

# Women, World Religions, and Human Rights

**Dr. Gisela Webb. RELS 3493. WMST 3332. DIPL 6019. May be taken for honors seminar credit.**

**Description of course:** The subject of "women and religion" has many levels. **First**, it consists in asking the question of what do the sacred sources in traditional religions say about women and issues of gender. **Second** - perhaps more important - is the issues of how the oral and written sacred narratives have been interpreted and used in society (by men and women). In other words, we must ask the question of how sacred traditional texts have affected views about --*and the life of*-- women in societies. (What are the actual cultural expressions of beliefs and practices related to gender, gender relations, sexuality, family, and the role of women in the public sphere?) **Third**, the subject also must include becoming familiar with contemporary women's work that criticizes, affirms, or amends traditional religious views and roles about women. **How are contemporary women (and men) - particularly those who are working from *within* their religions - addressing the questions raised by modernity and the quest for universal human rights/dignity. FOR EACH OF THE WORLD RELIGIONS WE STUDY, THESE THREE LEVELS WILL BE PURSUED.** This is clearly a formidable task! One could spend a semester on any one of the world's religions alone. Yet, we hold the assumption that there is value in looking cross-culturally at an important issue that is being addressed differently in different cultural worlds. A cross-cultural perspective is particularly critical in this era of globalization and the emergence of an "international women's rights movement."

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## Objectives:

1. To become familiar with current scholarship (not to be separated from "activism") dealing with women and gender in the world's major religions. This means familiarity with primary sources (sacred scripture), traditional religious commentary, social and cultural expressions of religious norms, social and cultural analysis, and contemporary literature/reportage on women and gender issues.
2. To demonstrate competency in understanding the history (past and present) of the particular relationship between 'east' and 'west', 'north' and 'south' discourses on women's

roles and rights in religion and culture.

3. To demonstrate competency in the knowledge of methodological approaches to contemporary women's religious studies.

4. To demonstrate development in thinking, writing, and speaking in ways that are fair minded, critical (and self-critical), empathetic, dialogical (i.e. listening to and learning from women from 'within' *their* own cultural and religious world view and experience).

5. To learn to participate actively in seminar style sessions and to produce a research paper, 10-20 pages.

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**Method:** Every four classes will constitute a unit dedicated to the study of one religion. Class one of each unit will be led by Dr. Webb to give background, sources, contexts, and specific student assignments. For each unit, four or five students will be assigned to articles or books (sometimes the students will choose) related to women in a particular religion. Those students will be responsible for presenting summaries, comments/analysis/criticism, including questions or confusion caused by the piece. Thus, the second and third classes of each unit will be student led. Please get in the habit immediately of summarizing or listing major points relevant to your topic and be prepared to distribute to the class. [ It may be helpful to think of these as book or article reviews, for they always answer the basic questions: What was the author trying to convey? What perspective was the author coming from? (Was she/he an anthropologist, a theologian, a man, woman, ♦traditional, ♦♦modern♦)? Was the book a personal narrative?) What did you learn from it? What was good about it? What questions, confusion, criticisms do you have? How does the material relate to other issues and religions we have discussed? Overall, was it a book that is beneficial to learning about women? ] Dr. Webb will help determine questions and issues you should be particularly focused on in your readings. The fourth class of each unit will be a time for synthesizing, analyzing, evaluating the materials covered, and reflection. Students who are not among the four presenters for that religion unit will be given reading and research assignments (including locating and evaluating internet sites on women in the particular religion we are studying). Together as a class we will construct an annotated bibliography (with internet sites) and by consensus agree which books should be on it.

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**Required texts:**

REQUIRED: Arvind Sharma, ed. ***Women in World Religions (WWR)***, John Raines and Daniel McGuire, ed., ***What Men Owe to Women (MOW)***, male feminists on women's justice issues). Fatimah Mernissi, ***Dreams of Trespass***. Selections from Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin, ed. ***Love, Sex, and Gender in the World's Religions, (LSG)*** Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary Hunt, Radhika Balakrishnan, eds. ***Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions (GS)***, Arvind Sharma, ed. ***Women Saints in World Religions (WS)***

### **Assigned Films:**

"Kaddosh", and "The Chosen"

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This is a seminar style course. That means students will be collaborating on and leading many of the discussions!

1. Introduction to course and to each other. Discussions: **A.** What do we bring to the table? (Goals, desires, experiences, views, cultural/religious/ethnic heritages?) **B.** Film analysis of *Veiled Revolution*. What does the film teach us about 1) the relationship of the political and the sacred in Islamic societies, particularly 20th century post-colonial, 2) dilemmas/methods in cross-cultural research (i.e., How do we study "the other" in a post colonial, "globalistic" world, [not to mention from within a Catholic university setting whose students are culturally diverse])? 3) views on the meaning of the veil/sexuality/modesty/religious identity in Muslim societies? **C.** Read in class xerox, Phyllis Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies" in Ann Loades, ed. *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, 1990. Westminster.

2. INDIGINOUS RELIGIONS. WWR: Gross, "Tribal Religion in Aboriginal Australia." MOW: Nkulu-N'Sangha, "Bumuntu Paradigm: Sexist and Antisexist Trends in African Traditional Religions." MOW: Christopher Ronwanien: Te Jocks, "A Native North American Perspective."

3. HINDUISM. WWR: Young, "Hinduism." LSG: Martin, "Loving the Goddess in Hinduism," MOW: Rambachan, "A Hindu Perspective." WS: Pandharipande, "Janabai: A Woman Saint of India." Sections from the *Laws of Manu*

4. HINDUISM/BUDDHISM. WWR: Barnes, "Buddhism." Selections from Buddhist Sutras, *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind, Yoga and Psychotherapy.*" GS: Satha-Anand,

"Buddhism on Sexuality and Enlightenment."

5. BUDDHISM. LSG: LaFleur, "Love's Insufficiency: Zen as Irritant." LSG: Hopkins, "Reason and Orgasm in Tibetan Buddhism." MOW: Puntarigvivat, "A Thai Buddhist Perspective."

6. CHINA and JAPAN: CONFUCIAN ETHICS and TAOISM. Selection from Confucius' Analects and LaoTzu's the Tao te-Ching. WWR: Kelleher, "Confucianism." WWR: Taoism. LSG: Nyitray, "The Real Trouble of Confucianism." GS: Ko, "The Sex of Footbinding."

7. JUDAISM. Xerox from Carmody, *Women in World Religions*: "Jewish Women" Selections from Jewish Scripture (Tenakh), Rabbinic commentary ("Family: Mother and Father"), On Medieval Jewish attitudes: Maimonides, Isaac ben Yedaiah, "A Jewish Penis is Better than a Christian Penis." (from Cantor, ed. *The Medieval Reader*) Also, Anonymous: "Sexual Holiness (from Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*).

8. Continue Judaism. On Yiddish community life: "The Woman's Share" and "Making Children into People" (From *Life is with People*) Discuss film: **Kaddosh**. Contemporary discussion resources: Penelope Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Challenge" (from *Feminist Reader*, Loades, ed.). In GS: Alpert, "Guilty Pleasures: When Sex is Good Because It's Bad."

9. ISLAM. Overview on history: GS Ayesha Imam, "The Muslim Religious Right ('Fundamentalists') and Sexuality. (Xeroxes from G. Webb, ed. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists of North America*, Syracuse University Press. 2000): Amina Wadud, "Alternative Quranic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women (and her pamphlets, "Are Men and Women Equal Before Allah" and "Are Muslim Men allowed to Beat Their Wives?" Azizah Al-Hiribi, "Islamic Law and Women," Mohja Kahf, "Braiding the Stories," Riffat Hassan on "Human Rights in the Quran," "On Contraception," (also her interview in *Salaam*

10. MOW: Farid Esack, "Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia." Selections from Rabia Terri Harris in *Salaam Alaykum*, Muslim Peace Fellowship Journal. Selection: Al-Ghazzali on Birth Control From His Chapter on The Secrets of Marriage. As'ad Abu Khalil, "A Note on the Study of Homosexuality in the Arab/Islamic Civilization" in *Arab Studies Journal*, Fall 1993.

11. No classes.

12. CHRISTIANITY: WWR Ruether, "Christianity." Xerox or Tertullian. MOW: either Sloyan, "A Roman Catholic Perspective" or MOW: Ellison, "A Protestant Christian Perspective." Xerox: Sloyan, "The Respector of Women" (from G. Sloyan, *Jesus in Focus*). Medieval Perspectives/Mysticism: Xeroxes on Hildegard, Mechtild, The Beguines, Jane Lead.

13. Continue Christianity. Xerox Mary Ramerman, "Why I Will Not Remove This Stole." Selections from Vatican documents on the history of contraception and women's ordination issues. Read in class xerox Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman" (from *Women: Images and Realities*, Kesselman, McNair, Schiedewind, eds.)

14. Capitalism/Globalization as Religion? GS: Radhika Balkrishnan, "Capitalism and Sexuality: Free to Choose?" Essay from *The Nawal El Saadaw Reader*, London: Zed Books, 1998: "Women and the Poor: The Challenge of Global Justice," "Women, Religion and Literature." David Abalos on Latino/Latina politics and the sacred.

15. Wrap up. Last class/exam

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### **Grading:**

- Attendance.
  - Quality and quantity of participation.
  - \*An essay due at the end of every two units, consisting of an annotated bibliography of works which you read or found on the internet, and a summary/commentary on major issues raised in the units with its interdisciplinary approach to ♠women in religion. ♠ (For each unit you should be able to write on the questions raised in the description.)
  - \* Two oral presentations (the unit group discussion). Student numbers permitting, everyone will be involved in two unit presentations, one in the Abrahamic religions, one in Asian religions.
  - \* Two essays which are the written versions of your presentations.
  - \* One interview.
  - \* Evaluation of the materials, summarizing important areas of learning, major academic, methodological, personal/existential issues raised by the course.
  - \* One 8-10 page paper research.
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