be respectful of others' space.

Getting to the church was a little hectic. One of the cars got lost on the way, and so the other students were waiting outside of the church for everyone to arrive. By the time the whole group was together, everyone was chatting. When we entered the church, Father Branko greeted us and led us into the sanctuary. Immediately, a calm fell over the students when they saw the icons inside the church and heard a recording of chanting playing in the background. We were surrounded by beautiful images of the lives of Jesus and Mary, with an image of Jesus and the four archangels above us on the ceiling. It was absolutely stunning.

Father Branko welcomed us to the church. He told us about the history of

the community, and explained what some of the images and objects that surrounded us were. At the front of the room, there were icons of Jesus and Mary, with a tray of sand in front of them, where people could light candles. Father Branko said that when most members of the church enter the sanctuary, they go up to these icons, kiss them, and light a candle, in order to honor them. He described the frescoes on either side of the room. One side depicted the life of Jesus, while the other depicted the life of Mary. This was done so that the women, who sit separately from the men, could be closer to images of Mary, while the men could be next to the images of Jesus. Father Branko told us about the Biblical stories that were depicted in these images in a way that brought them to life. He also explained the significance of every single aspect of the painting. Everything, from the maturity on baby Jesus' face, to the lack of shadows, had significance.

At the very front of the sanctuary was an icon screen filled with images of different Biblical figures and saints, whose stories Father Branko also explained to us. This screen divided the main part of the sanctuary, where worshipers sit, from the Holy of Holies, where the Eucharist is consecrated. The Holy of Holies is divided from the rest of the sanctuary because, just like the Holy of Holies that was in the Temple in Jerusalem, the sanctity of the space is so great that only certain people are allowed to enter. One must be an ordained Orthodox clergyman in order to go into this sacred space. While we weren't allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, we could look over the gate and see what was contained inside. There were more beautiful frescoes, with one of the last supper standing out in particular. There were also many ornate, gilded ritual objects. The space was

beautiful, and many of us felt that it had a holy ambiance.

Father Branko briefly told us what happens during the Divine Liturgy, or worship services. He showed us the prayer books they use, which are written in both Macedonian and English. Originally, all the prayers were recited in Macedonian, but now he leads services in both Macedonian and English so that those who do not speak Macedonian can still understand the service. Father Branko also explained that only people who were baptized within the Orthodox Church are allowed to be in the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy. During most of the service, those who aren't baptized stand in the narthex. The doors are left open so people can watch and hear; however, there are certain parts of the service that the unbaptized can't even watch or listen to.

Having seen the sanctuary and heard about the services, we walked to the social hall, where Father Branko spoke to us about a few of the other activities that go on in the community, such as dinners, bingo nights, and youth activities. He also spoke about the history and practices of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Father Branko shared many of the same things that had already been explained to the class; however, he spoke from a different perspective. Father Branko described the disagreement that arose when the Western Church added the word *filioque* to the Nicene Creed, emphasizing that the Orthodox Church kept the creed as it was supposed to be. He stated that the Orthodox follow Christianity exactly as it was handed down from Jesus and the apostles. It is the original form of Christianity, unlike Roman Catholic and Protestant practices, which have changed over time. Father Branko also stated that Orthodox Christians pray for

the day when other Christians will reunite with the Orthodox Church and resume the original ways of worship. He seemed to speak out of a deep hope that this would one day come true. It was very moving.

On our drive back to campus, my mind was already filled with different things I wanted to discuss with the class. I had decided to post some journal prompts after each visit that the students could use to jump-start their journals. I posted six different questions for the students to respond to, if they so chose. These questions were about everything from the function of the ornate artwork, to the fact that unbaptized people are not allowed in the sanctuary during the service, to whether or not there can be one “right” way of worshiping.⁴ I certainly had a lot to think about over the coming days, and I hoped the students felt the same.

As I received the students' journals, I was pleased to see some of the comments they made. They were clearly starting to think more critically about their reactions to what they had seen and heard. Furthermore, I could see a change in the ways that students were reacting. Many had begun to make the transition from observing diversity to engaging in pluralism, and their willingness and capability to understand other religions was increasing.

Several students commented on the calm they felt when they entered the sanctuary, and the mood that the music and art created. Almost everyone was impressed by the frescoes and icons. They all had loved hearing Father Branko tell the Biblical stories depicted by the frescoes, and many commented on the attention to detail in the artwork. There were some varying opinions on whether or not the ornateness of the sanctuary was beneficial to prayer. Michelle summed

⁴ The journal prompts for this and subsequent trips can be found in Appendix C.

up the feelings of several students when she wrote, “I think it was just hard for me to grasp their uses of the elaborate objects because I have never seen such glamour in a place of worship before.” A few students even described the decorations as overwhelming, although, as Michelle pointed out, that could have simply been because it was something they were not used to.

Some students thought the elaborate artwork could assist in prayer, while others expressed that it could be a distraction. Emily wrote that seeing all the beautiful objects in the sanctuary made her “wonder whether or not they worship objects more than they worship God. However, I was informed that the materialistic things don't matter, only the close-knit community.” This was a really great statement, not only because she was looking at both sides of a debate, but also because she was accepting what Father Branko had told us about his belief without criticizing or questioning it. Certain things should be questioned. However, an individual's personal beliefs are, well, personal. If someone says they are not worshipping objects, it is important to respect that person's position and accept what they say. Other students had different reactions. Amy wrote in her journal, “I feel like the artwork really does assist in elevating the experience and assisting in prayer”. Jillian had a similar reaction to Ariel, which, as she articulated, was surprising even for her.

Having gone to Protestant churches that hold their services in rooms with modest interior design, the frescoes seemed a bit too ornate for my taste. ... I never saw ornate decorations as necessary for worship or prayer. ... It does, however, elevate the status of

God. To feel the presence of a divine being was hair-raising. I can definitely say that I felt closer to God in the Orthodox Church than I did at the BCM [Baptist Campus Ministry] service in HBC [Huntington Beard Crouse Hall, an academic building on the Syracuse University campus].

Once again, I was thrilled to see that students like Jillian were able to step outside of their own traditions and consider the value of different practices. Yet again, the impact this class was having on the students was unmistakably clear.

All the students had very interesting reflections; however, there were three students whose journals were particularly interesting, both because of their reactions and because of the way those reactions were shaped by their own religious upbringings. Katelin came to this visit from a very interesting position. She had been raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, very similar to the church we were visiting. However, she stopped identifying as an Orthodox Christian many years ago, and considers herself an agnostic. While I could summarize her reactions to our visit, she really said it best:

Being at an Eastern Orthodox Church ... gave me a chance to look at the faith from a more objective perspective, and one of the funny things about it is that I found myself very defensive and proud of my faith, despite considering myself an Agnostic. ... [T]his visit overall made me want to attend church, and learn more about my faith overall. ... [N]o matter how long I've been away from church, or how many beliefs I stubbornly contest ... I can't argue against

the overwhelming feeling of being exactly where I'm supposed to be every time I set foot in an Eastern Orthodox church.

This was an amazingly reflective response to our visit. It showed her willingness to step back and look objectively at a religion, even though she had a very complicated personal connection to it. It also shows the ways in which interfaith encounters can strengthen our own faiths. Many people believe that participating in interfaith initiatives will weaken individuals' faiths. These people “fear that conversation among believers in different traditions inevitably leads to a wearing down of important differences” (Niebuhr xxiv). However, this is generally not the case. Interfaith work “is not about erasing differences but trying to understand and allow for them” (Niebuhr xxiv). Additionally, many of us very rarely sit down and think, “what do I like about my religion,” or “why do I adhere to this religion and not another?” Yet, when we engage in interfaith dialogue, we often feel the need to articulate answers to these questions. As Katelin's experience proves, interfaith encounters often strengthen individuals' beliefs.

Another student also felt an affinity with the Orthodox Church, even though she herself did not come from that tradition. Emily, who was Jewish, made several connections between Orthodox Christianity and her own religion. Specifically, she noted the separation of men and women during prayer; the use of both English and the “native tongue” during prayer services (Hebrew for Jews, Macedonian for the Macedonian Orthodox); the importance of lighting candles; and the importance of the Temple that stood in Jerusalem and the sacredness of the Holy of Holies. The fact that Emily identified these similarities showed she

was critically engaging in the site visits, and thinking about the religious communities we visited on several levels. However, it also showed me where she was on her path to interfaith understanding. Often, people set out looking for similarities among religions, trying to prove on some level that when it comes down to it, we all have the same basic beliefs and are just expressing them differently. After engaging in interfaith encounters, however, many people start to realize that having this attitude can encourage the belief that everyone is the same, negating the unique qualities of each religion that are equally worthy of celebration. This usually leads to a shift in perspective, and in the end, people tend to stop focusing only on the similarities and learn to embrace the differences just as much. It is, after all, the differences that make each religion unique and important. This has been my own personal experience, and I was interested to see if Emily would go through it as well.

While the religious backgrounds of Katelin and Emily helped them appreciate our visit to the Macedonian Orthodox church, this was not the case for everyone. Brianne had an especially difficult time recognizing the worth of certain Orthodox practices, at least in part because they were so different from the beliefs and practices she had been raised with. She felt that not allowing anyone except clergy to enter the Holy of Holies limited the religious experience that congregants could have. Brianne perceived this rule as an indication that Orthodox Christians could not have a direct connection with God, but rather that they had to communicate with God through an intercessor. She felt strongly that she did not need an intercessor to talk to God (implying that nobody should need

an intercessor), and wrote in her journal, “if I had an intercessor and if I couldn't be in God's presence then I [couldn't] be able to have that relationship [with God] that I believe that I should have.” While Brianne did mostly write in “I” statements, and should be respected for knowing what she believes, it seemed as if she was unable to recognize any good reasons for only allowing clergy to enter the Holy of Holies or using an intercessor during prayer. As I had told the class before, a crucial part of interfaith understanding is being able to recognize the worth of a practice or belief, even if it is not something you identify with. Reading Brianne's journal, I was disappointed to realize that after over a month in this course, she was still unable to recognize the potential worth of beliefs and practices that differed from her own.

While the students' journals touched on a wide variety of topics, there were three main things that we addressed in our class discussion: the practice of only allowing clergy into the Holy of Holies, the fact that people who weren't baptized within the Orthodox Church weren't let into the service, and Father Branko's hope that the Church would one day be reunited. As mentioned above, some students did not like the fact that only ordained clergy could enter into the Holy of Holies. However, other students felt differently. Jillian had written in her journal that this practice “certainly increased [the Holy of Holies'] holiness. When I peeked in, I could really feel the Holy Spirit within it. Certainly, the Holy of Holies should only allow ordained clergy to enter.” I brought up this difference of opinion in class. I explained that the word for “holy” in some languages is linked to the word for “separate,” and then asked the students if they thought separating

something increased its holiness. In our ensuing discussion, we related this concept not only to the separation of the Holy of Holies from congregants, but also of designating certain garments as “church clothes,” or a specific space for prayer. After this discussion, several students still disagreed with denying congregants entrance to the Holy of Holies; however, others saw how this practice might elevate the sacredness of the space for some people.

Our next topic of discussion focused on the practice of having people who were not baptized in the Orthodox Church stand in the narthex during the worship service. As soon as Father Branko explained this practice to us, I myself became aware of the mixed feelings I had about this. On the one hand, this can contribute to both the holiness of the service and the bond between people in the service; and additionally, I respect that this is their practice and that they find value in it. On the other hand, I can see how this practice could be easily interpreted as offensive or even xenophobic to outsiders. When I read the students' journals, I saw that they, too, had mixed feelings about this. Jillian had brought up a point in her journal that I hadn't even thought of. “It does not seem scriptural to exclude those who have not been baptized,” she wrote. “Certainly Jesus Christ would have welcomed everyone to enter the church and worship together with the followers.” In class I asked the students what they thought about this practice. Some said they thought it might change the way congregants felt and acted during the service, since they knew everyone around them was a part of the same religious community. Others brought up the concern that friends or family who are not part of the Orthodox Church might be excluded from important events such as

weddings and baptisms. Still others said they simply couldn't understand why anyone would exclude others from their services.

All of these points were very valid, and whether or not the students agreed with the practice, it was clear that they were trying to think from a different perspective, admitting when they had difficulty understanding something instead of just dismissing it as unimportant. However, not all the comments made showed a willingness to understand things from a different perspective. During the discussion, Brianne said she thought it was bad for the Orthodox Church to not allow unbaptized people in the service, because the children wouldn't understand their own religion. I responded to Brianne by saying that this practice wouldn't really affect children, because the Orthodox baptize their children shortly after birth. Brianne looked me straight in the eye and said without hesitation, "that's christening, not baptism." I asked her what exactly she meant by that, and she responded by saying that people are christened at birth, but they aren't baptized until they are older, and then reiterated that it was bad to forbid children to enter the service with their parents until they were baptized. I explained to her that while her Church may not baptize at birth, the Orthodox Church does, and since we were talking about Orthodox Christian practices, we had to use Orthodox Christian definitions. Since Orthodox Christians are baptized as infants, they are therefore allowed in the service from a very young age. Unfortunately, Brianne did not seem able to accept this, and continued to say that what the Orthodox did to welcome babies into the congregation was not baptism. We began talking in circles, and at one point I got so frustrated that I had to stop, take a deep breath,

and remind the class that we were there to step into the shoes of people in faith communities different from our own, and while it was good to compare their experiences to ones we have had, it was important to challenge ourselves to think about things from their perspective. I then continued to say that if the Orthodox define baptism as something that happens shortly after birth, then we have to put our own practice aside and accept that to them, that is baptism, not christening. I said this with a tone of finality, but when I paused after this statement, I heard Brianne mumble, “Whatever. *I think it's christening.*”

I was very disappointed at this point. I was disappointed that Brianne could not step out of her worldview for a moment to acknowledge that if a religious community defines something at baptism, then to them it is baptism, even if other people define it as something else. I was disappointed in myself, feeling that I had failed as a teacher to get this point across and to help my students in their journey towards gaining cross-cultural understanding. I also became disappointed in my project, and started to think that maybe it was impossible to help people appreciate religious beliefs and practices that are different from their own.

At the time, I just moved on to a different topic. However, since that class, I still frequently think about this incident. In a way, I was right. Sometimes it will be impossible to help people appreciate differences. However, that is only sometimes, and that is only with some people. The majority of people are able to come to an understanding of other religions and respect religious diversity. In fact, after surveying 35,000 Americans in 2007, the Pew Forum “found that 70% of

respondents agreed with the statement 'Many religions can lead to eternal life'" (Biema). Yes, there will always be those who will refuse to acknowledge the validity of other beliefs and practices. However, affecting the 70% of Americans who are open to respecting others' beliefs makes all the work worth it.

We ended our discussion by talking briefly about religious diversity and Father Branko's desire to see the Church united. Jillian echoed Father Branko's sentiment, but with an addendum: "One day, I hope the entire world will come together as one Church. But there's also so much beauty in seeing harmony between the different denominations." This was a great statement because it recognized multiple points of view. In a way, it also summed up the overall feelings of the class. Other students said they did not think the Church should be reunited. Many of them shared Amy's point of view, who had written, "I think it is important for people to be able to choose from many religions, as people believe many different things." This was a great conversation, since it got students thinking about the ways in which society as a whole benefits from diversity.

Overall, the trip to the Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church and the ensuing class discussion had been one of our most valuable experiences so far. Having been together for two other site visits, we were able to dig deeper into the encounters we were having with other religions. Many of the students were challenging themselves to step into the religious worlds of others and see things from a different perspective, and they were already growing as a result. We had reached the half-way point in the course and, Brianne's reactions aside, it was really remarkable to see the changes so many students were experiencing.

Chapter Seven

History and Community

Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Up until this point, most of the course had focused on differences in ritual practices and the aesthetics of the worship space. Our next visit would help us start thinking about some other important topics. The theme of community activism and social justice that we had touched on when we visited the Society of Friends would return. Most importantly, however, with our upcoming visit to the Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, we would begin to look at one of the most important—and most difficult—questions pertaining to religion: what shapes and defines religion?

The Christian Methodist Episcopal (or CME) Church is one of the many branches of the Methodist Church, which grew out of the religious ideas of John and Charles Wesley in the early 18th century in England. In many ways, the CME Church is similar to most Protestant Churches in America, and in fact, for most Americans, there is nothing too surprising about its beliefs and practices. The interesting thing about the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is that the only difference between it and any other Methodist denomination is the context of slavery and segregation from which it emerged. The theology, ideology, and rituals of the CME Church, one of the many Historically Black Churches in America, are no different than those of other Methodist Churches. Originally, the CME branch of the Methodist Church did not exist. When African Americans were enslaved, many were forced by their masters to go to the Methodist Church

every Sunday. At first, when the slaves were freed, they continued to attend Methodist worship services. However, they soon noticed a disconnect between the equality that the Church preached, and the segregation and discrimination that were part of the reality of the Church. In the 19th century, African Americans became so upset by this that they worked with the white leadership of the Church to form a Black Church within the Methodist Episcopal framework.

From the very beginning, African Churches, both within Methodism and other Protestant denominations, were a symbol of spiritual and physical freedom from white oppression. As such, they quickly gained popularity among African Americans, and within only a few years, several Black Methodist Churches had emerged. Initially, CME stood for the “Colored Methodist Episcopal Church,” labeling it as an African Church. The history of oppression and the commitment to social justice that were shaped by the history of slavery and segregation have always been, and continue to be, identifying elements of the Church. However, members wanted to promote ideas of universalism, and so in 1954, the name of the denomination was changed from “Colored Methodist Episcopal Church” to “Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.” In this way, members of the CME Church have found a way to welcome everyone into their community regardless of skin color, while still recognizing the role that the oppression of African Americans has played in shaping the CME Church.

Our visit to Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church marked the first time that we as a class seriously examined the role shared history plays in religious identity. We had touched upon this when we visited

Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas and briefly discussed the Holocaust memorial in the sanctuary. However, this was the first time we would seriously engage in thinking about the role of shared history in forming religious communities. It also marked our first visit to a house of worship in the inner city area of Syracuse, and maybe even the first time several students had seen the more impoverished side of the city.

In fact, many students noted in their journals how surprised they were when they saw how simple the architecture of the church was, along with its location in a “quiet, run-down neighborhood” (Jillian). The other thing we noticed right away was the delicious smell of home cooked food that seemed to be coming from inside the church. Later, we would find out that this smell came from the soup kitchen that the church ran in its basement every day.

When we entered the church, we were greeted by the Reverend Kevin Agee, a jovial man who simply emanated energy and love. I think everyone was affected just by his presence. He welcomed us into the church, and asked us to follow him so we could have a tour of the building. Reverend Agee lead us first to his office, then to the basement where there were Sunday school classrooms, meeting rooms, a music room where the church's choruses rehearsed, and then to the social hall, explaining all the different things that happened in each room as we went, giving us a sense of what the Hopps Memorial community does, and what is important to them. I think it is fair to say that all of us were shocked by how much there was in the church. From the outside, it looked much, much smaller. Jillian would later write in her journal, “I was amazed that so many

pockets of life went on inside the building.” I think we all felt the same.

Several things became clear to us as Reverend Agee showed us around the church. Many students noted how family-oriented the church was. There were many Sunday school classrooms, and Reverend Agee also spoke about youth involvement in the church's three choirs and in other events. Several students were also struck by the deep commitment to social justice and community activism that the church had. When we were walking in the school wing of the building, Reverend Agee told us about a recent health fair that the church had hosted for the entire community, which provided things like blood pressure and HIV testing right on site, in addition to getting information out to the community. Reverend Agee was clearly very proud of this wonderful thing his church community had done, and even made a point of telling us that he had some of the tests taken too, so everyone could see him involved.

We also found the place that the delicious smells were emanating from. In the social hall, there was a kitchen where several men and women – volunteers from the church – were preparing a dinner that was provided free of cost to anyone who needed it. This was something the church had been doing for years, and was clearly filling a need in the community. Many community members came to the church for the meals every day. There was also a room where a few women from the church would collect used clothes that people no longer wanted, and then distribute them to community members in need. Reverend Agee told us that this was entirely the doing of these women, who had decided to run the clothing donation center several years ago, and had kept it going until today. Reverend

Agee even mentioned at one point that the church had won awards and received recognition for the positive impact they had had on the greater community. Joshua later pointed out in his journal that this was “the first time our class has actually seen a church in a communal act of giving.” Other faith communities had spoken about what they do to help others, but at Hopps Memorial, we got to see it first hand. This had a huge impact on all of us. Not only did these things make the church's commitment to social justice clear, they also showed to us the strong sense of community that was present at Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, both among the congregants and the greater community. Some students would later write that the church seemed like one big family. Katelin went so far as to say that the community was so welcoming that “it felt more like a home than a church.”

After seeing the Sunday school classrooms, social hall, and other different places where the community gathers, Reverend Agee took us into the sanctuary, where worship services took place. Based both on what we had heard about the community, and the size of the room compared to the rest of the church, it was clear that worship was only a small part of what the church was about. It was, however, an important part as well. We sat in the pews, and Reverend Agee commenced telling us about the history of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and explained what happens at a worship service. He spoke about some of the ways in which they worship. Music is very important in the service. Hopps Memorial CME Church has three different choirs, each with a different style. Every week, a different choir leads the service, so that no two weeks in a row are

quite the same. Active participation of the congregants is highly encouraged. During the music, people will sing, dance, and clap along with the choir. During the pastor's sermon, many people will shout out statements like “amen!” or “tell it, brother!” Reverend Agee told us that once, during a particularly long sermon, a congregant shouted out to him to end it (in an endearing, lighthearted way, of course)!

Our visit to Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church had come to an end. That next week, I was surprised to see how many different things the students wrote in their journals. While some of the topics they wrote about were the same, many had very unique thoughts to share. In addition to noting the simple aesthetics, sense of community, and family-friendliness of the church, several students mentioned how nice it was to visit a community that was so similar to their own. As Amy put it, “it was really refreshing to be in a place of worship that reminded me of home.” Dan took this one step further. He had been raised as a Methodist, regularly attending church as a child; however, he had never been to a Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and said that going into the trip, he was excited to see the similarities and differences between his own Church and Hopps Memorial. After our visit, he wrote, “the beliefs are basically the same, but the services were slightly different,” pointing out the variance in the styles of music used during worship, and the congregational participation, which he said was not a part of worship in his church when he was growing up.

Joshua also made connections between different religions. His observations, however, had to do with the similarities he noted between the

Religious Society of Friends and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. He wrote about the parallel between the Quaker emphasis on social justice and the message Reverend Agee expressed about the “sense of community that extended outside of the Methodist Church connecting and trying to help people everywhere.” Joshua also pointed out that both religions encourage “the dramatic [physical] expression of faith through singing, dancing, and shouting” during worship.

Other students mentioned these aspects of the worship service as well. Michelle saw the music and congregational participation as something that really enhanced the worship experience. “It is great that they want people to be involved and that people feel compelled by himself or herself to react to a pastor's words. I think when you come in and take these kinds of actions you can really take in what is being preached or sung. ... Being a teenager, I would want to come to this worship service every Sunday.” She also mentioned that the different styles of worship made the service appealing to people of all ages. “Everyone seems to have a place in this congregation,” she wrote, saying that certain parts of the service seemed to appeal more to younger members, and others seemed more appealing the older congregants.

Almost everyone discussed the emphasis on community service and social justice in their journals. While most students simply mentioned this as something they had observed, Joshua and Michelle explored this aspect of Hopps Memorial CME Church a little more deeply. Joshua saw the church's focus on giving to the community as a direct result of “the economic status of the majority of African

Americans in this country.” Although he was the only student to point out the connection between community service and the average income of African American families, other students commented on the church's location, writing that the emphasis on service might be linked to the fact that the church is surrounded by poverty. These observations show a genuine effort to find the origins of certain practices, which was great to see.

Michelle made a bit of a different observation. One of the journal prompts I had posted asked the students whether or not they thought there was a direct connection between community service and religion/Christianity, and whether or not service should be a part of faith communities. In answering this, many students said that service should not be limited to religious communities, but religious communities provide a good framework within which to perform community service, because the community itself is already gathered. Michelle also began to look at service within religious communities as a way to bring different faiths together. She wrote that helping others “is one common ground all different faiths can stand on ... because bringing happiness and comfort to those less fortunate is something everyone can be excited to share.”

This was a great observation about the similarities among different religions, and even about the ways in which religions can come together. In fact, this is the entire premise of Eboo Patel's Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that “aims to introduce a new relationship, one that is about mutual respect and religious pluralism ... [by building] relationships on the values that we share, such as hospitality and caring for the Earth, and how we can live out those values

together to contribute to the betterment of our community” (“About the Core”).

Other organizations, such as the local interfaith grassroots organization ACTS (the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse), believe that service to the community is one of the best ways for people of different faith communities to come together as well. It was wonderful to see Michelle making this observation on her own.

The topic of racial diversity also came up in two students' journals. When we were visiting Hopps Memorial, Reverend Agee mentioned that although the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church had opened its doors to everyone, not just people of color, the members of Hopps Memorial were still predominantly African American. Katelin had written that “it was sad to hear how segregated the church still is.” Jillian made a different observation about racial diversity in the church, or the lack thereof. Throughout the church, especially in the Sunday school classrooms, there were many images of Jesus and other Biblical figures depicted as black. Jillian noted that “there was not a single non-black figure depicted in the pictures on the walls [of the church].” Jillian saw this as an expression of “the strong sense of African-American pride in the church,” however, she had very mixed feelings about these images. She found it “a bit unnerving” because the United States is comprised of people from all different races, and although she knew the children would meet people of other races in school, she felt that this sent the message that all Christians are black. “Seeing only African American people depicted is giving the children a narrow, closed off view of the society they live in,” she wrote. This was an amazingly insightful

observation, and while it could easily be argued that the church is simply trying to balance the hundreds of images of Jesus as a white man that are present in society, Jillian had brought up a good point.

Going into class, I had a long list of things that I wanted to discuss. We began by discussing the role that shared history and community plays in religion. In the journal prompts, I asked them if they thought religion is “simply about beliefs and practices, or is it also about sharing experiences with people who also share a history”. Only a few students had written about this, and so I wanted to discuss it further, since to me, the impact of shared history on the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church is really fascinating. After each student had talked briefly about what they had written in their journals, I posed this question to the class. We started out by talking about the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. However, this discussion quickly evolved into a conversation about the greater topic of what makes a religion a religion.

The students had many different thoughts on this topic, and this discussion ended up being one of the most interesting and intellectually stimulating conversations that we had all semester. It got the students to take what they had observed at the different faith communities we visited and use those experiences to think critically about religion in general. It also demonstrated the way that these experiences challenged their preconceived ideas about religion. For example, some students who initially said that belief in God had to be part of a religion changed their minds by the end of the class and stated instead that belief in any higher entity or entities made something a religion. Some even decided that belief

wasn't necessarily required at all to make something a religion.

The students also were clearly thinking more broadly about religion. After experiences like the one we had at Hopps Memorial, the students said that things like community and shared history were also part of religion. Katelin rejected the idea of a list of separate things that made something a religion, and instead suggested that religion is something that answers three questions: where do we come from, what is the meaning of being here, and where do we go after we die.

By the end of our discussion, in addition to Katelin's definition, I had written on the white board that religion was self identified, shaped by the region and culture that the religion was created in, and included celebrations or observances, belief in a higher entity, a sense of community, ritual practices, tradition, shared history or background, and oral or written texts. Not every student agreed that every one of these things necessarily had to be a part of religion, and we were unable to come to a consensus on a definition of religion. However, this conversation had made them think very critically about what defines a religion, and it had also prepared us for our upcoming trip to the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, since scholars and practitioners alike constantly question whether Buddhism is a religion or a way of life.

Chapter Eight

Religion or Way of Life?

Buddhism and the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji

I started this portion of our class by telling the students the story of Siddhartha Gautama, the first Buddha and the founder of Buddhism. Siddhartha was a prince who was born in Nepal in the 6th century BCE. When he was still a baby, his father was given a prophecy about his son: either Siddhartha would grow up to be a great ruler or a great spiritual leader. The King wanted his son to follow him as ruler, and so he kept Siddhartha sheltered in a luxurious palace, where Siddhartha had everything he could ever want. The King made sure his son's life was perfect so that Siddhartha would want to remain royalty forever.

Siddhartha was happy, but he wanted to know what else there was in the world, and so one day, he snuck out of the palace and journeyed in the town. There, he saw the Four Sights, which would change his life forever: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and an ascetic. In the first three sights, Siddhartha saw suffering, for the first time in his life. However, in the last sight, he saw a possible way out.

Shocked by what he had seen, Siddhartha left the palace in the middle of the night, abandoning his wife and all his possessions to live the life of a renouncer in the forest. For years, Siddhartha tried to find a spiritual life that had meaning to him, but nothing sufficed. Then one day, as he was meditating under a tree, Siddhartha found the answer in the form of the Four Noble Truths. In his famous Deer Park sermon, Siddhartha shared these Four Noble Truths with those

around him:

1. Suffering exists
2. The cause of suffering is desire
3. One can get rid of suffering by getting rid of desire
4. The way to get rid of desire is the Eight-Fold Path

The Eight-Fold Path, Siddhartha explained, consists of eight “rights”: right action, right speech, right mindfulness, right views, right thought, right livelihood, right effort, and right concentration. If one can discipline him- or herself to follow the eight-fold path, then he or she will become enlightened.

The revelation of the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path made Siddhartha Gautama the first Buddha, or “Enlightened One.” The Buddha continued to preach, and to teach people how to become enlightened, spreading what we now know today as Buddhism all over Asia. Today, Buddhism is practiced all over the world. It is one of the five largest religious groups in the United States, and it continues to grow, both here and elsewhere.

The entirety of Buddhism comes down to the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path. There are different schools of Buddhism with different teachings and practices; however, the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path are common to all Buddhists, uniting them no matter where they are from. We would be visiting the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji. Zen, a form of Buddhism that developed in Japan, is known for using silent meditation and koans (“riddles” such as “what is the sound of one hand clapping”) in order to realize the Eight-Fold Path and attain enlightenment. Teaching stories are also used in Zen

Buddhism. I enhanced my lecture before our class visit by reading some of these koans and teaching stories from the book “Zen Flesh, Zen Bones” to the students (Reps and Senzaki). This really made this style of study and discipline come to life. Although Zen is the form of Buddhism most predominantly practiced at the Zen Center of Syracuse Heon-ji, Buddhists from all different paths come together there, and so they also offer Tibetan meditation and study.

We had the very special opportunity during our visit to the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji to not only observe the community, but to experience meditation for ourselves as well. When we arrived at the Zen Center, we first went into the Forman House, where classes and other programs are held. Jikyo Bonnie Shoultz, the Buddhist chaplain at Syracuse University and Buddhist nun at the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, met us there. She asked us to remove our shoes and make ourselves comfortable on one of the cushions on the floor. Jikyo Shoultz welcomed us to the Zen Center. She told us about the community, including the types of Buddhism that are practiced, and the different activities that go on. In addition to *zazen* (Zen meditation) and Tibetan meditation, there are classes, retreats, programs, study sessions, wellness programs, chant ceremonies, and many other activities at the Zen Center. Additionally, the community brings its practices to others, working with at-risk youth and prisoners to teach them meditation.

Jikyo Shoultz also explained the meanings behind some of the things we saw in the Forman House. There were two altars in the room. Each altar contained an image or statue of the Buddha, a candle or incense, and fresh flowers. Jikyo

Shoultz told us that these things represented the earth, life, and enlightenment, and mentioned that when she goes to prisons to meditate with people there, the prisoners always love seeing the flowers especially. The elements of the altar really do bring life and joy to other people. She also told us that there is always an image of a Buddha on the altar because Buddhas are revered for their ability to achieve enlightenment; however, the Buddhas are only revered for their discipline in the Eight-Fold Path, and are not worshiped as gods.

After answering any questions the students had, we put our shoes back on and walked over to the Zendo, the building designated for *zazen* (meditation). When we entered the Zendo, Jikyo Shoultz again asked us to remove our shoes, and then told us that when Buddhists enter the main room, they bow to the altar. As we entered, we were given the option of bowing, and then each of us selected a cushion to sit on, close to the floor. Jikyo Shoultz first taught us how to sit, since it is important to sit in a way that your body won't feel cramped or loose circulation. She told us that she would be leading us in a silent meditation. We were told to breathe deeply and slowly, and try to count to ten, focusing only on the numbers. If any other thought came into our heads, we were to dismiss it and then begin counting again. We could choose to close our eyes, but Jikyo Shoultz suggested that we simply pick a spot on the floor to focus on. She said she would hit a small gong when it was time to begin meditating, and then again at the end, when we should slowly bring ourselves back to the world. With that, we heard the soft, low rumble of the gong. Our *zazen* experience had begun.

This was one of the most special moments of the entire semester, because

for the first (and only) time, we were actually experiencing the practices of a faith community different from the ones we all came from. Most of the students loved the meditation experience. Several students described the experience as calming, relaxing, centering, and peaceful, saying that it helped them quiet and focus their minds. Dan later wrote in his journal that he heard noises he “hadn't previously noticed,” like a clock ticking. Emily enjoyed the experience because she felt it was the perfect balance of individual and community. She wrote: “I definitely prefer to pray alone, but I like being with a bunch of people so meditating with a group of people seemed like the perfect combination. I have alone time in my head while surrounded by people.” Amy said she felt so calm, that when Jikyo Shoultz rang the gong, she wished it hadn't ended already.

Jillian found meditation very difficult, although she did like the idea of it. In her journal, she explored the reasons why meditation was so difficult for her, and came up with a very interesting answer: “Usually, when I pray in church, the point of being silent is to think about all the things I want to say to God With Buddhist meditation, I had trouble reaching the state of nothingness. ... [It] seemed like the hardest thing in the world.” It was very interesting to hear how Jillian's prayer experiences in church had affected her meditation experience in the *Zendo*, and it was very insightful of her to realize that there might be a connection between trying to think of what to say to God during prayer, and trying to do the exact opposite and empty your mind during meditation.

While most of the students enjoyed the meditation experience on some level, there were a few students who simply did not care for it. Brianne wrote that,

like others, she became very aware of everything around her while meditating. This, however, was not a calming experience. In fact, Brianne wrote, “I didn't get a sense of peace, because I had time to think about everything that I had to do before Thanksgiving week. Also, I was anticipating the last 'ding' so I never really was experiencing a true sense of peace and quiet.” Lindsey also didn't like meditating, but for different reasons. “I personally don't feel connected with anything,” she wrote in her journal. “I end up daydreaming and not feeling in tune with my surroundings.”

Whether the students had enjoyed the silent meditation or not, it had certainly been a worthwhile experience for everyone. One thing I noticed, however, was except for Jillian's discussion of meditation in relation to prayer, nobody had spoken of meditation in terms of a spiritual experience. The students seemed to appreciate meditation as a stress relief tool, or a way to calm down as the end of the semester approached. Not a single student described the experience as spiritual or enlightening, which was very surprising to me.

Once we had finished our silent meditation, Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat Roshi, the primary teacher at the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, joined us. She introduced herself, welcomed us to the Center, and asked us about our meditation experience. A lot of the students told her that it had been calming and relaxing; some mentioned that they had found it difficult to sit still and clear their minds. Roko Chayat said that in a few minutes, she thought she would take us outside to do a walking meditation, so we could experience that as well, if we wanted. Before that, however, she wanted to speak to us a bit about herself and answer any

questions we might have. One of the things the students found most interesting about Roko Chayat was that she herself is Jewish. Even while a teacher at the Zen Center, her son had a bar mitzvah ceremony at a local Jewish temple. Roko Chayat explained that Buddhism is a practice that teaches you to live life with awareness. This can be the only set of teachings one uses to instruct themselves on how to live; however, Roko Chayat and many others who are part of the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji also identify with other religions, such as Christianity or Judaism. This was very interesting, and made many of us again address the question of what defines a religion, and whether or not Buddhism should be considered one.

Since all of us thought it would be interesting to experience a different kind of meditation, Roko Chayat lead us outside to a path in the small patch of woods behind the *Zendo* that had been created and cared for by the Zen Center community. Roko Chayat told us that we would walk in single file, with her at the head of the line, taking our time and trying to clear our minds of all thoughts so we could become aware of what was around us. The walking meditation was very peaceful, and I know I found it easier to clear my mind, because instead of focusing on counting, I could focus on my movement. However, there were several different noises around us. Next door to the Zen Center was a family's home, and there were children running and playing in the back yard; additionally, the Zen Center is not set back from the road, and so we could often hear the sound of cars driving by. Overall, the walking meditation was a great experience, and it was an excellent example of how different practices can be done for the same goal

of enlightenment.

Again, the students had a variety of responses to the walking meditation. Some students liked it more or less than the silent meditation, while others thought both types of meditation were equally enjoyable. Dan, who had been relaxed by the silent meditation, said the walking meditation “didn't really do anything.” Katelin also didn't find the walking meditation as valuable as the silent meditation. “The walking meditation was much too distracting for my taste,” she wrote. “All I could focus on were the kids screaming, the birds and the squirrels and everything else in the environment and failed to focus on inner quiet.” Michelle had a different experience from Katelin, noticing the sounds but finding them soothing. She wrote that during the walking meditation,

I kept hearing children scream while they played from the neighbor's yard or a car passing by on the road along with all of nature's beauty. All these sounds kind of came together to create a sense of peace rather than an annoyance. It was great to notice these things in a different light because I never seem to take the time to walk through nature without thinking of other things that I have to do.

These two examples just go to show how certain practices can be very meaningful to some, and not to others.

Other students found the walking meditation to be more meaningful than the silent meditation. Emily wrote that she liked the walking meditation better than the sitting meditation “because I felt more with nature and despite the fact

that there were a lot of stimuli I felt really relaxed and enjoyed the fresh air and movement. Once the meditation stopped I felt calm, centered, and relaxed.” Jillian also had a much more positive experience with the walking meditation:

When we went on the meditation walk, it was incredibly soothing. ... At first, I tried to keep my eye on the path, to focus my attention on nature, rather than on personal thoughts. But my thoughts leaked through, and I started meditating on my past, present, and future. Even the path was right next to a factory and someone’s backyard, I could see the metaphor. Finding peace in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Sometimes, you don’t need beautiful surroundings to find peace, you can create your own.

I found these words to be not only beautiful, but incredibly insightful as well. Her observation that one can create his or her own inner peace, regardless of his or her surroundings, seemed very reflective of Buddhist beliefs as well.

Feeling relaxed and refreshed, it was time for us to return to campus. In their journals, almost every student had written about their experience meditating. However, as I mentioned earlier, very few people discussed it in any spiritual sense. In class the next week, after everyone shared a few words about their meditation experience and their other reflections on our trip, I asked the students if they thought Buddhist meditation was a religious or spiritual experience, and if there was anything particularly Buddhist about it, or if the meditation was simply a way to relax. Most students said they had not found anything particularly spiritual about it; however, they seemed to agree that it all had to do with

intention. If a person was meditating with the desire to have a spiritual experience, then it would most likely be one. However, one could also meditate simply with the intent of reducing their stress, in which case the meditation would not be a spiritual experience.

Following up on the conversation that had taken place two weeks before about what makes a religion a religion, we also discussed whether Buddhism was a religion, or a way of life. Many students were very unsure about this. Joshua understood Buddhism as something that could be either one of the two. “Zen Buddhism seems to be more focused around centering or calming someone's life more than any specific spiritual meaning. In the same respect their can be spiritual interpretations [of their practices].” Several students leaned towards seeing Buddhism as a philosophy or a way of life, not a religion. Dan had written in his journal, “I believe that to be a religion people must believe in a higher power. Buddhism ... [is] more so a way of life and a way to live one's life. Its practices benefit people emotionally and physically and the lessons that it teaches are valuable to all. However, I do not consider Buddhism a religion.” Brianne agreed with this, saying that Buddhism seemed simply to be a collection of teachings about “how people should truly live,” which was beneficial to individuals and society, but not religious in any way. Some students, however, said in class that even though they did not necessarily believe that Buddhism is a religion, they thought that if Buddhists identified their way of life as a religion, then that should be respected. These opinions were all wonderful, and each student had valid reasons for thinking what they did. I was thrilled at the ways in which the students

were thinking about this question. Instead of just saying, “no, Buddhism isn't a religion because it doesn't seem like one,” they were thinking about what makes a religion a religion, and whether or not Buddhism fit the definition.

One other thing many students had commented on in their journals was the fact that one could be both Buddhist and Jewish, Christian, or something else. Emily and Jillian were both surprised that Roko Chayat was Jewish, despite her clear commitment to Buddhism. Emily even commented, “I like that you can be any religion and [still] be accepted into the close-knit community.” Jonathan and Katelin had similar comments. Jonathan wrote, “One thing that I really loved about Zen Buddhism is its ability to be flexible in its beliefs not necessarily demanding people to renounce their other religious beliefs.” Katelin felt the same, but articulated it differently, saying that she liked that Buddhism “does not seem to compete” with other religions, in that they allow people to be both Buddhist and something else.

Our trip to the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji had truly been a wonderful experience. The trip had been completely different from any other that semester, and the students really had gained a lot from experiencing meditation themselves. It was also clear that they were applying things we had discussed in other sessions, such as our discussion on what defines a religion. The visit and discussion afterwards had been very successful, and it was time to move on to our very last trip.

Chapter Nine

Overcoming Stereotypes

The Islamic Society of Central New York

Our series of visits to different religious houses of worship concluded with a trip to the Islamic Society of Central New York (ISCNY), the largest mosque in the Syracuse area, which happens to be only a short walk away from the Syracuse University campus. I thought this trip was especially important, considering the growing role Islam plays in American life. Especially since September 11th, there has been a lot of prejudice against – and even violence towards – Muslims in the United States. Islam is often viewed as a strange or foreign religion, despite the fact that it is the second largest religion in the world (Esposito, “What Everyone Needs to Know” 1). It is one of the three largest religions in America, and it is the fastest growing religion in the United States (Esposito, “Islam” 208). Islam is clearly an integral part of the American religious landscape, and therefore, I thought it was very important that the students learn about Islam and visit the Muslim community in Syracuse.

Islam emerged as a distinct religion in the year 610 when the prophet Muhammad first received revelations from the angel Gabriel. These revelations became the Qur'an, the Muslim scripture, which is considered to be the final revelation from God. From these revelations, Muslims have established five core practices (often called the “five pillars of Islam”) and six central beliefs, which are common to Muslims all over the world. In class, I asked the students if they knew any of the five pillars of Islam. With my help, the students were eventually

able to identify all of them. First is the *shahada*, the declaration of faith, which proclaims: “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

Salat (prayer) five times a day is another pillar, as is *zakat*, or the donation of 2.5% of one's savings to the poor each year. The remaining two pillars are *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina at least once in one's lifetime, and fasting during the Muslim month of Ramadan, the month when Muhammad received the Qur'an. In addition to these five practices, there are also six beliefs. I explained that belief in one God, angels, messengers and prophets of God (including Biblical figures such as Noah, Moses, and Jesus, as well as Muhammad, the final messenger), and the final day of judgment, and the belief that God has the ability to control everything are all integral to Islam (Kobeisy).

We went over some basic terminology as well, in preparation for our visit. I explained that Muslims pray in mosques, called *masjids* in Arabic, and their religious leaders are called imams. I also clarified the difference between the words “Muslim” and “Islam,” saying that Islam is the name of the religion, while one who practices Islam is called a Muslim. I wanted the students to have the tools they needed to ask questions and discuss our visit in an accurate way, and I thought that knowing these words would assist in those processes.

One week later, the students and I walked down Comstock Avenue, and within minutes of leaving the SU campus, we had arrived at the Islamic Society of Central New York. We entered the building and removed our shoes, as is the custom in mosques all over the world. We had arrived only a few moments before one of the five daily prayers, which we were able to observe. This was a very

exciting opportunity for the class because it gave the students a chance to really step into the religious lives of others. We wouldn't just be learning about the religion first-hand from a practitioner, we would be observing it in action. Because men and women pray separately at the ISCNY, Joshua and Dan parted ways from the rest of the class, remaining on the first floor with several male members of the mosque who would explain to the two of them what was happening. The rest of the students and I were taken downstairs and waited for the call to prayer. Before each of the daily prayers, the *azzan*, a call to prayer, is chanted. At the ISCNY, it can be heard inside the mosque, played on a speaker system; in some countries and even some cities in the United States, the *azzan* is broadcast throughout the streets for everyone to hear. Either way, it is emotionally stirring. After our trip, Jillian wrote in her journal: "the sound of the call to prayer was mesmerizing. I got goose bumps listening to it." Emily also noted how beautiful the call to prayer was, and said it reminded her of when her cantor leads prayers at her synagogue. Although everyone reacted to the *azzan* differently, all the students were affected by it in one way or another.

The *azzan* indicated that the prayers would start in just a few minutes, and so we headed upstairs. At the ISCNY, men pray on the main floor, and women pray on a balcony overlooking the main prayer room. We were told later that men and women were not required to pray in separate rooms. In fact, at one time the ISCNY didn't have a balcony, and the women simply stood behind the men during prayers. Several of the students were surprised by the practice of separating men and women, since it was something they were unaccustomed to. Some also

misunderstood the reasons for separating men and women. After the trip, Joshua wrote in his journal, “at first I thought this was due to cultural customs of a patriarchal society, but I later learned that this was out of respect.” After the prayers, we were told that men and women were separated during prayers so that each would be able to pray without worrying about modesty, therefore respecting both men and women's right to pray without inhibition. This reason has nothing to do with the existence of a male-dominated society, and I was pleased that Joshua was so open to changing his understanding of this practice.

Amy had trouble understanding why men and women had to be separated at all, regardless of the reasons we had been told. “I left questioning why a religion would prevent women and men from worshiping together,” she wrote in her journal. Besides our visit to the Macedonian Orthodox Church, this may have been Amy's first encounter with a religion that separated men and women during prayer. This was a practice that seems to have been outside of anything she would even think of, making it hard to understand. However, despite the fact that Amy questioned why men and women did not pray together, she did not judge the custom or put it down in any way. Rather, her questioning showed a willingness to be open to learning about different religious customs, a truly wonderful approach to interfaith encounters.

The prayers commenced, and as the Muslim women lined up shoulder to shoulder on the balcony, the female students and I sat down in a row of chairs behind them. We observed as the women knelt and bowed all the way to the ground, their hands stretched out in front of them and their faces only inches away

from the carpet. As they prostrated, they silently recited passages from the Qur'an. Downstairs, Joshua and Dan watched a similar scene, played out by the men of the community. Observing the prayers was very interesting and exciting. Most of the students did not even know what a Muslim prayer service consisted of, and so actually watching one was a very new experience. It was also interesting for the class because until this visit, everything had been explained to us by someone who was a part of that religious community. When we were observing the prayers, we had to take it all in and try to make sense of the things we were seeing on our own. Of course, after the prayers we had the opportunity to ask questions and have things explained to us; however, the experience of observing and trying to understand something on our own was very valuable.

Following the prayers, we all went down to a room that is used for religious school, youth activities, classes for adults, overflow from the main prayer room, community dinners, and more. We were joined there by several members of the mosque who were all there to speak to us and answer our questions. Earlier, when the girls were waiting for the *azzan*, one of the women had begun speaking to us about modesty in Islam and the practice of veiling. However, our conversation had been cut short by the beginning of the prayers; furthermore, Joshua and Dan had not heard this conversation since the men and women had already split up. Now that we were all together, we continued this conversation about modesty and veiling.

Modesty is very important in Islam. Neither men nor women are supposed to wear revealing clothing. Women are supposed to have their arms and legs

completely covered at all times, and no clothing should reveal the shape of a woman's body. Women are expected to cover their hair whenever they are in front of men (excepting their family members), and some women also veil, or cover their faces. One woman who spoke to us was wearing a very loose-fitting dress of plain fabric, with everything except her hands and eyes covered. Many of the students found it very striking to see someone dressed like this. They were even more surprised when she explained that she hadn't dressed like this growing up, but had chosen to veil as an adult. She explained that when she was younger, she thought women who veiled were uneducated and backwards, and that the custom was oppressive – beliefs many non-Muslims hold concerning veiling. However, as she learned more, she came to realize that veiling is none of those things; rather, the practice respects a woman's body as her own. She wanted to prove that an educated, working, “modern” woman could veil and still be an educated, working, “modern” woman.

This woman's story had a huge impact on the students, although it affected them in very different ways. Dan was very impressed by this woman's story. “This was a bold undertaking on her part and I have a lot of respect for her,” he wrote in his journal. Amy had an opposite reaction to the concept of veiling: “I think that there are many ways to practice modesty and I feel like the practice of covering your face is a little extreme.” Lindsey also had difficulty understanding this practice. We had been told that veiling is optional, not mandatory. It is considered a way to emulate the Prophet Muhammad's wives, and therefore it is laudable, but, as the woman at the mosque told us, women who do not veil are not “wrong.”

Lindsey wrote that she could not understand why a woman would want to veil unless she had to. This was unfortunate, because it showed that Lindsey couldn't yet understand the reasons Muslim women found for veiling. However, she was thinking critically about what we had seen and heard, which is an important step.

Joshua had a very interesting reaction to the custom of veiling, and of modesty in general. He “found the Muslim dedication to modesty to be extraordinary, especially for women.” However, he was struggling with why modesty is important in religion in general. He wrote in his journal: “One question I was tempted to ask but didn't was... 'Why is modesty and the covering of the natural human form so important to Muslim and religious culture in general. ... God made us this way, so why do we go to such great lengths to hide it.'” This question really showed that Joshua was carefully thinking about everything we saw and learned throughout the semester. It is easy to understand how the concept of modesty might seem contradictory to the concept of being creations of God. Joshua was clearly processing what he learned in this course, and while there is no clear answer, I was glad he was asking these questions.

After answering several other questions that we had about Islam, especially the prayer service, we were all taken into the main prayer room. Many students were surprised by its simplicity. On the floor was a beautiful, ornate carpet. However, everything else about the room was simple. The walls were painted white, and had no decorations on them whatsoever. The only other objects in the room were one bookshelf at the front of the room, and a plain, white *minbar*, a platform where the imam or community member stands when he

delivers the sermon during the *jum'ah* prayers, the main prayer service at noon every Friday. We were told that the room was plain so that people would not be distracted from their prayer.

This stood in stark contrast to many of the other places we had visited this semester. The simplicity of the room had a great impact on the students. Michelle later wrote in her journal, “Obviously, it means a lot to the people that belong to this particular faith that no pictures or idols stand in the way of their contact with God and I think that this is a great aspect. When they pray, they have their faith and their values and that is what makes it so great.” Even though Michelle was not used to praying in such a simple room herself, she was able to understand the reasons that the Muslims of the ISCNY had for doing so, and respected them.

Katelin also respected this practice, though she did note that it was different from what she was used to. She wrote in her journal that she:

thoroughly enjoyed seeing the mosque itself. I never realized how simplistic it is. I am partial because of my upbringing, so I prefer the more decorated/iconic style, but I understand why they prefer things plain and simple. I respect that they don't want any distractions that might take them away from focusing fully on their prayers.

I was thrilled by reading Katelin's comment, because it showed that she had reached the stage where she could recognize and celebrate differences among various religions. She could embrace the Eastern Orthodox tradition of decorating worship space with icons as meaningful and at the same time respect and

understand the practice of worshipping in a simply decorated space.

Unfortunately, not everyone had reached the stage of understanding and embracing differences. Lindsey wrote in her journal that she was impressed that the Islamic society “was an actual church.” While it may have looked more like a traditional church than, say, the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji or the Society of Friends, which were in buildings that had previously been houses, to say that a mosque is a church negates the differences between the Christian and Muslim traditions. In my comments on her journal and in class, I brought this up, and emphasized that it is important in any interfaith context to use the terminology that the group itself uses. This is more respectful to the members of that faith, it gives you as a visitor a more “authentic” experience of the religion, and it also recognizes the differences among religions, a very important thing to acknowledge.

After learning a little bit more about how the prayer services are conducted, and hearing about the differences between the prayer service we observed and the *jum'ah* prayers, we returned to the room downstairs. The people at the mosque had brought food, coffee, and tea for us, and so in the last few minutes of our final visit as a class, we ate and conversed with members of the Islamic Society of Central New York.

The students had many interesting comments about our visit. In addition to the things discussed above, many students wrote about the dedication they saw in the observance of Islamic customs, comparisons between the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), and their preconceived notions or

prejudices concerning Islam that had been dispelled during our visit.

Nearly all the students were impressed with the commitments that the Muslims we met had made to their religion. “I truly admired the dedication required to the faith,” Joshua wrote, in relation to prayer and dress. His words were echoed by many. Jillian was particularly struck with the Muslim commitment to prayer, examining the impact it might have on Muslims' lives. She wrote that it must be “impossible” for Muslims to only think about God occasionally, because they are reminded of God five times each day. This was wonderful because not only was Jillian acknowledging the value of a practice different from her own, she was also thinking about the ritual laws we had learned in terms of how they relate to – and affect – every-day life.

During our visit, some of the members of the ISCNY spoke about the similarities between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The three religions share several founding figures, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. They also emerged from the same area of the world, and therefore from similar cultures. While these two aspects do mean that there are a lot of commonalities between the three religions, there are also a lot of differences. Among both scholars and practitioners, some will emphasize the similarities, and others will focus on what is unique.

Our class was no different. One of the women who spoke to us at the mosque emphasized the similarities between the three religions, pointing out elements of the faith such as belief in one God, concepts of modesty, and scriptural characters such as Abraham and Moses that all three faiths held in

common. This really affected many of the students. Katelin wrote in her journal:

The biggest surprise to me is just how uncannily similar Islam is to the other Abrahamic religions. I guess ignorance led me to perceive a larger gap between the teachings of Christianity/Judaism and Islam. But, in learning what they actually believe, it just seems like they have taken the same concepts and made them a bigger part of their daily lives than a lot of Christians or Jewish people do.

Katelin represented several students in the class in writing that she was surprised by the similarities between the Abrahamic faiths. I was glad that she and others like her were thinking comparatively. Katelin's journal entry showed something more important as well. She had clearly gained a lot from our visit to the ISCN. She had left herself open to learning new things, and as a result her point of view on Islam's relation to Judaism and Christianity had changed. Katelin was also willing to admit her weaknesses and recognize areas where she could grow. By stating that ignorance had been the cause of her misconceptions, and that learning about Muslim beliefs and practices had corrected those misconceptions, she had identified how her opinions of Islam had changed. Furthermore, she recognized the value of knowledge and the danger of forming uneducated opinions. My only hope is that she will remember this experience, and be motivated to learn about other religions in order to dispel misconceptions about them as well.

Other students disagreed with what the woman at the mosque had said about the similarities between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Some students

focused on very specific differences. For instance, Amy wrote that she “thought that there are many differences [between Islam and Christianity], especially since in Christianity men and women are permitted to worship together.” Besides the fact that some Christian communities do separate men and women during prayer, this is a very minute difference. To say that the two religions are different simply because of this one practice seems to focus in on details without looking at the big picture. However, it also shows a recognition of difference, which is very important in moving away from an assimilationist society and towards a pluralistic one.

Although comparing the Abrahamic faiths and discussing Muslims' commitment to religious practices was interesting and beneficial, the most important thing that came out of this trip was the fact that several students began to examine the prejudices they held about Islam. Michelle realized she had misconceptions about marriage in Islam. “I must confess I actually thought that a Muslim male had to marry a Muslim woman. ... I am not entirely sure as to how I developed those thoughts about the Islamic religion but it was nice to finally learn from the source and from those with the actual experiences and traditions in their back pockets [that this is not true].” Not only does this show a willingness to learn from others, it also underscores the affect that having personal encounters with people of other faiths can have, something Gustav Niebuhr notes in his book “Beyond Tolerance.” As he says, “direct contact with other living, breathing believers ... can work against stereotyping. They can mitigate corrosive social fears that work to isolate entire groups of innocent people” (xxi). This certainly

had been the case for the students in “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse.”

Dan wrote the most about this in his journal. He commented that “after 9/11, it seemed like the majority of Americans were swept up in anti-Islamic prejudice,” saying that at the time he was too young to understand what was happening, but that “as I got older I unfortunately began to fall into the same downward spiral” of prejudice and hatred. Some of these prejudices were dispelled during high school. Many of his fellow students were Muslim, and by interacting with them, he “saw that Islam is not a violent religion, it is only the radical extremists who are responsible for acts of violence and every major religion has such groups.” Our trip to the mosque not only reinforced his own beliefs, but it also gave him the chance to see others breaking down their own stereotypes. “People are afraid of what they do not understand,” Dan wrote. “Actually interacting with people and having a better understanding of their practices eliminates intolerance. If more people could experience what we have in this class their sentiments towards Islam I believe would change dramatically.” Dan truly understood the importance of having interfaith encounters. His own personal experiences had made him realize how important it is to get to know other people. By meeting Muslims and speaking with them face to face, Dan was able to recognize his prejudices for what they were. If more people engage in interfaith encounters, the possibilities for eradicating fear, hatred, and violence could be endless. With this discussion, we concluded our final reflective process and moved on to the final two steps in our interfaith journey together.

Chapter Ten

Putting it Together

The students had two final tasks, which I hoped would help them wrap up all of the experiences they had during the past semester. First, I had asked the students to attend a worship service at a faith community that was different from the one they had grown up in, and to present what they had seen and learned during their visit to the class. I hoped this would accomplish several things. It would allow the students to “see” more than just the six sites we visited as a class. Not only would each student visit one additional site on his or her own, but each student would also have the chance to see nine other presentations, therefore vicariously being exposed to many more faith communities. Additionally, the individual visits allowed the students to observe a worship service, instead of simply visiting a community, because they would not be bound by the course's meeting time. Lastly, this project would encourage the students to continue exploring other religions on their own, outside of the course. I hoped this project would inspire students to take things into their own hands, so to speak, because they would feel at ease visiting a house of worship without the comforts of being with a group of people, on a prearranged visit. In all, I thought the personal site visit and presentation was an excellent way to enhance what we had experienced in class and encourage students to continue participating in these types of encounters in the future. I also thought it would give them a chance to exercise their recently developed skills of deeply reflecting on new experiences.

Second, the students were asked to write a final reflection paper, reflecting

on their experience over the entire semester. Our reflections after each site visit had been very valuable, and while some students had drawn connections to previous site visits in their journals, I thought it was very important to intentionally synthesize the semester as a whole. I also thought the students would benefit from looking back on all of their journal entries to see how they had grown and changed over the course of the semester.

The personal site visits and presentations were beneficial to each individual student and to the class as a whole. Jillian decided to return to the Islamic Society of Central New York for their *jum'ah* prayers, the main prayer service on Friday afternoons. This certainly enhanced her previous visit to the mosque with the class, and also her respect for other religions. During the *jum'ah* prayers, Jillian had been very struck by how real the presence of God felt. This experience was something that could only have come through attending an actual service.

The other students visited communities we had not been to as a class. Some chose to visit different communities of the same religious groups. Dan was, as he said, “fascinated” by Buddhism and whether or not it is a religion, and so he chose to attend two meditations that were offered by the Buddhist chaplaincy on the Syracuse University campus. This was interesting for both Dan and for the rest of the class, because it allowed us to see some of the differences in religious practices among the same religion. For example, Dan explained to us that instead of using a gong to begin and end the meditation, during the meditations that he attended, the leader hit a wooden fish with a stick in rhythm. This practice was

tied to a story about the Buddha who, after losing many *sutras* (scriptures) in a river, would beat a wooden fish with a stick. Every time the fish was hit, another part of the *sutra* would come out of its mouth. There were also many similarities between Dan's description of the meditations at Syracuse University and our experience of meditation at the Zen Center. Dan's presentation really showed the class how faith communities can be distinct from each other and yet still be tied together with common beliefs and practices.

Emily and Sara both chose to visit Jewish houses of worship, although they visited the services of different denominations. As a class, we had all visited a Conservative synagogue, but for their final presentations, Emily chose to attend an Orthodox synagogue, and Sara visited a Reform temple. These two presentations also nicely outlined the differences and similarities between different Jewish denominations. For example, at the Orthodox synagogue, men and women were separated during the prayer service, which differs from the practices of Reform and Conservative communities. Sara found that the Reform temple worshiped in a combination of both Hebrew and English, while Conservative and Orthodox communities tend to worship mostly, if not entirely, in Hebrew. These differences were very interesting, and I was glad the students had the chance to learn about the practices of all three denominations.

The other students visited faith communities that were completely new to the class. Ariel and Joshua both attended meetings of the Syracuse University Pagan community, called Student Pagan Information Relations And Learning (SPIRAL). I was very glad they chose to give a presentation on this community,

because it was very different from any of the other faith communities we had visited as a class and, for that matter, very different from anything most of the students had ever encountered before. One of the most interesting things about SPIRAL is that the students who attend the meetings have a wide variety of Pagan beliefs. Some students identify with certain gods or goddesses of their choosing as monotheists, pantheists, or polytheists; some do not identify with any specific deities at all, but consider themselves agnostic or atheist and believe in nature; still others follow indigenous traditions. Overall, the students' personal faiths represent a wide range of beliefs and practices. However, these students come together every week to perform rituals together and discuss their beliefs, despite their differences. Seeing this had a huge impact on all of the students, but especially on Amy. In her final reflection paper, she wrote:

I was so surprised that they could have such different beliefs, but still be able to worship and exist together focusing on the beliefs that they had in common, rather than their differences. After I left I questioned why our society and even the world could not follow similarly the practice of being able to exist together peacefully, instead of trying to convert people, or prove that one religion is the “right” or “only” religion.

While not everyone in the class may have had quite as profound a reaction to the diverse nature of SPIRAL, Amy's and Joshua's presentations certainly made us think about the nature of religion and religious communities.

Katelin's presentation also made the students contemplate these two

subjects. Katelin had shown quite a bit of interest during one class when the topic of atheist societies came up, and so instead of actually visiting a house of worship, Katelin researched different atheist societies and organizations, and presented her findings to the class. This made many of us reconsider our discussion on what makes something a religion, as well as the nature and function of faith communities. Katelin's presentation certainly gave me a lot to think about, and I hope the other students had the same reaction.

The remaining three students – Lindsey, Michelle, and Brianne – all attended Roman Catholic Masses, although each student went to a different church. I was glad some students had chosen to visit a Roman Catholic Mass, because I thought it was important for the students to learn about Roman Catholicism. Catholics are the single largest religious group in the United States, and out of the population of Onondaga County that claimed a religious affiliation, more than half are Catholic (“County Membership Report: Onondaga County, New York”). While one of my goals in this course was to expose students to religious groups that would otherwise have remained unfamiliar to them, it is also important for people to be aware of the prominent religious communities around them, and these students' presentations allowed Catholicism to be a part of the course without having to skip any of our other site visits.

The presentations that Michelle, Lindsey, and Brianne gave were very interesting. None of these students gave a detailed, step-by-step account of the Mass, although they did describe different aspects of it. Rather, they focused on speaking about similarities and differences between the Catholic Mass and the

worship services they themselves were used to, or the culture of the church and its community. To me, this in and of itself was very interesting, because it seemed to indicate that these students, all of whom had grown up in a country with a Christian majority and were themselves Christians, assumed that everyone in the class had a basic knowledge of Christian worship services. This often unconscious assumption is relatively common among many Christian Americans, and this can make it difficult for Christians to explain their beliefs and practices to non-Christians. It is important to be able to recognize what is and isn't common knowledge for people of other faiths, so that people can communicate successfully with each other. It was a little disappointing that none of these three students seemed to be able to explain the Mass in enough detail.

That being said, everyone in the class learned from the presentations on Roman Catholic Masses. Additionally, Lindsey, Michelle, and Brianne each had different things to share with us. Lindsey had attended a Mass at a Catholic school during the week, and was surprised to find out that the Mass was in Latin and that she was required to cover her head during the service. Lindsey herself had said that she had wanted to find out whether or not all of their services were in Latin and to ask why they still worshiped in the ancient language; however, as soon as the Mass was over, everyone had rushed off to continue the school day, and so she did not have an opportunity to ask. Even without an explanation, this was very interesting. The Masses that both Michelle and Brianne had attended were in English, so this served as an interesting example of the diversity of religious practices within the Roman Catholic Church.

Michelle was surprised to find so many similarities between the Catholic Mass she attended at Syracuse University's Alibrandi Catholic Center and the Lutheran services that she attends at home. Brianne also had a unique experience when she realized the role that race can play in worship experiences. The Mass she attended was filled with an entirely white congregation, and Brianne said she felt out of place and even uncomfortable being the only black person in the room. As someone who had been raised in a variety of Historically Black Churches, this must have been a very different experience from what she was used to. I think Brianne's experience made everyone in the class think about the role that cultural identity plays in forming a religious community.

Overall, the site visits and presentations had been very valuable, both for the individual students as they headed off on their own to visit a worship service and for the class as a whole, as the students got to hear about the different interfaith experiences their fellow students had taken part in. With the conclusion of the final presentation, we had come to the end of our time together as a class. The only thing left to do was to contemplate our experiences over the course of the semester.

I had already begun to receive the students' reflection papers before the last session came to an end, and it was clear that the students had learned and grown immensely from the course. Many students had begun the semester with few, if any, substantial interfaith encounters. Our visit to the Society of Friends marked the first time Amy had ever experienced another religion first-hand, and it was the first time Emily had ever been inside a church in the United States. Even

those students who had experienced other religions prior to the course gained quite a bit. Katelin wrote in her final paper that this class “gave me the opportunity to learn about religions that I had not previously encountered, increase my experience with religions that I have already studied and even take a look at my own religion from a whole different perspective.” Many other students felt the same way.

One of the most remarkable things about the students' reflection papers was their ability to see their own growth over the course of the semester. Brianne wrote that as the semester progressed, she had become “more receptive of other persons as a whole.” She also noted her newfound ability to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. “Yes, I may not attend the same services as another person or look and talk like them, but the fact that I can now engage myself in a religious based conversation without becoming offensive or offended is a personal victory.” Engaging in these types of conversations was something she would never have felt comfortable doing prior to this course, and I was thrilled that she was not only able to acknowledge this growth but be proud of it as well.

Several other students noted that they had become more open minded. Both the students and I had observed a very interesting shift in the students' reactions towards beliefs or practices that were different from their own. At the beginning of the semester, many students spoke about what they liked about a specific religion, or which practices made sense. By the end of the semester, however, almost all of the students were able to learn about a belief or practice and say to themselves, “this practice would not have meaning to me, but I can

understand the value that it could hold for other people.” Michelle took note of this in her reflection paper. “When I first visited the Society of Friends, I really did think it was a little weird and rather pointless but in no way possible do I believe that now because I know it means something wonderful to them to believe what they believe and do what they do.” Even though a silent, unprogrammed meeting might still hold no meaning to Michelle herself, she has grown in a way that allows her to recognize the meaning this type of worship can have for others. This shift in understanding is extremely important for living constructively with people of other faiths, because it enables people to appreciate differences and allows for more than one “right” way of worshiping or believing. As Amy put it, this course had helped her realize that the other religions in her community “are all most certainly just as valid and important as my own religion even though I do not choose to practice them.”

The students also recognized personal growth in other ways. A few students found the semesters' experiences to be rather humbling. Amy wrote that “one of the most surprising realizations came right at the end of the semester when I realized how little I actually knew about religions other than my own.” Michelle took this one step further, writing that the encounters she had with people of other faiths made her realize that she “may never fully understand some aspects” of other religions because she did not grow up in those faith communities. She also wrote that despite this inability to completely understand other religions, she “will always respect those faiths for as long as I'm living.” This willingness to acknowledge limitations in interfaith understanding and still

respect other religions, as Michelle had stated, was something other students realized as well.

Brianne, Katelin, Amy, Emily, and others also grew to recognize the need to educate themselves about other religions and engage in religious diversity. In her final reflection, Emily wrote, “I now know that I will continue to explore mine and so many other faiths because I believe that they each have something different to teach me about life.” Dan saw this need to educate himself about other religions in a greater context. He wrote that he “saw a developing pattern that I had previously only connected with race and ethnicity could also be applied to religion: ignorance leads to misunderstanding, misunderstanding leads to fear, and fear leads to discrimination.” Therefore, if people educate themselves and engage in religious diversity, discrimination can be put to an end.

Unfortunately, though inevitably, not every student showed this amount of personal growth. Lindsey's reflection paper in particular made it seem almost as if she had missed the point of the course. She wrote that she had learned a lot about different religions, and recounted different details about the various visits we had made throughout the semester. However, she spoke about which religions she liked and didn't like, and even called meditating “odd.” She also seemed very concerned with the idea that everyone should be a part of a religion, an idea Michelle also expressed. It had never occurred to me that bringing students to different faith communities would have a negative effect on the way in which the students would interact with people of no faith at all.

Jillian's reflection exemplified another dynamic of interfaith work.

Throughout the semester, she had been very open to learning about other people's beliefs and practices, and she approached every encounter we had with the desire to understand the religious traditions of the people we were meeting with.

However, by the end of the semester, Jillian was still wrestling with some of the challenges of interfaith dialogue as a whole. Jillian wrote:

Personally, I do not understand how Hendricks Chapel can be home to the three Abrahamic faiths, and Paganism at the same time. To me, the two are directly in conflict. I personally do not agree with having an Interfaith Chapel because if you are truly a follower of your faith, be it Judaism, Islam or Christianity, then you believe that your God is the one true God, and no other. I tolerate other faiths, but they are not equal to mine, otherwise why would I choose to be Christian over other faiths?

This statement that Jillian made brings up several big questions. First, how can faiths as different as Islam and Paganism successfully coexist under one roof or, for that matter, in the same country? Second, if one believes that his or her God is “the one true God,” then can that person ever completely respect people of other faiths? These questions are very difficult to answer.

Despite the challenges that still lay ahead for many of us on our interfaith journeys, the students' reflections had made it clear that every single one of them had learned and grown over the course of the semester. After many incredible experiences, “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” came to a close.

Chapter Eleven

Reflections

When I set out to make “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” a reality, I had lofty goals and high hopes for the semester. I firmly believe that the lack of interfaith understanding and dialogue in America is damaging society. We, as a society, do not take the time to learn about others' beliefs and practices, and so we fear, we hate, and we discriminate against each other, when we should be working together to create a society of mutual understanding and support, where we can focus on working together to improve our society. I wanted to do something to move us closer to a society of understanding. Having face to face encounters with people of other religions had helped to increase my understanding of others, and I thought that maybe creating a similar experience for other people would do the same for them.

It is very hard to measure the impact of a project like this. Were there things that should have been done differently? Of course. Did I make mistakes along the way? Definitely. However, considering the innovative nature of this course and the overall growth that the majority of students showed at the end of the semester, I think it is safe to say that “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” was a success. I could not have remained a realist and hoped for a better outcome. Every single student gained something from their experiences over the semester, and the majority of students had grown immensely in both their understanding of others and their ability to continue having interfaith encounters.

“Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” gave students a chance to

learn about other religions in a unique way. Several students said they learned more about specific religions in an hour and a half long visit than they ever had before. Not only did the course teach them about other religions, it gave them a real experience of the religion itself. As Michelle so succinctly said in her final reflection paper, “Somehow, you really cannot know how [people] feel about a certain practice until you see it being performed.” Visiting different houses of worship and speaking to religious leaders and community members allowed the students to get a glimpse of these religions as lived human experiences in a way that no other class could do.

The course also succeeded in making the students more open to others' beliefs and practices, outside of the class as well as within. Many students had commented on this in their reflection papers, and I had seen them become more open to beliefs and practices different from their own over the semester as well. The students also increasingly saw the importance of interfaith encounters, and saw ways they could create those opportunities for dialogue themselves. Many students shared the thoughts Emily expressed in her reflection: “This course has shown me that it's okay to look into different religions and explore. If I seem interested in some religion now I know it's okay to ask and try it out.” This attitude shows that the experiences students had in “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” will continue to affect them and their future interactions.

All that is not to say that, if given the opportunity to do this again, I would not do anything differently. In fact, there are several changes which would most likely have benefited the course. Very early on in the semester, both the students

and I realized that meeting once a week for two hours was not enough time. I always had to cut off our class discussions about our visits, and often felt very rushed when I had to condense the background information on a religion into less than 45 minutes. Although the course was valuable, it would have been far more valuable if it had been a three credit course. This would have given us more time to devote to reflecting on the different experiences we had and process our various interfaith encounters. It also would have enabled the students to gain a greater academic understanding of each religion through more detailed readings and lectures, something several students expressed the desire for.

The students would have also benefited from more discussion at the beginning of the semester about having interfaith experiences and reflecting on them in general. We never created ground rules for our group reflections, and we also only briefly discussed the best ways to be a guest at another's house of worship. In addition to this, I think the students would have learned a lot from talking with members of local interfaith groups such as InterFaith Works of Central New York; Women Transcending Boundaries, an organization that promotes understanding and dialogue among women of different faiths; or the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse, a “coalition of faith communities ... [that addresses] the social, economic, educational and political concerns” of the greater Syracuse area (“Mission”). It is important to experience other faith traditions, but it is also important to learn about the different ways that people engage in interfaith dialogue and work together to improve society. This would have added a very interesting element to the course, and I think the

students would have enjoyed hearing about these people's experiences as well.

There were some other minor changes I would make if I had the chance to do this over. I would have made sure that the course was cross-listed through the Religion Department, as opposed to just being listed as a general humanities course, so that students looking for courses about religion would have discovered it. It would also have been interesting to explore the religious landscape of the Syracuse University campus itself, and I am sure there are many other things I could have done differently as well. However, the semester was still extremely successful. Overall, the students learned and grew immensely from the experiences they had in this course.

I myself learned and grew as well. By observing the students throughout the semester, I gained many insights about the ways people process interfaith encounters and the stages of growth that they go through. I also grew as a dialogue facilitator. I learned how to help students express their reactions to our interfaith encounters. At the beginning of the semester, it hadn't even crossed my mind to give the students journal prompts. I assumed the students would simply be able to respond to their experiences. After reading the first few journals, I realized that some people need to be given a framework to think about their experiences so that they can better reflect on the encounters they had. Once I began posting journal prompts for the students, their journals were much more focused, and in addition to helping them organize their writing, the prompts helped them organize their thoughts in general. I also gained a greater understanding of how best to be both a participant in and a facilitator of interfaith

encounters, because I played both roles at different times throughout the semester.

Most importantly, I learned that interfaith understanding can be increased, and it does not take a hero to make a difference. This course could be easily reconstructed practically anywhere by anyone who has the passion and commitment to building interfaith communities and creating opportunities for interfaith dialogue. The structure of the course could be adapted and turned into a program for youth groups or post-college adults. There are dozens of possibilities, and the potential impact is huge. As Dan said after realizing that ignorance of others leads to misunderstanding, fear, and discrimination, “Courses like this one need to be continued in the future to prevent such a deleterious pattern and open other students to this same revelation.”

Teaching “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” was not always easy. In fact, there were times when I struggled with how to respond to the students' experiences and reflections. However, it was not difficult to organize the course itself, and the impact that it had on the students, as shown by their reflections, made the work worthwhile. As demonstrated by the students' journals, presentations, reflection papers, and class discussions, this course has the potential to reduce the amount of discrimination, hatred, and violence against people of different faiths. Religious intolerance has become a major issue for American society, and the world in general, but the experiences of these students demonstrate that it is possible to make religious diversity a force for peaceful coexistence. I can only imagine what the future will look like if more people have the experiences that “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” created.

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Appendix A: Syllabus

Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse

HUM 100 M001
 Thursday 2:00 – 4:00 p.m.
 Tolley 307

Faculty Instructor:
 Dean Thomas V. Wolfe
tvwolfe@syr.edu

Student Instructor:
 Rachel Dudley
redudley@syr.edu

About This Course:

Today, the United States is possibly the most religiously diverse country in the world. Living side by side are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Wiccans, Pagans, Bahais, Atheists, and others. Yet few realize this great diversity; even fewer take advantage of it.

Throughout this semester, we will experience first-hand the religious diversity in Syracuse. The main component of this class will be visits to some of the many different houses of worship and faith communities in this city. We will be leaving our campus to talk with local religious leaders or community members, and have a chance to see their ritual space and learn from practitioners about their faith.

Visiting other faith communities can be a very powerful experience, and so another large component of this course will be the reflection and dialogue we engage in together following our site visits. This will give you an opportunity to process your thoughts and reactions and to ask any questions you may have.

Although it is impossible to teach everything about a religion in a semester, let alone half of a class period, we will also spend time learning the “basics” of each religion from an academic perspective. Many of the readings for this course will be assigned with that in mind, and a portion of our classroom time will also be set aside for lectures on different ritual practices, belief tenets, and other information on the different faith communities we will be visiting.

It is our hope that the experiences you will have in this course will help you to gain an understanding of the different religions and cultures that surround us, and the people who are a part of our city. This course should be the beginning of your journey towards interfaith understanding.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Attendance and participation – 50%: Because this course is experiential, and there is no way to make up a site visit or a reflection discussion, your attendance at all classes is very important. Additionally, you are not only expected to show up. You

are expected to be on time, to be prepared with whatever assignments you have been asked to do, to participate, and to be respectful of others.

Journal Entries – 5% each for a total of 30%: After each site visit, we ask that you write a brief journal entry with your thoughts and reactions from the visit, along with any questions you might have or things that might concern you. These entries are intended to help you in the reflection process which will be continued during our classroom time. The each entries should be a minimum of 1-2 pages long, although if you would like to write more you are more than welcome to do so. Entries will be due via e-mail by the following Wednesday.

Personal Site Visit and Presentation – 10%: Since there is no possible way for us to visit every different faith community as a class, the last class day and the time reserved for a final exam will be used for you to present to us your own experience. Each of you should select a faith community which we have not visited in class, either on campus or off campus, and should visit a holiday service or ritual event. Then, in a 10-15 minute presentation, explain to us the background information on that faith community, tell us what your experience was like, and share with us your own personal reflections on the experience. The presentation does not need to be formal, and may take any form you would like.

Reflection Paper – 10%: At the end of the semester, we would like you to look over your journal entries and think about this semester's experience. What effect has this course had on you? Have you changed at all? How? Why do you believe this is important? This is a chance for you to reflect on the whole semester and what you have gained from it. The reflection paper should be at least 3 pages long and is due on the last day of final exams.

Respect

Religion very personal, and it can be a very controversial topic. It is extremely important that we create an environment of respect, where everyone can feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and responses. Keep in mind that this course is about gaining understanding and experience, not about convincing anyone that one faith tradition is better or worse than another. At no point should anyone be made to feel that their beliefs are inferior in any way. During our first class, we will be creating a set of guidelines for classroom discussions, and it is important that you adhere to those guidelines. At any point, if you feel that something disrespectful has been said and do not feel comfortable addressing the issue yourself, please speak to Rachel or Dean Wolfe.

Course Schedule:

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Topic or Visit:</u>	<u>Assignment (due at the beginning of class unless otherwise noted)</u>
August 28 th	Welcome and Introduction: 1. Why are we here? 2. Background information on the Society of Friends	
September 4 th	Visit to Society of Friends— Meet in front of Shaw Hall by 2:05 pm to walk to the corner of Euclid and Westcott	-Read selection from "Communities of Dissent" -Optional: explore www.quakerinfo.org
September 11 th	5. Reflection on visit to the Society of Friends 6. Background information on Judaism	-Journal Entry (due 9/10) -Read selection on Judaism from "World Religions Today"
September 18 th	Visit to Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas— Meet in front of Shaw Hall by 2:05 pm	
September 25 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflection on visit to Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas ● Background information on Orthodox Christianity 	-Journal Entry (due 9/24) -Read selection from "The Christian Theological Tradition"
October 2 nd	Visit to Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church— Meet in front of Shaw Hall by 2:05 pm	
October 9 th	NO CLASS – YOM KIPPUR	-Please submit your journal entry no later than 4:00 pm on Friday, October 10 th
October 16 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflection on visit to Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church ● Background information on the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church 	-Read "Our History", "Methodism", and "Statement of Beliefs" at http://www.c-m-e.org
October 23 rd	Visit to Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church— Meet in front of Shaw Hall by 2:05 pm	

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Topic or Visit:</u>	<u>Assignment (due at the beginning of class unless otherwise noted)</u>
October 30 th	Reflection on the visit to Hopps Memorial CME Church Background information on Zen Buddhism	-Journal Entry (due 10/29) -Read selection on Buddhism from “World Religions Today”
November 6 th	Visit to Zen Center of Syracuse— Meet in front of Shaw Hall by 2:05 pm	
November 13 th	Reflection on the visit to the Zen Center of Syracuse Background Information on Islam	-Journal Entry (due 11/12) -Read selection from “What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam”
November 20 th	Visit to the Islamic Society of Central New York— Meet in front of Shaw Hall by 2:05 pm to walk to the Islamic Society on Comstock Ave.	
November 27 th	NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING	Please submit your journal entry no later than midnight on Tuesday, November 25 th
December 4 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflection on visit to the Islamic Society of Central New York ● First 2 presentations 	
Final Exam Date: December 11 th 2:45 – 4:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Final 8 presentations ● Thank you for a wonderful experience and enjoy your break! 	Reflection Papers due on Friday, December 12 th by 5:00 p.m.

Appendix B: Letter to Faith Communities

July 31st, 2008

Ann K.U. Tussing
Society of Friends
[street address removed]
Syracuse, NY 13210

Dear Ms. Tussing,

I am a senior at Syracuse University, majoring in religion with a concentration in interfaith dynamics. For my Renee Crown University Honors Program Capstone Project, I am designing a one-credit course entitled “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse,” with my faculty advisor Thomas Wolfe, Interim Senior Vice President and Dean of Student Affairs. In this course, students will visit a different faith community every other week to meet with religious leaders and community members, and gain a first-hand experience of the religious diversity Syracuse—and America—has to offer. The other weeks will include reflection and dialogue on the previous week's experience, and a background lecture on the history and practices of the faith community we will be visiting the following week.

The goal of this course is to expose students at Syracuse University to faith communities which they may not know much about, in order to increase cross-cultural understanding. The visits will give students the chance to learn about faith as a human experience, something that is a part of people's lives. I hope that the experiences we will have during this course will increase tolerance and help pave the way for a society in which different faith traditions are appreciated and embraced.

“Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” will take place this semester, from August 25th to December 5th, 2008, on Thursdays from 2:00 to 4:00 pm. There are 15 students registered for the course, and I have very high hopes for this semester. However, I cannot do this alone, which is why I am writing to you. I have thought very carefully about the types of experiences I want students to have this semester, and I think that a visit the Society of Friends would make a valuable contribution to the students' experience. Your help would simply involve you and/or a community member being available on one Thursday afternoon to give us a tour of the meeting house, talk to us about the community and what it is like to be a part of it, and answer students' questions.

I really appreciate any help that you can give me in making “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” a success. Please call or e-mail me at your soonest convenience to discuss your participation in this course. Below, you will find my contact information. Do not hesitate to be in touch with any questions you may have. I look forward to working with you.

Thank you so much,

Rachel Dudley
[phone number removed]
[e-mail address removed]

Appendix C: Journal Prompts

Journal Prompts following our trip to the Saint George Macedonian Orthodox Church

- 1) What do you think of the artwork we saw in the church? In your opinion, does such ornate decoration detract from worship, or does it assist in prayer, elevating it to a higher level? Why or why not? When thinking about this, keep in mind the Friends' meetinghouse and the synagogue we have visited and the decoration in those places.
- 2) When speaking to us, Father Branko mentioned that anyone who is not baptized must stand in the narthax during services, and for parts of the service they have to leave altogether. What do you think of this?
- 3) During our tour of the church, we were allowed to see into the "Holy of Holies," but only Father Branko was allowed to enter it. Do you think that separating something from the mundane (i.e. only allowing ordained clergy to enter the Holy of Holies) increases its holiness? Is this similar to any practices in other religions that you know of?
- 4) From the reading and from what Father Branko said, we have learned some of the reasons for the division between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Do you think that those are valid reasons to divide into separate denominations, or do you think that despite the differences in belief, people should be able to come together to worship?
- 5) When Father Branko was speaking to us about Orthodox Christianity, he said that the Orthodox follow Christianity as it was handed down from Jesus and the apostles; that is, they follow the "original" form of Christianity, while Catholics and Protestants do not. In a way, this is monopolizing Truth, saying that only one form of religion is right and all others are wrong. What do you think of this? Do you think that there can only be one "right" religion, and that all other religions by default are "wrong," or can more than one religion be right at the same time? Is it fair for someone to say that their way of belief and practice is the way God intended it to be, while everyone else's beliefs and practices are tainted? How can you build a pluralistic society among people of different beliefs, each of whom think that they are right and everyone else is wrong?
- 6) When talking about the differences between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, Father Branko said that the Orthodox hope and pray for the day when they can become one Church again. Do you think that will happen? Why or why not? Do you think it should happen, or do you think it is better to have many different religions to choose from? Why?

Journal Prompts following our trip to the Hopps Memorial
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

- 1) How was the history of slavery, segregation, and the struggle for civil rights incorporated into Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church? Try to think in terms of religious practices, visual elements of the church, and other activities within the church community.
- 2) Pastor Agee mentioned that the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church shares almost all of the beliefs and practices as all Methodist Churches. The only difference between the CME Church and other Methodist Churches is the social context from which it emerged. With this in mind, share your thoughts on the role of shared history and community in religion. Is religion simply about beliefs and practices, or is it also about sharing experiences with people who also share a history? Is having a shared history important? Why?
- 3) What is the connection between social justice and religion/Christianity? Should social justice necessarily be a part of faith communities, or is it something that people should chose to incorporate into their lives?

Journal Prompts following our visit to the
Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji

- 1) Describe your experience meditating. What did you think of it? How did you feel afterward? Did your experience with the silent meditation differ from the walking meditation? In what ways?
- 2) In light of our conversation last week on what makes something a religion, and what is inherent in religion, what do you think of Buddhism? Did visiting the Zen Center and learning about Buddhism change your thoughts on the definition of religion? Do you think that Buddhism is a religion?
- 3) How did the alters at the Zen Center compare to alters you have seen or heard about in other religions?
- 4) What do you think about the community work that the Zen Center does in prisons and after school programs? How do you think meditation affects the people in those communities? Bonnie Shoultz said to us that often people from the Zen Center lead meditations simply as a way to focus and relax, and not as Buddhism. What do you think about that?
- 5) We were told that for the first time in a a history of over 2500 years, all forms of Buddhism are being practiced in the same country-America. What does this say or mean for Buddhists? What does it say about or mean for America? For you as an American?

Journal Prompts following our visit to
The Islamic Society of Central New York

- 1) What did you think of the prayer service we got to observe?
- 2) What do you think about the fact that men and women do not stand together during prayer?
- 3) What are some similarities, if any, between Islam and the other houses of worship that we have visited, or between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity? What are some differences?
- 4) What do you think about the Muslim concept of modesty, especially concerning women who cover their face and/or hair?
- 5) During our last visit, at the Zen Center of Syracuse, we heard about how in one community, there are people from different Buddhist traditions and areas of the world. Again, at the Islamic Society of Central New York, we were told that there are people whose families are from all over the world, including Africa, Asia, and Europe, and that the members speak over 40 different languages. What do you think of this? What does this say about the transformation of religion in the United States?

Written Capstone Summary

Today, America is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Brodeur and Patel 2). In 2001, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) identified over 55 different categories of religious groups with a significant presence in the United States, including 35 Christian groups and a variety of other religious groups as varied as Sikh, Eckankar, Baha'i, and Santeria (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar). Since 2001, as immigrants continue to arrive in America with their own faith traditions and religious innovators respond to changing spiritual needs, religious diversity has only increased.

Religious diversity is present in the United States, and it cannot be ignored. However, very few people actively engage in this diversity. There is quite a bit of ignorance when it comes to the variety of religions present in the United States. This ignorance leads to fear, hatred, and even violence against those who are of different faiths. Intolerance of people of different faiths is arguably a greater problem than racism today. In 1999, the World Values Survey polled Americans, asking them to identify groups of people they would not like to have as neighbors. Eight percent said they would not want to live next to someone of a different race, while 10.7% stated that they would not want to have a Muslim as a neighbor – and this data was collected before the World Trade Center was bombed, when intolerance of Muslims increased! Religious-based hate crimes such as the burning of a Sikh gurdwara, the forcible removal of a Muslim woman's *hijab* (hair covering), or the painting of a swastika on the side of a Jewish synagogue are far more common than they should be. With the ever-

increasing presence of religious diversity in the United States, it is clear that something must be done to put an end to the ignorance, fear, hatred, and violence towards people of different faiths. They are our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers, our fellow students. If we want to live constructively in this world, we must work towards a pluralistic society in which we engage in religious differences and try to gain an understanding of others.

This is exactly what “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” seeks to do. The course “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” was designed to increase interfaith understanding amongst students by giving them a first-hand experience of different local faith communities and the people who are a part of them. This course, which I taught in the fall of 2008 to ten undergraduate students of Syracuse University, was centered on six different site visits. Over the course of the semester, students visited the Syracuse Friends Meetinghouse, Congregation Beth Shalom-Chevra Shas, St. George Macedonian Orthodox Church, Hopps Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-Ji, and the Islamic Society of Central New York. At each house of worship, the students and I met with religious leaders and community members who spoke with us about the community and their practices, and answered any questions we had. The faith communities represented a wide range of religious experiences. We visited houses of worship that were very simple, and ones that were extremely elaborate. We encountered religions centered on faith and religions centered on practice. Throughout the semester, students questioned many ideas that they had previously held to be true, including their idea of what

makes a religion a religion. These visits not only gave the students a chance to step into the religious lives of others and understand religion as a lived human experience, they also encouraged students to broaden their understanding of religion itself.

Each faith community was introduced by background readings and lectures on each religion. The week before each visit, I explained some of the history, beliefs, and practices of each religion. I also prepared the students for some of the things they might see or hear while at each house of worship. This information gave the students a very basic understanding of some aspects of each religion, which allowed them to understand our visits in a greater context and maximize the value of each trip by knowing what to look for and what to ask. Following each trip, the students were asked to write a journal entry on that week's experience. This began the reflection process, which was furthered during group discussions in class the following week. In both the written and verbal reflections, students had the chance to share some of the things they had noted during the visit, ask some of their remaining questions, and discuss issues of religion, society, and interfaith understanding. This helped them process the experiences they had with the class, and critically analyze what they had observed and how their encounters with other faiths could affect their lives.

The course was very successful. Throughout the semester, the ways in which the students responded to other faiths changed. At the beginning of the semester, many students responded to unfamiliar practices by saying that they did not like them or that they did not understand them; by the end of the semester,

most of the students' responses had shifted. Students were able to acknowledge that a certain practice could have meaning for someone else, even if he or she did not think it would hold any meaning for his- or herself. This shift, however, small it may seem, shows a willingness to see the value in the practices of others, something that is crucial to living constructively in a pluralistic society.

Additionally, the students' comfort level with encountering people of other faiths changed. Several students said that prior to participating in “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse,” they would never have asked someone about their religion. However, after having participated in the course, these same students now say they feel comfortable asking people questions about their faith traditions. This will have a great impact on the lives of these students in the future. Now, whenever they encounter someone of a different faith – and they will inevitably encounter people of different faiths – they will be able to engage in dialogue with that person. This will keep the students from fearing or hating others, because they will not be ignorant of others' religions.

These are just some of the many ways in which students were impacted by participating in “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse.” Every single student was changed in some way by encountering people of other faiths and reflecting on their experiences. This course provides a strong case for the importance of intentional interfaith encounters and interfaith dialogue, as it demonstrates the ways in which students' lives were changed simply by visiting faith communities that were not their own and discussing those experiences. “Exploring Faith Communities in Syracuse” has brought us one step closer to living in a pluralistic society where we can live together

constructively, embrace each others' differences, and celebrate the religious diversity of the United States of America.