

Religious Studies

Also relevant for History, Political Science, Arts, Cultural Anthropology and other socio-cultural disciplines, Theology

Course: Religious Studies

Group of courses: Humanities

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Course objectives:

Students should be familiarised with the methodological and theoretical principles of women's studies, men's studies and gender research in the field of religious studies. First of all, it is intended to put prevailing paradigms into question and to develop the competence for critical analysis of gender concepts in religious traditions (e.g. polarised gender roles and heteronormativity) and implicit gender constructions in research and theory building concerning religions. Another objective is the revision of current data of the history of religions relying on the broad empirical results of gender research that are available today. Selected comparative and systematic issues reveal interreligious coherences relating to gender-specific stereotypes, norms, ideologies and symbolisms, but also specifics of particular religious traditions. Students should be enabled to recognise the interactions between systems of religious symbols and gender relations, which stretch from the legitimisation of hierarchic dominance relationships to egalitarian tendencies or even the dissolution of the man/woman dichotomy. Eventually, students should be encouraged to independently integrate the category gender into their own analysis, depiction, interpretation and theory building as part of the study of religions – just like other differentiations, such as social class, age or ethnicity.

Teaching content/subject-specific gender studies content:

Description of subject areas:

Questions and issues of women's, men's and gender studies should be included both in the history of religions and in the comparative systematic study of religions.

In the field of the history of religions, the initial focus is on:

- status and roles of women, men, and other genders
- various aspects of the images of women and men, and images that are related to a "third" gender, from stereotypes (such as the seductive woman, the heroic man, the womanish man, etc.) and ideals (the clean virgin, the steadfast ascetic) to the mythical images of women, men, and transgenders that appear in religious symbolism
- women as religious subjects in different religions and religious traditions, both past and present (so far, the majority of research has dealt with the religious life and thought of men)
- dealing with the traditional androcentric representation of humans as religious beings: So far, research has predominantly focused on the so-called homo religious, who – at a closer glance however – turns out to be the vir religiosus and does not include women as religious subjects. The focus is not only on compensating deficits, but also on extending traditional concepts referring to the man as a religious being (e.g. masculine sacral values and qualities such as stability, order, strength, size, battle, sacrifice, hunt, light, transcendency) by revealing masculine roles and images as gender constructions shaped by the culture and the historical period to which they belong.
- interactions between the various sexual gender relations and the respective religious context: Different value systems and guidelines exist in the different religions when it comes to sexual gender relations. These influence how sexuality is dealt with and viewed by society in practice. Here, for example, the role of religions in the normalisation of heterosexual relationships, in the (varying degrees of) rejection and punishment of homosexuality or in the development of gender identities is discussed. In the context of patriarchal social orders, male control of female sexuality and fertility is legitimised by religion and supported by various restrictions on women

(e.g. the ideal of virginity, dress regulations, restriction of movement). There is a widespread integrative perspective on heterosexuality that sees it as primarily for the purposes of reproduction, but also to some extent as a value in itself. However, in the ascetic-monastic traditions found in many religions, sexuality is seen – mainly from the perspective of the man in search of salvation – as a barrier to finding salvation. It is thus rejected, at least for the religious elite. Women are branded stereotypically as sexual temptresses, and frequently demonised.

- Differences between religious and socially lived gender equality: The socio-cultural reality of male/female relationships is either confirmed and legitimised or – usually with regard to religion – rejected or dissolved by the religions. In this context, concepts on religious gender equality have emerged, which, however, have rarely been translated into social equality. However, religious reform movements and feminist theologies have been following these concepts since the 19th century.
- Gender relations as a religious metaphor: The divine couple, which either reflects or reverses the respective dominant gender relations, is part of the anthropomorphic religious symbolism of many religions. The relationship between man and woman is widely used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and man. Thus man (or woman) is seen as the bride or spouse of a deity personified as a man, or as a (male) human being who encounters a goddess manifested in a concrete woman. Both variants can lead to a symbolic or even bodily manifested gender reversal among the believers and may modify or relativise social gender relations. Furthermore, divine images and respective myths, which are characterised by a variety of transgender phenomena, exist in many religious traditions.

Comparative systematic studies of religions examine questions and issues in a way closely linked with the history of religions. It is therefore likely to integrate the teaching content outlined above (i.e. gender images, roles and relations) into:

- an anthropology of religions dealing with the various myths of the origin of human beings, statements about the nature and the special dignity of human beings as well as the objective of human existence from a differentiating gender perspective
- specific key questions referring to issues with gender-specific attributions such as the body and spirituality, or birth and death
- religious theory concepts in which gender-specific aspects play a role with regard to the emergence and development of religions, religious socialisation, symbols for God, etc. Although these coherences have not yet been adequately dealt with in research, they can be integrated into teaching by critically questioning certain ideas (such as the typification of the religious man as an ascetic hero in search of immortality or the idea of prehistoric hunting as the origin of religion and incarnation following the often cited theses of Mircea Eliade and Walter Burkert).

Methodical and theoretical approaches:

The fundamental methodological debate on objective and value-free research affects both the history of religions and the comparative systematic study of religions. The insight that pure objective research does not exist at all is constitutive for women's studies, men's studies, and gender research. Following different lines of research like Critical Theory, Constructivism, and Postcolonialism the deconstruction of the claim of objectivity belongs to the core of feminist theory building. The gender ideology of the bourgeois society of the 19th century is characterised by bipolar opposites. According to this scheme the line is drawn between science and religion, rationality and emotionality. From the viewpoint of science, the disembodied rationality is independent and objective and takes the position of an epistemic acontextuality. Religion and morality belong to the female inner zone contrasted by the analytic,

scientific, male gaze in the outer zone. Contrary to other disciplines like Cultural Anthropology or History many representatives of the study of religions plead for a strictly objective, distanced and value-free science. Up to now there is only a slight awareness that the exalted claim of objectivity most often functions as a mask for particular interests, values and commitments.

Religion and gender are connected in many ways. Religious traditions, ideas, symbols and practices are not gender-neutral but gender-specific. Gender roles, images, stereotypes, ideals and the self-conception of women and men in a particular culture are in constant interaction with the religious and philosophical heritage of that culture. Moreover, traditional research and the description of religions are predominantly carried out from an androcentric perspective; the classical outlines of theory building in religious research are non-reflectively premised on specific gender models. Women's studies, men's studies, and gender research in the study of religions take account of the category gender in the collection, description, interpretation and representation of data and shed light on the relationships and interconnections between religion and gender.

Fields of action and aspects of professionalization:

In modern multi-religious societies, gender-related religious studies currently have strong practical significance in the media, intercultural education, and in the context of migrant integration.

Therefore, the following aspects arise with regard to professional implementation

- knowledge and reflection of normative gender concepts and their significance for socio-cultural identity processes, emphasising egalitarian tendencies, which are partly present in religious traditions
- an awareness of religiously motivated and/or legitimised forms of gender discrimination and sexual violence that counteract cultural relativistic arguments
- gender competence in integration work that allows dealing with the practical challenges of religious-cultural gender ideologies and recognises the needs of gender-sensitive and gender-equality policies

Integration of gender studies content into the curriculum:

The gender perspective should be integrated into all subjects and topic areas, as it cuts across them all. Whenever religion comes up, the gender-specific aspects of the questions, topics, concepts and theories should be debated.

Unless women's studies, men's studies, and gender research are integrated into the subject-specific content of the study of religions, we recommend offering a module on gender. This module might consist of the following elements:

1. "Women in the history of religions" (focusing on the status and roles of women in religions, especially the role of women as religious subjects, i.e. the religious life and thought of women in relation to the religious life and thought of men)
2. "An overview of gender and gender relations in religions" (gender diversity, sexual norms, sexual violence, metaphorical gender relations in interaction with real gender relations)
3. One or more module elements on selected systematic questions (e.g. "The anthropology of religions", "The image of God and gender", "Body, spirituality and gender", "Sexual violence in religion – a comparison", "Religions and transgenders")

4. "Religions and gender": methodological and theoretical principles and concepts of women's studies, men's studies, and gender research in the field of religious studies

Degree Stage:

For the most part, the content should be taught as part of the Bachelor's degree (module elements 1 and 2, and the introduction to module element 4). Module elements on systematic questions (module element 3) and the continuation of module element 4 could be integrated into the Master's courses.

Basic Literature/Recommended Reading:

- Paula M. Cooney/William R. Eakin/Jay B. McDaniel (ed.): After Patriarchy. Feminist Transformations of the World Religions. Maryknoll/NY 1994.
- Ursula King (ed.): Religion and Gender. Oxford 1995.
- Ursula King et al., Gender and Religion, in: Lindsay Jones (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion 5, Detroit et al. 2005, S. 3295–3419.
- Ursula King/Tina Beattie (ed.): Religion, Gender and Diversity. Cross-Cultural Perspectives. London 2004.
- Anna-Katharina Höpflinger/Ann Jeffers/Daria Pezzoli Olgiati (ed.): Handbuch Gender und Religion. Göttingen 2008.
- Susanne Lanwerd/Márcia Elisa Moser (ed.): Frau – Gender – Queer. Gendertheoretische Ansätze in der Religionswissenschaft. Würzburg 2010.
- Christoph Elsas/Edith Franke/Angela Standhartinger (ed.): Geschlechtergerechtigkeit: Herausforderung der Religionen. Berlin 2011.
- Birgit Heller (ed.): Religion, Transformation and Gender. Journal of Religion and Transformation, J-RaT 5 (2017). Online: http://www.v-r.de/de/religion_transformation_and_gender/c-3166

Journals:

- Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion | [Website](#)
- Religion and Gender (e-Journal) | [Website](#)