326-01A Women and Religion

Van Pham

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THEO 326  
WOMEN AND RELIGION  

SPRING 2014  
Saturdays, 8:30-12:00pm

INSTRUCTOR:  
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COURSE MEETING TIMES:  
Pre-Assignment Sunday, 12-2pm, January 12th  
Saturdays, 8:30am-12:00pm, January 18th - March 8th

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will be built on discussion of key texts. In this course, gender is the organizing theme. 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. This course 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.

The Sharma volume functions as an introduction to each religion. Study of each religion is supplemented by selected essays found in the Peach volume. 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.

General Objectives for Students

1. To understand the writings of representative figures who write on the subject of religion and society.  
2. To master basic concepts in the study of religion.  
3. To critically reflect upon the texts and to articulate your own views of the strengths and weaknesses of each thinker's argument.

As a required course in the Ethics/Religion & Society (E/RS) component of Xavier University’s undergraduate curriculum, this course is structured to further the E/RS objectives of:

(1) heightening awareness about the ethical and religious dimensions of socially significant issues;  
(2) enabling students to use philosophical and theological methods and principles effectively in the analysis of socially significant issues;  
(3) enabling students to understand and to evaluate the ethical and/or religious content of social significance in literary texts;  
(4) helping students integrate moral reflection and religious analysis into their study of a chosen major or minor; and
(5) encouraging the development of a worldview that is oriented to responsible action.

As a course in the GDST curriculum, this course is structured to further the GDST objectives of facilitating the development of students' critical thinking skills, knowledge base, and intellectual frameworks for analyzing and exploring the nature of diversity including socioeconomic, political, psychological, and cultural experiences and positions between and among individuals and groups defined by gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, age, religious beliefs, and physical/mental abilities.

II. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(1) Attendance and Participation
It is imperative that students: (a) complete all reading assignments before class, (b) attend and prepare for questions, and (c) participate at all class sessions. A 2% point will be deducted for every late arrival. Excuses will be accepted only for grave emergency situations (e.g., major illness with proper written documentation, or death in family) or university-approved activities off-campus (e.g., varsity sports) and only at the instructor’s discretion. More than two absences will result in a failing grade.

(2) Examinations
Six examinations, covering materials in the textbooks and classes. The examinations are non-cumulative. All examinations must be taken on the assigned date and time. As a rule, substitute examinations will not be given. Exceptions may be made for grave emergency reasons (e.g., major illness with proper written documentation, or death in family) or university-approved activities off-campus (e.g., varsity sports), but only if: (i) the request was made before the examination, and (ii) at the professor’s sole discretion.

(3) Class Presentations
A 15-minute powerpoint presentation that addresses one of the fundamental questions about women and religion (see Introduction and Overview).

IV. REQUIRED TEXTBOOK

(1) Peach, Lucinda J. Women and World Religions (Prentice Hall, 2002).
(2) Sharma, Arvind and Katherine Young, eds. Feminism and World Religions (SUNY Press, 1999).

V. THEOLOGY DEPARTMENT’S GRADING GUIDELINES
(approved by department: March 20, 2002)

The full version of the Theology Department’s Grading Policy is available on-line at:
http://www.xu.edu/theology/grading_policy.html

Grades indicate a professor’s assessment of a student’s academic performance and not a student’s effort. Grades are not an entitlement – you have to earn your grade for this course.
In accordance with University policy and the Theology Department grading guidelines, letter grades in undergraduate theology courses mean the following:

- **A=94-100**
- **A-=92-93**
- **B+=90-91**
- **B=87-89**
- **B-=84-86**
- **C+=82-83**
- **C=79-81**
- **C-=76-78**
- **D+=74-75**
- **D=71-73**
- **D-=68-70.**

**The Grading of Objective and Essay Tests**

Grades reflect the accuracy, coherence, clarity, and completeness of answers and essays. In grading your answers, the following elements will be evaluated:

1. comprehension of the materials under consideration,
2. ability to articulate one’s understanding with clarity,
3. correct usage of standard English grammar, spelling and punctuation,
4. organization of material,
5. ability to establish relationships and synthesize ideas, and
6. ability to reflect on the material with an eye to raising serious, critical questions.

**VI. COMPUTATION OF MIDTERM & FINAL GRADES**

- Exam #1 (15%)
- Exam #2 (15%)
- Exam #3 (15%)
- Exam #4 (15%)
- Exam #5 (15%)
- Exam #6 (15%)
- Class Presentation (10%)

**VII. ACADEMIC HONESTY**

The professor expects all work that appears under the student’s name to be that student’s own, and will follow up on evidence that a student has copied from another’s work or used notes in examinations. **If an incident of cheating is established, the instructor will give a grade of F for the entire course.**

**VIII. COURSE OUTLINE, SCHEDULE & READINGS**

**January 12th: Introduction and Overview of the Course**
Reading: Sharma, pgs. 1-24

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. 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?

*The descriptive dimension: We will seek women's voices, discover women's experiences, and assess their contributions to the shaping of different religious traditions.
*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.
*The methodological dimension: We will look at how scholars of religion are doing research differently in order to locate the gendered experience of religion.

January 18th:
Women and Hinduism
Reading: Peach, 15-55, Selected Essays
Reading: Sharma and Young, “Brimming with Bhakti, Embodiment of Shakti,” pgs. 25-69

*Relationship of Female-Gendered and Feminism Images of “Real” Women
*Women’s Relationship to Hinduism
*Changes in the Status of Women

January 25th: EXAM 1 on Hinduism
Women and Buddhism
Reading: Peach, 61-95, Selected Essays
Reading: Sharma and Young, “Strategies for a Feminist Revalorization of Buddhism, pgs. 78-107

*Buddhist scriptures that discuss female sexuality and spirituality,
*Biographical accounts of pious women (including both lay and ordained),
*Scholarly works that discuss contemporary Buddhist women in various societies.
*Is there any significant departure in Buddhist tradition from Confucianism in terms of gender prescriptions and the images of women?
*What influences did the indigenous Chinese religions (Confucianism & Taoism) have on the feminine transformation of Kuan-yin?

Feb. 1st: EXAM 2 on Buddhism
Confucianism
Reading: Kelleher, “Confucianism,” in Women in World Religions, 135-159.135-15,
Reading: Sharma and Young, “Confucianism and Feminism,” pgs. 110-176
*Introduction to Chinese concept of religion and the “Three Teachings”
*Women in Confucian Tradition

Feb. 8th:
Women and Confucianism through the media
Analyze the film “Snow Flower and the Secret Fan”

*What sources of empowerment and inspiration can Confucianism provide to women?
*What hindrances/discriminations would Chinese women face?

We will see how films affect the portrayals of women in traditional Chinese society.

Feb. 15th: EXAM 3 on Confucianism
Women and Islam
Reading: Peach, 258-292, Selected Essays
Reading: Hassan, “Feminism in Islam,” in Feminism and World Religions, pgs. 248-275

*Muslim women’s lives in various regions and historical periods
*Understand religious and legal authority in Islam and its impact of the construction of gender
*Analyze information about Muslim women presented in various media
*Learn about contemporary issues impacting women and gender roles in Muslim societies

Feb. 22nd: EXAM 4 on Islam
Women and Judaism
Reading: Peach 157-196, Selected Essays
Reading: Sharma and Young, “Feminism in Judaism,” pgs. 179-92

*What Does It Mean/Has It Meant to be a Jewish Woman?
*New Challenges and Opportunities: Jewish Women in the Modern World

March 1st: EXAM 5 on Judaism
Women and Christianity
Reading: Sharma and Young, “Feminism in World Christianity,” pgs. 214-247

*Significant religious opportunities available to women in the Christian tradition
*The subordination of women in Christian institutions
*Women’s roles in contemporary American society and in American Christian churches.

March 8th: EXAM 6 on Christianity
Class Presentations