California Local Religions Conference

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On September 21 and 22, 2012, CSU, Chico’s Religious Studies Department held a conference focusing on the study of local California religions. We were especially interested in how to incorporate students into the study of local communities, both to increase student engagement in religion and to involve the university in public dialogue about religion.

The conference brought together scholars from CSU Chico, CSU Fresno, CSU San Bernadino, San Diego State, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Clara University, and the University of Southern California to explore new tools for mapping religious practice in California and to discuss pedagogical strategies for helping students interact with local religious communities in ways that could increase their learning and engagement while simultaneously increasing public understanding of religion among community members and leaders.
OVERALL CONFERENCE GOALS

We wanted to create a dialogue among scholars who were doing work on the connections between the study of local religion, civic participation, and student engagement. Specifically, we were interested in how student research on local religious communities might benefit those communities and help create community-academy partnerships.

QUESTIONS WE HOPED TO EXPLORE

- How can we best engage students in public-sphere learning about religion?
- What are the benefits and obstacles to involving undergraduates in scholarly studies of local religion?
- How can student-produced studies be made accessible and useful to public constituencies like policy planners, K-12 educators, religious organizations and civic groups?
- What kinds of community and academic partnerships might emerge from such initiatives?
- How might digital technology facilitate these partnerships and advance student learning about real world religion?
Conference Sessions

1. Local Religion in the Religious Studies Classroom.

Panelists: Vincent Biondo and Andrew Fiala, CSU, Fresno; Rebecca Moore, San Diego State University; Margaret Hill, CSU, San Bernardino

This session featured reports on several ongoing studies of local religion:

Vincent Biondo and Andrew Fiala of California State University, Fresno talked about their “Religion and Civic Discourse” project, which has included a number of initiatives connected to educating the public about religious diversity in America, including workshops for public school teachers and partnerships with interfaith groups both on campus and in the community. They specifically addressed the local nature of religious conflict and the need to train students both to understand local religion and to model civility and dialogue.

Rebecca Moore of San Diego State University talked about her MAPS project (a project to identify religious communities in the San Diego/Tijuana area) and specifically about the importance of fieldwork projects to student learning, faculty research, and concrete demographic data about religious change in Southern California.

Margaret Hill of the California 3 R’s Project summarized the work of her organization, which works to educate K-12 teachers on First Amendment issues related to religion and train them in rights, responsibility, and respect as these values relate to teaching religious diversity issues in public school settings. Persistent challenges noted by Hill are that teachers are generally unprepared to teach religion content, and that ongoing pressure to teach to state tests, which do not address religion standards, further reduce motivation to cover this material in any depth.

2. Digital Mapping: Does it Engage Students? Is it publically useful?

Panelists: Micki Lennon and Kate McCarthy, CSU Chico; Rebecca Moore, San Diego State University; Dean Fairbanks, CSU Chico

The second session of the conference grew out of our presenting question on the value of student research on local religious groups to the larger public, and also our question about the use of digital technologies to engage students.
Micki Lennon and Kate McCarthy, both from CSU Chico’s Department of Religious Studies, reported on the “Mapping Religion in the Northstate” project in which students in 100-level religious studies classes are asked to identify specific religious communities in our region and create digital map assignments to situate these communities geographically and to begin a database on local religious communities.

Rebecca Moore’s reported on SDSU’s MAPS project, which uses student fieldwork to map religious communities in Southern California and Northern Mexico. Finally Dean Fairbanks from the CSU Chico Geography department spoke about the importance of GIS technologies in our new “spatial century.”

This session generated some very helpful discussions about the potential—and problems—of the pedagogical and research use of various digital mapping technologies. She talked about the great value of fieldwork in helping meet many specific educational goals of SDSU, such as teaching students to negotiate differences and integrate global and local perspectives. She also reported that fieldwork assignments that take students out of their comfort zones and allow them to experience true religious otherness definitely increased student engagement in her classes. On the other hand, she talked about the real challenges of maintaining an accurate and up-to-date MAPS website, from budget, technology, and personnel issues to the ever-changing nature of religious communities.
Similarly Dean Fairbanks pointed out that the use of new GIS technologies can definitely engage students who grew up in a web 2.0 world, but they may find it difficult to interpret or synthesize the data they collect. Drawing on the power of crowd-sourced “volunteer geographic information,” he highlighted the power of “citizens as sensors” and how much can be learned by combining data from different sources. He also noted that there are no established standards for crowd-sourced data, and that it’s difficult to assess the accuracy of this self-reported information.

3. Visual Ethnography—The Pros and Cons of Student Documentary Filmmaking

Presenter: Brian Brazeal, CSU Chico Department of Anthropology

Brazeal explained how he trains students in his visual anthropology class to create their own documentaries on local communities, and screened several short student-produced documentaries on Northern Californian religious communities. Brazeal laid out a useful method for those wanting to begin doing documentary work with students, including preparatory ethnographic research on a given community, gaining human subjects research approval, and developing film treatments. After taking a class like the one Brazeal has developed in which they are trained as directors, videographers and editors, students are prepared to pair up with a faculty member to help document his or her local research. This presentation prompted a good discussion about the ethics of representing religious communities, and whether documentarians should be critics or caretakers.

4. Public Session on “Global Religions in Local Contexts: Religious Diversity in California.”

Panelists: Rudy Busto, UC Santa Barbara; Richard Flory, University of Southern California; David Gray, Santa Clara University; Sarah Pike, CSU, Chico

Rudy Busto offered an analysis of the complexity of ethnic and religious identities in California with an emphasis on the sometimes surprising configurations that have emerged in recent decades, including Latinos converting to Islam as a means of reconnecting with Spanish roots, and the fact that a larger percentage of Asian-Americans are Christian (40%) than Hindu or Buddhist (24%).
David Gray also focused on the complexity of religious identity when seen from the ground. His work studying Buddhist centers in Silicon Valley, of which there are over 90, reveals that some cater to American converts while many more emerge from Asian-American diaspora communities, for whom the centers may have less religious than social significance. Religious hybridity is also a prominent feature in these communities.

Finally, Chico State’s Sarah Pike reported on her research on minority religious communities in northern California. Pike’s research focuses on conflicts between minority communities and the wider society and the ways in which lived religion often occurs in “other” ostensibly non-religious settings.

She illustrated interesting themes from this work with a report on a local Native American community’s struggle to maintain sacred rituals on a river site increasingly used recreationally by locals with little regard for indigenous traditions.

All of these presentations and the discussions that followed brought home the reality that California religion cannot be understood within traditional ethnic or denominational frameworks, nor with the usual understandings of what constitutes sacred space. Instead, the study of California religion requires intensely local observation and analysis and further exploration of the dynamics of religious hybridity.
5. Defining the public in publicly engaged teaching and scholarship: Who needs what we can offer?

Panelists: Vincent Biondo and Andrew Fiala, CSU, Fresno; Margaret Hill, CSU, San Bernardino; 3Rs Project; Bruce Grelle, CSU Chico; David Gray, Santa Clara University; Richard Flory, University of Southern California

Panelists in this session addressed the value of religion research to local constituencies like K-12 teachers, the media, health care agencies, civil rights groups, and government agencies. The group addressed strategies for reaching these groups, responding effectively to their needs, and examining what kinds of resources a consortium of California religion scholars could more usefully develop.

The highlight of this discussion was the emerging consensus that public universities offer a valuable neutral space for the exploration of sensitive religious topics in the communities in which they are located. This discussion was also the first opportunity for participants to begin to think about follow-up activities, specifically in terms of collaborating on religion resources that could be of use to these various constituencies.

6. Closing Reflections

This set of presentations and discussions about studying and teaching religion in California was wide ranging, but several salient themes emerged. Our initial presenting questions focused largely on the pedagogy of teaching about local religions, but we discovered in the course of our colleagues’ presentations that California religion itself—racial-ethnic connections, the complexity of congregational membership, and hybrid religious identities—is in need of analysis and reflection, and that inviting students into that conversation is a rich but challenging opportunity.

Five conclusions we reached as a result of the conference were (1) that counting religious populations is hard; (2) that mapping them is harder; (3) that religious identity is complex and increasingly hybridized; (4) that public religious literacy is low; and (5) that public partnerships are good.

Numerous sessions identified the difficulty of determining who counts as a member when studying religious communities.
For example, David Gray pointed out that in his student surveys of Buddhist centers in the Bay Area, it was difficult to determine who they should include as members: anyone who ever visited to meditate? Chinese Americans who attended for cultural reasons but didn’t actually consider themselves Buddhist? Donors who contributed to the ongoing work of the center but never attended? Similar issues can be found in the study of many religions in the state; for example, in his public talk Rudy Busto mentioned Catholics who attend mass regularly but have statues of the Buddha on their nightstands. Religious identity in the 21st century is complex and hard to quantify, which makes the task of “mapping religion” much more complex as well. If we seek to “map” religious identity, do we simply focus on communities? Physical spaces? What about personal sites that people find spiritually meaningful? Native American sites that are considered too sacred to disclose to the public? Ever-changing membership spaces of communities in urban areas? And when is it appropriate to send students to such spaces when the ethical questions they pose are challenging even to professional academics?

These issues of the complexity of quantifying modern religious identities only compound another of the issues mentioned above: the lack of basic religious literacy in the public sphere.

Peggy Hill, Richard Flory, Vince Biondo and Andy Fiala each talked about the need for more education about religion among public school teachers, interfaith groups, public service employees like prison guards and paramedics, etc. These are all constituencies we hope to address in our next steps. Biondo and Fiala also emphasized the ways public partnerships with the local community, especially local religious groups, can help promote religious literacy and concomitant civic understanding of minority religious communities. A possible initiative discussed in this context is sending advanced religious studies students into high school classrooms as part of civic engagement programs to model and facilitate civil dialogue about religious difference.