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Hindu Center of Virginia

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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Hindu Center of Virginia

by Daija Harris

Religious Studies 108 has presented me with the opportunity to venture to different places and try new things. I have been able to meet new people and experience new religions in full swing. Two months ago I ventured to Saint Paul's Baptist Church which was an experience I very much so enjoyed and could see myself participating in again. Last month I traveled to a Methodist Church named Crewe United Methodist which is located in my hometown where I was surprised to see a female pastor. The past two months were different experiences, so for the third month I decided to keep the ball rolling and take on what I thought was going to be the most different and difficult trip out of the whole semester. I chose to save this one for last so that I could end my semester with a bang. For my third and final field trip, I made my way to the Hindu Center of Virginia.

This Sunday on November 29, 2015, I attended a class at The Hindu Center of Virginia which is also called the Richmond Temple. The Richmond Temple is located at 6051 Springfield Rd., Glen Allen, Va-23060. Before I went I tried to look up where I could go and what times I could participate in a service. Based off of my research, from what I gathered they offered classes and not services. I could be wrong but this is what my understanding was after reading the website for the center. I chose a class that was scheduled on Sunday November 29, 2015 at 11:00 am until 12:00 pm. Right away I knew my final trip would

be unlike my other two. There was only one service at Crewe United Methodist, which was different from Saint Paul's. At the Richmond Temple there weren't any services at all. There was no fee for the first two churches I went to but the class I was attending at the Hindu Center cost \$25 dollars. I was surprised but not surprised at the same time. I was getting the vibe that this was more of a site for tourist and things of that nature. The class that I took was called Ganapati Abhishekam. I searched the title in google and it means, "We meditate on Lord Ganesha." I believe the name of the instructor for the class was Pt. Subramanyam Kannan who is responsible for all "poojas" in the temple. Poojahs is a term for a prayer ritual or service.

I have lived in Richmond for about 13 years now and I have been to Glen Allen many, many, many times in this time period but I have never seen this temple. As I was driving to the temple I just kept thinking I have been through this area so many times but never paid attention to the signs and once I reached my destination I was speechless. The Hindu Center of Virginia was outstandingly beautiful. I had never seen a building like it in all of my life besides in pictures. The outside of the parameter was wood lines and a huge yard. The landscaping was managed nicely as most of the grass looked healthy. The actual building was gigantic. It looked as if it was made out of stone or concrete. It was all that one tone of concrete except for the big wooden doors.

When I walked inside I was actually expecting it to be grander than what was presented. Inside the temple was a hallway with various walkways on both sides. The floor was tile and the walls were this orange-tan color. There too were half columns located along the walls. I was much underwhelmed as I walked through the center. I ended up in a carpeted area where there were little decorative pieces along the walls but nothing extreme.

I already felt out of place but now I was starting to have second thoughts about coming because I didn't know where to go and I honestly could not understand anyone. I have a hard time interpreting what people with accents are saying especially when they are heavy. So I showed my ticket to someone and they pointed me in the right direction. I ended up just returning to the main hall where a bunch of people were gathered. There was no seating so I couldn't even estimate how many people were there but I would say there was around 50-100 people in the hall and maybe more. I could tell that this ceremony was very ritualistic in the way the crowd was responding and the way the priest was praying. I wasn't able to comprehend the event at all but it was definitely an experience that was an eye opener. It wasn't that I didn't feel welcome, it was more so of me just being uncomfortable with the fact that I didn't understand and couldn't ask questions about the class.

After attending the "class" I felt as though it was more of a service than a class and this is what I received without being able to properly comprehend. The ritualistic ceremony class is held every week and is different from other rituals like communion and baptisms. Those are usually once a month whereas this is every

week. As I was watching him perform the task while chanting and sprinkling the substance using what looked like a leaf, I was thinking that the ceremony is interesting but it is boring as well. It may have been because I didn't know what was going on. I had many questions but I was not comfortable with interrupting and asking anyone because I did not want to disturb the mood. The atmosphere was intense and felt more serious than the two trips I had taken before.

The people who were also at the class all looked to be in different age ranges and different social statuses. Before I could say the average age was 50 but here I could not tell. It was a wide range of ages but as far as gender goes, there were definitely more males in attendance than females. Everyone in attendance that I could see was Indian or Indian descent. Based on skin complexion I wasn't so noticeable but based on attire and hair, I was. Although I didn't talk to anyone, everyone seemed to acknowledge me. Usually I say hello or receive a friendly smile, but I don't think I got too many of those. Everyone seemed to be very serious at the temple.

Reviewing everything that I saw and experienced, I did come across symbolization which was a huge Hindu God in the back of the hall where the ceremony took place. The temple itself in my eyes is also symbolization, but other than that, I did not come across any other symbolization. As far as traditions go in the Hinduism religion, I would call the Ganapati Abhishekam a ritualistic tradition that takes place every week.

This experience at the Hindu Center of Virginia was very nerve racking and interesting. I can't see myself attending another class

unless someone is going to help me understand what the meaning behind the ceremony is and walk me through the class step by step what each process does and means. Although I didn't enjoy myself, I am glad that I stuck it out and finished all three of my field trips. •

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