Seeing What Takes Place: Exploring Immersive Experiences of Religious Rituals

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“We’re looking for a moment of understanding in the understanding of a moment.”
- Elizabeth Pérez

“What is the message the camera is saying?”
- Maya Georgieva

“We should think about both authenticity and transparency in production.”
- Gerald Liu

“Through these rituals, we can change perspectives... but we need more people like you to see these rituals.”
- Achmed, Sufi community leader in 
  *Zikr: A Sufi Revival*, created by Gabo Arora

**Executive Summary**

The NEH DHAG Discovery grant Seeing What Takes Place: Exploring Immersive Experiences of Religious Rituals (SWTP) was initiated to work through the issues to engage extended reality (XR) technologies in teaching about religious ritual. Prompted by a lack of video resources for teaching about religious practices, a cohort of interdisciplinary scholars, digital humanists, and immersive media creators met for a two-day conference in June of 2022 to discuss harnessing XR towards increased familiarity with and understanding of diverse religious practices. Participants evaluated currently available video resources, discussed best practices regarding immersive media, and wrestled with methodological and theoretical issues regarding categories of ‘religious’ and ‘ritual’.

At the close of the meeting, discussions concluded with a creation plan focused on three main intentions:

- a) begin by identifying and collaborating with locally based religious institutions willing to participate;
- b) incorporate framing and commentary materials alongside and within immersive experiences;
- c) capture not only ceremonial behaviors, but surrounding ‘micropractices’ of preparation and purification, along with the experience of college-aged practitioners who can serve as ‘tour guides’ of their experiences within their religion.

Ultimately, the workshop outlined how to scale the project by training research pods based in different institutions of higher education who could be trained to work with their own local communities (as well as engaging students in the creation) to develop a central repository of experiences that could serve as an immersive landscape of religious practices in the U.S. Not only would such a repository serve to embrace the diversity of religious practice in this country, but it would enhance understanding, intercultural empathy, and serve as a means of cultural preservation.

A project website with collected materials can be found at [ImmersiveReligion.org](http://ImmersiveReligion.org).

Selected videos of workshop discussions can be found at [https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/swtp/foundations/discussions/](https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/swtp/foundations/discussions/)
Project Director - John Soboslai

John Soboslai is an assistant professor in the department of Religion at Montclair State University whose scholarship focuses on global religion and religious violence. In 2019, after finding few video resources for teaching about religious ritual available online, he began filming local services of various religious traditions for use in his Understanding Religion classes, which lead to his applying for a NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Discovery Grant in 2021.

Workshop Participants and Consultants

Gabo Arora

Gabo Arora is a world renowned multi-award winning immersive artist, professor, entrepreneur and former UN diplomat. He has had the honor of being the UN’s first-ever Creative Director; a Davos World Economic Forum Arts and Culture Leader; a member of the Council on Foreign Relations; and is the Founding Director of a new lab and academic department - the first of its kind - dedicated to Immersive Storytelling and Emerging Technologies (ISET) at Johns Hopkins University.

Sam Baumel

Sam Baumel is an independent filmmaker and Creative Producer. He serves on the Video Consortium Education Committee and has taught as a guest lecturer at SVA and NYU. He developed a course on the business of independent video production for KitSplit EDU’s pilot program and delivered the keynote speech at the 2019 COEx Conference in NYC on in-house VR video production.

Julia Berger

Julia’s research focuses on the political theology of religious organizations, particularly those engaged in international discourse and policy making. More broadly, she looks at religiously inspired conceptual frameworks for social change, with particular attention to the epistemology and practices of the Baha’i community. She teaches at Montclair State University and works with the Baha’i International Community United Nations Office, and LEAD IMPACT Reconciliation Institute.

Mark Clatterbuck

Mark is an Associate Professor in the department of Religion at Montclair State University, the Co-Director of Native American & Indigenous Studies, and co-founder of Lancaster Against Pipelines. He spends a lot of time involved in environmental justice work/activism, both in PA and supporting Indigenous pipeline resistance efforts across the so-called US. His research & teaching focus is on Native North American ceremonial ways, Native Christianity, Liberation Theologies, and religion and eco-activism.

Emory Craig

As CEO of Digital Bodies, Emory works with universities, nonprofits, and international organizations to develop programs in digital ethics and redesign learning by leveraging the potential of augmented and virtual reality. He co-authored the first EDUCAUSE series on VR and AR in 2017-2018 and the State of XR Report on Immersive Learning in 2021. Emory worked for many years as the former Director of eLearning and Interim CIO at The College of New Rochelle, where he designed and taught the interdisciplinary senior seminar in the humanities.
Maya Georgieva
Maya is the Senior Director at The Innovation Center at the New School where she provides strategic leadership in creating a culture and capacity for innovative design with emerging technologies, including XR and AI. She leads a team driving new media and innovation focused on immersive storytelling and learning, spatial computing, future interfaces, and design. In addition, Maya teaches Immersive Storytelling at The Parsons School of Design.

AJ Kelton
Dr. AJ Kelton is the Director of the Digital Media CoLab in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Montclair State University in New Jersey. He is involved in collaborative learning, reflective teaching, academic and emerging technology, digital humanities, social media, games, and virtual worlds for education. Dr. Kelton is the Founder and current Board Member of Emerging Learning Design (ELD) and Co-Editor-in-Chief for the Emerging Learning Design Journal.

Gerald Liu
Gerald C. Liu is Director of Collegiate Ministries, Initiatives, and Belonging for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church. An ordained United Methodist Elder of the Mississippi Annual Conference, he also serves as a Minister in Residence at the Church of the Village, a United Methodist Congregation in Manhattan.

Semontee Mitra
Semontee is a Assistant Teaching Professor of English and American Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park. Her research interests include South Asian Indian Americans and their religious festivals and celebrations in the United States. She also studies how Hinduism is performed, practiced, articulated, and maintained by Indian Americans in the 21st century using digital media.

Elizabeth Pérez
Elizabeth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She specializes in the study of Cuban Lucumi (popularly called Santería) and other innovative systems of belief and practice that crystallized in the Americas: Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, and Puerto Rican Espiritismo, among others.

Hussein Rashid
Hussein is a freelance academic, whose research interests focus on Muslims and US popular culture. He also works as a consultant focusing on religious literacy whose last major project was with the Children's Museum of Manhattan exhibit America to Zanzibar: Muslim Cultures Near and Far. He was an executive producer on the award-winning New York Times short animated documentary The Secret History of Muslims in the US.

Pilar Rau
Pilar is a cultural anthropologist with a background in visual arts, media studies, and sociolinguistics. She specializes in the anthropology of religion, anthropology of art and aesthetics, visual anthropology, and economic anthropology, with a regional focus on Latin America. She also has professional experience in the arts and film and video production.
Project Origins and Goals

**Problem**

There is a troubling lack of digital resources for teaching about religion. Religion is a lived, embodied experience, but instructors too often give disproportionate attention to abstract belief structures while students merely read descriptions of rituals and ceremonies, stultifying interest and obscuring their impact. Site visits to religious spaces have shown to have great pedagogical benefits (Pinault 2007; Klippel et. al. 2019), but logistics for such trips can be challenging and visits usually take place when no services occur. Traditional video can give a first-hand view of some practices, but most extant videos are inappropriate for use in a college classroom, being either aimed at increasing devotion in the faithful, others are too long and without explanation, while others contain dubious interpretations and explanations. All speak as though representative of their tradition as a whole, offering an inaccurate sense that religions are monolithic, coherent, and univocal.

**Proposal**

Immersive media and extended reality (XR) technologies offer a new avenue for creating educational resources for use within and beyond the college classroom. Their high level of engagement provides a chance to develop profound empathy by providing students the opportunity to approximate presence at diverse religious practices. We propose to create a series of XR experiences of live religious rituals from a variety and expanding set of religious traditions. In addition to the rituals themselves, we propose to capture surround activities of purification and preparation of ritual elements—which we label ‘micropractices’—along with interviews with scholars, the religious professionals performing the rites, and practitioners of the religion. Within the spaces where the practices take place, we intend to integrate interactive hotspots and 3d renderings of objects in the space to enhance understanding and encourage exploration and interaction. (See below for a fuller rendering of the resources we propose.)

**Potential**

These methods could build on the popularity of site visits by providing the chance to experience active practices and obtain reliable information about their meaning, symbolism, and place within the lives of practitioners. Immersive experiences accompanied by expert analysis has been found to be a powerful tool (Callahan and Harbin 2020; Ramey et.al. 2019), and XR is showing great potential in terms of enhancing empathy (Bollmer, 2017; La Peña et.al. 2010), subject matter retention (Di Natale et. al. 2020; Krokos, Plaisant, & Varshney 2019), and advancing learning outcomes (Chavez & Bayona 2018; Jensen & Konradsen 2018). Our approach could also open opportunities for students to participate in the creation of the resources as well as the consumption while generating insights for religious studies as well as anthropology, media and performance studies, as well as gender and ethnic area studies.

**Project**

Designing the creation of the resources was not simple. A host of concerns required a great deal of consideration and interdisciplinary expertise. Not only do the vast differences between religious forms require careful treatment for equitability, but how can the creation avoid the mistakes of the history of film ethnography and armchair anthropology? How can we capitalize on the pedagogical promise of digital media while avoiding pitfalls of technology for technology’s sake? How can we settle the myriad methodological problems considering religious rituals, beginning with what exactly constitutes a ritual and what designates one as religious? How can we avoid reinforcing outdated paradigms of ‘world religions’ that implicitly mark some traditions as more worthy of study than others? To answer those questions a team of scholars, digital humanists, and immersive media experts and creators came together over a two-day conference held in the Digital Media CoLab at Montclair State University in June 2022. Over the two days participants had animated conversations that touched on a number of questions (see below), evaluated extant resources, and considered how to actualize the project.
**Project Activities**

Prior to the workshop, the set of questions that anchored our agenda was circulated and kept available through a LMS portal, and at the conclusion of the workshop weekend we went back over the answers we derived. The process allowed us to not only make sure that all our issues of priority were covered, but also to think back upon whether the answers determined at the beginning of the workshop held up at its close. The workshop consisted of round table conversations oriented by the topics below, evaluations of extant video and VR resources regarding religion, and outlining of potential components of the resources. What we found was the outlines we early shaped were honed over the weekend until at the close we were left with both actionable plans and articulations of methodological concerns and resolutions.

**Select workshop questions of concern:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method and Methodology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do we determine what constitutes a ritual?</td>
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<td>How / should we derive a list of rites to record?</td>
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<td>How do we deal with cultural v. religious rituals?</td>
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<td>How do we avoid replicating the problematic “world religions” paradigm?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Religious Representation</th>
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<td>Can / should we seek to record the perspectives of practitioners of different genders?</td>
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<td>How can we highlight intrareligious diversity rather than presenting one form as representative of a tradition?</td>
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<td>How can we capture ethnic and geographic varieties?</td>
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<td>How can we visualize differences in participation and experience, both horizontally (e.g. different genders, people with disabilities) and vertically (e.g. caste or class considerations)?</td>
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<td>What religious identifiers would best serve the project goals? Are there graphic ways to accomplish this (e.g. a religion “tree”)?</td>
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<th>Resource Features</th>
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<tr>
<td>Are there ways of highlighting issues of change and development over time and between communities?</td>
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<td>In what ways can we draw connections with texts / stories within practices?</td>
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<td>How can we emphasize the connections to specific communities of practice?</td>
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<td>What aspects of the rites should be recorded?</td>
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<td>What kind of commentary should be integrated, and how?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is it better to record from a central position that gives greater access, or the view of participants which better replicates the experience of “being there?”</td>
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<th>Logistics and Engagement</th>
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<td>How can we partner with communities from design to execution to analysis?</td>
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<td>What steps are necessary to record live rites? Is it better to film an active rite (which might lead to disruption) or attempt to arrange a ‘mock’ ceremony for greater control (raising questions of authenticity in performance)?</td>
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<td>How do we incorporate background elements like narration or music score?</td>
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<td>Who should be approached for explanation and commentary?</td>
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Recording Praxis (and its drawbacks)

In an attempt to both create a record of our conversations and engage the technology we intended to use, a GoPro Max camera was set up in the middle of the meeting to capture events in 360° perspective. We hoped that it would not only give the team some experience with the technology, but also bring to our immediate awareness how the camera’s eye affected our performance and behavior.

Two interesting outcomes were the consequence: first, while there was discussion at the beginning of the meeting regarding self-consciousness—and what the consequences of doing the same at a religious rite might be—very quickly participants seemed to forget the camera and spoke freely. Second, and much more ironically, it was discovered after the workshop wrapped that the settings on the GoPro were not initiated correctly and rather than recording in 360° mode it recorded in traditional (HERO) mode. Instead of a hemispheric view on the proceedings, two participants were filmed very closely for both days. Lesson learned.

**Technology**
- What level of extended reality will best serve the goals of the project?
- How can we deal with the digital divide and make the experiences broadly available?
- What is the best equipment for the project considering ease of use, inobtrusive, and output format?
- What is necessary for the hosting and sharing of the experiences once created?
- Is it better to aim for proprietary mediums (e.g. HTC Vive, Meta) or more open source but less used varieties (e.g. Steam VR)?
- What should be kept in mind regarding user experience (UX)?
- What is possible in terms of user navigation / branching within the UX?
- How can we maintain accessibility in the resources?
- How can we integrate commentaries into UX?

**Ethics and Access**
- How do we avoid cultural voyeurism?
- How can we prevent exoticizing non-white religions?
- How can we attend to the possibility of triggering events?
- How to address traditions who only allow initiates/certain castes/practitioners into these rites?
- Does the camera’s presence transgress against such concerns if wielded by the initiated with access?

**Future Considerations**
- What level of public access to materials is appropriate?
- How can we communicate the potential of the project to future grantors and partners?
- Where else can / should this project go (e.g. internationally, festivals, rites of passage, pilgrimages, etc.)?
- How can we grow partnerships inside and outside the academic community?
- Outside of the religious studies classroom, where else might these resources be useful?
- What are best practices for evaluating the success of these resources in terms of learning outcomes, empathy, subject matter retention?
- What avenues of applied scholarship are there as the project continues?
Project Outcomes

So… What Rituals Should We Film?

From the start of the workshop we addressed the complications of how to define a ritual, specifically a religious ritual. As part of that conversation we discussed the selection of rituals to film, how we could highlight multiple forms of traditions while including religious forms often excluded from the ‘world religions’ model that focuses on 8 “major” religions. Having experts in Native American traditions and Afro-diasporic religions helped anchor those intentions, though we still struggled with how to determine a list of rituals to record from the outset. Any recordings could be taken as representational of broad and varied traditions, reducing awareness of religious diversity rather than expanding it. That is, seeking to record one Shabbat service (for example) would be taken as how all Jewish communities celebrate, however capturing every variation—not simply reform, conservative, orthodox, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, etc., but the nuances brought about by specific histories, cultures, and geographies—would be impossible.

Our solution is to begin geographically, focusing on religious communities nearby participating universities. Framing the project as not a comprehensive set of recordings, but rather localized explorations of religious communities helps avoid the problem of representation while highlighting intrareligious differences. Over time, it was suggested, a kind of American ritual landscape could be constructed using Diana Eck’s work with the Pluralism Project based at Harvard University as a model. A localized approach would show these communities are not peripheral exports from some imagined center but fully anchored in the locales and cultures wherein the congregants live.

Starting locally also fed into a central imperative of the project: our determination to create sincere, effective, and equitable relationships with communities. Our catchphrase became “scholar-driven agenda, community-led research.” Balancing insider understanding with outsider analysis with care and compromise remains the goal. Immersive media would allow users to perceive the “texture” of these practices—the pauses, feelings, expressions, all of which communicates practitioners’ experiences during the rites. Moving beyond the sequencing and symbolic communications of the rite to the ways in which participants shape the meanings of these practices.

Working closely with communities can ensure engagement in the process and assure partners of their agency in producing the assets. Effective collaboration requires built-in planning along with feedback mechanisms; while the researchers will have the final decisions, thoroughgoing partnerships can facilitate recording, enhance community buy-in, and aid questions of access. The usage of the spaces and time devoted to digital capture obliges a level of remuneration as well.

Participants evaluate an edited video on Islamic salat, created by the PD.
Who is the audience?

These pieces of learning technology will be aimed primarily at college students, with an eye to how the wider public might access and benefit these resources. One of our participants with experience teaching high school suggested that these experiences would be useful there as well. Our intention is to make these resources publicly available, but the level of explanation will be appropriate for college-aged students.

How can we best capture the performances?

A nagging question remains about whether to capture live rites as they occur, or to try to arrange a special rite performed specifically for recording.

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<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Recording Active Rite</th>
<th>Recording Arranged Service</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Capturing what happens as it happens.</td>
<td>- Greater flexibility in recording, including opportunities for making changes during performance.</td>
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<td>- Reflects the participants’ experiences.</td>
<td>- All present aware of filming; no one who wished not to be filmed would be present.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Assured authenticity and ritual validity.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Drawbacks</th>
<th>Recording Active Rite</th>
<th>Recording Arranged Service</th>
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<td></td>
<td>- Filming causes disruption</td>
<td>- Likely fewer attendees present giving appearance of less robust communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Limited access to equipment during rite.</td>
<td>- While still authentic, rite may not be considered ritually valid.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Challenge to obtain waivers from all present.</td>
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In the end, if a specially arranged rite is possibly for recording it will provide the greatest flexibility and the most promise for exciting filming.

Additionally, there is the question of whether to place cameras to capture views from the perspective of the participants (i.e. the audience) or to use the opportunity to provide privileged perspectives usually reserved for professionals. Audience perspectives provide a closer relative experience but might be less engaging due to the distance and separation. The more reserved perspectives would provide a more attractive and engaging viewpoint, along with greater access to some symbols and meanings, but may also separate users from the actual experience of participation. In addition, access may be an issue; many religious forms reserve some aspects of rituals or sacred spaces for the ordained or initiated.

The solution will likely come down to the religious communities engaged, some are more strident with those prohibitions while some less so. For example, when the PD filmed a Antiochian Orthodox Christian Divine Liturgy, one of the performing priests offered to bring the camera behind the Holy Gate, showing a concern to prevent physical access but allow virtual access. Moreover, the separation in both cases is sometimes aimed at reducing disruption or distraction (while at the same time instituting implicit and explicit hierarchies) during services. While the ultimate choices will be made by the participating religious communities, the way they respond will provide further insight into the ways religious traditions come to terms with new digital forms.
**What should these resources look like?**

Our experts determined that the immersive experiences themselves—the actual period where a user is virtually present during recorded events outside their physical space—should be a) limited, b) continuous, and c) accompanied by other elements.

a) **Limited:** Immersion can be exhausting, and overtaxing a user’s tolerance for remote presence can decrease enjoyment and engagement. Twenty minutes was articulated as the maximum amount of time for immersive experiences, while much shorter sessions of 8-10 minutes were promising. The length will somewhat depend on the segments of the ritual themselves, but aiming for shorter segments will benefit user’s experience.

b) **Continuous:** Stopping and starting during immersion reduces presence, so we discussed how to incorporate other elements without breaking immersion. Users need to feel control over those choices, so the group discussed how to accommodate both the desire for consistent immersion and the user’s ability to control the experience. Potential options include overlays that would use (limited) text and other visualizations while the video plays, or UX interactions which would conclude an immersive element and incorporate other graphics or interview elements outside the video itself. User testing is required to know which will be more effective.

c) **Accompanied:** Users can be disoriented if the immersive experience begins immediately and without warning. Moreover, learning outcomes are more likely to be achieved if contextual information is incorporated to anchor what the user will see and experience. These can include UX menus and navigation tools, but also graphic information about the lineage, “core” elements, and positionality of the religious group the user will be virtually joining. Offering background information on the people is also likely to heighten empathetic connection.

**Proposed resource components:**

- **B1:** Religious Studies Scholars
- **B2:** Religious Professionals
- **B3:** Participants / Community Members
- **A:** The Rite: Full recordings of ritual practices
- **D:** ‘Micropractices’ of preparation and purification
- **E:** Hotspot explorations and 3d objects
- **C:** Behind-the-Scenes footage
- **F:** A ‘Tour Guide’ to the experience

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*Seeing What Takes Place White Paper*
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<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Why</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> Recordings of Full Religious Rituals</td>
<td>360° video and ambisonic audio (See above for questions re: live or arranged rite)</td>
<td>The central feature of the resource, rituals will be recorded from 1-3 perspectives (that of a participant, of the performer, and possibly gender differences) using immersive media capture to allow users to approximate presence at the rites. Questions of privileged access may prevent some angles.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> Interviews with Scholars of Religion</td>
<td>Planned interviews using traditional cinematic or holographic recording</td>
<td>Those with expertise in the traditions recorded can provide historical and cultural context and speak to the specific symbols, procedures, and meanings of the rite.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews with Religious Professionals</td>
<td>Reflective interviews following the rite’s recording</td>
<td>Those responsible for performing the rites can highlight salient connections to wider traditions, explain specific features of the performance, and speak to the meaning of ritual actions and activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews with participants and community members</td>
<td>Reflective interviews following the rite’s recording</td>
<td>Those practitioners who attend the rite can provide reflections and vision on the experience itself as well as insight into the place of the service within their larger lives.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> Footage of and taken by a college-aged ‘tour guide’</td>
<td>Self-captured footage using personal media device</td>
<td>To connect with our primary audience, a practitioner will be engaged to record their preparation, attendance, and departure from the rite. Virtually walking users through their point of view could provide additional context, humanize participants, connect with audience expectations, and highlight the particularity (rather than universality) of the religious culture and rite.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong> Micropractices of preparation and purification</td>
<td>Traditional 2d video capture, with 360° / ambisonic recording where appropriate</td>
<td>Dr. Elizabeth Pérez suggested capturing “micropractices” that prepare and accompany the larger services and occur largely behind the scenes. Highlighting these will disrupt traditional boundaries of what constitutes ritual and its responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong> Informational hotspot overlays of spaces and interactive ritual implements</td>
<td>Detail photography, photogrammetry, 3d object construction and rendering</td>
<td>Interactive hotspots can help explain the symbolism that often permeates sacred spaces, while 3d renderings of sacred implements for users to interact with and increase engagement and understanding. Not all items will be open for photogrammetry, but detail photographs can be integrated also to allow for deeper engagement with the spaces and rites</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong> Behind-the-scenes footage of the recording setup and filming</td>
<td>Handheld cameras and personal media devices</td>
<td>In recognition of the camera’s effect on performance, framing, and explanation, the group felt maintaining a video diary of creation will provide transparency to our decision-making. Moreover, interviews with the filmmakers about their experience interacting with communities and recording the rites can close the circle on those involved.</td>
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Storyboard images (created with ShapesXR on Meta Quest 2; Pictured: St. Georges’ Antiochian Orthodox Church):

Proposed UX Design Flow:
Project evaluation and impact

Through our wrap up conversations at the close of the workshop and the email communications that followed, we felt that we had exceeded our initial hopes in outlining the characteristics and future of the project. Our initial hopes for the meeting were threefold: a) to settle methodological and logistical questions about selecting and recording religious rites; b) to outline features and best practices of the proposed resources; and c) establish plans for future partnerships and expansions.

a) The conversations we had around the methodological questions (outlined above) demonstrated the power of collaboration. Questions of how to operationally define religion and ritual led to the insight driven by Dr. Mark Clatterbuck to begin locally, allowing us to avoid making statements about what religion or ritual is and rather highlight the myriad forms of religious practice within certain geographies. As we intend these resources as a way of engaging students in some of the pressing questions in the study of religion, a regional approach would invite students to think about the challenges presented in definitions rather than asserting a single answer evident in our selection process. In addition, it settled questions of how to avoid presenting a specific variant of religious practice as representative of the tradition as a whole. Now they are expressly not representative, which will drive home the diversity within abstract ‘religions’.

b) The proposed features of the project expanded dramatically through our conversations. Dr. Elizabeth Pérez’s suggestion to focus on micropractices opened up the idea of ritual and introduced new ways to conceptualize what goes into ritual, and the essential role played by women in facilitating rites often performed by men. Without the preparation of the sacred meal, the rite cannot move forward. Another crucial insight came from Maya Georgieva, who consistently kept us thinking about separating the immersive experience from the framing material. That helped us orient the context of these resources to best support understanding without disrupting immersion. Other features outlined above were only possible thanks to the collaborative spirit all approached the workshop.

c) Perhaps most central to the project’s evaluation was the growing excitement with which the project was met as the workshop and consequent discussions unfolded. Partnerships with other universities and institutions have begun to be established, plans laid out for a network of research pods based at universities across the U.S., and a keen belief in the potential of the project to help increase understanding about religion continues.

Initially the project plan was to determine the best means of creating immersive, interactive experiences of religious ritual. Our outcomes included methodologically sound and culturally engaged plans that exceeded our expectations. We left having formulated a sound means of approaching recording replete with diagrams, materials, and a set of trainings for the next stage of production.

‘Sign-in board’ from day 1 of the workshop
Project continuation and long-term impact

All involved categorically believed in the project’s promise and determined to move forward in several ways outlined below. Some participants have already confirmed their further participation in the project and committed to staying in touch as the project moves forward.

First is the prototyping of the resources themselves. With the outlines of the structure, aspects, and processing of the resource creation, a NEH Level II Digital Humanities Advancement Grant was submitted at the beginning of 2023. It proposes to make three prototypes partnering with religious communities near to Montclair State University (the PD’s home institution) as well as the University of Chicago. (This latter site is made possible thanks to a partnership with the Martin Marty Center housed at the institution.) As part of the prototyping, we intend to focus on a WebVR platform to reach the most users through a website but also explore how different the creation methods using Unity SDKs for use on HMDs like the Meta Quest or HTC Vive. Regardless of whether the grant is awarded, steps are being taken to work with communities to record their services and begin learning the best processing practices for using them to create interactive, immersive experiences.

Second, after articulating the pedagogical and technological needs and aims, workshop participants became excited at the possibility of students not only consuming the immersive media resources, but taking a direct role in creating them. Project-based classes offered in concert with media production departments could offer students a chance to research, film, and process the materials themselves, simultaneously guiding students in responsible partnerships with cultural communities, instructing about religious behaviors and cultures, and training them in skills demanded by the future of media creation. Interdisciplinarity is a given, combining religious studies, anthropology and ethnology, documentary film studies, media production, digital technology, even teacher education. Classes held simultaneously at multiple institutions could connect virtually and support each other and work together. Microcredentials earned en route could serve as demonstrations of marketable skills. The PD has held initial conversations with members of the School of Communications and Media at Montclair State University and they have expressed excitement about the possibility of establishing cross-listed curricula based on producing a final resource towards which all assignments aim.

While differing institutions and the diversity of religious communities could provide a replenishing pool of settings for recording, different themes in different years could give a focus to unites classes while building out a pool of immersive resources, and students who have connections with religious communities could offer additional insights and aspects of experience. A remaining question about how to manage the ownership and use of the resources between academic institutions, the central project hub, and particular communities still needs to be settled before going to full scale production and distribution.

In addition, the possibility of incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) driven holograms for conversations between users and participants was also briefly discussed. StoryFile has frameworks for filming in-depth interviews and processing them for AI key term searching and appropriate responses. Those technologies could make for future versions of the resources.

Due to the withdrawal of a few intended participants, monies were available to purchase equipment that will allow for limited prototyping and initial resource creation. That allowed us to work up general instructions to be included in toolkits that we hope can ultimately be offered to research fellows (see appendices).

Finally, attending to many of the concerns raised above and wanting to highlight the diversity within religious traditions while providing opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students the chance to gain the requisite skills involved, the group determined to design toolkits that could be shared with partners.
to enable exponential resource creation. The recommended toolkit would a) be comprised of trainings, materials, and suggestions for curricula, b) be shared with something akin to research fellows, and c) include feedback mechanisms to be used in ongoing iterative development.

a) The idea of the toolkit is to facilitate ease, efficiency, and consistency in content capture and processing. They will include recording equipment, in-person trainings on using the equipment (bolstered by online tutorials and reminders), and guidelines for best practices on recording and communicating with communities. These are meant to guide creation but also leave space for innovation within each pod, not direct in a obligatory way but in a way that prevents the need to reinvent the wheel with each iteration. Centrally deriving core components from the center to share with all pods will ensure consistency and enable curriculum sharing and deployment.

b) In order to gain a wide span of different religious forms, graduate and post-graduate students as well as faculty members will be sought as research fellows. Small groups of 3-5 fellows would be brought together and trained using the toolkits and the overarching intentions and purposes of the project before returning to their own institutions to put the materials to work. Footage captured would be processed centrally to maintain consistency. Research fellows could become a community of mutual support, and if the program continues experienced fellows could contribute to future trainings and share lessons learned. Maintaining consistent forums for communication will also allow for fellows to learn from each other and provide mutual support and advice. Classes too could be connected in certain ways.

c) Broader landscapes of creation and engagement would mean more opportunities to learn about what works and what does not. Feedback from students, community members, and scholars will all be essential for establishing best practices and determining what works and what does not. The workshop felt the participatory action research (PAR) model was a useful way to think about ongoing development. PAR consists of taking an action, reviewing that action, then applying information from that review into the next iteration of the action, which is followed by review, etc. Providing consistent feedback mechanisms will facilitate this kind of development and increase familiarity between research pods while gaining essential data regarding deployment.

Concept Map of Research Pods (created by Maya Georgieva during SWTP workshop; see too the infographic in the appendix used to explain the project to potential partners)
Closing

The workshop was a resounding success, functionally settling issues of selection, methodology, and religious studies theory while outlining clear directions forward. Excitement about the project’s pedagogical potential was equalled by the possibilities in engaging students—graduate, post-graduate, and undergraduate—in the creation process. Having a broad set of sites for creation can avoid a monolithic representation of any religious tradition while reinforcing the importance of connecting religious practices to specific communities. Students will not merely be brought for a tour of sacred spaces but be introduced to another segment of humanity, and we believe the increase in their knowledge and understanding about religious practices will be matched by the gains in empathy that can benefit our entire global society.

SWTP day 2 workshop participants, clockwise from top left: Gerald Liu, Hussein Rashid, John Soboslai, Emory Craig, Nina Singer, Britney Black, Maya Georgieva, Gabo Arora, Semontee Mitra, Pilar Rau, Mark Clatterbuck.
Not pictured: Julia Berger, AJ Kelton, Elizabeth Pérez

For more information visit ImmersiveReligion.org
Infographic explaining the project to potential partners

Research Pod Planning
Creating Immersive Experiences of Religious Ritual

Project Goals
- Increasing religious understanding
- Creating equitable partnerships with religious communities
- Developing intercultural empathy
- Embracing socio-cultural diversity
- Blending insider voices with outsider analysis
- Promoting our common humanity

Organizational Structure
The PD’s institution forms the Project Hub from which funds, equipment, and trainings extend.

Research Pods are responsible for producing film packages created in concert with local religious communities.

Seeing What Takes Place White Paper
Production Plan

Contact and Communicate
Fellows will use institutional networks to identify willing participants, scholars and religious communities, relating expectations and planning initial site visits and interviews.

Visit and Plan
At initial meetings, fellows will discuss ritual history and symbolism with religious professionals, diagram the space to aid recoding design, and take detail photography.

Attend and Annotate
Fellows and teams attend a live service to outline stages, begin developing a timeline and list of interview questions, and noting elements appropriate for photogrammetry.

Rite Recording
Teams record rites along with associated micropractices of purification using 3d technologies, along with brief on-site interviews with practitioners capturing their reflections and reactions in traditional 2d recording. Participant guides record their own preparation and attendance.

Additional Interviews
Teams share footage and question list with religious professionals and scholars. After settling on list of interview questions, they record interviews for integration.

Finalize Digital Asset Packages
Edited footage of ritual, guide attendance, practitioner reactions, and interviews are grouped with detail photography. In collaboration with Hub, teams create graphic timelines, illustrate connections with scriptures, and incorporate detail photos of ritual.

Extended Reality Processing
To attend to the digital divide, asset packages are processed (1) for use in head-mounted displays (e.g., Meta Quest or HTC Vive) and (2) for deployment via multimedia websites with smartphone integration.
### Opportunities Offered

- **Classroom Use**
  Aimed at augmenting courses on religion and religious studies.

- **Student Creation**
  Co-listed classes could design, record, and process digital assets.

- **Public Events**
  Virtual or in-person events including possible CAVE installations.

- **Future Expansions**
  Different annual themes could give way to other practices like pilgrimages, holiday celebrations, etc. A national focus could lead to a global one.

### Project Promise

- **Improve Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes**
- **Increase Intercultural Understanding and Empathy**
- **Revolutionize Teaching and Learning About Religion**
- **Develop a Landscape of American Religious Practices**
Seeing What Takes Place:  
Exploring Immersive Experiences of Religious Ritual  
Workshop Agenda and Goals  
June 11-12, 2022  
Montclair State University  
Digital Media CoLab | Schmitt Hall 135

Saturday, June 11

8:30a – Breakfast
9:00a – Introductions; Goals of Workshop
9:30a – What are we doing here?
   - Project goal A: Begin curating a list of rituals to film in prototyping and production.
     o Part 1: Questions of method and Methodology
     o Break (11:00-11:10a)
     o Part 2: Questions of representation and diversity
12:30p – Lunch
1:30p – What should these resources look like?
   - Project goal B: Determine features of proposed resources.
     o Part 3: Questions of video features
     o Break (3:30-3:45p)
     o Part 4: Questions of logistics and engagement (part 1)
5:30p – Wrap up of day 1
   - What did we learn? What do we still need to know?
6:00p – Close day 1

6:30p – Optional dinner at De Novo European Pub Montclair, NJ
Sunday, June 12

8:30a – Breakfast

9:00a – How do we make these immersive? What level of immersion is appropriate?

- Project goal C: Decide upon the level of extended reality for the project and the related requirements.
  - Part 5: Questions of technology
  - Break (11:00-11:10a)
  - Part 6: Questions of logistics and engagement (part 2)

12:30p – Lunch

1:30p – How do we bring these resources about?

- Project goal D: Establish best practices for actualizing resources.
  - Part 7: Questions for ongoing work (part 1)
  - Break (3:00-3:10p)
- Project goal E: Outlining strategies for next steps.
  - Part 8: Questions of ongoing work (part 2)

5:00p – Wrap up of day 2

- What did we learn? What do we still need to know?

5:30p – Closing, future plans, and gratitude

6:00p – Workshop concludes
Our mission (you've already chosen to accept it…)

To determine best methods for the production of pedagogically useful and theoretically sound immersive experiences of religious practices and identifying effective steps towards creating such resources.

- **Project goal A**: Begin curating a list of rituals to film in prototyping and production.
- **Project goal B**: Determine features of proposed resources.
- **Project goal C**: Decide upon the level of extended reality for the project and the related requirements.
- **Project goal D**: Establish best practices for actualizing resources.
- **Project goal E**: Outlining strategies for next steps.

**Collaborative Resources**

- Recording for posterity and transparency (and recall)
- Shared Google Drive folder
  - Questions
  - Video Samples
  - Agenda
  - Scholarship
  - Other
  - Contribute as you feel!
- Canvas course (you’re invited)
Defining ritual

- Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (1977): “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests” (183).
- Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (1987): “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process of marking interest… ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference” (103, 109).
- Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997): “To anyone interested in ritual in general, it becomes quickly evident that there is no clear and widely shared explanation of what constitutes ritual or how to understand it. There are only various theories, opinions, or customary notions, all of which reflect the time and place in which they are formulated” (x).

Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (2009)

- “I will use the term ‘ritualization’ to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (74).

Religion For Breakfast – What is Ritual?

If the strategies used towards establishing an assertion of difference are all culturally specific, how can we select a subset of those strategies that will allow interested and ignorant parties to better understand the religious practices and lives of others?
Ritual taxonomies

- Emile Durkheim
  - Positive rites, negative rites, piacular rites
  - Instrumental v. expressive rites

- Victor Turner
  - Life-crisis rituals v. rituals of affliction

- Ronald Grimes
  - Rites of passage v. marriage rites v. funerary v. festivals v. pilgrimages v. Purification v. civil ceremonies v. rituals of exchange v. sacrifice v. worship v. magic v. healing v. interaction v. meditation v. rites of inversion v. ritual drama

- Catherine Bell
  - Rites of passage / life-cycle rites v. Calendrical and commemorative rites v. rites of exchange and communion v. rites of affliction v. rites of feasting, fasting, and festival v. political rituals

Other considerations (Julia)

I found it helpful to try to spell out some possible areas of inquiry explicitly to ground the ensuing pedagogical, methodological, technical, and logistical questions. To the extent that a ritual sheds light directly on any of the fundamental questions that the group identifies, it would help to identify that ritual as an important one for inclusion in the project. E.g.:

- What worldview/cosmology is being conveyed through this practice/ritual?
- How does the practice/ritual shape a particular sense of identity?
- What kind of collectivity/social structure is being conveyed/forged through this practice?
- What kind of a relationship between the material and the spiritual is being conveyed through this practice?
- A question about generativity. One aspect that might not be as explicitly defined in the literature is that of what the community is constructing (or it’s just my lack of knowledge of the literature) so it might be interesting to ask what is being created through these rituals (e.g. new identities, collectivities, new skills, new knowledge, etc.). I’m thinking here of very specific guidelines in the Baha’i community for example, around collective decision-making as well as elections, which require attention to the question of generativity to be more fully understood.

As ritual, so religion

- Any attempt to define ‘religion’ is doomed as it artificially asserts a separation between a sphere of life called ‘religion’ and the rest of a person’s existence.
- Clifford Geertz, *An Interpretation of Culture* (1973): “Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting mood and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (90).
- Talal Asad’s response: you can’t isolate something called ‘religion’, symbols themselves can’t act, religious lives are lived fully within their social, historical, and political context; it is not a privatized mental activity that is voluntarily assumed but utterly engaged with all facets of life.


- “There is no data for religion... Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative act of comparison and generalization.”
References


Masuzawa, Tomoko. (2012). *The Invention of World Religions: Or how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism.* University of Chicago Press.


