

## WRITING SAMPLE #1

The following is an excerpt from an essay written in 2010 for a Religious Studies course. The subject matter deals with current gender issues regarding sexuality and religious ordination within Thai society.

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The battle for equality between the two genders has been ongoing for centuries. For the most part, the United States and Western Europe have made much progress during those centuries and women generally receive the same educational, political, and occupational opportunities as their male counterparts. There are however many societies in the modern world in which women have many more obstacles to overcome before they are able to enjoy the amount of liberties women possess in America. In Thailand women are forced to work and live in a society that likens them to “the hind legs of the elephant.”<sup>1</sup> Within the realm of religion certain aspects regarding gender remain unresolved, and tensions between authority and gender roles still exist within the majority of religious traditions of the world. Women in Thailand who desire to become fully ordained bhikkunis, or nuns, are subject to discrimination and do not receive the same respect or recognition as their religious brothers, the monks (bhikkhus). Mirroring the way in which Christianity influences the social aspects and gender roles of western society, such discrimination is a direct result of the cultural work produced through the country’s past as it existed for centuries under the sway of India’s ancient religious traditions and caste system. These cultural ideologies then intertwined with Buddhist traditions which lasted for an additional several centuries and currently makes it difficult to transform a male centered society into one that allows women the opportunity to assert themselves as an equal. In general, by becoming an ordained nun, the ways in which Thai

women are perceived, their sexuality, and the roles they are assumed to perform according to gender can offset the predominate notion that males are the most superior of the sexes.

Brahminism can be described as both a religious tradition and the foundation from which India's current caste system originated. It is also the precursor of Hinduism, the most prevailing religion in India. Time within both is cylindrical rather than linear and each is shaped by *samsara*, or the idea that one's life cycle consists of birth, death, and rebirth. If one lives a life of virtue and morality, then the chances of one being reborn as a human or a god are greater. A life of immorality would then result in being reborn as an insect or one of the many "lower forms." The laws of karma (cause and effect) are responsible for the distribution of awards and punishment within the person's life and the outcome of their rebirth. An individual born into a society ruled by the caste system would then be obligated to fulfilling their *dharma* or the moral guidelines for each individual according to which class they were born into. This may also include the religious disciplines one decides to take up within the tradition. The Brahmin (not to be confused with Brahman) class of the caste system are the most revered of the four and consists of priests. These priests were predominately male and responsible for carrying out rituals and other religious responsibilities. The Brahminist tradition contains many rituals of purification. Similar to Hebrew texts concerning the sacredness of blood, Brahminist blood was an unclean substance with the ability to taint holy objects, people, and places.<sup>2</sup> Therefore the biological occurrence of menstruation rendered women

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<sup>1</sup> Chatsumarn Kabil Singh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Kabil Singh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, 32.

impure sentient beings and they were excluded from having any position that would involve dealing with rituals or items considered sacred.