

**Sacred Landscapes: Spatial Data, Student Collaboration, and
New Investigations of Religious Life**
**Professor Courtney Bender, Department of Religion and
Mark Phillipson and Josh Stanley, CCNMTL Educational Technologists**

Professor Courtney Bender, professor of religion at Columbia University, discussed how she has implemented technology in her classroom to help her students understand religion within a larger social context. She spoke about her partnership with the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, and the development of a course Web site called Sacred Gotham. CCNMTL educational technologists presented Sacred Gotham and demonstrated how students in Professor Bender's course contributed to the collaborative Web site.

Professor Bender began by explaining how religious studies has historically been a field that focuses on text, theologies, philosophies and philological discipline. Many interesting sociological and cultural influences that have impacted both people's perception and practice of religion often go unnoticed. However, there have been new developments in the last two decades where people are beginning to think about religion as more than something people do, but rather a practice within a social context.

Professor Bender referenced older views of religion, as it was practiced and interpreted. She explained that, in the past, people have observed religion to be a set of practices and functions like maintaining specific diets and visiting religious centers for prayer. Moreover, she explained how this perception influenced religious studies such that it was understood as a vestige of ancient things. She argued that in the present day people are beginning to see religion as a powerful force that intersects and shapes public life. She used different prominent religions in New York City to demonstrate her point.

First, she discussed how Protestants do not have a place-based understanding of religion. Instead, she explained that Protestants are more likely to follow the church and will congregate where others are practicing. On the other hand, Catholics utilize the Parish model, meaning that where a person lives dictates the church they attend. She contended that the Catholic model has been incredibly influential on the development of New York City. Professor Bender provided one particular example, where Bishops in communities have been successful at convincing parishioners to buy houses and set-up businesses within their locality.

The last example of religion's influence on society was Judaism. Professor Bender noted several communities in New York that make it possible for Jewish residents to adhere to the policy of not using technology in order to respect Shabbat. She remarked how religion was able to take a seemingly secular space and turn it into a sacred space, due to the influence of the religious leaders and followers in these communities.

Professor Bender reiterated that religion should be thought of as more than the activities that take place in a church or in a synagogue. She spoke about the research Omar McRoberts, author of *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*, conducted on storefront churches and how they illustrate the different spaces religion can fill. She referred to the disconnect McRoberts had explored, between the lively community within the church and the streets of the city. Professor Bender explained how McRoberts discovered that the church ministers in Boston used the story of the city as a contrast to the church. She explained that ministers and parishioners view the church as god's space which was sinless and a place of religion, whereas the street was none of these things. This nation, she asserted, allows people to act in a story of redemption. This phenomenon translates into a social practice of the church; they make decisions not to engage in the city, to differentiate themselves from the streets.

Professor Bender described the importance of showing students that religions are not static entities, but in fact changing traditions. She also explained how religion is molded by its surrounding. Professor Bender also noted that religion can shape a culture or society, but that there is also evidence to the contrary. She recounted how in Harlem, it is unlawful to have bars within five hundred feet of a church, which significantly changed the dynamic of the neighborhood and how businesses were established.

Professor Bender ended her remarks by arguing that religions are not limited to a particular location. She commented on how new groups that come to New York City find space for religious congregation. She referred to a building that had started as a synagogue and is now used as a church, and then cited a contrary example to demonstrate how religion is both pervasive and reflective of changes in the culture and demography of the city. She asserted that in New York City, religion is not lived in isolation from other religions. It is continuously morphing, allowing for discussions and interpretations. She decided to collaborate with CCNMTL so that her students could look at religion and the communities in which they unfold differently. She wanted her students to understand what religion could mean outside of a traditional framework.

Next, Mark Philippon from CCNMTL introduced the Sacred Gotham Web site. He explained how the project team wanted to engage students to build cases using digital tools. Their first challenge was to determine how much and what kind of data students should have. The project team decided that they did not want students to sift through spreadsheets, but rather build visualizations. In other words, they wanted to give students the opportunity to make active choices and be engaged in one another's work.

At first, they looked at an out-of-the-box application called Social Explorer, which allows users to drill down within religious subsets (i.e. Muslim, Catholic) and within particular time frames. Data-like transportation lines and census statistics were available but the tool was not robust. It would not have allowed students to layer different data in order to help them shape claims about religion.

Since CCNMTL had experience with wikis, they decided to pursue this route. They wanted to give students a workspace that would allow them to collaborate but also work

in an individualized way and present their visualizations. Most critically, they wanted the tool to be accessible online, so real-time updates could be made. As they developed the application, Electronic Data Services (EDS) was a significant partner in helping them to find the right tools. In addition the team was able to leverage the application, Google Earth, which is a mapping tool for the general public. This tool contributed to the flexibility and robustness their classroom application required.

CCNMTL educational technologist, Josh Stanley then demonstrated Sacred Gotham. He explained that the wiki CCNMTL had built was a collaborative tool for students to edit each other's work and publish their own. He continued, explaining that wiki allows students to categorize their subject into thematic areas. In addition, the application includes an embedded map that shows all of the various religious sites other students have chosen. The CCNMTL team also integrated parts of the Google Earth application, which allows students to overlay census data and land-use details like location of transportation routes (ie. trains) on the maps. Using the tool, students can highlight certain aspects of the location of their religious site.

Professor Bender remarked that using the wiki allowed for a lot of collaboration and cooperation amongst students. It was a unique experience because of the way ideas were exchanged. The students' final project was to write a comparative paper using each other's data posted on Sacred Gotham. She said that the one challenge was that her course requires students to cover an enormous amount of material in addition to learning how to use the site.

Following the demonstration, Dr. Bender and the CCNMTL team opened up the discussion for questions about Sacred Gotham. One audience member asked the speakers how they facilitate students' ability to create wikis and maps. The team explained that the students in the course were fairly tech savvy, and were comfortable with applications like Google Earth. Professor Bender mentioned that the team was careful not to make the class about technology, because they did not want the application to supersede the purpose of the course. The team wanted to make the technology digestible and not lose students in all of the information. Instead, the application was more about facilitating their exploration of religion in New York City.

They also saw that the coursework coupled with the Sacred Gotham application encouraged students to be more interactive with their work. Students were engaged in the material and were helping one another to shape the research. They did mention that students who understood the technology had better online content and were able to take more advantage of the features.

Professor Bender provided some final reflections on studying religion with the help of a collaborative tool. She asserted that Sacred Gotham allowed students to conceptualize religion in an entirely unheard of way. For instance, students could view the movement of African American churches into Harlem or the movement of Jews out of Harlem as more than just migration. Using the tool, students were able to see the impacts of demographic changes and tell the stories of the religions they were exploring.