



RELG 376: Holy Women

Instructor: Dr. K. Vehlow

Office hours: Monday, 1 -3 p.m.

Over the centuries, holy women have inspired the faithful and even the not-so religious. Holiness has taken many forms and inspired ideas of piety, martyrdom, monasticism, mysticism, and social activism. By examining holy women from various traditions and times, we will look at the ways in which particular communities have understood, practiced, and endorsed essential elements of holiness.

We will begin by studying Peter Brown's classic *Cult of the Saints* and by thinking about what it means to be holy and, furthermore, what it means to be a *woman* and holy. We continue with what I have called "model holy women", i.e. women who became standards for holiness in their respective traditions, such as the Biblical and midrashic Sara, the Virgin Mary for Christianity, and Khadija for Islam. We will also look at women who were holy to more than one tradition such as Hagar and Mary/Maryam. We will read the books of a number of particularly outspoken women scholars, namely the great Doctor of the Church Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, and Rabi'a. We will also look at modern women such as Mother Teresa and the mystic Fatima Yashrutiyah and Edith Stein, we will close this class by thinking about the function of holiness in the modern secular world.

You will need access to the **Bible** and the Qur'an.

For the Bible, I recommend the [New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Augmented Third Edition](#), New Revised Standard Version. OUP, 2007.

For the **Qur'an**, I recommend Marmaduke W. Pickthall, [The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: Explanatory Translation](#). Amana Publications, 1996. A good online resource can be found [on the website](#) of the [Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought](#), Amman, Jordan.

Your grade consists of the following:

Participation, incl. weekly 1-page position papers and one in-class presentation:	30%
First paper (5 pages):	30%
Second paper:	40%

Class objectives:

- **The goal of this course is to investigate the specific meaning and function of the portrayal of holiness through analysis of the writings of and about holy women dating from the Bible to our times.**
- Analyze primary texts in terms of their specific historical and religious messages.

- Analyze the impact of contemporary cultural, political, and religious ideals have impacted ideas of holiness.
- Articulate how holy women have been portrayed in their own words, in contemporary writings, as well as in art and music.
- Use of the library and of relevant bibliographic tools.
- Communicate effectively in written work and oral presentations using college-level English.

About class. Depending on the topic, anywhere from a quarter to most of the class session is devoted to discussion and a good portion of your grade depends on your participation. Participation is gauged in a variety of ways: attendance, asking questions and your actual participation in class discussion. *It is therefore essential that you are prepared and bring along your reading material.* Students who consistently come to class unprepared or without their texts will be penalized. In this class, you will also be expected to hand in weekly writing assignments, mostly on-page position papers.

Completion of the course. Any student who does not hand in at least ten of the short writing assignments and the two papers *will automatically fail the course.* Any student who misses three or *more classes* will be downgraded by a full letter grade. Attendance is taken starting in the third class. It is your responsibility to make sure that your presence is noted.

Short assignments. There will be eleven brief assignments in this class, out of which you are expected to complete ten.

First paper. This is a five-paper research paper on a holy woman of your choice. If you are choosing someone we have not dealt with in class, please clear your topic with me in advance. **The first paper is due on October 8 in class.**

Final paper. You have two options for the final. **Option 1 : Write a second 5 page paper** on a different figure *or* **Option 2: Extend your first paper to an 8-10 page paper,** make sure to revise your paper and to include new material. **The final paper is due on Friday, December 5 in class.**

Plan ahead: It is always better to let me know about a potential problem in advance rather than to come to me at the last minute. I am quite lenient about extensions arranged in advance; I am not at all lenient about late submissions.



Contacting the instructor: Under most circumstances, the best way to reach me is via email.

A word on intellectual honesty: Any violation of the regulations upheld at the USC-Columbia, including acts of plagiarism or cheating, will be dealt with on an individual basis according to the severity of the misconduct. If you are uncertain what constitutes plagiarism, please consult me before handing in written work.

Class Schedule

Texts marked with * are available on our course website.

Introduction

Friday, August 22

Monday, August 25

Peter Brown's *Cult of the Saints*, pp. ix-22.

Wednesday, August 27

Peter Brown's *Cult of the Saints*, pp. 23-68.

Post two discussion questions with brief answers online by Tuesday, 5 p.m.

Friday, August 29

Peter Brown's *Cult of the Saints*, pp. 69-127.

Monday, September 1 **Labor Day, no class**

Wednesday, September 3

Gender and holiness*

Models of holiness: holy Jewish women

Friday, September 5: Sara

Genesis 12-23

Locate the Anchor Bible Dictionary in the library and find references for three of the following figures: Sara, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hagar or Esther. Copy and note the reference according to the Chicago Manual of Style and post online until Thursday, 5 p.m. Do not forget to read the articles you chose!

Monday, September 8: Sara & Hagar

Genesis 16; 21

Midrashic literature on Sara*

Post two discussion questions with brief answers online by Sunday, 5 p.m.



Wednesday, September 10: Rebecca

Genesis 24-28, 35

Midrashic literature on Rebecca*

Friday, September 12: Leah & Rachel

Genesis 29-35

Midrashic literature on Leah & Rachel*



Monday, September 15: Esther

The Book Esther

*Esther Rabba (Selections)**

Wednesday, September 17: (cont.)

Models of holiness: holy Christian women



Friday, September 19: Mary, the mother of Jesus

Luke 1:26-56

Matthew 1:18- 2:23// Luke 2

Mark 6:1-6//Matthew 13:54-58//Luke 4:16-30

Mark 15:33-16:9//Matthew 27:45-28:10//Luke 23:44-24:12//John 19:25-20:18

Acts 1:14

Monday, September 22: Mary, the mother of Jesus

Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*. 7-21; 55-65; 153-163; 215-233

Wednesday, September 24: Mary & Martha

Luke 10:38-42

John 11:1-44

Reid, "Pitting Martha against Mary." Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, 51-76.*



Friday, September 26: Mary Magdalen

Luke 7:36-50; Luke 8:2-3

Mark 15:33-16:9//Matthew 27:45-28:10//Luke 23:44-24:12//John 19:25-20:18

[*Gospel of Peter*](#)

Monday, September 29: Perpetua

[*The martyrdom of Perpetua*](#)

[*Diocletian Edicts against the Christians*](#)

[*Tertullian's address to martyrs*](#)

Wednesday, October 1 **Rosh ha-Shanah, no class**

Models of holiness: Holy Muslim women

Friday, October 3: Khadija

Selections.*

Valerie Hoffman. *Muslim Sainthood, Women, and the Legend of Sayyida Nafisa*. 107-144.

Monday, October 6: Aisha

Surah 24:11-20

Selections*

Elsadda, Hoda. "Discourses on women's biographies and cultural identity: twentieth-century representations of the life of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr ". *Feminist Studies* 2001/27 37-64*

Wednesday, October 8: Fatima **First paper due in class**

Selections*

Friday, October 10 **Fall break, no class**



Monday, October 13: Zaynab bint Ali

Surah 33:37-40

Darwish, L. "Images of Muslim women: `Aisha, Fatima, and Zaynab bint `Ali in contemporary gender discourse". *McGill Journal of Middle East Studies / Revue d'Etudes du Moyen-Orient de McGill* 4 (1996) 93-132.*

Women holy to more than one tradition

Monday, October 20: Hagar

Review Genesis 16; 21

Selections*

Firestone, Reuven, "Difficulties in keeping a beautiful wife: the legend of Abraham and Sarah in Jewish and Islamic tradition." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42,2 (1991) 196-214.

Michel, Thomas. "Hagar," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16,2 (2005) 99-105.

Wednesday, October 22: Hagar (cont.)

Friday, October 24: Mary/Maryam

Review New Testament Mary material

Surat al-Maryam (Surah 19)

Surah 3:31-49, 4:156, 5:75, 12:109,15:43, 21:7; 21:91, 22:75, 23:50, 66:9-10.

Smith, J. I. "The Virgin Mary in Islamic tradition and commentary". *Maryam, mother of Jesus. Muslim World* (1989) 79 Issue iii-iv, p161-187.*

Monday, October 27: Mary/Maryam (cont.)

Medieval holy women

Wednesday, October 29: Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Catherine's [Dialogue](#) Selections*

Kiely, "The Saint who lost her head"*

Friday, October 31: Catherine of Siena (cont.)



Monday, November 3: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

[Some poetry](#) by Hildegard

Boyce-Tillman, June. "Hildegard of Bingen: A Woman for our time". *Feminist Theology* 22 (1999) 25-41.

Wednesday, November 5: Hildegard of Bingen (cont.)

Friday, November 7: Dolce (12th c.)

Selections*

Baskin, Judith R. "Dolce of Worms: The Lives and Deaths of an Exemplary Medieval Jewish Woman and her Daughters," in Lawrence Fine, ed., *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 429-437.

Monday, November 10: Rabi'a (717-801)

Selections*

Ford, Heidi. "Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions"*

Wednesday, November 12: Rabi'a (cont.)

Holy women in modernity



Friday, November 14: Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)

["Ain't I a woman?"](#)

[The Narrative of Sojourner Truth](#) (Selections)

Monday, November 17: Sojourner Truth (cont.)



Wednesday, November 19: Edith Stein (1891-1942)

A letter by [Edith Stein to Pope Pius XI](#)

[Two poems](#) by Edith Stein

Edith Stein on the [Love of the Cross](#)

Edith Stein on [Feminine Vocations](#)

Rosenblatt, Eloise. "Canonizing Edith Stein and recognizing Catholic Antisemitism ". in *"Good news" after Auschwitz?*, p 45-68. Macon, Georgia : Mercer University Press, 2001.

Berkman, Joyce Avrech. "The German-Jewish symbiosis in flux: Edith Stein's complex national/ethnic identity". *Contemplating Edith Stein*, p 170-198. Notre Dame, Ind : Univ of Notre Dame Pr, 2006.

Friday, November 21: Edith Stein (cont.)



Friday, November 24: Mother Theresa (1910-1997)

Selections*

Cahill, Lisa Sowle. "Mother Teresa: postmodern saint or Christian classic?" *Criterion* 39/3 (2000) 18-25,37.

Zaleski, Carol. "The dark night of Mother Teresa". *First Things* 133 (2003) 24-27.*

Wednesday, November 26 **Thanksgiving break, no class**

Friday, November 28 **Thanksgiving break, no class**



Monday, December 1: Fatima Yashrutiyyah

Selections*

Yashrutiyyah, Al-Sayyedah Fatimah al-. "Contemplation and action: the sufi way." *Contemplation and action in world religions*, p 212-217. Houston, Texas : Rothko Chapel, 1977.

Wednesday, December 3: Fatima Yashrutiyyah (cont.)

Friday, December 5: Conclusion **Final paper due in class**

T.B.A.