

RELS 0050/GSWS 0050: **Gender, Sexuality, and Religion**

Fall 2023

Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:15am-11:15am

Graduate Education Building 121

INSTRUCTOR

Jeremy Steinberg

Cohen 229

Office Hours: Mondays, 11:30-1:30 or by appointment¹

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

How have norms for gendered individuals in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist religious traditions been negotiated over time? Whose voices matter, when deciding which gendered actions are acceptable (or not)? What happens if we read religious traditions according to the voices of women, queer people, or people who identify with other marginalized gender and sexual identities? This course tackles these questions, showing how gender and sexuality—how they are taught, performed, and regulated—are central to understanding religious communities and their histories. We will consider a range of historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches to gendered religion in this course. You will learn how feminism and queer theory have contributed to contemporary debates about gender and sexuality across communities.

In this course, you will learn about some fundamental gendered rituals, social roles, and mythologies in a range of religious traditions. We will also look at the central significance of gender to the field of religious studies generally. Although it is beyond the scope of this class to offer comprehensive discussions of any one religious tradition, the aim is to provide entry-points into the study of religious traditions through the lens of gender. This course will emphasize both historical perspectives and contemporary contexts. We will also read religion through feminist and queer lenses: we will explore the key characteristics of diverse feminist and queer studies approaches to religion, as well as the limits of those approaches.

PREREQUISITES

There are no prerequisites.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the end of this course you will be able to:

- 1) recognize and understand key terms and concepts in religious studies and gender studies;
- 2) compare and contrast different approaches to gender across religious traditions;
- 3) apply religious studies and gender studies concepts to real case studies; and
- 4) write a convincing academic research essay using both primary materials and secondary literature.

REQUIRED TEXTS

There are no texts required for purchase.

CANVAS

This class has a Canvas site where an up-to-date syllabus and other materials will be posted. All readings will be made available via Canvas. The “Modules” tab on Canvas will serve as your one-stop hub for accessing the readings and submitting written assignments.

¹ In weeks when there is no class on Monday, office hours will be held on Wednesday from 11:30-1:30.

Occasionally, I will send out updates and announcements about the class through Canvas' "Announcements" function. For this reason, please make sure your notifications are set to "on" and that you check your email regularly.

Circumstances may dictate alterations to the schedule of readings. Any such updates will be announced either in class or by email and also will also be reflected on the "Modules" tab on Canvas. For this reason, you should always refer to the Canvas site when looking for the reading assignment.

ATTENDANCE

If you will miss class due to a religious observance or another scheduled conflict, you must notify me well in advance. In the event of illness or emergency, please try to contact me before class; if that is not possible, please let me know as soon as you can. Students who miss class, for any reason, are expected to secure notes from a classmate and are strongly encouraged to come to office hours.

EVALUATION

Your grade will be determined on the following basis:

Participation	10% of total grade
Reading Responses	25%
Find & Reflect	3%
Revisit & Reflect	2%
Final Essay Proposal	15%
Final Essay	45%

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Readings: You are expected to complete all required readings and to come to class prepared to discuss them. Close and attentive reading is a prerequisite for adequate participation and will be assessed accordingly.

Participation: As this is a discussion-based course, your participation is crucial. It is through class participation that you will demonstrate that you have read and reflected on the assignments. Sitting inattentively through class will not only inhibit your learning but will also deprive everyone of the insights you could have shared.

Reading Responses: For every reading assignment, there will be 3-4 response questions posted to Canvas. Once a week, you will select one of these questions and write a response of 100-150 words (please do not exceed this limit). Over the course of the semester, you will write 12 responses.

Students will be divided into two groups: the "Monday group" and the "Wednesday group". Response papers for students in the Monday group are due Sundays at 3 PM; response papers for the Wednesday group are due Tuesdays at 3 PM. These early deadlines enable me to read your response papers in advance of class and incorporate your responses into my teaching.

Find & Reflect/Revisit & Reflect: The first assignment of the semester asks you to find and reflect thoughtfully (100 words) on a media source that combines the topics of gender/sexuality and religion. At the conclusion of the semester, you will revisit this media source and reflect (100 words) on how your understanding of this source has changed, consolidated, or evolved.

Final Essay Proposal/Final Essay: Your work for this course will culminate in a term paper (2000-2500 words/8-10 double spaced pages). In this essay, you will analyze some aspect of gender, sexuality, and religion. You are expected to engage both with the theoretical literature we read in class and with secondary sources that you have encountered through your own research. A selection of essay questions

will be provided; you are free to choose among those questions or to devise your own question. Rubrics and guidance will be provided.

A proposal (500-750 words/2-3 pages) will be due on November 27. This proposal will describe how you plan to approach your essay. The proposal will be accompanied by a preliminary bibliography of at least six sources, at least three of which you should have already consulted; at least two of those three must come from outside of class. Rubrics and guidance will be provided.

All papers should be double-spaced, in 12-point font size, in a standard font with standard margins. Writing Assignments should be submitted via Canvas.

EXTENSIONS

Extensions require good reasons and are not granted willy-nilly. However, requests for extensions made with good reason will be considered fairly. It is incumbent upon the student to request the extension as soon as the need for an extension is known. Requests made within 24 hours of the due date will not be considered barring extenuating circumstances.

LATE SUBMISSIONS (WITHOUT EXTENSIONS)

Assignments that are submitted late will receive little to no feedback from me. Additionally, late assignments may not be graded and returned within the normal time frame.

Assignments that are turned in late will lose one letter grade for every 24 hours the assignment is late (e.g. an A- paper will receive a B- if submitted late but within 24 hours of the due date, a C- if submitted 24-48 hours late, etc.). Response papers submitted after the beginning of class will receive no credit.

CLASS CONTENT

It is probable that some of the content of this course will make you feel uncomfortable. We touch on issues of deep importance that intimately connect to our sense of self as humans. Feelings of discomfort are an important part of a liberal arts education, which endeavors to instill the value of critical thinking and the importance of considering perspectives at odds with your own. Try to approach disagreements in class, if they occur, as opportunities to understand different approaches and to clarify your own views.

We will read and discuss content you may find disturbing—this content may include racist language, descriptions of sexual violence, and negative attitudes toward a group with which you or people you love identify. Some of the religious voices we will read and listen to in class are very invested in a clear gender binary and present heterosexual sex as the ideal. This content is in the class to encourage serious reflection on issues of profound importance to the study of gender, sexuality, and religion.

You are welcome to talk to me about any of your concerns in office hours or by email, if you do not feel comfortable discussing your discomfort in class. Please let me know if you find yourself extremely anxious about any of the topics we are scheduled to discuss in class. If I know the concern, I can mention when we are approaching disturbing content and will be available to talk in office hours. Please take care of yourself, and know that in addition to me, you are encouraged to avail yourself to other resources available on campus including CAPS and affinity groups supporting members of various gender, sexual, religious, racial, and ethnic identities.

Furthermore, this class is likely to raise challenging questions on God, faith, and related topics. Our goal in this class is not to reject or confirm your religious beliefs (or lack thereof) but rather to expose you to a range of interpretive perspectives and to analyze these perspectives using academic methods. You are welcome to refer to your own religious background in the classroom in order to enrich our discussion.

However, if you are unable to bracket your own perspective in order to understand different points of view, then this class may not be for you.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

Computers and tablets are permitted in the classroom for consulting the readings, taking notes, and engaging in other class-related activities. The use of computers and tablets for email, web browsing, etc., and the use of cell phones for any reason is strictly prohibited. If you choose to use a computer or tablet, I encourage you to turn off the WiFi while in the classroom.

CHEATING AND PLAGIARISM

You are encouraged to share intellectual views with your fellow students. However, graded work must be the product of independent effort, and others' contributions must be appropriately cited. Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, I am happy to discuss them with you or to direct you to appropriate resources. Please also consult Penn's [Code of Academic Integrity](#).

REGRADES

I will not discuss grades over email. If you wish to request a reconsideration of one of your grades, the first step is to meet with me during my office hours, where we can discuss my feedback on your work. If you still desire a regrade, you must then submit a formal request, in writing, documenting what you think was overlooked in the original grading. I am happy to grant valid, well-reasoned requests for a regrade, but be aware that your grade is not guaranteed to improve and may go down.

SPECIAL NEEDS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Our classroom is intended to be accessible to all students, regardless of disabilities or special needs. If you anticipate or experience physical or academic barriers, please let me know immediately. To get the most out of this class, I advise you to contact me about accommodations within the first two weeks of the course. You will also need to be registered with [Student Disability Services](#), who will help us determine the right strategies.

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COURSE SCHEDULE

Unit 1: Key Terms & Concepts

What do we mean by the terms *gender*, *sexuality*, and *religion*? How do feminism and queer theory intersect with the discipline of Religious Studies?

Wednesday, August 30

Introduction to the Course

No assignment.

Monday, September 4

No Class: Labor Day

Find & Reflect due Monday, September 4 at 11:59 PM.

Wednesday, September 6

Gender & Sexuality

Lisa Wade and Myra Marx Ferree, "Bodies," in *Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 35-57.

No reading response due.

Monday, September 11

Intersectionality

Lisa Wade and Myra Marx Ferree, "Intersections," in *Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 83-111.

Wednesday, September 13

Intersectionality & Religion

Melissa M. Wilcox, "Queer Religiosities," in *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 1-37.

Unit 2: Gender & Authority

Who decides what issues are dominant for gender groups and minority sexual orientations? Who has the "right" to speak for a religious tradition?

Monday, September 18

Women's Veiling in Islamic Traditions

Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in their Minds and on our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women," in *Women, Gender, and Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 420-446.

Wednesday, September 20

Multiculturalism and Feminism

Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9-24.

Monday, September 25

No Class: Yom Kippur

Wednesday, September 27

Women's Veiling in Christian Traditions

Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Veils, Virgins, and the Tongues of Men and Angels: Women's Heads in Early Christianity," in *Women, Gender, and Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 389-419.

Monday, October 2

Women's Active Voices in Hindu Traditions

Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.4 (2000): 761-779.

Wednesday, October 4

Women's Active Voices in Jewish Traditions

Judith Plaskow, "Torah: Reshaping Jewish Memory," in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 25-60.

Unit 3: Gender Binaries, Gender Spectrums & Gender Equality

In what religious contexts does a clear male/female binary hold normative significance, and in what context is that significance challenged? How have modern voices attempted either to recover a history of gender complexity or to project a firm binary into the past? How have defined gender roles and (in)equalities been impressed onto these (non)binaries?

Monday, October 9

Liberationist Readings of the Qur'an

Asma Barlas, "The Quran and Muslim Women: Reading Patriarchy, Reading Liberation," in *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2019): 1-29.

Wednesday, October 11

Christian Non-Binarism

Leah DeVun, "Heavenly Hermaphrodites: Sexual Difference at the Beginning and End of Time," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 9 (2018): 132-146.

Monday, October 16

A Third Gender in South Asia

Serena Nanda, "Life on the Margins: A Hijra's Story," in *Everyday Life in South Asia*, 2nd ed., eds. Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 124-131.

Wednesday, October 18

LGBTQ+ Muslims

Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, "Engaging Religious Tradition," in *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 21-54.

Monday, October 23

LGBTQ+ Jews

Elazar Ben-Lulu, "'Let Us Bless the Twilight': Intersectionality of Traditional Jewish Ritual and Queer Pride in a Reform Congregation in Israel," *Journal of Homosexuality* 68.1 (2021): 23-46.

Wednesday, October 25

LGBTQ+ Activism in Orthodox Jewish Communities

[Reading assignment TBA]

Unit 4: Agents & Purposes of Sex

Who has sex with whom, and why? Is sex for pleasure? Procreation? Profession? In what contexts can sexual activity, or its rejection, be a tool of spiritual transformation? Is sex a morally laden activity?

Monday, October 30

Sex in the Hebrew Bible

David Biale, "Sexual Subversions in the Bible," in *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 11-31.

Wednesday, November 1

Tantra

Lorilai Biernacki, "Sex Talk and Gender Rites: Women and the Tantric Rite of Sexual Union," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10.2 (2006): 185-206.

Monday, November 6

Christian Priestly Celibacy

Helen Parish, "'If there is one faith, there must be one tradition': Clerical Celibacy and Marriage in the Early Church," in *Clerical Celibacy in the West: c. 1100-1700* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 15-58.

Wednesday, November 8

Sex Work and Buddhist Morality

Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang and John Lowe, "Sex Work and the Karmic Wheel: How Buddhism Influences Sex Work in China," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 63.13 (2019): 2356-2377.

Monday, November 13

Christianity & Sex Trafficking

Carly Daniel-Hughes, "Abolition Mommas: Evangelical Women as Exceptional Citizens in the Fight to End 'Global Sex Trafficking'," in *Religious Responses to Sex Work and Sex Trafficking: An Outrage Against Any Decent People*, ed. Lauren McGrow (London: Routledge, 2023), 8-28.

Unit 5: Marriage & Divorce

How do different religious traditions constitute marriage and divorce? How are spouses expected to interact with one another? How do religious regulations on marriage and divorce interact with political and ethical agendas?

Wednesday, November 15

Marriage & Gender in Evangelical Christianity

John P. Bartkowski, "Wifely Submission or Mutual Submission? Evangelical Discourses of Family Power" and "Separate Spheres or Domestic Task Sharing? Evangelical Debates over Financial Provision, Housework, and Child Care," in *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 54-86.

Monday, November 20

No class: Society of Biblical Literature conference

You are strongly encouraged to use this time to work on your final essay proposal.

Wednesday, November 22

No class: Friday schedule for Thanksgiving week

Monday, November 27

Hindu Widow Marriage

Brian A. Hatcher, "Introduction," in Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar, *Hindu Widow Marriage*, trans. Hatcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012): 1-56.

Final Essay Proposal due Monday, November 27 at 11:59 PM.

Wednesday, November 29

Jewish Divorce

Lisa Fishbayn Joffe, "Negotiating Divorce at the Intersection of Jewish and Civil Law in North America," in *Love, Marriage, and Jewish Families: Paradoxes of a Social Revolution*, ed. Sylvia Barack Fishman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 240-255.

Unit 6: Gendered & Sanctified Beings

What is the impact of worshipping male, female, or intersex gods? How does gendered divinity and sainthood manifest? Is there room for subversion in spaces otherwise characterized by gendered power?

Monday, December 4

Sanctified, Feminized Bodies in Buddhist Traditions

Reiko Ohnuma, "Woman, Bodhisattva, and Buddha," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17.1 (2001): 63-83.

Wednesday, December 6

Sufi Islam & Divine Feminine

Bianca J. Smith, "Sufism and the Sacred Feminine in Lombok, Indonesia: Situating Spirit Queen Dewi Anjani and Female Saints in Nahdlatul Wathan," *Religions* 12 (2021): 563.

Revisit & Reflect due Friday, December 8 at 11:59 PM.

Monday, December 11

Gendered Christian Deity

Wallace Best, "'The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit': African American Preaching Women and the Paradoxes of Gender," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, ed. R. Marie Griffith (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 101-127.

Final Essay

Final Essay due by the conclusion of the exam period.