

Transing Religion: Gender Beyond the Binary

Course Syllabus

Instructor: Siufung Law



“Transmasc Saint Sebastian” by Costa Rica-based artist Dani Jimenez of *And Her Saints*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This advanced undergraduate course explores how transgender, nonbinary, Two-Spirit, and other gender-expansive people have lived, theorized, and transformed religion across time and traditions. Even within broader LGBTQ religious conversations, trans and gender-expansive people are often marginalized and their histories obscured; and this course recenters those lives, archives, and

theologies as its primary focus. Bringing doctrinal texts, ethnographies, archival materials, creative work, and digital media into conversation, we explore how religious communities have imagined gender beyond the assumption that everyone is simply male or female. We pay particular attention to traditions and movements in which trans and gender nonconforming people appear as saints, bodhisattvas, ritual specialists, activists, doulas, and everyday practitioners, and we trace how religious ideas shape trans identities, activism, and spiritual care.

Moving through modules on method, ontology, sacred figures, law and politics, and everyday practices, we will investigate concepts of nondualist philosophies, Indigenous gender sovereignties, trans and intersex saints, trans rights movement, Black trans prayers and theology, and resistant spiritualities, among others. Throughout the semester, we will ask: In what ways do different religious traditions already speak to lives that do not fit binary gender categories? How do religious concepts, institutions, and practices participate in the production of trans identities, politics, and everyday ethics, and how might they be mobilized to imagine trans religious futures?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify core questions and debates at the intersection of trans studies and religious studies, and explain how “transing” functions as a critical method for rethinking categories such as religion, secularism, theology, and embodiment.
2. Explain how multiple religious traditions conceptualize self, body, and gender, and assess how these frameworks constrain, recognize, or creatively exceeds binary gender categories.
3. Analyze case studies of trans, nonbinary, Two-Spirit, and gender variant figures and communities, such as saints, bodhisattvas, doulas, and practitioners, and evaluate how religious ideas and institutions shape trans identities, law/rights, and everyday spiritual care.
4. Draw on course readings, archives, and creative materials to develop and present a constructive, tradition-specific or comparative vision of trans religious futures that respond to the current conditions and articulate more livable worlds for trans and gender-expansive people.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Participation and in-class exercises: 25%

This is a seminar-style course, emphasizing active participation in discussions, close reading, and analysis of selected texts and media. At the start of the semester, you will receive a personalized file with your name and pronouns on the front. Each class, as part of attendance, you will write 1-2 lines in this file about how you are arriving to class (this might be about the readings, your energy level, or anything else you want me to know), and I will respond briefly in writing as well. You

are expected to arrive on time, fully prepared, and ready to engage with your classmates. I will take attendance using your file.

In each module, specific in-class exercises will be implemented to help you actively practice the methods and concepts we are studying. Completion of these activities, which is measured by your active, good-faith participation and effort rather than “getting it right,” will count toward your overall participation and in-class exercises grade.

Module 1: *concept-mapping exercise*: In small groups, you will build a digital map that links key terms. Prompt each group to add 2-3 examples from readings under each term.

Module 2: *comparative grid exercise*: In small groups, you will build a shared comparative grid to see how different religious traditions talk about self, body, gender, and community. We will then discuss the grid as a class, focusing on patterns and tensions that emerge across these traditions.

Module 3: *Icon-reading lab exercise*: Bring 3-4 images and we will do a “slow looking” exercise to annotate visual details of the religious icons or figures and connect them to the readings.

Module 4: *policy storyboard exercise*: In groups, you will build a storyboard of one legal or political scenario. Each “panel” should illustrate how religious discourse, state action, trans/community responses interact and shape the political situation. Your storyboard should make visible the chain of events and the lived consequences.

Module 5: In-class collaborative “Imagine Trans Religious Futures” workshop (more details below)

Short written reflections: 15%

Over the semester you will write three short reflections (300-500 words each), each one connected to a different module. For each reflection, you will choose one week from that module and use general guiding questions on the syllabus to frame your response. You will upload your reflections on Canvas one week after each module ends. Rather than responding to fixed prompt, you will decide which readings, examples, or in-class conversations to engage and how they speak to the course’ core questions. Reflections will be evaluated on thoughtfulness, clarity, and engagement with the texts and guiding questions.

Wellness Workshop: 10%

During Week 7, each of you will sign up for 15 minutes one-to-one wellness check-in with me. This is not a therapy session and will not focus on grading. Instead, we will reflect on how the course materials are landing for you emotionally and intellectually, check in on workload, access needs and any concerns about class dynamics, and identify one concrete practice of care (for yourself or the class) you want to try for the rest of the semester.

Collective art project: Imagining Trans Religious Futures: 15%

In the final class, the entire class will collaborate to create a shared art piece (be it a large poster, a collective zine, or a modular digital exhibit) that imagines the qualities of trans religious futures. Each of you will choose a thread from the course and design 1-2 “tiles” or “pages” for the collective piece. Your tile can be visual, poetic, or mixed-media, and should respond to questions like: what does care look like in your imagined trans religious futures? What does authority look like—who gets to speak, leads, or decides? And what practices, rituals, or spaces do you see?

During Week 12-14, you will begin to develop your tile; in Week 15, we will assemble them into one collective work during class. Together, we will also write a short artist’s statement explaining how the piece draws from specific traditions and readings, and how it responds to the course’s core questions about gender beyond the binary and the role of religion in trans lives. Your work will be evaluated on evidence of engagement with course materials, the quality of your collaborative process, the clarity and richness of the futures you imagine, and the thoughtfulness of the written statement connecting back and expanding the project beyond to the course.

Final creative project or research paper: 35%

For your final assessment, you may choose either a traditional research paper or a creative/critical project. The research paper (approximately 2000-2500 words) should offer a historically grounded analysis of a case relevant to the course, such as a particular community, figure, movement, or debate. It must engage at least one religious tradition and one trans or gender expansive community, draw on at least two course readings and two additional sources, and address at least one core course question.

Alternatively, you may complete a creative/critical project. The creative component could take the form of a 8-10 page zine, a 6-8 page comics or illustration sequence, a 8-10 minute audio or video piece, a small curated exhibit of images with captions, or a set of prayers, liturgies, or rituals inspired by course themes. This will be accompanied by a 1000-1500 word critical essay that situate your creative work in relation to at least two course readings and two additional sources. In that essay, you will identify the religious tradition(s) and community(ies) you are engaging, explain how your project responds to or extends specific theological, religious, or spiritual insights from the course.

WEEKLY COURSE SCHEDULE

The weekly course schedule below is a working plan; it is subject to change as our conversations, interests, and collective needs develop over the semester. We will meet once a week for a two-hour session, and any adjustments to readings, topics, or activities will be announced in advance and updated on the online syllabus.

Week 1 Introduction	
	Watch TED talk video of delfin bautista, “Sacred TRANSgressions”, link

Module 1: Mapping Trans/Religion studies as a field

Guiding Questions: How has “religion” been defined in ways that render trans lives invisible or impossible? What happens when we take trans and gender nonconforming experience as a starting point for defining what counts as religion, rather than an exception? How do trans studies and religious studies each benefit from, and resist, being brought into conversation with each other?

Week 2 Trans in Religious Studies, Religion in Trans Studies

1. Strassfeld, Max. “[Transing Religious Studies](#).” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 37-53.
2. Strassfeld, Max and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza. “[Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion](#).” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 283-296.

Week 3 Transing as Method

1. Wilcox, Melissa M. “[Theory in the Interstices: Queering and Transing Religious Studies, Religioning Trans and Queer Studies](#).” *Temenos Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 56, no. 1 (2020):119-146.
 2. Henderson-Espinoza, Robyn. “[Transing Religion: Moving Beyond the logic of the \(hetero\) norm of binaries](#).” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 88-92.
- Recommended: Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore. “[Introduction: trans-, Trans, or Transgender?](#)” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3/ 4 (2008): 11-22.

Module 2:Trans Religious Ontology

Guiding Questions: How do different traditions (Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Indigenous, etc.) imagine “self,” “body,” and “gender,” and where do we see limitations in the binary? In what ways can religious doctrines be used to affirm or contest trans embodiments? What kinds of being and becoming do these religious ontologies make possible for gender-expansive people?

Week 4 Trans Theology Beyond the Binary

1. Sabia-Tanis, Justin. “Transgendered body Theology”, “Transgendered Theological Thoughts” in *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018.
2. Joy Ladin, “[Excerpts from The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective](#).” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 409-417.
3. Joy Ladin, “Reading between the Binaries” in *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*. USA: Brandeis University Press, 2018.
4. Excerpts from SVARA’s Teshuva Writing Collective from The Trans Halakha Project, [link](#)

Week 5 Buddhist and Daoist Concepts of nondualist philosophies	
	1. McClintock, Sara. "Gendered Bodies of Illusion: Finding a Somatic Method in the Ontic Madness of Emptiness" in <i>Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars</i>. edited by J. Makransky and R. Jackson, 261- 274. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999. 2. Law, Siufung. "Transgender Trouble: gender transcendence in self-ethnographic genderqueer experiences in Hong Kong." <i>Inter-Asia Cultural Studies</i> 22, no. 2 (2021):196-214. 3. Em von Euw, "Coming Home to Themselves: The Resonance of Non-self and Impermanence for Transgender Buddhists," in <i>Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices</i> edited by Kevin Manders and Elizabeth Marston, 235-250. USA: North Atlantic Books, 2019. 4. Huang, Peter I-min. "Nondualist Philosophies and Trans Literature." in <i>The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature</i>, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp, 83-92. Routledge, 2016. Recommended: Kalmanson, Leah. "Buddhism and bell hooks: Liberatory Aesthetics and the Radical Subjectivity of No-Self." <i>Hypatia</i> 27, no. 4 (2012): 810-827.
Week 6 Indigenous Spiritualities: Challenging Colonial Gender Systems	
	1. Robinson, Margaret. "Two-spirit identity in a time of gender fluidity." <i>Journal of Homosexuality</i> 67, no. 12 (2020): 1657-1690. 2. Morgensen, Scott. "Conditions of Critique: Responding to Indigenous Resurgence within Gender Studies." <i>Transgender Studies Quarterly</i> 3, no. 1-2 (2016): 192-201.
Week 7 Wellness Check-in Workshop	
	One-to-one Wellness check-in workshop with Siufung
Module 3: Transcending Religious Figures/Icons	
<i>Guiding Questions:</i> How have religious icons and figures been used to enforce, complicate, or subvert gender norms? What does it mean to claim a religious figure as "trans," "nonbinary," or "gender-variant," and what are the risks and possibilities of that move? How do visual and narrative representations of these figures shape contemporary trans and intersex religious imaginations?	
Week 8 Trans Buddhist icons	
	1. Bailey, Cathryn. "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin." <i>Hypatia</i> 24, no. 3 (2009): 178-196. 2. Wawrytko, Sandra A. "Buddhism: Philosophy Beyond Gender." <i>Journal of Chinese Philosophy</i> 36, no.2 (2021): 293-312.

3. Citlas, Cypress. "Gender and Emptiness", in <i>Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices</i> edited by Kevin Manders and Elizabeth Marston, 53-56. USA: North Atlantic Books, 2019.
Week 9 Transfigured Holiness: Trans and Intersex Saints
1. Bychowski, M. W. "The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints: Imago Dei and imitation Christi in the Life of St Marinos the Monk." In <i>Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography</i>, edited by Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, 245-266. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 2. Libby, C. "The Historian and the Sexologist: Revisiting the 'Transvestite Saint'." <i>Transgender Studies Quarterly</i> 8, no. 2 (2021): 172-187. 3. Wolff, Michelle. "A diptych reading of Christ's transfiguration: trans and intersex aesthetics reveal baptismal identity." <i>Theology & sexuality</i> 25, no. 1-2 (2019): 98-110.
Module 4: Trans politics, law and the role of religion
<i>Guiding Questions:</i> How do religious narratives, institutions, and activists shape trans law and policy in different contexts? In what ways do trans movements mobilize, resist, or strategically accommodate religious discourses in their political struggles? How do we analyze the entanglement of religion, secularism, and the state without collapsing trans people into either purely "secular" or purely "religious" subjects?
Week 10 Religion and Trans Politics
1. Rodriguez, Diego Garcia. "Religion and Trans Politics." In <i>The Palgrave Handbook of Queer and Trans Studies in Religion</i>, edited by Wilcox, M.M. 123-144. Palgrave Macmillan, 2025. 2. Savci, Evren. "Transing Religious Studies: Beyond the secular/religious binary." <i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i> 34, no. 1 (2018): 63-68.
Week 11 Trans Rights, Religiosities and the State
1. Nagar, Ila and Debanuj DasGuspta. "Transgender Rights and Religiosities in India: NALSA Judgment and Beyond." <i>GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies</i> 29, no. 3 (2023): 329-352. 2. Pamment, Claire. "Performing Piety in Pakistan's Transgender Rights movement." <i>Transgender Studies Quarterly</i> 6, no. 3 (2019): 297-314.
Module 5: Trans Religious and Spiritual Everyday Practices
<i>Guiding Questions:</i> How do trans people craft everyday spiritual practices in the midst of hostile or ambivalent religious environments? What forms of care, community, and ethical life emerge from Black trans spiritualities, trans Catholic practices, and other resistant theologies? What qualities define the trans religious futures we want to imagine (what kinds of communities, rituals, archives, and theologies), and how do we begin to materialize these futures?

Week 12 Trans Doulas, Care, and Embodied Practice	
	1. Yam, Sharon and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz. "Against Gender Essentialism: Reproductive Justice Doulas and Gender Inclusivity in Pregnancy and Birth Discourse." <i>Women's Studies in Communication</i> 46, no. 1 (2023): 1-22. 2. Lawliet, Eli. The Gender Doula (Read articles from The Blog) 3. Colkitt, EM. "Meet the Doulas Providing Inclusive Care to Queer Pregnant People", link
Week 13 Black Trans Spiritualities	
	1. J Mase III and Lady Dane figueoroa Edidi. Excerpts from <i>The Black Trans Prayerbook</i>. 2. "A new theology of survival for the Black trans community," documentary video 3. Reign, Eva. "The Black Trans Prayer Book is More important now than ever," link
Week 14 Resistant Theologies in everyday life	
	1. Goh, Joseph. "Malaysian Roman Catholic transgender men, simultaneous failures in gender and religion, and customisations of spirituality and ethical living." <i>Religions</i> 14, no. 2(2023): 1-16. 2. J Mass III, "Casting Prayers for Survival: Towards a Black Trans Theology," link
Week 15 Conclusion: Imagining Trans Futures through Religion	
	1. Manders, Kevin. "Becoming Whole Just to Let It Go." In <i>Transcending: Trans Buddhist Voices</i> edited by Kevin Manders and Elizabeth Marston, 161-167. USA: North Atlantic Books, 2019. 2. Taj M. Smith, "The Future of Faith From a Trans-Man's Perspective," link 3. Micah Bazant, "Timtum: A trans Jew Zine", link Recommended: Avivit, "How 'Timtum: A Trans Jew Zine' taught me to be a sexy, smart, creative, productive Jewish Genderqueer", link <i>In-class:</i> collaborative "Imagine Trans Religious Futures" workshop

GENERAL COURSE POLICIES:

Classroom behaviors: Please arrive on time having read the required readings for that day. I do not tolerate using your electronic reading device (laptops, tablet, etc) for purposes other than reading or taking notes. You will be marked absent that day if you are found not using your electronic device inappropriately in class.

Formatting: All written work should be in double-spaced, with a 12-point font and one-inch margins. Please include your name and the title/assignment name on the top of the first page, and page numbers at the bottom of each page. Please use a major citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago).

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism is a serious breach of academic conduct and will be penalized. Students who violate the Honor Code may be subject to a written mark on their record, failure of the course, suspension, permanent exclusion, or a combination of these and other sanctions.

AI tools: Using an artificial intelligence program to generate any content for any assignment in this course constitutes plagiarism and is a violation of the Honor Code. The use of an artificial intelligence program in this course without permission from the instructor may also constitute seeking unauthorized assistance or violate other provisions of the Honor Code. Any suspicion of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Council.

Late Assignments: Late assignments will be subject to a full letter grade deduction for each day late after the original deadline. If you have difficulties in meeting the deadlines, please contact me at least 24 hours before the deadline and you may or may not be approved for extended deadlines.

Disability/Accessibility: Department of Accessibility Services works with students who have disabilities to provide reasonable accommodations. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must contact DAS. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and that disability accommodations are not provided until an accommodation letter has been processed. Please coordinate a meeting time with me to discuss a protocol to implement the accommodations as early in the semester as possible.

Writing Center Resources: Tutors in the Emory Writing Center are available to support students as you work on papers, discussion posts, websites, and other projects.