

“World(?)” “Religion(s)(?)”(?)

Theory, Methodology, and Gender

Instructor

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Office Hours

9a-12p, Mondays

Course Overview

In this class, we will explore a number of practices and traditions that often get included on popular lists of “world religions.” Google tells us that “world religions” include Baha’i, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. Though we will not consider all twelve of these religions in this class, we will learn about Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism. We ignore Baha’i, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism not because they are unimportant but because we simply cannot do justice to all twelve of these religions in one class. In addition, there are a number of traditions that do not make the list of “world religions,” and we won’t consider them either—again not because they are unworthy of study but because our goal is not comprehensiveness. Instead, throughout the course of the semester, you will develop a number of analytical tools that you might apply to the study of not only other religions on the list of “world religions” but also to other practices and traditions that might be considered “religious.”

In our exploration of “world religions,” we will utilize three lenses:

1. *Theory*: We will spend the first three weeks considering the efficacy of employing the category of “religion” to begin with. Scholars now recognize the category of “religion,” as we typically understand it, to be a modern invention. We will consider the genealogy of “religion” as a descriptive category to attempt to understand why some practices are called “world religions” and why others are not. The work we do during the first three weeks will inform our study of religion throughout the rest of the semester.
2. *Methodology*: Throughout the semester, we will consider “world religions” from a variety of methodological perspectives, including the role of text, comparison, historical analysis, ethnography, sacred space, and ritual. We will consider what we gain and, perhaps, what we lose in our analyses depending on which methodological approach we utilize.
3. *Gender*: We will approach each of the religious traditions we are studying through the lens of gender. Women play a crucial role in the creation, maintenance, and spread of all world religions but are often considered secondary actors in “World Religion” classrooms and textbooks. In this class, we will centralize the contributions and experiences of women as a corrective to this.

Objectives

We will assess a number of trends, questions, and tensions in the handful of “world religions” we will be considering in this class utilizing all three lenses outlined above. The religions we will be considering most deeply are fairly arbitrarily chosen from the list of “world religions” and reflect my areas of specialty, training, and research interests. This, of course, means that, by the end of the semester, you will be far from having a comprehensive understanding of “world religions.” In fact, by the end of the semester, you should feel confident rejecting the premise that it is even possible to be fluent in “world religion” in the first place. Instead, the intention of this class is that the questions and discussions we have throughout the semester, grounded in our three lenses, unfold in such a way that we develop tools and skills for analyzing and assessing other religions—both other “world religions” and religions that are not on the list of “world religions”—that are not directly covered in this course.

Requirements

This course will be highly collaborative and discussion based. In order to facilitate discussion, you will be assigned and assessed on the following:

- *Class Preparation:* You will write a total of (10) two-page summary-analysis papers within which you will craft a thesis, briefly summarize, and carefully analyze one assigned text. Each paper is due the day the text is being discussed in class. Percentage of Grade: 60%
- *Class Participation:* You will be expected to engage with texts, lecture material, and each other during every class period. To actively participate in class, you will be expected to have read the assigned text and will have a hard copy of the text at your disposal during each class meeting. You are permitted to miss (2) class periods throughout the semester with no penalty; further absences will directly impact your participation points. You need not provide an excuse; you must, however, email me prior to the start of class. Percentage of Grade: 20%
- *Group Presentation:* You—individually or as a group—will offer a thirty-minute seminar to your colleagues on one of the world religions we have not covered in class. You will be responsible for 1) identifying and researching a world religion, 2) presenting your findings to the class, and 3) preparing and leading the class through 2-3 discussion questions that connect your topic back to assigned course material. Percentage of Grade: 20%

Materials Needed

Some of the assigned readings for this class will be compiled into a reader that you can purchase from [insert print shop].

In addition, you will need to purchase the following books (which you can find in many bookstores and online—both used and new).

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Thomas Cleary, *Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women*. Boston: Shambhala, 1989.

Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992.

Susan Murcott, *First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2006.

Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *The Virgin of El Barrio: Marian Apparitions, Catholic Evangelizing, and Mexican American Activism*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Please note that you will not be allowed to utilize technological devices of any kind during class. You are encouraged to take notes—with pen and paper. You will be required to bring a physical copy of the readings with you to every class meeting.

Course Schedule

Week	Subject	Reading Assignment
Week 1	Methods and Theories	Day 1: Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “Notes on How to Ask a Good Question about Theory That Will Promote Conversation and Further Discussion from Your Colleagues” Day 2: Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”
Week 2	Methods and Theories	Day 1: Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map is Not Territory” Day 2: Bernhard Siegert, “The Map is the Territory”
Week 3	Methods and Theories	Day 1: Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones”

Week	Subject	Reading Assignment
Week 4	Taoism Religion through Text	<p>Day 2: Alex Mar, “Three Nights at the Castle” AND Rhyd Wildermuth, “Eat, Pray, Learn Magic: Alex Mar’s Spiritual Tourism”</p> <hr/> <p>Day 1: Thomas Cleary, <i>Immortal Sisters</i>, 1-57</p> <p>In class: Basics of Taoism Lecture</p> <p><i>NOTE: For all class lectures, I will utilize a PowerPoint that incorporates data, images, graphics, and video clips. These PowerPoints will be available to you on [INSERT].</i></p> <p>Day 2: Thomas Cleary, <i>Immortal Sisters</i>, 58-99</p>
Week 5	Buddhism Religion through Text	<p>Day 1: Susan Murcott, <i>First Buddhist Women</i>, 11-51</p> <p>In class: Basics of Buddhism Lecture</p> <p>Day 2: Susan Murcott, <i>First Buddhist Women</i>, 53-104</p>
Week 6	Buddhism and Taoism Religion through Comparison	<p>Day 1: Susan Murcott, <i>First Buddhist Women</i>, 105-152</p> <p><i>NOTE: Be sure to bring your copy of Immortal Sisters to class.</i></p> <p>Day 2: Susan Murcott, <i>First Buddhist Women</i>, 153-217</p> <p><i>NOTE: Be sure to bring your copy of Immortal Sisters to class.</i></p>
Week 7	Islam Religion through Historical Analysis	<p>Day 1: Leila Ahmed, <i>Women and Gender in Islam</i>, 1-37</p> <p>In class: Basics of Islam Lecture</p> <p>Day 2: Leila Ahmed, <i>Women and Gender in Islam</i>, 39-123</p> <p><i>NOTE: Discussion will focus on chapters three and four.</i></p>

Week	Subject	Reading Assignment
Week 8	Islam Religion through Historical Analysis	Day 1: Leila Ahmed, <i>Women and Gender in Islam</i> , 127-188 <i>NOTE: Discussion will focus on chapters eight and nine.</i> Day 2: Leila Ahmed, <i>Women and Gender in Islam</i> , 189-248 <i>NOTE: Discussion will focus on chapter eleven and the conclusion.</i>
Week 9	Christianity Religion through Ethnography	Day 1: Kristy Nabhan-Warren, <i>The Virgin of El Barrio</i> , 1-51 In class: Basics of Christianity lecture Day 2: Kristy Nabhan-Warren, <i>The Virgin of El Barrio</i> , 52-102
Week 10	Christianity Religion through Ethnography	Day 1: Kristy Nabhan-Warren, <i>The Virgin of El Barrio</i> , 103-148 Day 2: Kristy Nabhan-Warren, <i>The Virgin of El Barrio</i> , 149-218
Week 11	Judaism Religion through Sacred Space	Day 1: Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, <i>Daughters of the King</i> , xxi-87 In class: Basics of Judaism Lecture <i>NOTE: Discussion will focus on the Introduction and "Tehines: A Brief Survey of Women's Prayers"</i> Day 2: Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, <i>Daughters of the King</i> , 89-202 <i>NOTE: Discussion will focus on "Are Women Obligated to Pray," "Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta," and "Language and Liturgy"</i>
Week 12	Judaism Religion through Sacred Space	Day 1: Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, <i>Daughters of the King</i> , 203-236

Week	Subject	Reading Assignment
		Day 2: Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, <i>Daughters of the King</i> , 237-305 <i>NOTE: Please read at least five of the fifteen personal vignettes.</i>
Week 13	Hinduism Religion through Ritual	Day 1: Mary McGee, “Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Politics in India” In class: Basics of Hinduism Lecture Day 2: Ann Grodzins Gold, “From Demon Aunt to Gorgeous Bride: Women Portray Female Power in a North Indian Festival Cycle”
Week 14	Hinduism Religion through Ritual	Day 1: Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan, “Threshold Designs, Forehead Dots, and Menstruation Rituals: Exploring Time and Space in Tamil <i>Kolams</i> ” Day 2: Kathleen M. Erndl, “The Play of the Mother: Possession and Power in Hindu Women’s Goddess Rituals”
Week 15	Presentations	Day 1: Two Presentations Day 2: Two Presentations
Week 16	Presentations	Day 1: Two Presentations Day 2: Two Presentations

Policies

EMAIL: I encourage you to contact me via email with questions or concerns about class. During the week, I will respond within 24 hours. Please do not, however, direct questions to me that can easily be answered by consulting the syllabus.

FEEDBACK: I am happy to work with you on your assignments during office hours or by appointment. I will not read drafts of papers or provide feedback, however, through email.

LATE WORK: Late work should not be a problem in this class. You will turn in all summary-analysis papers on the day we discuss the text you analyzed. You (and, if applicable, your group) will sign up for a presentation time that works with your schedule. Barring truly extenuating circumstances, no extensions will be given.

Resources

I encourage all of you to make use of the resources available to you on campus, particularly the following:
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