

Women & Religion: Sisters, Seekers, Sages

Contact Instructor: <u>Professor:</u> Sara Swenson <u>E-mail:</u> saswenso@syr.edu <u>Office:</u> Hall of Languages 514 <u>Office Hours:</u> Tues., 2:00-3:30 pm or by appointment	Course Information: <u>Rel 320:</u> Spring 2017 <u>Classroom:</u> Life Science 200 Tuesdays, Thursdays: 5:00-6:20pm
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Course Overview:

Theme: What might a nun, a Hasidic Jewish school girl, and a long-distance hiker have in common? This course explores how women around the world participate in religious and spiritual traditions in pursuit of self-transformation. We will read about women from Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu religious traditions alongside women who might be labeled “spiritual but not religious.” To narrow down our scope for comparison, we will focus on women as monastics, mystics, and ascetics. These women adopt disciplining practices to help themselves achieve religious and spiritual ideals. Their methods, contexts, and motivations for taking on these practices are widely diverse. Through close readings and in-class conversations we will consider how and why the women we read about choose (or don’t choose) to adopt certain spiritual or physical practices – from fasting to hiking. How might these practices interrelate with other aspects of their identities – gender, sexuality, family status, class, race, nationality, or ethnicity? What do they hope to achieve by adopting these practices? Why might these outcomes be important for them, given their social and cultural contexts?

Method/Approach: The majority of the readings from this course come from ethnographies and biographies. Ethnographies are books written by social scientists, like anthropologists, who base their research upon years of interviews in the communities they are researching. Anthropologists study cultures with the understanding that societies change over time. No culture is “pure” or unchanging. Ideas, beliefs, and practices also change across time and distances, even when we may regard them as “traditional.” The religious traditions we will discuss each contain an array of internal variation. Our goal is not to master complete knowledge of each of religion but to explore how individuals and communities adapt local understandings of these religious ideas and practices, for the purpose of transforming themselves and the world around them.

Key Terms, “Women” and “Religion”: Religion and gender are two categories of ideas with a wide variety of meanings across the groups we will study. Being a “woman” can mean completely different things in two different cultures. In the same way calling oneself a “Buddhist” or “Muslim” can mean diverse things depending on time, place, and social context. From a social-scientific perspective, these categories are highly flexible and not universal. Especially because we will be working with case-studies and biographies, we must remember that no single person we read about is a global representative for all others who share their religious or gender identity (even if they, themselves, claim to be)! Among our goals for this course, we will think deeply about the differences and similarities in what these two words “women” and “religion” mean for the people in our texts.

Learning Goals: The underlying goal of this course is to help you develop skills and confidence in articulating your thoughts and passions. The course materials are training tools for practicing critical thinking and writing skills. Because I view myself as a learning facilitator – not just a lecturer – a majority of our classroom time will be oriented around in-class activities and discussions. I aspire to support your creativity and curiosity in order to help you pursue your own burning questions. Please take advantage of this opportunity for us to learn together by thoughtfully preparing for discussions and reading before class.

Required Texts: The following books are required reading for the course and are available through major online providers or the SU Bookstore. In addition to selections from these texts, many articles will be available on Blackboard (BB). Bring hardcopies to class – do not bring online copies unless they have page numbers.

- Brown, Sid. 2001. *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Lester, Rebecca. 2005. *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fader, Ayala. 2009. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Strayed, Cheryl. 2012. *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. New York: Knopf.

Course Assignments and Grading:

1. Class Participation (20%)

Requirements:

- 1.) Attendance: Students with 4 or more absences, regardless of reason, will not receive credit for class participation. Extreme circumstances negotiable (for example, with a doctor's note or letter from SU Support Services).
- 2.) Attention: Class participation also requires meaningfully joining in class discussions. Listen carefully when peers are speaking or presenting. Keep comments focused and on-topic. Distracted laptop or cellphone use will count against class participation and may lead to an electronics ban.

2. Reading Responses (25%)

Required length: Bullet points should total 150-400 words (½ to 1 full page)

Due date: Thursdays by 2pm, posted under “Assignments” tab on Blackboard.

Do not upload attachments, as these files can be corrupted and not open properly. Instead, copy and paste your post directly into the text box on Blackboard.

Description: Each Thursday by 2pm, students will post a critical reflection on that week's reading. Critical reflections should follow the format below:

- **Thesis:** make an argumentative claim about a key theme or character.
- **Evidence:** support your thesis with one quote or example from the text. Include page numbers in citation format. [Example: Paraphrase. “Quote” (36).]
- **Analysis:** briefly analyze the quote or example you have provided. What is its broader symbolic value or meaning within the text? Why is the character or event you have chosen essential for demonstrating your argument?
- **Warrant:** explain why your thesis is important for best interpreting the text or understanding our course themes.
- **Critique:** what did you like or dislike about the reading? What could the author have done better? What did you find convincing or compelling?

Answer each section with 1-2 short, focused sentences. Less is more. Critical reflections are neither for vague personal reactions to the text nor rote summary. One way to develop an argumentative focus for responses is by focusing on “how” and “why” questions, or by offering comparisons with other readings. Reading responses will be graded collectively over the course of the semester. Students who turn in continuously excellent work, or who actively incorporate feedback, will receive high cumulative scores. You may miss up to four responses without impact to your grade. If you turn in all responses, I will count your eight best toward the final evaluation.

3. Midterm Paper (15%)

Required length: 4-5 pages (double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman)

Due date: Tuesday, March 21st. Upload under “Assignments” to Blackboard.

Description: Students will receive a writing prompt for this paper on Tuesday, March 7th, two weeks before the assignment is due. I will develop the prompt based on themes raised during our in-class conversations and activities. As such, prompts will be heavily directed by students’ collective questions and interests. This paper will involve a comparative synthesis of the course materials we have read so far.

3. Research project proposal (5%)

Required length: 2-3 pages (double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman)

Due date: Thursday, April 11th. Upload under “Assignments” to Blackboard.

Description: Students will receive instructions for the research project on Tuesday, March 28th. Students will turn in their research project proposals with an outline of their planned argument by Tuesday, April 11th. The project proposal will require finding and summarizing 3-4 sources on a theme found beyond class readings, and comparing these to a case study from one of our class readings. I will provide feedback on student proposals and use these to form groups of 2-3 students for the research project presentations.

4. Research project presentations (15%)

Required length: 10-15 minutes

Presentation dates: April 25th and April 27th

Description: Groups of 2-3 students, with similar research project themes, will work together to compare and contrast themes from their independent research projects and course readings. Students will then offer 10-15 minute presentations on their findings, with 5 additional minutes for Q&A.

5. Research project paper (20%)

Required length: 6-8 pages (double-spaced, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman)

Due date: Final due Tues. May 2nd. Revisions option due Tues., May 9th.

Upload both as designated under “Assignments” to Blackboard.

Description: This final paper will showcase students’ argumentative writing skills through synthesizing independent research with in-class materials. Papers should critically engage the concepts of “gender” and “religion” through a comparison of the students’ selected examples from outside research and one in-class reading. Final papers due May 2nd may be accepted for final grade. Students who wish to improve their grades can turn in a revised draft, addressing instructor comments, by May 9th.

Grading Scale

A = 95-100 A- = 90-94 B+ = 87-89 B = 84-86 B- = 80-83
C+ = 77-79 C = 74-76 C- = 70-73 D = 60-69 F = 0-59

Course Readings and Assignments

(BB) indicates reading posted on Blackboard

Indicates assignment due

Part I: “Women as monastics, mystics, sages, and ascetics”

Introductions

Jan. 17 (T) – Course Welcome and Introductions (no assigned readings)

Jan. 19 (Th) – First reading response due by 2pm

Valantasis, Richard. “Introduction,” pages 3-13 in *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (BB)

Buddhism

Jan. 24 (T) – Brown, Sid. “Chapter 1,” pages 6-23 in *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun*

Jan. 26 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm

Brown, Sid. “Chapter 2,” pages 24-36 in *The Journey...*

Jan. 31 (T) – Brown, Sid. “Chapter 3,” pages 37-41 in *The Journey...*

Brown, Sid. Selections from “Chapter 7,” pages 76-80 in *The Journey...*

Brown, Sid. “Chapter 8,” pages 86-91 in *The Journey...*

Guest visit by SU Buddhist Chaplain, Jikyo Bonnie Shoultz

Feb. 2 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm

Brown, Sid. “Introduction,” pages 1-5 in *The Journey...*

Brown, Sid. “Chapter 12,” pages 132-133 in *The Journey...*

Brown, Sid. “Chapter 13,” pages 137-142 in *The Journey...*

Christianity

Feb. 7 (T) – Lester, Rebecca. Selection of “Intro,” pages 1-23 in *Jesus in Our Wombs*

Feb. 9 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm

Lester, Rebecca. “Chapter 7,” pages 161-179 in *Jesus in Our Wombs*

Feb. 14 (T) – Lester, Rebecca. “Chapter 10,” pages 210-228 in *Jesus in Our Wombs*

Feb. 16 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm

“RitaMarie” Article (BB)

Guest speaker, historian Dr. Peggy Thompson

Hinduism

Feb. 21 (T) – Reddy, Gayatri. “Introduction,” pages 1-16 in *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (BB)

Feb. 23 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm
Reddy, Gayatri. “Chapter 4,” pages 78-98 in *With Respect...* (BB)

Islam

Feb. 28 (T) – Hoodfar, Homa. “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women,” pages 420-446 in *Women, Gender, and Religion* (BB)

Mar. 2 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm,
please focus your response on one reading, either Hoodfar or Quinn
Quinn, Ben. “French police make woman remove clothing on Nice beach following burkini ban.” *The Guardian News*. 24: 8/16 (BB)
In-class film segments from “Young, Muslim, and French” (2004)

Mar. 7 (T) – Witt, Joanna. “Why Do Young Women Want to Join the Islamic State?” *The Guardian News*. 25 July 2015 (BB)
Gilsinan, Kathy. “The ISIS Crackdown on Women, by Women.” *The Atlantic*. 25 July 2014 (BB)

Mar. 9 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm
Please focus your response on one reading, either Witt or Gilsinan
Reread: Valantasis, Richard. “Introduction,” pages 3-13 in *The Making of the Self* (BB) for mid-semester synthesis.

Mar. 14 and 16 (T/Th) – No Class, Spring Break

Judaism

Mar. 21 (T) – Midterm Paper Due by 5pm
Fader, Ayala. Selections of “Intro,” pages 1-3; 7-33 in *Mitzvah Girls*

Mar. 23 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm
Fader, Ayala. Selections of “Ch. 2: Fitting In,” 34-48 in *Mitzvah Girls*

Mar. 28 (T) – Fader, Ayala. “Ch. 3: Defiance,” pages 62-86 in *Mitzvah Girls*

Mar. 30 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm
Fader, Ayala. “Ch. 6: Ticket to Eden,” 145-155; 164-170 in *Mitzvah Girls*

Part II: "Spiritual but not religious?"

Women and Food

- April 4 (T) – Philips, Layli. "Veganism & Ecowomanism," 8-19 in *Sistah Vegan* (BB)
Lelwica, Michelle. "Introduction," 3-14 in *Starving for Salvation* (BB)

Athleticism

- April 6 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm, please focus response on one article
Hersh, Philip. "Chasing Katie Ledecky." *ESPN*. 4 August 2016 (BB)
Shepherd, Janine. "A broken body isn't a broken person." TEDTalk.
https://www.ted.com/talks/janine_shepherd_a_broken_body_isn_t_a_broken_person?language=en (BB)
Arnesen, Liv; Ann Bancroft. "Women Polar Explorers on Going for It."
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JZMErem7B4> (BB)

- April 11 (T) – Research Project Proposal Paper due by 5pm
Strayed, Cheryl. "Chapter 1: The 10,000 Things," 1-27 in *Wild*.
Strayed, Cheryl. "Chapter 2: Splitting" 28-37 in *Wild*.

- April 13 (Th) – Reading response due by 2pm
Strayed, Cheryl. "Chapter 9: Staying Found," 136-145 in *Wild*.
Strayed, Cheryl. "Chapter 12: This Far," 190-205 in *Wild*.

- April 18 (T) – Strayed, Cheryl. "Chapter 13: The Accumulation of Trees," pages
206-221 in *Wild*.

Strayed, Cheryl. "Chapter 16: Mazama," 262-273 in *Wild*.

In-class film clips from "Wild" (2014); book/film discussion

- April 20 (Th) – [No response due]
In-class small group work time for Research Project Presentations

April 25 (T) – Presentations

April 27 (Th) – Presentations

- May 2 (T) – Final draft of research papers due by 5pm
Final Class, reflection on course themes
(or continuing Presentations as needed)

- May 9 (T) – Research paper revisions due by 5pm

Academic Integrity

Syracuse University's academic integrity policy reflects the high value that we, as a university community, place on honesty in academic work. The policy defines our expectations for academic honesty and holds students accountable for the integrity of all work they submit. Students should understand that it is their responsibility to learn about course-specific expectations, as well as about university-wide academic integrity expectations. The university policy governs appropriate citation and use of sources, the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments, and the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verification of participation in class activities. The policy also prohibits students from submitting the same written work in more than one class without receiving written authorization in advance from both instructors. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by an undergraduate student is course failure, accompanied by a transcript notation indicating that the failure resulted from a violation of academic integrity policy. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by a graduate student is suspension or expulsion. SU students are required to read an online summary of the university's academic integrity expectations and provide an electronic signature agreeing to abide by them twice a year during pre-term check-in on MySlice.

For more information and the complete policy, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

Students with Disabilities / Special Needs

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>, located at 804 University Avenue, room 309, or call 315-443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue "Accommodation Authorization Letters" to students with documented disabilities as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.

Faith Traditions and Observances Policy

Syracuse University does not have non-instructional days for any religious holiday and students must notify instructors by the end of the second week of classes when they will be observing their religious holiday(s). SU's religious observances policy, found at http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm, recognizes the diversity of faiths represented among the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their tradition. Under the policy, students are provided an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance provided they notify their instructors no later than the end of the second week of classes. Student deadlines are posted in My Slice under Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances/Add a Notification.