

R S 373G
Goddesses in World Religions and Cultures
Spring 2023
Unique #42839

Class Meets: TTH 3:30-5, ETC 2.114

Office: BUR 510

Instructor: Jeff S. Wilson

Office Hours: MWF

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By appointment.

“There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that...You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember...You say there are not words to describe it, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.”

—Monique Wittig

“Ants try to grasp the moon, we the goddess.”

—Ramprasad Sen

Course Description

In this course, we will examine the long and storied history of human contact with feminine divine beings from the mysterious Venus of Willendorf twenty-five thousand years ago to the presence of modern goddesses in contemporary film posters, music videos, and magazine ads.

The course begins with a focus on India, where the reverence and worship of different goddesses has remained a relatively uncontroversial part of religious life for at least three millennia (Unit I). After a couple of case studies in China and Japan, we will retrace the early history of goddesses in Europe and the Middle East, starting with the terracotta ‘goddess’ figurines of the Upper Paleolithic and ending with the imported Isis cult in Rome (Unit II).

The next unit will address the rise of monotheism and the erasure of goddesses in favor of a singular male God (Unit III). Then, the fourth and final unit will cover the emergent Goddess movement in Europe and America, and the several critiques leveled against monotheistic religion by modern feminists—from both inside and outside the tradition (Unit IV).

We will also look at how African and American indigenous goddesses survive in the modern era, in the form of the global worship of the Yoruba goddess Oshun and the enigmatic Virgin of Guadalupe, with her roots in both Christian and Aztec religion. Then, the final week will conclude with a “lightning round,” which will address some of the goddesses we missed along the way.

By the end of this course, students will be able to identify key trends, concepts, and controversies in the historical discourse surrounding both the worship of goddesses and the intersection of religion and gender more broadly.

**The instructor reserves the right to make changes to this syllabus as needed. In the event of such changes, students will be informed via Canvas notification and a revised syllabus will be provided.*

Core Text for Purchase

Kinsley, David R. 1988. *The Goddesses' Mirror*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Grade Distribution

- Attendance: 10%
- Participation: 15%
- Reading Responses: 20%
- Group Presentations and Discussion: 25%
- Final Project: 30%

Assignments

- Attendance: Students will be expected to attend class during all synchronous sessions. Each student will be able to miss 2 class sessions before the absences start to affect their grade. Attendance will be tracked starting Thursday, January 26th.
- Participation: Students will also be expected to complete small assignments to prepare for class discussion and to speak up regularly.
- Reading Responses: Students will be asked to complete **six** 1-3 page (double-spaced) reading responses over the course of the semester. Study questions will be provided on the Canvas page, but students should feel free to pursue other topics related to the readings as well.¹ *Students will have the option to turn in these assignments every week by 5 p.m. on Friday.*
- Group Presentations and Discussion: Small groups of 3-4 students will be asked to sign up to lead particular class sessions, with a 5-10 minute presentation on the day's readings, followed by 5-10 discussion questions for the class.²
- Final Project: Students will be expected to turn in a 6-8 page final project ***before 5 p.m. on Saturday, April 29th***. These projects can take the form of 1) written reports on visits to local places of worship, 2) broad, historical essays on the development of different topics in the study of religion, 3) in-depth literary analyses of certain religious texts or films, or 4) creative projects that engage the substance of the course through visual art, poetry, dance, film, or other media.³ Students are encouraged to discuss their ideas with the instructor.

¹ The Entry Survey from Week 1 counts as one of these weekly responses.

² *Kindly note that students who do not attend class regularly will be asked to submit a 5-page paper in lieu of a presentation.*

³ Creative options do not have to be 6-8 pages, but they do require an additional 5-7 page paper explaining the relevance of the creative work to the subject matter of the class.

Weekly Schedule:

Week 1 (January 10/12): Welcome and Introduction

- Tuesday: No readings.
- Thursday: Mallory Nye on Religion and Gender (Canvas).
- Optional: Paul Hedges on the Politics of Scholarship and Gender (Canvas)

*Unit I: Goddesses in South and East Asia***Week 2 (January 17/19):** India I: Vedic Goddesses and the Female Trinity

- Tuesday: Excerpt from Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton on the Rig Veda (Canvas) and Kinsley on Vedic Goddesses (Canvas)
- Thursday: Kinsley on Parvati (Canvas)
- Optional: Kinsley on Sarasvati (Canvas) and Lakshmi (textbook)

Week 3 (January 24/26): India II: The Struggles of Sita

- Tuesday: Movie Day 1: *Sita Sings the Blues* (YouTube)
- Thursday: Kinsley on Sita (textbook)
- Optional: The Laws of Manu on Women (Canvas)

Week 4 (January 31/February 2): India III: Durga and Kali

- Tuesday: Kinsley on Durga (textbook)
- Thursday: Kinsley on Kali (Canvas)
- Optional: Kinsley on the Mahadevi (Canvas) and Tantric Goddesses (Canvas)

Week 5 (February 7/9): China and Japan: Kuan-Yin and Amaterasu

- Tuesday: Kinsley on Kuan-Yin (Canvas)
- *Presentation 1 on Kuan-Yin*
- Thursday: Kinsley on Amaterasu (Canvas)
- *Presentation 2 on Amaterasu*
- Optional: Hymn to the Twenty-One Taras (Canvas)

*Unit II: Goddesses in Europe and the Middle East***Week 6 (February 14/16):** Mesopotamia: Inanna-Ishtar and Tiamat

- Tuesday: Kinsley on Inanna (textbook)
- Thursday: Stephanie Dalley, "Creation Myth"
- Optional: Excerpts from Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence* (Canvas)

Week 7 (February 21/23): Greece I: Gaia and the Olympians

- Tuesday: Excerpt from Barry Powell, “The Origins of the Gods” (Canvas)
- Thursday: Excerpt from Barry Powell, “Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena” (Canvas)
- *Presentation 3 on Athena*
- Optional: Kinsley on Athena and Golden Aphrodite (textbook), more excerpts from Barry Powell (Canvas)

Week 8 (February 28/March 2): Greece II and the Arrival of Isis

- Tuesday: Excerpt from Barry Powell, “Demeter and Related Myths” (Canvas)
- Thursday: Kinsley on Isis (textbook)
- *Presentation 4 on Isis.*

*Unit III: The Rise of God***Week 9 (March 7/9):** God’s Wife: Asherah

- Tuesday: Movie Day 2: *Seder-Masochism* (YouTube)
- Thursday: Raphael Patai on Asherah (Canvas)
- *Presentation 5 on Asherah*
- Optional: Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, “The Goddess in Exodus” (Canvas)

Week 10 (March 13-17): SPRING BREAK

- *Enjoy!*

Week 11 (March 21/23): Women Without Goddesses: Mary and Lilith

- Tuesday: Kinsley on Mary (textbook)
- *Presentation 6 on Mary*
- Thursday: Raphael Patai on Lilith (Canvas)
- *Presentation 7 on Lilith*
- Optional: Aleister Crowley, “The Cry of the 3rd Aethyr” (Canvas) and Judith Plaskow, “The Coming of Lilith (Canvas)

*Unit IV: The Rebirth of the Goddess***Week 12 (March 28/30):** Feminist Spirituality I: The Discourse of Thealogy

- Tuesday: Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess” (Canvas)
- Thursday: Melissa Raphael, “The Goddess” (Canvas)

Week 13 (April 4/6): Feminist Spirituality II: Christian Feminist Theology

- Tuesday: Excerpt 1 from Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*
- Thursday: Excerpt 2 from Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*

Week 14 (April 11/13): Goddesses in the New World

- Tuesday: Excerpts from Joseph Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, *Ọṣun Across the Waters* (Canvas)
- Thursday: Rosemary Radford Ruether on Tonantzin-Guadalupe (Canvas)
- *Presentation 5 on the Virgin of Guadalupe or Santa Muerte.*
- Optional: Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba on Santa Muerte (Canvas)

Week 15 (April 18/20): Lightning Round and Farewell

- Optional Readings: TBD.

*****Final Projects due Saturday, April 29th at 5 p.m.**

Disability and Access (D&A)

Students with documented disabilities who require academic accommodations should contact the Disability and Access (D&A) office:

<https://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/>

Academic Dishonesty

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Office of the Dean. If you are worried that you may be committing plagiarism accidentally, please contact me and/or see the following guide:

<https://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/conduct/academicintegrity.php>

When in doubt, cite your sources!

Religious Holidays

Per University policy, students will have the opportunity to make up without penalty any work missed due to religious holidays—provided they provide notice at least 14 days in advance.

Commitment to Free and Open Inquiry

In agreement with the unanimous decision of the UT System Board of Regents, the instructor of this course endorses the University of Chicago’s Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression, also known as the “Chicago Statement.”

Though special exceptions must necessarily be made for illegal activities such as threats, harassment, and violations of privacy, the Chicago Statement nevertheless maintains that “without a vibrant commitment to free and open inquiry, a university ceases to be a university.”

In particular, I would like to draw your attention to the following paragraph:

“Of course, the ideas of different members of the University community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although

the University greatly values civility, and although all members of the University community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.”

The statement can be read in full at:

<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>