

When God Came to the City: Urban Life and the Transformation of Religion

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Hilit Surowitz Israel, SAS - Jewish Studies

MTH 09:50-11:10A

Honors College Seminar Room S120

College Ave Campus

This course will explore, describe, and attempt to define religion in American urban space during the twentieth century. By focusing on urbanization, diversity, and the cityscape, we will look at the ways that various groups worship, engage ritual, and organize in a religiously pluralistic environment. Both in class and through visits to different religious spaces, we will see how the city, the social concerns of urban environments, architecture, and religious adherents encounter one another to create a dynamic religious landscape.

Topics such as immigration, race, and gender will play significant roles in our discussions as we consider how communities define themselves, establish and maintain boundaries, and transform themselves in a cosmopolitan landscape. Challenging the narrative that American religion developed in rural America, we will shift the narrative of American religious history to the city. By living through their environments, urban dwellers “crafted diverse religious ontologies” and new sites of religious contestation. With a strong focus on immigration and migration, the socio-religious negotiations of both majority and minority communities will be brought to the fore. These negotiations coupled with dynamism of religion will allow us to analyze the “fantasy of the city as it has emerged over the last two centuries, attending to both the forces that have shaped this fantasy and their impress on the ways in which we construe urban popular experience, religious and secular” (Orsi, 1999, 12) and the construction of the city as a space of “desire, fear, fantasy, and ‘sacrality’” (Orsi, 1999, 62).

Some of the communities and issues to be covered are the redrawing of (Catholic) parish boundaries along racial lines, social separatism and political involvement among Hasidic Jews, the religions of the Caribbean diaspora and their engagement with American institutional religion and traditional Catholicism, New York and New Jersey’s multi-ethnic neighborhoods and the struggle for power and boundary maintenance, and the transformation of urban demographics and the American religious landscape following the Hart-Cellar Act (the 1965 Immigration Act).

HILIT SUROWITZ-ISRAEL is a lecturer in the Religion and Jewish Studies departments. Her areas of specialty are Religion in the Americas, Caribbean Religions, and Diaspora Theory.