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Religions of the World: A Women's Studies Emphasis

Instructor

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Institution

Dept. of Philosophy and Religion, U. of Northern Iowa

Course Level and Type

general education

Hours of Instruction

3 hours a week, 2 days a week

Enrolment and Last Year Taught

35 students per section; 2 sections a year

Texts

1. Women in World Religions ed. Arvind Sharma (available from University Book and Supply)
2. Work Book on Religions of the World: A Women's Studies Emphasis, 3rd Edition, by Dr. Martha J. Reineke (available from Copy Works = # 125)
3. Essay Packet on Women in World Religions, 2nd Edition, edited by Dr. Martha J. Reineke, (available from Copy Works = # 126)

This course will be built on discussion of key texts. The Sharma volume functions as an introduction to each religion. To facilitate reading comprehension of that text, a work book has been prepared that serves as a guide through the Sharma text. Study of each religion is supplemented by selected essays found in the essay packet: these essays permit a close-up view at the history, culture, or religious symbolism of each religion. Integral also to this course is a series of video tapes. Students often express a desire not only to learn about the various world religions, but also to see them in action, to see how these religions are actually practiced by people who believe in them. The videos provide insights available from seeing religious people in action.

Purpose

Religion is a powerful and deeply felt force in human society. It shapes the ideals, hopes, and needs of humanity. It organizes key aspects of experience--sexuality, birth, death, power, and violence--and provides a basis for decisions based on a knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong. It influences the nature of our relations with each other, the shaping of familial structures, and the organization of communities, economic, and political life. Religion, more than any other institution, "patrols the borders" that separate order from disorder.

in society, dispensing information, protection, and judgments. Because religion plays such a significant role in human society, scholars have found it important to examine religion.

Scholars of religion turn to the examination of religion on the basis of two interests. First, they recognize the importance of religion to many people. They seek to understand the meaning of religion to believers. Second, religion is of interest to them because of its influence on society and society's impact upon religion. Analysis of this dynamic relationship calls for examination of the interdependence of religion and other aspects of society.

There are many ways in which scholars of religion carry out their examination of religion. Their interests are generally focused by means of an organizing theme or paradigm. For example, they may center on the development of the individual within the context of society and examine the role of religion in that process of development: through childhood, adolescence, and adult life. Or, they may focus on public religion and religious institutions. They may examine religion through the study of its relation to social change--particularly its relation to social class and economic organization. They may focus on ethics, or on key religious texts authored by major representatives of a religion. Building on the foundation of the organizing theme, each scholar can "branch out" to address a broad variety of topics.

In this course, gender is the organizing theme. Gender issues are of widespread interest in contemporary society. Although the study of gender concerns both women and men, in this course we pursue a novel working hypothesis that leads us to focus primarily on women. Our hypothesis follows: because through most of the world's history, for most of the world's people, religious experiences have been markedly differentiated by gender, religion needs to be studied in ways that acknowledge its gender-specific character. In discussing religious symbols, historian Caroline Walker Bynum sets forth this hypothesis in succinct terms:

Our analysis admits that gender-related symbols are sometimes 'about' values other than gender. But our analysis also assumes that all people are 'gendered.' It therefore suggests, at another level, that not only gender-related symbols but all symbols arise out of the experience of 'gendered' users. It is not possible ever to ask "how does a symbol--any symbol--mean?" without asking "for whom does it mean?"

To act on this hypothesis is to assert that, when world religions are taught from a perspective that only infuses additive materials on women into a "regular" Religions of the World class, the integrating gesture distorts the lived, religious experience of women and makes women the objects rather than the subjects of inquiry. By contrast, a course that focuses primarily on women offers students the option of seeing women as subjects of religion and affords students a unique opportunity to see religion's other face, a face visible in the gender-specific experiences of women.

Exploring this hypothesis will pose a challenge: many texts currently available for students' use focus on the status and role of women as religious teachings have espoused these views. Women appear in the sources of study primarily as objects of others' regard. There remains inadequate recognition of women as creative agents and participants in religion in their own right. Even so, our goal will be to rigorously pursue women as the agents and actors in the religious expression of their lives. We will ask a series of fundamental questions about women and religion:

1. How is women's spiritual quest experienced and explored?
2. How do women experience their relationship with the sacred, give voice to it, and describe it?
3. What rituals and roles do women participate in? Are they excluded from any in their religion?
4. What religious rituals, lives, and communities have women created for themselves?
5. What authority and power have women held in religion and how have they expressed that authority and transmitted it to others?
6. What influence have women had on the creation and transmission of knowledge about religion?

7. What is religion for women?

In asking these questions we will look at three dimensions of scholarship about women in religion:

1. ***The descriptive dimension***: We will seek women's voices, discover women's experiences, and assess their contributions to the shaping of different religious traditions.
2. ***The critical dimension***: We will look at the invisibility, marginalization, and subordination of women in religious history and in religious practices in society and assess the work that religion does on behalf of cultural and social values. But we will also look at the potential for religion to run counter to social norms and to provide women with opportunities for agency. Our critical work will include a feminist dimension. When the word "feminist" is used in this course, it means that persons who advocate a feminist perspective on religion support and advance the proposition that women are as fully human as men and should enjoy equal access to rights and opportunities in a society. From a feminist perspective, religions need to be critiqued if they are the occasion for the denigration of women; so also should they be assessed as bases for the recovery of the full humanity of women. Finally they should be studied to see in what ways religions have supported the efforts of women in their own times and cultures to promote their equality as they understand it.
3. ***The methodological dimension***: We will look at how scholars of religion are doing research differently in order to locate the gendered experience of religion. This does not mean abandoning tools of scholarship previously used; however, it does require us to examine how these tools are being modified and refined in order to take gender into account.

General Objectives for Students

1. To *understand* the writings of representative figures who write on the subject of religion and society. Ask yourself if you are getting a clear idea of what each author is saying. Do the various points fit together? What is still unclear? Jot down your questions as you read the texts and share them in the next class period.
2. To *master* basic concepts in the study of religion. Throughout the semester you will be introduced to "tools" of analysis of central importance to scholars of religion. You will be expected to *grow in awareness* of these tools and to take preliminary steps toward using these tools in your own analyses of women in world religions.
3. To *critically reflect* upon the texts and to *articulate* your own views of the strengths and weaknesses of each thinker's argument. To what do you react positively? Why? To what do you react negatively? Why? What elements of the argument are insightful? What elements are problematic?

Evaluation and Class Procedures

The academic study of religion works best when it is pursued as a communal, conversational effort. Class discussions will comprise a major part of this course and evaluations will reflect this focus. Indeed, the classroom rightly may be viewed as a "laboratory for reflection." As in a science laboratory, students will often work together in small groups on questions for discussion and reflection and share the results of their work with others in the class. Units of the course are as follows:

1. Worksheets and writing exercises (2-5 points): These projects will be assigned in class. Many will be completed in class. They will focus on general objective #1: reading comprehension.
2. Before/After Essay (25 points): This project is started at the beginning of the semester and completed at the end of the semester. The goal of this project is for students to develop and synthesize skills in reading comprehension, concept awareness, and critical reflection.
3. Tests: Tested units are listed on the calendar. Tests will include some review of general objective #1, but will focus on objectives #2 and #3.

NOTE: You will find it helpful to be extremely organized in collecting and maintaining a file of assignments in this course. Plan to have a loose-leaf notebook, with pockets. Save all handouts, written assignments, and class notes. You may find that you want to use them later in the semester.

POLICY ON LATE WORK:

1. Work other than tests: You are urged to remain current with assignments. If you have not completed an assignment on the day I request that you submit it to me, you will be ineligible for points on that assignment. Late submissions will not be accepted for points because they are associated with group work in class.
2. Tests: If you are unable to be present for a scheduled test, you must inform me beforehand or not later than the next day. Messages may be left at 273-6221 or on e-mail. A make-up quiz will then be arranged. Make-up quizzes will differ from those quizzes given in class.

CHEATING:

Any documented instance of cheating will be reported to the Office of Academic Affairs and will result in a grade of "F" for the course and expulsion from the class.

EXTRA CREDIT:

Throughout the semester, there may be various opportunities for extra credit. You may choose to do an extra credit project if you believe that your grade in this course does not reflect your actual level of achievement. Extra credit projects will be announced in class and will be limited to "live" events (lectures on campus) or television shows. Reports will be due one week following the event and cannot be returned to you. Reports will not be accepted more than one week following the event.

Format for extra-credit reports:

- 1/2 - 2/3 = a summary in your own words of the lecture, film or event.
- 1/3 - 1/2 = evaluation that includes a) personal reflections (how do you feel about what you saw or heard? What interested, surprised, or bored you etc.?) and b) a description of the relation of this e.c. project to class. How has this project contributed or not contributed, enhanced or not enhanced your knowledge of this subject area in this course. Be specific.
- Length (average): 3 pages handwritten or 1 1/2 pages typed and double-spaced. E.C. projects need not be typed if your handwriting is legible.
- Points: 3-4 points on most projects. Students may do seven projects, earning a cumulative total of 28 e.c. points during the semester. 28 e.c. points will raise a student's cumulative average one full letter grade, but no further. In proportion to that maximum possibility, fewer e.c. points will raise a student's grade by a lesser amount. On occasion students may receive a "4+" on their projects. The "+" represents a level of quality above and beyond the call of duty. While a "+" is not translatable into points, I will take it into consideration when tabulating your final grade at the end of the semester. Borderline grades may be affected.

Calendar

Revised 1/16/98

Note: There will be activities assigned in class which therefore are not listed on the calendar. However, for each Sharma assignment, a worksheet or portions of a worksheet will be due on the day of the assignment. Worksheets are located in the Work Book: Religions of the World - A Women's Studies Emphasis, Third Edition, by Dr. Martha J. Reineke.

Date	Test & Location	Topic
1-13		Introduction to the Course
1-15		Lecture on Hinduism
1-20		Sharma - Hinduism: 59-80
1-22		Sharma - Hinduism: 92-103
1-27		Video: "Dadi and her Family" (VH 1492)
1-29		Essay Packet: "Hindu Women's Family and Household Rites in a North Indian Village"
2- 3	SEC244/45	Test on Hinduism
2- 5		Sharma - Buddhism: 105-119
2-10		Sharma - Buddhism: 123-33
2-12		Video: "Choice for a Chinese Woman: Enlightenment in a Buddhist Convent" (VH 1565)
2-17		Sharma - Confucianism: 135-159
2-19		Essay Packet: "The Gender Symbolism of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva"
2-24		Video: "Kuan-Yin's Birthday and Pilgrimage" (VH 1497)
2-26		Sharma - Taoism: 161-181
3- 3		Lecture on Judaism
3- 5	SEC244/45	Test on Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism
3-10		Sharma - Judaism: 182-92
3-12		Sharma - Judaism: 193-206
3-24		Essay Packet: "The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Hiddenness, Power, and Physicality in the Theology of Orthodox Women in the Contemporary World"
3-26		Essay Packet: "Tumah and Taharah"
3-31		Video: "Half the Kingdom" (VH 0810)
4- 2	SEC244/45	Test on Judaism
4- 7		Sharma - Christianity: 207-220 + mini-lecture
4- 9		Essay Packet: <u>I and II Timothy</u> ; <u>Acts of Paul and Thecla</u>
4-14		Sharma - Christianity: 221-233
4-16		Essay Packet: "When Christ is A Woman: Theology and Practice in the Shaker Tradition"
4-21		Video: Hands to Work; Hearts to God (VH0269)

4-23	SEC244/45	Test on Christianity
4-28		Sharma - Islam: 235-250
4-30		Video: "Hidden Faces" (VH 1564)
Finals Week:	SEC244/45	Test on Islam; Before/After Essay due. Date: May 6, Wednesday, 1-2:50 p.m.

Bibliography for Dr. Reineke's Essay Packet for Religions of the World: 640:024 Sect. 2

1. "Hindu Women's Family and Household Rites in a North Indian Village" **from Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives eds. Nancy Falk and Rita Gross, pp. 72-81** (#9 below is from same text)
2. "The Gender Symbolism of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva" **from Buddhism, Sexuality and Culture, ed. Jose Ignacio Cabezon, pp. 159-180**
3. "The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Hiddenness, Power, and Physicality in the Theology of Orthodox Women in the Contemporary World" in **Gender and Judaism, ed. T. M. Rudavsky, pp. 51-77.**
4. "Tumah and Taharah" in **The Modern Jewish Woman: A Unique Perspective**, Lubavitch Educational Foundation, pp. 114-124.
5. I and II Timothy **from The New Oxford Annotated Bible, pp. 300-310**
6. Acts of Paul and Thecla **from New Testament Apocrypha by Wilhlem Schneemelcher, pp. 352-364**
7. "When Christ is A Woman: Theology and Practice in the Shaker Tradition" **from Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives eds. Nancy Falk and Rita Gross, pp. 221-232.**
8. Selections from "Muslim Ethics," in **How to Live Well: Ethics in the World Religions**, Carmody and Carmody, pp. 65-70.
9. Time Lines of the Religious Traditions **from Living Religions by Mary Pat Fisher: Pages 65, 112, 195, 243, and 299**

Pedagogical Reflections

See course objectives. The students enjoy the class. They particularly like units that feature women's contemporary experience. They also appreciate the diversity of religious experiences represented in the course. The textbook is a decade old and needs to be replaced with one that reflects 80s and 90s scholarship when one becomes available. The "workbook" mentioned below consists of study sheets that students fill out for homework assignments, discussion questions for the videos etc.

Future versions of this syllabus may be accessed directly on my website at <http://www.uni.edu/reineke>.

Select a location 

http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/religions_of_the_world-reineke.html

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