WOMEN, RELIGION AND THE FUTURE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES

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Course Description:
What is going on in 2020 with women’s involvement in faith communities? There seems to be growing variation among women on what issues their religious associations should be doing now and next. There are also increasing disparities among women of faith, particularly younger, educated women, in pursuing a ministerial leadership position. This is in part due to limited career rewards in ministry, compared to possible secular positions. Findings on these trends from recent social science research is summarized and included in reading assignments available.

Public voices of women religious leaders (‘heard’ or read on online sites) depict diversity among what women prioritize in different faith communities. Women’s action groups have strived to bring changes not only in worship and religious leadership, but also in public attitudes and laws on wide variety of ethical, social justice, environmental and global issues. Causes promoted by an active faith coalition of women can be ignored or rejected by many other women of their faith. Reasons why women promote or reject particular causes, however, are both important for assessing the future directions and health of faith communities.

Women are usually in the gender majority attending worship or involved in congregational responsibilities. Women are also a typical minority in filling top leadership positions. Nonetheless, whether women are leaders, active volunteers, or worship attenders, it is likely that women’s kind and degree of participation are key factors in whether the particular congregation and larger religious community will flourish in contemporary US. Women leading congregations, because of their official roles and values, could have a major impact on the surrounding community and the larger society.

The major focus of this course, therefore, is on what roles women are taking in US faith communities in the 21st century: why, with what support, and possible consequences for the women and congregations going forward.

Learning Objectives and Procedures
In this graduate level course the reading assigned is intended to give students an overview and understanding of themes and trends (not historical or empirical details). The instructor’s on-line lectures will summarize the findings of research studies and position on religion and women. The purpose of this weekly reading is to provide information and insights for students to examine whether similarities in trends and situations have occurred within their faith communities, with what outcomes. For this purpose, a major weekly assignment is that students respond online to a question posed by the instructor on the subject focus of the reading and lecture.

Students are NOT expected to read articles that include many tables of numbers. These studies will be summarized in lectures, and available for full reading under a category called “Empirical Studies.”
Seminary 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.” Of importance also 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 4 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 neither a major focus nor a course grading component.

Course Grounding and Guides Forward

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.

Differences and commonalities: 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 are gaining recognition for their leadership capacities.

Although this course focuses on women in North American communities of faith, similar trends are occurring elsewhere, and students can bring findings in from these.

Year Focus: in reading assigned and lectures is mainly for studies done between 1978-2020: 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 is continually expanding. In illustration:

ALL reading assigned is available ON-LINE in CANVAS  
No purchase of books is required.

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 two other student’s answers on the course discussion course site is expected. 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 4,500 (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.

Note:
*1. THIS IS A PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS AND NEW READING IS NOT YET INCLUDED BELOW.
*2. ALMOST ALL READING IS ALREADY IN CANVAS

COURSE SYLLABUS

After the 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.

NOTE: DATES below NOT CORRECT for the weeks of the 2020 Spring semester

WEEK 1: Jan 16. Introduction to Women’s Place in World Religions
1. Reading: Only the on-line lecture introduction.
2. Students: Introduce themselves online, give some information about their religious backgrounds, and explain 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:
5. 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


Recent Empirical Studies (skim)


WEEK 6: Feb 20. Women’s Roles in US Muslim Communities in of Faith
Reading for themes, similarities and differences


New Empirical Studies (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 13: April 10. Gendered 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 4,500 (or more) 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, and reading from relevant chapters and articles in this syllabus.