

# Independent Study for “ReligYinz: Mapping Religious Pittsburgh”

RELGST 1902, Directed Study (Undergraduate; 3 credits)

University of Pittsburgh

Term: Fall 2020

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## Description of ReligYinz

[ReligYinz: Mapping Religious Pittsburgh](#) is a digital humanities project that transforms how religion is studied at the University. It is centered around a dynamic online exhibit that showcases the lived experiences of religious communities in the city. Its emphasis is not on doctrine, but on the vernacular aspects of religious life. The exhibit features religious Pittsburgh in all its diversity, and in ways that are as colloquial and unexpected as our second-person plural pronoun. For each case study, undergraduate students research, photograph, and write about lived religion in Pittsburgh, usually in the context of a course they are taking at Pitt. The co-PIs are Rachel Kranson and Ben Gordon of the Department of Religious Studies and Aaron Brenner of the University Libraries. Sai Koros is the project’s Digital Humanities Coordinator.

## The Main Parameters of Your Work

Students in this independent study will spend the semester conducting research on the diverse religious life of Pittsburgh. At the beginning of the semester you will do some reading on material religion and religion in the American city, as well as on digital humanities projects. After becoming acquainted with these topics, you will begin working on *6 case studies*, each resulting in a short multimedia essay that will be published on ReligYinz. You will also keep a reflective journal throughout the semester. You will pick your own case studies, though your work should fit the following criteria:

1. Each essay should relate to some aspect of lived religion in Pittsburgh. To do this, we find it most instructive to focus on *material culture*, which refers to the aspect of social life grounded in things and spaces. Elements of the material expression of lived religion can include liturgical objects, buildings, memorials, artwork, clothing, food, and musical instruments.
2. You should strive for diversity in your essay portfolio. For this independent study, we ask that you research and write essays on *topics relating to at least 4 different religious traditions* (e.g. different denominations, demographics, cultural backgrounds, origins, etc.), *at least 1 of which should deal with a non-Abrahamic form of religious expression* such as Buddhism or Hinduism, or with a form of spiritual expression largely indebted to non-western beliefs and practices.
3. You should also aim for diversity in the aspects of material culture you explore. Each essay should be geared toward one of the main categories of ReligYinz, which are food, displays, memories, objects, rituals, sounds, and spaces. While some essays can fit into more than one category, we ask that your 6 essays be geared toward *6 separate ReligYinz categories* over the course of the semester.

You should plan to spend about 2 weeks total on each topic, including the research and the writing phases.

## Readings

1. At the beginning of the semester you should read selections from the following two volumes (PDFs will be accessible on Canvas):  
Plate, S. Brent (ed.). *Key Terms in Material Religion*. New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.  
Orsi, Robert A. (ed.) *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*.  
Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1999.

2. Other short readings may be assigned throughout the semester, including:  
Narayan, Kirin. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*,  
University of Chicago Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central,  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pitt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=867807>  
DeWalt, Kathleen Musante and Billie R. DeWalt. *Participant Observation: A Guide for  
Fieldworkers*, AltaMira Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central,  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pitt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1021969>  
Zook, Kristal Brent. “Academics: Leave Your Ivory Towers and Pitch Your Work to the Media.”  
*The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 23 Sept. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/sep/23/academics-leave-your-ivory-towers-and-pitch-your-work-to-the-media](http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/sep/23/academics-leave-your-ivory-towers-and-pitch-your-work-to-the-media)

3. We also encourage you to peruse the reading list in the Religion in Pittsburgh Libguide for your own research purposes.  
<https://pitt.libguides.com/religionpgh>

## Journaling

Throughout this course, we ask you to keep a journal with summaries of the readings and reflections on your research. More specifically:

1. By Sunday, Aug 23, please peruse the following websites:

- [Arch City Religion \(https://www.archcityreligion.org/\)](https://www.archcityreligion.org/)
- [Boston’s Hidden Sacred Spaces \(https://www.hiddensacredspaces.org/\)](https://www.hiddensacredspaces.org/)
- 1 additional website of your choosing from the following list in the Religion in Pittsburgh Libguide (<https://pitt.libguides.com/religionpgh/websites>)

For each website, write about 200–300 words in your journals, summarizing the website and pointing out its strengths and weaknesses. You will submit these journal entries next week.

2. By Sunday, Aug 30, complete the following four readings:

- Plate, “Material Religion: An Introduction,” pp. 1–7 in *Key Terms in Material Religion* (2015)
- 2 chapters of your choosing from the selection on Canvas from Plate’s *Key Terms in Material Religion* (2015)
- Orsi, “Introduction: Crossing the City Line,” pp. 1–63 in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (1999)

For each reading, provide a 200–300-word entry in your journals, summarizing the reading. Give your thoughts also on how the reading might be relevant to your research on religious expression in Pittsburgh. Note that the Orsi reading is quite long; you might focus on one or two subsections of the reading in your journal entry.

Submit all your journal entries on the websites and the readings in a single WORD document by Friday Aug 28, 11:59pm. Use the submission Box folder on Canvas.

3. Throughout the semester, we may provide you with some additional readings on cultural heritage, material religion, ethnographic research, the history of religious life in Pittsburgh, or other topics related to this independent study (see the list above). These readings will not exceed a total of around 100 pages for the whole semester. For each reading, we ask that you provide a summary in your journal of 200–300 words, noting also how the reading might be relevant to your research. You will submit these journal entries together with your finished journal during the exam period; there is no need to submit them before then.

4. The most important component of your journal will be your reflective thoughts on your research. For each case-study, strive for a 200–300-word entry that includes personal reflections on your approach to the topic, your methods, your research materials, and any challenges you faced. Though you will not submit these reflections with each essay that you complete, we ask that you write your reflections throughout the semester and not retroactively so as to indicate your development. You will submit them all on a single document at the end of the semester, together with all the reading/website summaries from throughout the semester.

## **Researching Your Case Studies**

You will want to be smart, adaptive, and creative in both your topic selection and your research.

1. *Topic Selection.* In addition to meeting the criteria listed above, it is very important that you pick topics that are interesting to you. Our goal is to change the way religion is approached, showing people that religion is about far more than doctrine, so we encourage you to find topics that are quirky, different, unexpected, and revelatory. We also prefer topics that lend themselves to eye-catching photographs or other forms of engaging multimedia such as video and sound.

To start, have a careful look at ReligYinz itself to see what topics have been taken up so far. Then peruse the Religion in Pittsburgh Libguide (see link above). There you can find examples of this kind of digital humanities project under Websites > Material Religion and Digital Projects. Finally, we will be sharing with you a lengthy list of potential topics that you might explore, though we heartily encourage you to think of new topics yourself! (If you find a topic that you choose not to write about but think would make a worthy addition to our list, by all means share it with us!)

Please make sure you get each preapproved by us via email before beginning the next step.

2. *Research.* You will need use some ingenuity and flexibility here too, tailoring your research agenda to each topic and making sure you use the appropriate resources to acquire a basic understanding of your case study. Start with our LibGuide (see above), where you'll find copious

resources about religious life in Pittsburgh. Keep in mind that you will be asked to produce a short “further reading” list for each topic you pick (see below). If the topic you are researching is a place that can be visited (safely in the Covid-19 era...), please make every effort to do so. And in addition to your reading on the topic and any site visits you make, you might communicate by email or over the phone with an archivist or a member of a local community who can help you better understand your topic. Do not hesitate to be in contact with us if you need help in your research.

## **Writing about Your Case Studies**

Your objective for each topic is to produce the following three things: (1) an essay of 400–500 words, which should be written in a style appropriate for the broader public; (2) a few high-quality photographs that you have taken yourself or have responsibly sourced and credited; and (3) a short list of resources for further reading to be appended to the end of your essay.

1. *The Essay*. Your essay should use clear and simple language to inform the reader of the basics of the case study—what it is, what is interesting about it, and how it reflects religiosity in Pittsburgh. You should write in the active voice to engage readers without persuading or “selling” your topic. Any technical language or non-English terms should be explained in terms of the non-specialist. For information about formatting, follow the template provided to you in a separate document. Submit all essays as WORD attachments on Canvas by the due dates indicated below; we will set up a Box folder where you can upload them. Do not embed the photographs in the WORD documents, but submit them separately.

2. *The Photographs and Other Multimedia*. High-quality, illuminating images (along with other multimedia) are an important part of your essays. Please do your best to find or photograph yourself about 3–4 total for each and follow the following instructions when you submit:

- Include captions for all images at the end of your essay.
- Fully credit images in the captions, but make every effort to submit photographs you have taken yourself.
- Please do not embed images in the WORD files you will submit. Instead submit them separately in the Box folder.
- Name your image files according to your name followed by the number you’ve given the image, as follows: yourname1, yourname2 (e.g., bengordon1, bengordon2, etc.)

3. *The “Further Reading” List*. Provide for your reader a few sources under “Further Reading” in MLA format at the bottom of your essay. These can include websites, news stories, scholarly readings, and popular readings of relevance to the topic. No in-text citations are required.

## **Schedule and Due Dates**

All readings will be uploaded to Canvas and all submissions should be made to the Box folder on the Canvas website. Preapprovals for case studies should be made via email at least one week before the essays are due.

*By the following dates  
at 11:59pm:*                      *Submit the following on Canvas:*

Sun Aug 30	Journal entries on websites and readings
Sun Sept 13	Case Study 1
Sun Sept 27	Case Study 2
Sun Oct 11	Case Study 3
Sun Oct 25	Case Study 4
Sun Nov 8	Case Study 5
Sun Nov 22	Case Study 6
Wed Dec 2	Final journal with all entries, including websites, readings, and case-study reflections

## Assessment

The reflective journal will be 20% of your final grade; the case studies will be 80%. For the case studies, your grades will be calculated based on the quality of your 6 essays, the photographs/multimedia, and the “further reading” lists. You will receive feedback on the essays throughout the semester and we will indicate whether there are areas in which we would like to see improvement so you can earn an A in this independent study.

## Special Statement on Covid-19

Given these highly uncertain times, we are committed to maintaining an open channel of communication with you, prioritizing your safety and well-being, and accommodating your personal circumstances whenever needed. We recognize that unforeseen difficulties may arise and we are dedicated to respecting your needs as a student and—more importantly—as a human being. As such, please do not hesitate to contact us with questions or concerns so that we can work together to create an effective and supportive learning environment. For this course in particular, we ask that you carefully evaluate the risk and safety associated with on-site research and make decisions according to your needs. Any and all in-person interaction related to this course must comply with University policy, including but not limited to implementing proper face coverings, social-distancing, symptom-monitoring, and sanitization. For the most up-to-date information and guidance, please visit [coronavirus.pitt.edu](https://coronavirus.pitt.edu) and check your Pitt email for updates before each class.

## University Policies

### Academic Integrity Policy

Students in this course will be expected to comply with the [University of Pittsburgh’s Policy on Academic Integrity](#). Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy. Furthermore, no student may bring any unauthorized materials to an exam, including dictionaries and programmable calculators.

To learn more about Academic Integrity, visit the [Academic Integrity Guide](#) for an overview of the topic. For hands-on practice, complete the [Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism tutorial](#).

### Disability Resource Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and [Disability Resources and Services \(DRS\)](#), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648- 7890, [drsrecep@pitt.edu](mailto:drsrecep@pitt.edu), (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

### **Accessibility**

The Canvas LMS platform was built using the most modern HTML and CSS technologies, and is committed to W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative and [Section 508](#) guidelines. Specific details regarding individual [feature compliance](#) are documented and updated regularly.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

The University of Pittsburgh does not tolerate any form of discrimination, harassment, or retaliation based on disability, race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, genetic information, marital status, familial status, sex, age, sexual orientation, veteran status or gender identity or other factors as stated in the University's Title IX policy. The University is committed to taking prompt action to end a hostile environment that interferes with the University's mission. For more information about policies, procedures, and practices, see: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/>. I ask that everyone in the class strive to help ensure that other members of this class can learn in a supportive and respectful environment. If there are instances of the aforementioned issues, please contact the Title IX Coordinator, by calling 412-648-7860, or e-mailing [titleixcoordinator@pitt.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@pitt.edu). Reports can also be filed online. You may also choose to report this to a faculty/staff member; they are required to communicate this to the University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. If you wish to maintain complete confidentiality, you may also contact the University Counseling Center (412-648-7930).

### **Gender Inclusive Language Statement**

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Just as sexist language excludes women's experiences, non-gender-inclusive language excludes the experiences of individuals whose identities may not fit the gender binary, and/or who may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Identities including trans, intersex, and genderqueer reflect personal descriptions, expressions, and experiences. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (for example, first year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind, etc.). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students, faculty, and staff may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

### **E-mail Communication Policy**

Email is the best way to communicate with me. Each student is issued a University e-mail address ([username@pitt.edu](mailto:username@pitt.edu)) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to

read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

### **Provost's Memo regarding Religious Holidays**

The University of Pittsburgh has a tradition of recognizing religious observances of members of the University community in instances where those observances may conflict with University activities. When such conflict occurs, students and faculty should make every effort to reach mutually agreeable arrangements to reschedule the academic activity or provide a substitute activity or evaluation. Please alert me to the potential for such conflicts as early in the term as possible.

### **Student Opinion of Teaching Surveys**

Students in this class will be asked to complete a *Student Opinion of Teaching Survey*. Surveys will be sent via Pitt email and appear on your CourseWeb landing page during the last three weeks of class meeting days. Your responses are anonymous. Please take time to thoughtfully respond, your feedback is important to me.

### **Take Care of Yourself**

Do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle this semester by eating well, exercising, avoiding drugs and alcohol, getting enough sleep, and taking time to relax. Despite what you might hear, using your time to take care of yourself will actually help you achieve your academic goals more than spending too much time studying. All of us benefit from support and guidance during times of struggle. There are many helpful resources available at Pitt. An important part of the college experience is learning how to ask for help. Take the time to learn about all that's available and take advantage of it. Ask for support sooner rather than later – this always helps. If you or anyone you know experiences any academic stress, difficult life events, or difficult feelings like anxiety or depression, we strongly encourage you to seek support. Consider reaching out to a friend, faculty or family member you trust for assistance connecting to the support that can help.

The University Counseling Center is here for you: call 412-648-7930 and visit their website.

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, call someone immediately, day or night:

University Counseling Center (UCC): 412 648-7930

University Counseling Center Mental Health Crisis Response: 412-648-7930 x1

Resolve Crisis Network: 888-796-8226 (888-7-YOU-CAN)

If the situation is life threatening, call the Police:

On-campus: Pitt Police: 412-268-2121; Off-campus: 911