

# ***INTERFAITH SITE VISITS + SELF ANALYSIS PAPER: FINAL PROJECT ASSIGNMENT***

Dr. Dan Mathewson, Wofford College (Spartanburg, SC)  
[mathewsondb@wofford.edu](mailto:mathewsondb@wofford.edu)

*Used with Permission*

*In 2016, Dr. Dan Mathewson participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit <https://www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources>.*

## **ABOUT THIS ASSIGNMENT**

The following assignment was developed by Dr. Dan Mathewson for use in his “[Religions of the World II: The Newer Traditions](#)” course at Wofford College (Spartanburg, SC). In this course, students focus on the theological tenants and practices of newer religious traditions, such as Mormonism, The Baha’i Faith, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. This assignment outlines the final project for the course, in which students are required to research a religious tradition, attend the tradition’s worship services, and then write a final paper that integrates the student’s research with their in-person experiences.

## **ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION**

### General Instructions:

The final project takes place outside of the classroom entirely; it requires you to attend religious services/meetings and to interact with members of a faith tradition unfamiliar to you. You may do this either on your own or in small groups. This project requires a high degree of self-motivation, planning, coordination of schedules, and, if you desire, group work. After completing the off-campus portion of the final project, you will then write a paper that analyzes your experiences utilizing the concepts and ideas about religion and travel in Bud Ruf’s *Bewildered Travel*.

## Specific Instructions:

There are four steps to this final project, and they should be completed sequentially:

1. Select a tradition;
2. Research the tradition and meet with me;
3. Attend two services/meetings/gatherings and talk to people;
4. Write your paper.

Steps 1-3 may be completed in groups (2-5 people) or individually; it is entirely up to you. Step 4 must be completed individually.

### 1. Select a tradition.

- a. You must choose a religious tradition or faith community that is completely unfamiliar to you, regardless of whether it's a newer or an older tradition.
- b. There are a number of really good options in or very near to Spartanburg including the following:
  - ▶ Buddhist Temple (and monastery)
  - ▶ Hindu Temple
  - ▶ Jewish Temple
  - ▶ Muslim Masjid (aka, a mosque)
  - ▶ Sikh Gurudwara
  - ▶ Tons of Christian churches
- c. If you're willing to drive a bit farther, there are plenty of options in Charlotte, the Asheville area, Columbia, and Atlanta, including a couple of my favorites:
  - ▶ U.R. Light Center (a kind of new age spiritual center in Black Mountain, NC)
  - ▶ BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir (a newer Hindu division in Atlanta)

### 2. Research the tradition and meet with me.

- a. Once you've settled on a group, you should start searching for appropriate sources of background information on your religious community. The purpose of this research is to give you a general sense of who the group is and what you might expect when you go to one of their services. To be clear: I'm not asking you to become an expert on your group. I just want you to do a little reading so you don't feel completely and utterly lost when you go to the services.
- b. You must find *three* different sources.
- c. One source you *must* include (if your group is found in it) is the following: [Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J Magida, \*How To Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook\* \(Woodstock, VT.: Skulight Paths Publishing, 2011\).](#)
- d. If your group has a website, that should be one of your sources too.

- e. Your other sources can be web-based or print-based.
- f. You will set up a 10-minute meeting with me. Prior to your meeting, each individual will submit a document on Moodle (see course Moodle page) that lists the following:
  - i. Who is in your group (if applicable).
  - ii. Which religious community you've selected.
  - iii. Contact information for your community (e.g., address, phone number, contact person).
  - iv. The times and dates of the two specific meetings/services/gatherings you will attend.
  - v. The three research sources you've found. (During our meeting, I will confirm whether or not they are appropriate).

**3. Attend two services/meetings/gatherings and talk to people.**

- a. Before you attend your first service, you need to read through your research sources carefully. The research sources will give you background information on your group so that you don't feel quite as lost as you otherwise might when you attend your first service. Also, you may use your research sources in your final paper (though you are not required to do so – see the instructions for the paper, below).
- b. You must attend at least two services *in their entirety*, including any fellowship or socializing periods that accompany your community's services.
- c. At some point during this project, you must engage in a conversation with at least three separate people in your community. These conversations need not be long or elaborate -- though long and elaborate conversations might be quite helpful. During each conversation, however, you should:
  - i. Explain who you are and why you're spending time with your chosen community (i.e., explain what this project is and that you've selected this community to get to know better).
  - ii. Try to have your conversation partner (emphasis on the word "try") explain why he/she is part of this community (i.e., why he/she attends services/meetings there, or what spiritual "benefits" he/she receives, or what difference the community or religious tradition makes in his/her life).
- d. There are different ways to find your three conversation partners, including the following:
  - i. Simply talking to people when you attend your services. This will be easier to do than you might think; oftentimes, people are quite curious about why strangers show up in their midst. Explaining who you are and what this project is, is often a good icebreaker.
  - ii. Schedule a time to speak with someone in your community.
  - iii. Have an email exchange with someone in the community.

- e. NOTE: If you do not attend two services/meetings in their entirety, you will fail this assignment. If you do not speak to three people, you will receive a deduction in your grade:
- ▶ Failure to speak to one person = reduction of a half letter grade.
  - ▶ Failure to speak to two people = reduction of a full letter grade.
  - ▶ Failure to speak to three people = a grade of F.

#### 4. Write your paper.

- a. Each person must write his/her own paper *individually* whether or not steps 1-3 were completed in a group.
- b. The topic of the paper is as follows: For this project, you have travelled to an unfamiliar place, experienced religious activities unfamiliar to you, and had conversations with strangers whose commitments (at least some of them) are likely different from your own – and you’ve done all this with only minimal background preparation from a handful online and/or print resources. In other words, you’ve had the kind of travel/religious experience that Ruf discusses in *Bewildered Travel*. For your paper, I would like for you to examine your entire experience – from the research to the services to the conversations – using the categories and concepts Ruf discusses. How did your experience connect with Ruf’s discussion of travel and religion? What concepts and ideas from Ruf help explain or illuminate the different parts of your experience? Two important points to make:
- ▶ There is no single correct way to go about accomplishing this. Because each of you will experience things in ways that are distinctive to you, different parts of Ruf will be of greater or lesser relevance for each one of your papers.
  - ▶ You are free – even encouraged – to dispute Ruf’s claims if you find them insufficient to account for your experiences.
- c. Intended audience: You should imagine Bud Ruf as your intended reader for this paper. This has two implications for how you write your paper:
- ▶ Since Ruf obviously knows his own arguments backwards and forwards, in your paper, you will *not* need to explain in meticulous detail his concepts. For example, if you decide that his ideas about “orientation” are important for the argument you’re building in your paper, you do not need to provide a full and complete explanation of what Ruf means by this concept as you did in your midterm paper when someone who was unfamiliar with *Bewildered Travel* was your intended reader.
  - ▶ Ruf has no knowledge of your experiences with your religious community, so you will need to compose your paper in such a way as to share the important experiences you’ve had – in particular, those aspects of your experience that tie in to the “Ruf-ian” aspects are analyzing. For example, let’s take the “orientation” example again: If you decide this is an important concept that connects to your experience, and you wish to discuss it in the paper, while you do not need to explain what Ruf means by this concept (since he’s perfectly aware of what he means by it), you definitely need to be crystal clear about *what* it is you experienced that connects to “orientation,” and *why* you think it connects to “orientation.”

d. Other Details about the paper:

- ▶ They should be 4-6 pages long (regular font sizes and margins)
- ▶ First person is fine (expected, even)
- ▶ When you cite any of your sources, follow either the *Modern Language Association Style Guide* or *Chicago Manual of Style* both of which are linked from our library's homepage.
- ▶ Do not put your name anywhere on your document, including in the file name of your document.

At the very end of your paper, please provide me the following information:

- ▶ Before I attended two services/meetings/gatherings I read these sources:
  - (Source 1)
  - (Source 2)
  - (Source 3)
  
- ▶ I attended two services/meetings/gatherings here:
  - (Service/Gathering/Meeting 1)
  - (Service/Gathering/Meeting 2)
  
- ▶ The two dates I attended were:
  - (Date 1)
  - (Date 2)
  
- ▶ I spoke or corresponded with these three people (either their names or a simple description [i.e., a middle-aged woman attendee; the leader of the congregation; the person who greeted me at the door; etc.]):
  - (Person 1)
  - (Person 2)
  - (Person 3)