

**Sociology 129a. Religion in American Life:
A Sociological Approach
Brandeis University
Fall 2006**

Field Visit and Report Guidelines

You will write **two** field reports this semester based on your visits to two different religious organizations in the greater Boston area. These visits must be to organizations in two different religious traditions. I strongly encourage you to visit organizations in religions traditions that you have not practiced in the past and do not currently practice. Your first field report is due on September 21st and the second on November 13th.

Guidelines for Visiting

We will talk in class about the ethical issues involved in visiting religious centers, and I want you to think carefully about these issues before visiting. It is important that you treat the people you meet at these centers with respect, you are their guest. At the same time you are under no obligation to do anything (praying, chanting, kneeling, bowing, etc.) that you do not feel comfortable with during your visit.

Guidelines for what to wear to a center vary depending on the religious tradition and the people who attend. As a sign of respect, it is generally appropriate to dress up a bit (no jeans or sneakers). Depending on the tradition, you might have to remove your shoes or cover your head when you visit. Watch what other people are doing and do likewise. If you are not certain what to wear please ask a knowledgeable source or do a little internet research before you go.

If you are not certain where to visit or what kinds of religious centers are in this area, consider:

1. Centers listed through the Pluralism Project at Harvard University:
<http://www.pluralism.org/research/profiles.php#MA>

2. The Yellow Pages or Waltham Community Directory:
<http://www.waltham-community.org/churches.html#BETHEDEN>

3. Brandeis University Chaplaincy's Office
Ellen Afienko
afienko@brandeis.edu
tel: 781-736-3570
Usdan Student Center 51

You should be able to find a religious center in almost any religious tradition.

When you visit each center I encourage you to notice (and take notes if possible) about the following:

1. Demographics: What are the ages, sexes, races, and social classes of the people present? Do people who are attending differ from the leaders in some way? Do people attend as individuals? With their friends? With family members?
2. Physical Setting: What do the physical spaces look like? Are they large or small? Plain or ornate? Rented or owned? Shared or not? How are people dressed? Are the leaders and participants dressed differently? What sorts of props are there? Tables? Chairs? Microphones? Musical instruments? Religious texts? Symbols like crosses or Buddha images? Containers for money collections?
3. Description of Events:
 - How long is the whole gathering? Segments of the gathering?
 - What are the number and ordering of the segments? Songs, prayers, chants, testimonies, standing, kneeling, etc.
 - Who participates and how? How diffuse is the leadership? How many leaders? How do participants participate?
 - Tone and style of speech? Is the language vernacular or “churchly” or “priestly?” Is stylized language used?
4. Content of message: Be cautious here. Listen more than ask and don’t get “snowed” by a speaker. Read carefully anything that is passed out, read the words of the songs, listen to the words of the prayers or teachings. Don’t take everything literally but:
 - Look for “doctrine,” especially the conception of the relationship between the “sacred” (or spiritual, godly, or supernatural) and the “secular” (or profane of everyday) world. Is the relationship close or distant, warm or cold, comforting or threatening?
 - What are the subjects that are being taught about? If you didn’t know anything about this religious tradition what would you leave this gathering thinking that they care about? Are they talking about themselves? Other people? Particular issues?
 - How do you feel being at this event? What makes you feel this way?

Following Your Visit

As soon as possible after your visit (preferably as soon as you get home), it is essential that you write detailed notes about your visit. These notes will become your field report and are a summary of what you observed. When they are doing research, sociologists of religion write field reports to systematically remember and keep track of what happened at the places they do research over the weeks and months they are “in the field.” Your field report should be a description of the events and people you met at the center. You should answer the questions above in your field report and also include mention of other things of interest that happened at the center. At the end of your summary of the events, you should write about one paragraph single that includes your personal reaction and thoughts about what you observed.

The length of your field reports will vary but it is not unusual for a field report from a one hour visit to a religious center to be at least 4-5 pages single spaced. A sample field report from my own research follows.

(Much of this document is based on “The Protocol: Some Things to Look for in Religious Events” written by R. Stephen Warner, University of Illinois at Chicago).

Sample Field Report

Wendy Cadge
September 21, 2000
PMC (a Buddhist meditation center)
Thursday night, "regular sitting." 7:20 to 8:20pm

Description

I drive out of the city towards H. where the PMC is located. I park in the public parking area around the corner from the Center. There are rows of shops on both sides of the street – two story row houses with stores in the first floor. About three stores down from the parking lot is a store with a picture window covered on the inside with a dark colored fabric. Between the fabric and the window facing out are two medium sized gray stones (about a foot and a half high and a foot wide). One stone is sitting upright facing the sidewalk. It reads "PMC" the words are etched in the stone. It is leaning against a second stone that is lying flat on the ground. On the outside to the left of the door are three pieces of paper. One describes the regular meetings, the second special events, and the third a conference, I think.

I open the front door and walk inside. The room is about 30 feet long and about ten feet wide. Lights are on – but are dimmed in the center – like in a nice restaurant. Spot lighting is around the sides of the room and focused on the walls like an art gallery. The walls inside are beige and the carpet is wall to wall beige and brown mix. The carpet is flat, a tweed or braid of some sort (not puffy wall to wall carpet you see in some people's house). After the lighting, the next thing that strikes me is the strong smell of incense. I can't identify the scent but it is strong and sweet. (Smells like a college dorm room). Music is playing at a medium volume in the background. It's melodic – pipes or a flute of some kind.

Immediately inside the door is a coat rack. One coat is hanging there and I notice one pair of shoes on the floor next to the rack. A glance around the room shows three people, none of whom are wearing shoes, so I take mine off and place them against the wall (which is actually the front window). A man approaches and reaches out his hand.

G: "Hi, I'm G."

W: "I'm Wendy"

G: "Have you meditated before?"

W: "Yes, but not here."

G: "Well, we do half an hour of sitting meditation followed by fifteen minutes of walking followed by another half an hour of sitting. There is a library upstairs and tea and a bathroom and there is a bathroom there in the back (motioning). We have cushions (motioning to the corner) and chairs."

G. looks in his mid fifties with grayish hair (balding on top) and glasses. He is white. He wears brown socks, brown loose fitting curdorary pants, and a long sleeved button up shirt. After he greets us, he walks back to his black cushions and sits down Indian style facing the center of the room. He is sitting in front of what seems to be an altar (it is a low wooden table). The other two people in the room are sitting along the wall facing him. I take him to be the teacher.

I walk to the back room, just looking around, where there are two pictures. The first is a photograph of the Insight Meditation Center (IMS) with the word "Metta" on the front of the building. (This photo tells me that this is indeed a vipassana center, probably). The second picture is a circle with geometric prints on the inside and a Buddha outline.

I walk back to the main room and pick up a black cushion from the tall stack. I place the mat along the wall directly across from G. I sit down Indian style on my mat with my hands in my lap. G. sits to the right side of a wooden table with a large Buddha (1.5 feet), a candle, and an incense burner on it. Above the table is a 3x2 painting that is greens melted into blues with gold around the edges (abstract). Next to the altar is a wooden platform, elevated about one foot off of the ground. It is about 2.5 feet square. It is covered with a blue oriental carpet. On top of the carpet is a black square pillow with a round pillow on top of it. No one is sitting on the platform. On the corner of the platform are three books. There is also a long thin bell or chime that you hit with a hammer next to the pillow. To the right of the altar/table and platform are two photos / art pieces on the wall, both of the Buddha.

To my left against the wall is man who looks in his 50s. He wears jeans, a denim button down shirt, and white socks. He has white hair. His white Nike sneakers are tucked under the side of his meditation pillow. He is sitting on a square and circle cushion Indian style with his hands on his knees breathing deeply. He does not move or open his eyes as I sit down. To my right is another man in his 50s also dressed in jeans and a light beige sweater / shirt. He is also sitting on a square and circle cushion Indian style with his hands on his knees breathing deeply. He opens his eyes and looks around as I sit down.

It is about 7:25. This sitting session is to start at 7:30. G gets up from his seat and walks to the low brown table that we are all facing (and he is sitting to the side of). He picks up a box of incense sticks from under the table, pulls one out, and lights it with a match from the box of matches also under the table. He sticks it in a gold candleholder looking thing. He then picks up the large Buddha, puts it on its side under his arm and walks with it to the smaller room behind the room we are sitting in. He comes back with a smaller Buddha with a black head (it looks like a Sri Lankan Buddha – long ears). He puts this Buddha in the back left corner of the table. He sits a large bow leaf in front of the Buddha and he moves the candle to the center of the table. The incense stick is burning to the right of the candle.

As G rearranges the altar, a woman enters through the back door (into the small room behind this one). She looks in her 40s, white with a white shirt and pants. She goes directly to the cushion corner and selects a square cushion and three round cushions. She positions herself in the back right corner of the room. A minute later a woman and man also enter through the back door. The woman looks in her late 30s, is white, and is wearing jeans with a hole in one knee and a white shirt. Her hair is piled on top of her head. She enters the main room and goes directly to select a square and a round pillow for herself. She walks to my left and drops her square pillow on the ground. Then she puts the round pillow on its side and pushes the side of the pillow several times with her fist. She turns the pillow to the opposite edge and repeats this motion. She stands up, puts her hands over her head, and then lets them fall to her feet (stretching her back in the process). She places the round pillow to the back of the square pillow and sits down, placing her feet in a partial lotus position (one on top of the other but the other not back on top of the first). The man she entered with selects a chair from near the coat rack where I left my shoes and opens it behind where the woman just sat down. He sits in the chair with his feet shoulder length apart and puts his hands on his knees.

Some kids are playing next door and I can hear their voices through the wall. There is a lot of traffic on the street in front of this building. Inside the room seems still though – no one is moving. The church across the street has a clock that rings 7:30. To G's left is a brass bowl and a hammer with a black felt head. To his right is a book open to a certain page with what looks like an alarm clock next to it.

G picks up a remote control to his left, aims it into the back room, and pushes a button. The music that has been playing in the background stops. G picks up the hammer and hits the brass bowl. Bonggggggg it sounds. Everyone gathered brings their hands together into a praying position in front of them. They hold that position for about 10 seconds and then they bow forward – their heads are not touching the ground but they are bowing as deeply as they can without lifting off their pillows. They bow and come up. The woman directly in front of me touches her thumb and pointer finger making a O with her fingers. She stretches her arms and places her hands on her knees. She is sitting in lotus position with her back straight and her neck straight. Her eyes are closed and her face looks relaxed. She straightens her back, closes her eyes, and moves around a little settling into her posture.

G: “Welcome. We’ll start with a few announcements. As we usually do, we will start tonight with about 30 minutes of meditation. We will follow that with 15 minutes of walking and will then sit for another 30 minutes. We follow that with tea if people want to hang around. On Saturdays we also have meditation with more instruction. We start at 9:00 and sit for 45 minutes, walk for 15 minutes, sit for 45 minutes, etc. Sometimes we have more talking than sitting depending on who comes. We follow that at 12:00 with some yogi jobs if anyone wants to stay – some cleaning and things around the building. Also we are a 501c3 non profit organization and exist on donations. There will be a special program in October name of teacher (I didn’t catch) is coming here to do a program. My wife did a New Year’s retreat with her last year and says she does a really good metta. Metta is Pail for “lovingkindness.” Also, there is a lending library upstairs with many dharma tapes and there is also tea available upstairs.”

He hits the brass bowl for a second time and then looks around the room and waits in silence for about 2 full minutes. Everyone (all 7 people at this point) is sitting – 6 cross legged or in lotus position on the floor and one in a chair. Everyone has their hands on their knees – a few people have their first fingers and thumbs in small circles and a few people just have their hands flat on their knees. G then picks up a book that is open to the floor on his right (the title is *The Teachings of the Buddha*). He begins to read from the book:

G: To meditate you close your eyes and concentrate on your breath. Concentrating on your breath brings you into contact with the 7 truths. Through your contact with the seven truths you come to a state of awareness. You breathe in and out being mindful at each point. Mindful breathing in; mindful breathing out. Your awareness increases.

He then closes the book and puts it behind him on the corner of the platform. He takes a deep breathe in and places his hands in his knees (he is sitting Indian style). He closes his eyes and slowly begins to lean forward and back – as he breathes in and out. About one minute after adopting this position, the front door opens and a woman about age 25 enters. She is white with long dark hair. She wears a loose fitting black tee shirt and purple loose fitting cotton pants. The man sitting in the chair closest to the door gets up and moves towards her.

Man: (To woman as she is taking off her shoes; in a whisper) “Have you been here before?”

Woman: “Yes, about a year ago.”

Man: “We have cushions over there and chairs here.”

When the door opened G’s eyes opened and he looked towards the door. He sees that the woman is being taken care of and closes his eyes. Nothing below his neck moved as he responded to the sound of the door opening.

The room is still. There is no music. The candle burns and the incense burns. The smell is sweet. The people playing basketball next door have stopped. There is very little noise. All nine people in the room are sitting with their eyes closed. Cars still drive past outside. I close my eyes and watch with my ears.

The church bells across the street chime 7:45pm. There is little motion around me. I'm amazed at how still the people here can sit. The man in the chair shifts his weight now and then and the woman to the right clears her throat – but otherwise, I can't hear anything. I open my eyes to see the teacher leaning forward and back and I wonder if he is sleeping and then waking himself up. I start to feel dizzy with all of this breathing and incense.

The church bells across the street chime 8:00pm. The teacher opens his eyes and looks around the room. The woman to my left stretches her arms high over her head and then leans forward as far as she can reach.

G: "If you'll move cushions we'll do some walking."

G: "We usually walk back and forth this way – motioning the short way across the room."

The 8 "students" form a straight line across from G.

G: "The idea is to be mindful in all that you do. You walk back and forth being mindful of how your foot hits the ground, how the earth feels under your feet, what it feels like to transfer your weight from one foot to the other. We will walk for about 15 minutes. Your mind may drift away. Take note that it has drifted away and then return your attention."

G picks up a gold bell, rings it furiously (clangalangalang) for 10 seconds and then holds it close to his chest. Everyone puts their hands together and bows. The first time we bowed this evening, everyone but me did it. Now I join in also. (How do people know what to do? The routine?)

G stands straight with his eyes closed.

I put one foot in front of the other and slowly transfer my weight. I proceed across the room like this – it is very hard for me as I am used to walking quickly to get to my destination. The man to my left is taking baby steps. He makes it across the room and back (a total of about 20 feet) in the 15 minutes that we are walking. The woman who was doing the stretching is way to my left and she moves fairly quickly across the floor. I notice one or two times in the 15 minutes that we are walking that she is stretching. At one point she is stopped in front of the bulletin board and seems to be reading the notices. The teacher is to my right walking in the opposite direction from me at first. He closes his eyes and slowly place one foot in the ground ahead. He shifts his weight to that foot and then slowly picks up the foot now in the rear and places that ahead of him.... The process continues. He has his arms curl in to his chest and he holds the bell in one fist with the other fist around the first.

For the next 15 minutes, we walk slowly back and forth across the room. Some people have their eyes open and some are closed. Some people walk more quickly than others. One woman leaves the room heading for the bathroom and returns a few minutes later.

The church bells across the street ring 8:15.

G holds the bell in front of him and rings it clangalangalang for 10 seconds. Everyone stops where they are (some in the middle of the floor come against one wall) and puts their hands

together in the praying posture in front of their chests. It's interesting that the hands start out about half an inch apart, they gradually come together and then you bow forward. It doesn't matter which way forward is – I notice that some people are bowing towards one wall and some people towards the opposite wall. (What are they bowing to? The Buddha statue is present but not in front of them).

G: "We will now have another 30 minutes of sitting."

I leave at this point.

On my way to the door I notice the *Inquiring Mind* publication of a Vipassana group I have been trying to locate on the floor. I pick one up. I put a few dollars in the "dana for the PMC" box which I notice has a \$10 in it. I also put a few dollars in the "dana for the teacher" box.

One paragraph of personal response here