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Honors Seminar: "Religion and the Sermon in Appalachia"

Robert Ellison

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**HONORS SEMINAR:
"RELIGION
AND THE SERMON
IN APPALACHIA"**

Robert H. Ellison
Associate Professor
of English,
Marshall University
Appalachian Studies
Association
Conference,
March 9, 2024.

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 - **INTRODUCTION/
BACKGROUND**

meMLA

**Northeast Modern Language Association
48th Annual Convention**

March 23-26, 2017
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Local Host: Johns Hopkins University
Administrative Sponsor: SUNY University at Buffalo

11.5 The Sermon as Literature

Chair: Mark Fulk, SUNY Buffalo State College
Location: Boardroom
British

"Sacheverell's 'Exploded' Obedience: Restoration and Secularity in the Augustan Age" Jeffrey Galbraith, Wheaton College

"[A] human composition, or a divine message": The Victorian Sermon" Jude Nixon, Salem State University

"The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Sermons of Henry Scott Holland" Ralph Norman, [Canterbury Christ Church University](#)

"Four Case Studies in Teaching Sermons at a Public University" Robert Ellison, Marshall University

"Good Essays" "GodTalk" "The Victorian Spoken Word"

"Sermon: Text and Performance"

This presentation is kind of a sequel/follow-up to one I gave 7 years ago in Baltimore, entitled "Four Case Studies in Teaching Sermons at a Public University." I discussed

1. A gen-ed ENG class
2. A gen-ed class cross-listed with ENG & RST
3. A graduate seminar
4. A class in the Honors College

The 1st three were one-offs, but the Honors class has lived on. I taught it again, in much the same form, the semester after that presentation, and again this past semester.

But there was a big difference the third time around:

HON 480 - SpTp: Appal Religion & Sermon

Next Anticipated Offering: TBD

CRN	SEC	CREDITS	DAYS
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The proposed course is both narrower and broader than the previous two. It is narrower in its geographic scope: in 2015 and 2017, we studied sermons preached throughout the United States and in some other countries; this one will deal specifically with the Appalachian region. On the other hand, it is broader in its subject matter: while the previous iterations focused almost exclusively on the sermons themselves, this one will examine them within the larger context of religious beliefs and practices in Appalachia.

The title was now “Religion and the Sermon in Appalachia” (for purposes of the online schedule, it had to be shortened to what you see on the screen). Here’s what I wrote in the course proposal:

The proposed course is both narrower and broader than the previous two. It is narrower in its geographic scope: in 2015 and 2017, we studied sermons preached throughout the United States and in some other countries; this one will deal specifically with the Appalachian region. On the other hand, it is broader in its subject matter: while the previous iterations focused almost exclusively on the sermons themselves, this one will examine them within the larger context of religious beliefs and practices in Appalachia.

Why did I make this change? Over the past several years, I’ve shifted my teaching and research interests from Victorian studies to Appalachian studies, while continuing my work on the literary and rhetorical aspects of the sermon. This class allowed me to bring my research into the

classroom, something I don't often get the opportunity to do.

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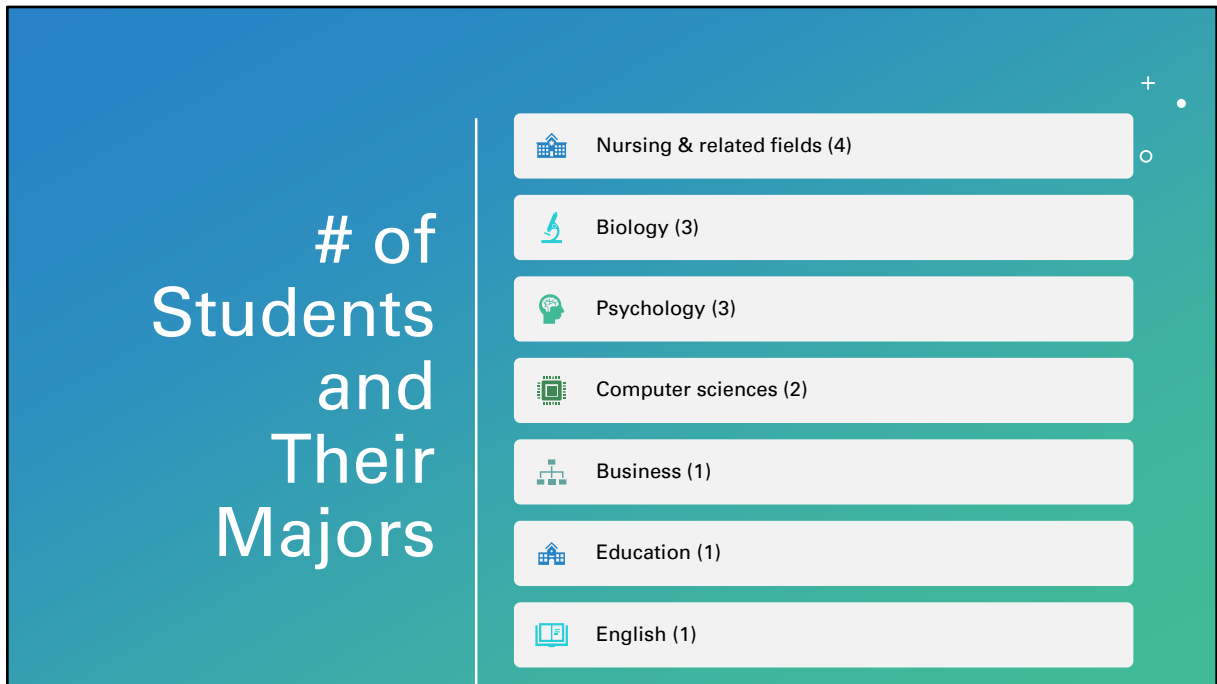
ABOUT THE STUDENTS

The 1st homework assignment was an “entrance interview,” so I could get a sense of where the students were coming from at the beginning of the semester.

Interview Questions

- What would you like the class to know about you?
- Why did you sign up for this class?
- What do you think of when you hear the words "Appalachia," "religion," and "sermon"?

These are some of the questions I asked the students to answer in writing...



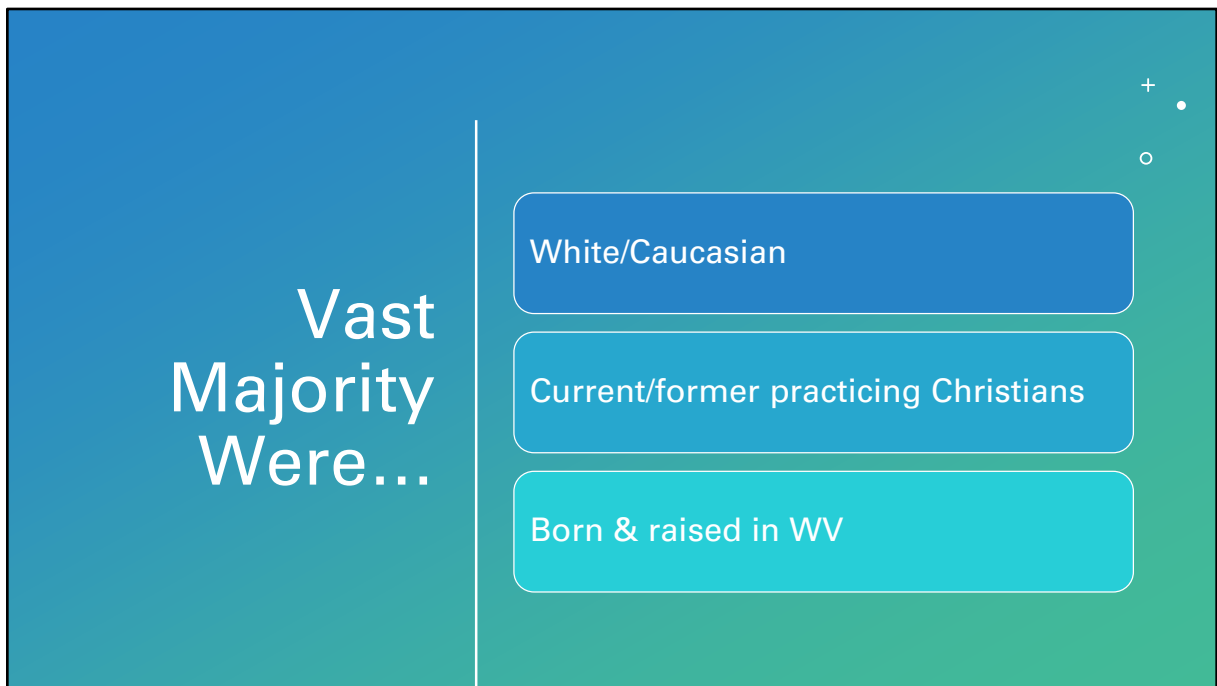
...and here are some of the answers.

15 students enrolled in the class. Most signed up because

- It fit their schedule best (may have been *only* option). That's fine by me; I'll take 'em however I can get 'em,!
- Sounded like the most interesting. Others were
 - "Nonprofit and small business"
 - "Love across cultures"

Rather diverse when it comes to majors

Pretty homogeneous in other characteristics...



I fit the 1st two items in this “vast majority” list. Some professors prefer to keep their religious beliefs and practices close to the vest, but I was comfortable being up-front with mine, as most of the students were up-front with theirs. I don’t do that in other classes—“Welcome to ENG 101. I’m Dr. Ellison, and I’m a Christian”—but it made sense to do it here because it’s relevant to the course content.

When it came to the last item, however, I was definitely an outlier! 14 of the 15 students had been born & raised in WV; the 15th grew up in a non-Appalachian part of Ohio, so he was more or less a “local” as well.

I, on the other hand, came to WV in 2009, at the age of 42. My father was in the Air Force, and I spent my school-age years in Turkey, Georgia, and Arizona. My degrees are from the University of Texas and the University of North Texas, and I spent the first 14 years of my teaching career in the east Texas town of Marshall (yes, I left Marshall, TX to come to Marshall University).

This led to some interesting conversations about identity. As my wife likes to say, “there are ‘born heres’ and ‘came heres’.” If you’re in the latter category, how long do you have to live here to be considered “local”? Am I best described as “West Virginian”? Or am I still a “transplanted Texan”? Or is there yet a 3rd term I should use?

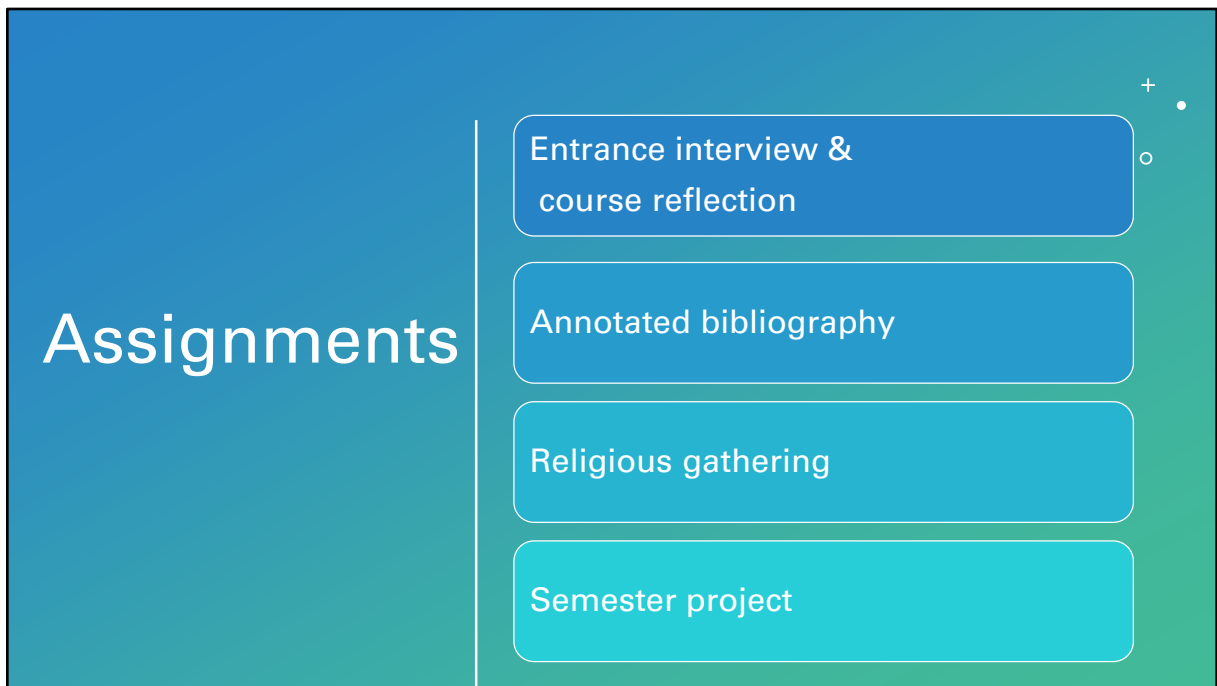


And now some brief words about how I structured the class.



There were 3 more-or-less equal divisions or “units,” all represented in the course title:

1. Appalachia
2. *Religion in Appalachia*
3. *Religion and the sermon in Appalachia*



The course was kind of “bookended” by the entrance interview and course reflection. I’ve already touched upon the interview; for the reflection, students looked back over their interview responses and discussed how their thinking changed—or not—over the course of the semester.

In between, the students

- Compiled an *annotated bibliography* on a topic related to the course
- Attended a *religious gathering*—most often an in-person or online service—outside their “comfort zone” and wrote a brief report about the experience
- Completed a *semester project*. Choices ranged from a “traditional” research paper to a collection of poems to video essays. I told them I hoped that they, as honors students, would think outside the box; they did, and they came up with some pretty impressive stuff!

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GUEST SPEAKERS

A highlight of the class—for both the students and me—was the guest speakers. I mentioned my “pivot” from Victorian Studies to Appalachian Studies a few moments ago. I did that in part so I could make connections with people in the area, a town/gown relationship sort of thing. The class is one example of how that shift has paid off.



I'd been to several interfaith discussions on campus, and the class gave me the opportunity to do one of my own. The panelists, all of whom I'd worked with before, were

- Amine Oudghiri-Otmani, a Moroccan-born colleague in my department and a faithful member of Huntington's Islamic community
- Fr. Dean Borgmeyer, pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church just a few blocks from campus
- Rabbi Joe Blair of Temple Israel in Charleston.

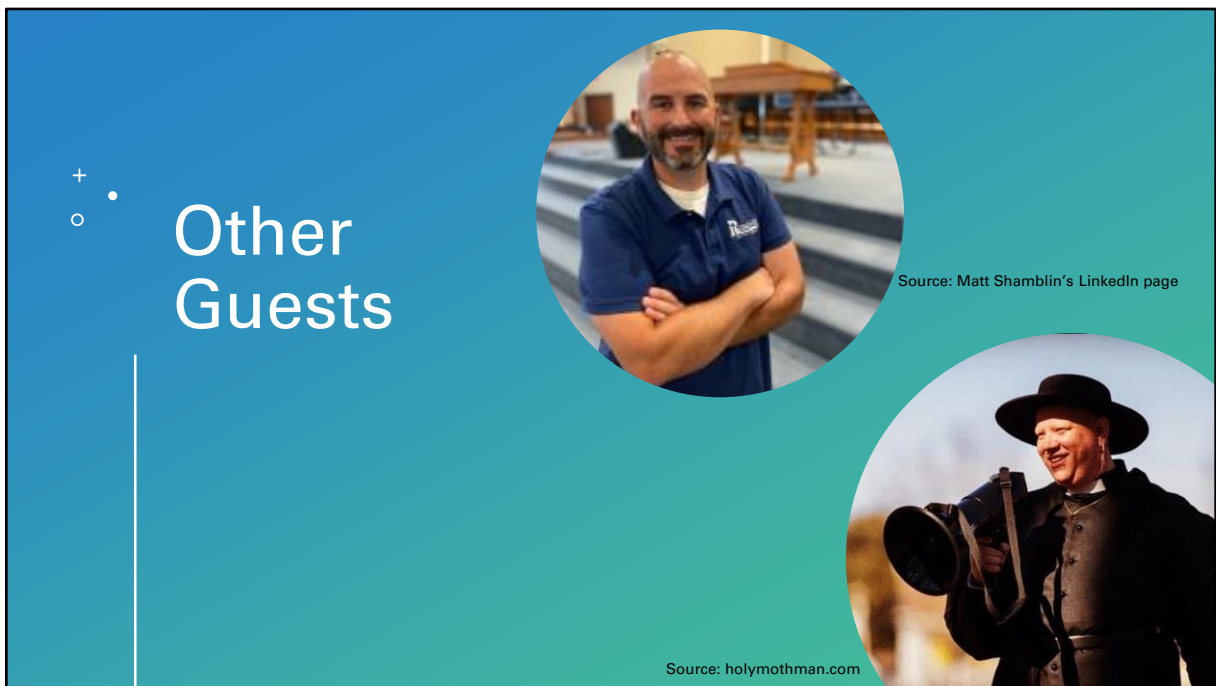
“My favorite part of this of the class was the interfaith panel”

Authors

Sara Moore Wagner	Sarah Beth Childers	Savannah Sipple
		
		
saramoorewagner.com	cas.okstate.edu	savannahsipple.com

I was also able to make some new contacts thanks to this very conference last year. I attended a session in which Sara Moore Wagner read some of her work, and invited her to join us via Teams on the day we discussed some of her poems.

I did not meet Sarah Beth Childers or Savannah Sipple, but they both came highly recommended, so I reached out to them as well. Sara Henning once told me that creative writers tend to be very generous with their time. That was certainly the case with these 3, and I was very pleased that we got to know something about the people behind the books.



Two other guests who were well received were

- Matt Shamblin, who developed a class in the history of Appalachian preaching at Tri-State Bible College, about 15 minutes from the Marshall campus
- Oliver Snow, Marshall student in RST and “testimonial minister” at Mothman Ministries. He is a trans man; he and Savannah Sipple, a queer poet, brought some often marginalized voices to the classroom.



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○ **WHAT THE STUDENTS
LEARNED...**

Let's turn now to some of the things students wrote in their course reflections

...About *Appalachia*

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"I now recognize the depth of its culture, extensive history, and close community"

"It gave me a richer knowledge of my home"

"taught me about people's experiences that didn't reflect my own"

Here's what they said they learned about Appalachia. Keep in mind that these are students who had lived their entire lives in WV/Ohio. Cat Pleska will say more along those lines in her presentation about teaching Appalachian literature to Appalachian students.

One comment didn't speak directly to what the student learned, but it was quite perceptive. Early in the semester, we watched *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Hillbilly*; here's what the student wrote about that:

"I hated *Hillbilly Elegy*, but the film and novel have become so popular, particularly outside of Appalachia, that not discussing it when talking about the stereotypes of Appalachia would feel wrong."

I agree, and I told the students you could almost build an entire class around *Elegy* and responses to it!

...About *Religion* in Appalachia

My religious beliefs haven't changed...

...but my understanding of religion has

Statements on screen are a paraphrase/compilation of several comments

My religious beliefs haven't changed...

- Totally fine, because that wasn't what the class was designed to do
- In fact, I explicitly took it off the table on Day 1

...but my understanding of religion has

- "I used to think of just Christianity, but now I think of many other religions."
- "far less vague"
- "much more nuanced"

...About Religion *and the Sermon* in Appalachia

“really know what a sermon is and how it's different from preaching.”

“I feel that I now pay more attention to how, where, and why a sermon is delivered than before”

Several students said they learned the most about the sermon, which makes sense because, apart from pieces like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” they probably hadn’t discussed preaching in an academic setting before.

“really know what a sermon is and how it's different from preaching.”

- Came up several times
- Pleased because that’s one of the things I’m writing about now

“I feel that I now pay more attention to how, where, and why a sermon is delivered than before”

- EITHER equipped you to be a better listener,
- OR ruined the experience for you forever!

“If College Doesn’t Change Your Mind...”

“Did change my mind that only Christianity and Catholicism exists within Appalachia”

“I have a totally different view of Islam”

“It changed my mind on the snake handlers for sure”

The title of this slide is one of my grad school mentor’s favorite phrases; the complete thought is “If college doesn’t change your mind about at least one thing, you should probably ask for your money back.” It was the last item in the course reflection; these are some of the responses.

Islam: comment made in context of HS Bible class which, in student’s view, grossly misrepresented it. Readings, sermons, and guest speaker gave them a whole new perspective.

Snake handling: we talked about snake handling (in a class on religion in Appalachia, how could you *not*?) and watched the 1967 documentary *Holy Ghost People*. I’m not sure what this student thought about snake handling at the beginning of the class, but this is what they had to say at the end:

“there is something I can respect about someone repeatedly putting themselves in peril because they have THAT much faith in God. If they put that unhindered sense of belief into Works of Worship that DIDN'T involve reptile induced self harm I would say they could really accomplish something.”

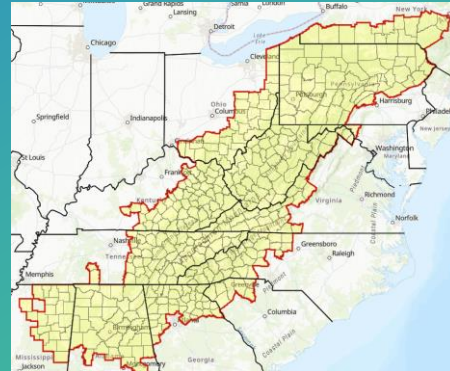
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WHAT I LEARNED...

...About *Appalachia*

Library of Appalachian Preaching: A Digital Repository of Sermons

Source: mds.marshall.edu/sermons



Source: arc.gov

Of the 3 divisions of the course, I knew the least about Appalachia, and therefore probably learned the most. Here are two examples:

First, I learned that there's not one settled definition about the geographical boundaries of Appalachia (yes, this is App Studies 101-type stuff, but recall that it's the first time I taught a class focusing on the region). When I was defining the scope of my *Library of Appalachian Preaching*, I came across the ARC map and just ran with it.

Now I understand that it's more complicated than that, with the politics behind the ARC map; John Alexander Williams' notions of "core," "consensus," and "loosely-constructed" Appalachia; and so on.

...About *Appalachia*

Jesus and I Went to the Walmart

It was late, and what I really needed was some Epsom salts to soak my ache. I've been dog-tired since I started exercising every day, and you know I took on that part-time job cause you can't really make good money at teaching & living in the city is rough. It costs a lot to keep up.

We also heard an interesting story about how language can be used differently within and outside Appalachia. When Savannah Sipple was with us, she mentioned that her publisher wanted to take the word “the” out of “Jesus and I Went to the Walmart.” She refused, on the grounds that “the Walmart” is the usage she grew up with. Many of the students confirmed that that’s what they say.

...About *Religion* in Appalachia



Source: nefeshmountain.com




Source: jacobsladdermusic.com

On the “religion,” side, I learned that there’s a genre of music known as “Jewish bluegrass,” also referred to—perhaps pejoratively--as “Jewgrass” (that may not be part of App Studies 101, so I’ll cut myself some slack for not knowing it before). The 2 bands that come up most often in Google searches are Nefesh Mountain and Jacob’s Ladder. Neither is based in Appalachia (they’re based in New York and Boston, respectively), but since their music has Appalachian roots, I’m leaning toward including them—and their Gospel counterparts--the next time around.

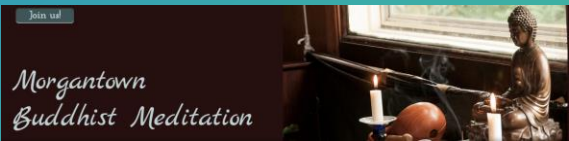
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...About Religion *and the* *Sermon* in Appalachia

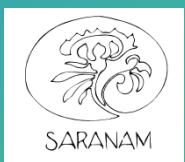


BHĀVANĀ SOCIETY

Source: bhavanasociety.org/



Source: morgantownbuddhism.wixsite.com/



Source: saranamwv.com/

Finally, on the “sermon” side, there’s something else I probably should have known, but didn’t do my homework on. I knew that there is a preaching tradition in Buddhism, but I didn’t know that we could find examples of it in West Virginia. At a student’s request, we watched a video recorded at the Bhavana Society monastery in High View, in the Eastern Panhandle.

There are also communities in Morgantown, Randolph County, and elsewhere. We have a faculty member in RST who specializes in Buddhism; I’ll definitely invite him to speak to the class next time!

Suggestions for Next Time

More

- Discussion of sermon preparation +
- Preaching by women
- Sermons in rhyme

Add

- Jewish & Islamic poetry
- Pagan/agnostic/atheist readings

Other suggestions

- Invite a snake handler
- Take a class trip to one of the churches/temples/synagogues in Huntington

And here are some things they asked me to keep in mind the next time around. The “more” and “add” lists make perfect sense, and I will definitely include those things

The “other suggestions” may be more problematic:

- Snake handling is becoming pretty rare. It might be hard to track one down, and I’m not sure how comfortable they’d feel coming to the class.
- A previous dean of the Honors College said I could require students to attend a religious service, provided I didn’t specify which one. So a mandatory class trip wouldn’t work, but I could say something like “I’m going to Friday prayers on such-and-such a date; who would like to join me?”

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FINAL THOUGHTS

“Overall, I am confident that I will be able to say that the class was a success (however “success” is measured in these cases) and that I look forward to teaching it again in a few years.”

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This is the last sentence in the abstract I submitted to the ASA. Based on the level of student engagement and the very high quality of their written work, I’d say that the class was indeed a “success.”

And I don’t have to wait “a few years” to offer it again. The Honors College policy is that a course can be offered in 3 consecutive academic years, and I’ve put my hat in the ring to do it again soon, probably in the spring of 2025.



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