

**RE 205: Women, Religion and Spirituality
Spring 2015**

Instructor: Mary Zeiss Stange, Ph.D.

Ladd 213

Office Hours: T 1:30-3:00, Wed. 10:00-12:00 & 2:00-4:00, and by appt.

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RE 205 deals with the various ways in which religion (i.e. institutionalized social and cultural structures of belief and practice) and spirituality (i.e. more privately or personally defined forms of religiosity) function to shape, explain and inform women's—and men's--individual and collective experiences. We will focus on images of, and ideas about, women and the roles women play in various religious, psychological and mythological contexts. While the broad perspective of the course is cross-cultural and transhistorical, our primary concern will be with women's experience within the western cultural traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In every case, religious belief and experience will be considered against the background of larger social, cultural, and political realities.

The texts for this course all share a feminist orientation. That is, all of the authors assume that gender inequality is a fundamental problem in religion and society. They seek in various ways to define the precise nature and dynamics of the problem, and to explore ways in which women and men can work, individually and collectively, to eliminate it. A key question for the class is whether, and/or to what extent, gender inequity can be transcended within the context of traditional religious belief and practice.

After successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

- *Describe* and *critically evaluate* some of the major issues and themes that drive the study of women, religion and spirituality.
- *Appreciate* the diverse and complex relationship between religion and gender as this relationship plays out in specific social, cultural, and geographic contexts.
- *Recognize* and *analyze* different forms of, feminist theology and emerging models of women-centered and gender-equal belief and practice, in light of on-going debates over contemporary forms of religiosity and the cultural and political implications of “the sacred.”
- *Designate* ways in which gender, economic and social justice issues intersect, with special emphasis on the religious responses that have recently emerged to address this intersection.
- *Understand* elements of racism, sexism and colonialism undergirding some forms of Western monotheism, and *strive for* a stance of critical accountability in their engagement both with their own religious/cultural traditions, and with spiritual and cultural traditions other than their own.

Texts:

Required:

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, Eds., *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought*

Ellen Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*

Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*

Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, Eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*

Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*

Additional materials to be provided in class [noted in brackets on syllabus].

Students should also have, and use, a good dictionary; and have access to a Bible (any standard translation will do: NRSV, RSV, Jerusalem are good choices; stay away from paraphrases like "Good News for Modern Man"), and a dictionary of mythology (there are several in the library, as well as online).

Format:

Classes are a mixture of lecture and discussion; regular attendance and active participation are vital to success in this course.

Attendance Policy:

Because regular attendance and active participation are vital to success in this course, no more than three unexcused absences will be tolerated. Exceeding this limit will result in an automatic lowering of your semester grade, 3 percentage points for each additional class day missed. If you must miss a portion of one class for a valid reason, you must clear this with the professor prior to the class in question.

Etiquette:

Plan to arrive in class on time, and to stay in class the entire time.

Feel free to bring a beverage and/or light snack, but not a meal.

Be sure your cell phone is turned off, and stowed out of sight, before class begins.

Use of a laptop during class is prohibited, unless you can document a medical reason.

Use of any and all other electronic devices during class is strictly prohibited.¹

¹ *If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator of Student Access Services. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.*

Criteria for Evaluation:

Religion Impact Paper/Class Participation.....	10%
2 Exams.....	30%
Final Essay.....	20%
Current Events Reports.....	10%
Books of Miriam Research/Role-Play.....	15%
Web Site Report/Review.....	15%
	100%

The **Religion Impact Paper** explores ways in which individual and collective experience are influenced by organized religion, through a careful investigation of the impact institutionalized religion has had—or not had— on your personal life. It is an assignment geared toward evaluating the relevance of the course to your individual experience. The paper is not graded as a separate assignment, however it forms part of your total class participation grade.

The two **Exams (one in-class, one take-home)** involve a more objectively based evaluation of your command of the information presented and the central ideas developed in the readings and other course resources. The **Final Essay** is, along similar lines, a critical evaluative response to readings in the third unit of the course, in light themes developed in our semester-long conversation.

The **Web Site Report/Review** is a project you will undertake outside of class, involving the critical evaluation of one or more religion-related sites on the Internet, in terms of women’s issues or interests. **Current Events Reports** are brief synopses of and critical commentary on news stories that are relevant to the content of the course; each student will write five of these in the course of the semester, two or three before and two or three after Spring break. Current Events discussion will occupy the first five-ten minutes of class time each day.

In the **Books of Miriam Research/Role Play**, each member of the class will be assigned an “identity” from the Frankel text. It is then up to you to research your character (providing your “biography” to the rest of the class) and, in discussions of the book, to represent your character’s point of view.

Class Participation means not only being present in class, but being fully prepared to participate in discussion, actively listening as well as constructively contributing, and remaining open to alternative points of view.

There is no final exam in this course. Final exams are against the Professor’s religion.

Syllabus:

All readings are to be completed in advance of the class session for which they are assigned. Handouts will be available at least one class prior to the date for which they are assigned. Audiovisual presentations are often unavailable outside of class, so if you miss them you have missed significant information you won't be able to "make up." Dates when written work is due are starred.

Unit I: Introduction and a Brief History of Western Antifeminism

- Jan 20: Introduction
22: Film: "Some Women of Marrakech"

27: *The Handmaid's Tale*
29: The view from the Vatican: Pope (now Saint) John Paul II's "Letter to the Women of the World" [Handout] and the Women's Ordination Conference video "It's a Man's World (But it doesn't have to be):" <http://www.womensordination.org/2014/09/05/vatican-its-a-mans-world-but-it-doesnt-have-to-be-video-ordainwomen/>
- Feb 03: *Women & Religion (W & R)*: Chapter 1 (New Testament and Christian Origins); Chapter 2 (Clement of Alexandria and the Gnostics) *The truth about Ground Hog Day*.
*05: *W & R*: Chapters 3 (Jerome), 4 (Augustine), 5 (Aquinas), 8 (Luther: pp. 152-168). **Religion Impact Essay due.**
- Note: This week you should be viewing "I, The Worst of All" and "Agnes of God" (on Library Reserve)---*
10: *W & R*: Chapter 7 (Woman as Witch); film: "The Burning Times"
12: *W & R*: Chapter 6 (Women Religious of the Middle Ages); R. Bell, "The Cloister" [Handout]

17: *Weaving the Visions (Weaving)*: 77-86 (Anzaldua); Guadalupe, then and now.
19: "I, the Worst of All" and "Agnes of God" discussion.

*24: **Exam**

Unit II: Re-Visioning "Women's Place" in Patriarchal Religion

- Feb 26: "God-Talk" and Religious Meaning. *Weaving*: 139-150 (McFague), 151-162 (Ruether), 163-170 (Inclusive Language Lectionary); * **Biblical Women Role Assignments.**
- Mar 03: "Others" Among "Us":. *Genesis* 1-3; Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith" [Handout]; *Weaving*: 39-50 (Plaskow), 128-138 (Falk), 187-198 (Umansky)

05: Released time for role research & preparation.

10: Frankel (*Miriam*), “Genesis: Individuals and Families,” (3-89) and “Exodus: . Community” (93-148)—Roundtable discussion of selected Torah Portions, by Biblical Women

12: *Miriam*, “Leviticus: Ritual,” (151-193) and “Numbers: Leadership” (197-243). Continuing Roundtable Discussion by Biblical Women.

17-19: ***Spring Break***

Mar 24: **Islamic Feminism: *The Veil and the Male Elite***, Part 1

26: *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Part 2

31: *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Conclusion. Film: *Beyond the Veil*.

Unit III: Alternative Visions of Women’s Spirituality

Apr 02: The Question of Community. *W & R*: Chapters 11 (Communitarian Movements in America) and 12 (Movements for Religious and Social Reform)

*07: The Spiritual Power of Sisterhood: Feminist Liberation Theologies.

W & R: Chapter 14. *Weaving*: 199-207 (Daly), 214-0225 (Harrison). ***Exam 2 (take-home) due.**

09: Goddess Spirituality: *Weaving*: 62-71 (Gimbutas), 72-75 (Spretnak), 87-92 (Teish), 111-118 (Morton), 119-127 (Downing). ***The truth about the Easter Bunny***.

14: Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, Introductions and Chapters 1-4. Film: “Goddess Remembered” (On Reserve)

16: *Spiral Dance*, Chapters 5, 6 & 13.

21: “Women-Church:” Selections from Rosemary Ruether [Handout]; film: “Changing Habits”

*23: Film: *Pink Smoke over the Vatican* ***Web Site Report Due***

28: Wrap-up discussion and class party.

*** The Final Essay is due in hardcopy, in the Philosophy and Religion Office no later than 4 p.m. Friday, May 8th. No exceptions, no extensions.**