WOMEN, RELIGION AND THE FUTURE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES

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Course Description:
In the United States, women are the majority of most attending worship services, but are a minority of those in top leadership positions in most congregations. At the same time, whether women are leaders, active volunteers, or worship attenders, it is likely that women’s kind and degree of participation in their faith community is a key factor in whether the particular congregation and larger religious community will flourish in America. The major focus of this course, therefore, is on the roles women are taking and seeking in different US faith communities in the 21st century; why, with what support, and likely consequences for the women and for congregational vitality, as indicated by recent social science research.

Course Grounding and Learning Objectives

Lay of the land: As in past epochs, theological principles, religious traditions and cultural history continue to affect roles that women are now expected or permitted to take in congregations of different faiths and denominations. Women’s roles can also vary among congregations of the same religion or denomination, depending on the freedom to interpret or revise theological principles and traditions granted by the congregational leaders or taken by women and men attending.

Women’s present opportunities for congregational leadership in the mainline Protestant denominations, although still lower than men’s, are far better on the average than those for women in the more conservative Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic congregations, as well as those of Jewish, Muslim, and Eastern religions. The relative success of women gaining leadership in USA mainline Protestant churches over the last fifty years, however, has provided encouragement for those women in patriarchal faith communities with little authority and want this to change.

Still, other women are content with the historic male-led faith tradition in their more conservative Muslim, Jewish and Christian denominations and congregations. Muslim women are the minority of most attending worship services, as well as a minority in senior leadership positions in mosques and Islamic centers, including the United States and other English-speaking nations. Yet more Muslim women here and in other countries are gaining recognition for their leadership capacities, as they become actively engaged in planning and carrying out educational and outreach events.

Although this course focuses on women in North American communities of faith, similar trends are occurring elsewhere. Recent research carried out in other continents will be summarized in the lectures. A course premise is that students can compare and observe implications for women in their own faith/denomination through course reading and discussion about women’s roles in congregations that differ in religious beliefs, attender/member characteristics, and community location.
Course Learning Outcomes: The MAJOR focus of this “RS” course is MA #5, “To demonstrate the ability to relate theory and practice in the social contexts in which a religion’s communities exist.” Also of importance are MA #2, #3, #4: “To demonstrate knowledge (in/of): #2: respectfully engaging other religions and world views”; #3: “practices of one’s own religious tradition…and appreciate those of others”; #4: “skills for …constructive engagement with diversity.” These outcomes will be considered in student grading throughout the semester. Although MA #1: “foundational and critical knowledge of one’s own religion” is important, this is NOT a course focus or an outcome grading component.

Course Requirements:
Weekly: Doing the week’s reading, answering one of the questions posed by the instructor with each lecture, and commenting on at least one other student’s answers on the course discussion course site is expected. Missing more than two weekly discussions, or very late response, will lower your final grade. 40% of final grade.

Mid-term proposal for final essay: 500-800 words on describing the final paper planned about the extent of women’s participation in your choice of faith-related community over the last decade, with references to assigned reading done. 15% of final grade.

Final essay: About 1500 (or more) words, About 15 pages double-spaced, on what the recent history indicates as the future of women’s participation and leadership in your choice of faith-related community, and the outcomes you see for the future vitality of this faith community– AND WHY (using, assigned & other readings, discussions, and insights.) 45% of final grade.
The final essay will be the “artifact” sent to the registrar.

Comments on Reading Assigned
Many articles and books on women and religion have been published over the last four decades, and this course builds on these. Recent research in this area has appeared in books, monographs, and articles, in illustration:


In this graduate level course the reading assigned is intended to give students an overview and understanding of themes and trends (not historical details). Additionally the instructor’s lectures will summarize the findings of empirical studies on religion and women. Students are NOT expected to read those articles that include many tables of numbers, but some of these will be available for downloading on the Canvas course site under a category called “Empirical Studies.”

ALL reading assigned is available ON-LINE in Campus.
No purchase of books is required.
COURSE SYLLABUS

After introductory week, the course is divided in three sections:

Section I, “Head Start for the Mostly Mainline: Protestant Women in Predominantly White Churches,” discusses factors in how women emerged more visibly as leaders of Christian congregations and denominations from the early 19th to the late 20th century America and challenges they still face in the 21st century.

Section II, “Catching the Spirit and Divisions Among American Women Outside the Protestant Mainline,” describes women’s situations and aspirations who belong to Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Muslim, Black, Hispanic or Asian congregations.


WEEK 1: Jan 16. Introduction to Women’s Place in World Religions
1. Reading: Only the on-line lecture introduction.
2. Students: Introduce themselves one line, given some information about their religious backgrounds, and what their particular interests are in this course.

SECTION I THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN AS CHURCH LEADERS:
PROTESTANT WOMEN IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

WEEK 2: Jan 23. Women’s Leadership in USA Churches in 18th- early 19th Centuries
Reading for themes, similarities and differences


Reading for themes, similarities and differences:


Empirical Studies and Web Articles:


SECTION 2: CATCHING THE SPIRIT FOR CHANGE AMONG WOMEN OUTSIDE THE MAINLINE PROTESTANT CHURCHES

WEEK 4: Feb 6. Roman Catholic Women Leadership and Divisions

Reading for themes, similarities and differences


New Empirical Study (Other Continents)

WEEK 5:  Feb 13.  Overview:  Women’s Roles and Identity in Other Conservative/Patriarchal Faith Communities in the USA and other “Neo-Liberal” English-Speaking Countries

Reading for themes, similarities and differences


WEEK 6:  Feb 20. Women’s Roles in Muslim Communities in of Faith

Reading for themes, similarities and differences


New Empirical Studies in Countries (Skim)
WEEK 7: Feb. 27. Women Members and Becoming Leaders of Christian African-American USA Congregations: A Different Situation?
Reading for themes, similarities and differences


WEEK 8: March 6. Women Taking Leadership in Asian Congregations: A Similar Journey?
Reading for themes, similarities and differences


SECTION III: UNDERLYING ISSUES, NEW CHANCES AND THE FUTURE

WEEK 9: March 13: Socioeconomic Differences affecting Women’s Religiosity
Reading for themes, similarities and differences


Reading for themes, similarities and differences


New Empirical Studies and Web Articles:


WEEK 11: March 27. Week of Reading/Writing Catch-up: Proposals for Final Essay Due No other assignments

WEEK 12: April 3: Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Congregations

Reading for themes, trends, differences


Additional Reading to skim: Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, eds. Gay Religion. (Walnut Creek, Altamira Press, 2005

WEEK 1: April 10. Women’s Leadership in Faith Communities
Reading for themes, similarities and differences


WEEK 14: April 17. Final Lecture: Women and the Future of Faith Communities
No Reading Assigned.

Students are asked to write an essay of 1500-2000+ words on what they see as the future of women’s leadership and congregational strength in their denomination, faith tradition, OR on a contemporary topic concerning the role of women in faith communities. Students may use their scholarly and personal observations, reflections they have written on lecture questions, some new insights, as well as: the course assigned chapters, articles and other reading.