

Jewish and Christian Feminism
Spring, 2006
REL 293/WS 293
Tues/Thurs. 10:20 – 11:30 am; Main Zinze 100
Instructor: Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug
Office: Comen 404; Office Phone x7104; email: kdenton@moravian.edu
Office Hours: Monday afternoons; TR 2:00 – 4:00 pm and by appt.

Course Description: What do feminism and religious traditions have to say to one another? A huge body of literature has burst onto the religious scene in the last thirty or more years as more and more women on the U.S. scene and around the world are exploring this question. Over the course of this semester students will be exposed to writers whose shared struggles with feminism and the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity have deeply touched the lives of countless religious women (and also men). We will compare and contrast Jewish and Christian women writers on themes such as the understanding of God, sacred texts, *halakhah*, understanding of community, sexuality, and ritual. In addition to assigned books, a number of additional articles, essays and chapters also are assigned; these may be found on reserve in the library (or may be passed out in class). *As well as learning about the intersection of feminism and the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, this class in particular honors the opportunity to direct the questions of feminism and religions to our own lives.* Additionally, we will learn from a few local women religious/educational leaders with respect to the fundamental questions of feminism and religion.

Required Readings (to be purchased in the bookstore)

After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions, Eds. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, Jay B. McDaniel
On Women and Judaism, Blu Greenberg
The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki
Beads and Strands, Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Required Reading you may purchase new or used through Amazon (make plans to do this TODAY!)

Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered, Ruth Kluger, Feminist Press at City University of New York, 2001

Additional assigned readings on reserve in the library or passed out as handouts.

Required Videos

Trembling Before God, Simcha Dubowski

Extra-class Experiences

- PLEASE NOTE AND MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS for the afternoon and evening discussion/presentations planned on Feb. 23, Mar. 27 and April 12. Inform your athletic coach and/or make a request of your professors/employers in order to be present. DO THIS EARLY! Work and athletic practice will not be

accepted as viable excuses not to participate in these events (if you have an athletic game, you may be excused).

- Student pairs will develop and present the religious/spiritual/feminist oral history of a woman, either Christian or Jewish. Each student pair will be required in advance to compete and fill out appropriate IRB forms for this study involving “human subjects.” Check out the HSIRB link on the intranet website.
- Plan now to be present for the screening of our course film
- We may try to make a plan to visit a “mikveh” if we can arrange our schedules accordingly

Course requirements

Careful advance reading, attendance and participation in class and at extra-class events. A seminar course such as this requires the careful preparation and the active participation of every student. Read every assigned text carefully well in advance of class. Don't use a highlighter to mark your text, but with pen or pencil write your reactions and questions in the margins and note the development of the author's argument. Underline what you think are the key points, ideas and reflections, and come to class ready to discuss, share and raise questions. **Bring whatever text(s) we are reading with you to class! We will regularly use them and read aloud from them in our seminar!** If you feel shy or uneasy about speaking up in class, please come see me during office hours for help on this issue; an important part of your liberal arts education is learning to speak in group settings in your own voice with intelligence, passion, confidence and power (this is also a feminist value). Use the response papers as a way to continue thinking through what you are reading, and as a way for you to respond to the material with your own experience and ideas. 25% of course grade.

Religious holidays, serious illness and family emergency are the only accepted reasons for missing class. Students with more than two unexcused absences will lose at least a letter grade for participation (those students who need to miss classes because of religious observance will have the option to make up what they have missed – if you fall into this category, please inform me immediately!). In case of excused absences, please contact me and let me know (in advance of class!). In any event, you are responsible for every class session's material, notes and assignments.

Short response papers with hard copy to be handed in at the beginning of class. Each of these papers will take up questions and issues from our reading. I will pose questions for your reflection or you may choose your own direction for each paper (please check with me first if you decide to go in a different direction). Overall these response papers count for 30% of the course grade. **Late papers will not be accepted.** In order to produce a high-quality short paper such as this, you will need time to read, think about the material, and make careful decisions about what you choose to include in your papers.

Collaborative Oral Histories You will choose a partner in the class with whom to work on this project. Together you will decide upon an adult Jewish or Christian woman to interview, focusing on the woman's life journey and her identity, struggles, joys, conflicts and questions with respect to her development religiously/spiritually and with respect to

her awareness of gender and feminism. In order to benefit from someone's life experience, please choose a woman who is at least 35 years old. 20% of course grade. Class Presentations of Women's Religious Histories

Each class pair (or trio) will have 25 minutes to present their findings from their interview. You do not need to hand in any written material for this assignment. Once you and your partner have selected someone to interview, please review the HSIRB information on the Moravian intranet to complete the necessary IRB paperwork for human subject research (we will talk about this in class). Additionally, you will wish to use your own notes to make sure in your presentation to include the following:

--careful decision-making regarding what each member of the pair (trio) will present from the interview (each member should have an equal part in the presentation);

--a brief summary of this woman's history, where she is from, her accomplishments, struggles, family, race/ethnicity, any other background you deem important for us to know;

--specific detail regarding the dynamic of her own religious/spiritual convictions, commitments, questions, struggles, searching, practices, leadership, etc. within her life as a whole. Are there contradictions between her feminist ideals and religious convictions? What do these contradictions reveal? Remember that it is particularly through being aware of and exploring the contradictions between feminist and religious/spiritual consciousness/commitments that your real learning will emerge out of this assignment.

--specific detail regarding the woman's feminist consciousness. Does she claim a feminist perspective? How did this perspective develop in her life? Why or why not and how has that influenced her life, and particularly, her religious/spiritual life? How does this interview compare and contrast with what you are learning in our class?

--what have each of you (members of the pair/trio) learned from your interview with this woman? What questions does this interview raise for you that you will continue to explore?

Note: Class members will provide critical/constructive feedback to one another for this assignment, and the professor will take this feedback into consideration for the assignment of the grade for this assignment.

Researching a theme important to you Every student will have the opportunity to choose and research a question or theme somehow significant or important to her/him and related to the topic of our class and will present her/his findings in a research paper (a format other than a paper may be chosen with permission from the instructor). Papers will be approximately 15 pages, will utilize footnotes and include a complete bibliography of not fewer than 10 resources. Your paper is worth 25% of your total course grade. Below are some key dates to keep you on track with this project:

Feb. 21: Hand in a short paragraph which clearly states the theme/question you intend to research and your initial thoughts about how you will proceed.

Mar. 14: Research workshop at Reeve's Library

Mar. 23: Hand in your research bibliography. You should have consulted at least 10 different resources. Your sources may include books, visual art, chapters and articles, dissertations, internet material, music, etc. Make sure you have material from a variety of different sources.

April 4-6: Students have the responsibility to make an appt. to meet with me for 20 minutes to review the progress of their research and writing for your papers. Plan on bringing in an outline or a draft of the first few pages of your paper to talk over with me.
April 27: Hardcopy of paper to be handed in at last class session. Over two class periods we shall celebrate a research roundtable, in which every student has some time to present her/his research and hear feedback from the group.

Schedule of Class Readings/Field Experiences:

Unit One: Introduction to Feminism and Theology

Jan. 17 Introduction to Course

Jan 19 Read: “Identity, Feminist Theory, and Theology,” Linell Elizabeth Cady, in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, Eds. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Devaney (on reserve in Reeve’s; make your own copy of these items so that you may write on them and later on bring them with you to class)

--questions: What IS feminism? What is theology?

Jan. 24 Read: “Introduction” and “Laying the Ground,” in Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (on reserve in Reeve’s)

Jan. 26 Read: “Keeping Faith in a Sexist Church,” Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections* (on reserve in Reeve’s)

3-4 page, double-spaced response paper due at beginning of class. Question for paper: What are the problems in Judaism and Christianity addressed by feminist analysis? What is feminism? What does it have to do with religion(s)? What is striking to you about each of these chapters and why?

Unit Two: What Is Feminist Transformation of Religion?

Jan. 31 Read: *After Patriarchy*, chapters 1 and 2

Feb. 2 Read: *After Patriarchy*, chapters 5 and 6

Jan. 7 Read: *After Patriarchy*, chapters 4 and 8

4 page, double-spaced response paper due at beginning of class: Question for paper: Identify and briefly outline 4 issues/questions/theological themes raised by the chapters you have read in *After Patriarchy*, then choose two to respond to in greater depth. What is significant about these issues/questions? Why are they feminist issues, and what does feminist “transformation” look like? Do you agree with the feminist concerns? Why or why not?

Unit Three: A Deeper Dive into Feminism and Judaism

Feb. 9 (No class: Professor away at conference)

Read: *On Women and Judaism*, preface, through page 37

Feb. 14 (No class: Professor away at conference)

Read: *On Women and Judaism*, pp 39--73

Feb. 16 Read: *On Women and Judaism*, pp 75--123

Feb. 21 Due: 1 paragraph (hard copy) with theme/question/issue you intend to research

Read: *On Women and Judaism*, pp 125--178

Feb. 23

4 page double-spaced response paper due at beginning of class: Questions to be addressed: Is feminism “good for the Jews” according to Greenberg? Why or why not? How does Greenberg hold together history and tradition with contemporary notions of freedom and equality? What do you make of her argument?

Also on Feb. 23rd!! 4—5:30 PM: “THE HISTORICAL AND EMERGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN RELIGION: WHY THE STAINED-GLASS CEILING? A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION” IN THE HUB (exact location TBA)

Unit Four: Toward a “thicker description” of Women’s Journeys through Feminism, Judaism and Christianity

Feb. 28 Read: *Still Alive*, Forward and Part I (through page 60)

Due in class: note to professor about partner you will work with and your person and date for interviewing process

Mar. 2 Read: *Still Alive*, Part II, “The Camps”

(March 5 – 13: Spring Recess – read ahead in Kluger!)

Mar. 14 Research Workshop at the library during class

Read: *Still Alive*, Part III, “Germany”

Mar. 16 Read: *Still Alive*, Part IV and Epilogue

Mar. 21 4-page paper due at beginning of class. Questions for paper: Think about the story of Ruth Kluger’s life in terms of the conflicts and intertwining of feminist, cultural and religious awarenesses and experiences. What are the conflicts of values and beliefs that are experienced by Ruth? In what way is this book a narrative of Judaism and feminism? Use this short paper to “dig deep” into her life as a way of preparing you for your own deep interview of a woman in our own community, paying special attention to Kluger’s internal conflicts, growth, values, insights, etc. What do you learn from attending to her story?

Mar. 23 Due at the beginning of class: bibliographies for research papers

Mar. 27 (Monday): EVENING PRESENTATION BY HANNAH MERMELSTEIN – MAKE PLANS NOW TO ATTEND THIS EXTRA-CLASS EVENT

Mar. 28 (Hannah Mermelstein in class, interviewed by professor)

Mar. 30 In class: debrief of Mermelstein events; discussion about your interviews

April 4 Oral reports: Interviews

(During this week I ask each of you to make an appt. to meet with me for 20 minutes to discuss the progress of your research and writing)

April 6 Oral reports: Interviews

Unit Five: a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Sin; and an African Christian Context

April 11 Read: *Beads and Strands*, Introduction and Chapter 1 (through page 11)

***The Fall to Violence*, preface through page 29**

Bring to class and be prepared to hand in: references to 4 different pages/paragraphs you have read, the theme/question that is raised, and your own question/insight/comment in response (be prepared to hand this in at the end of class; it shouldn't amount to more than one or two pages).

(Passover begins: April 12)

Wed. April 12: Required evening event: View *The Divan*, a film by Ruth Gluck about her own life and search for meaning in relationship to her father and her Orthodox Jewish heritage. Meet at Mellon at 6:30 to view the film; discussion following ending at 9:30 PM (we will be joining REL 197 for this event).

April 13 Read: *Beads and Strands*, Chapter 2

The Fall to Violence, pages 31 through 64

Bring to class and be prepared to hand in: references to 4 different pages/paragraphs you have read, the theme/question that is raised, and your own question/insight/comment in response

(Easter Recess: April 14 – 17)

April 18 Read: *Beads and Strands*, Chapter 3

The Fall to Violence, pages 66 – 99

Bring to class and be prepared to hand in: references to 4 different pages/paragraphs you have read, the theme/question that is raised, and your own question/insight/comment in response

April 20 Read: *Beads and Strands*, chapters 6 and 7

The Fall to Violence, pages 100 – 127

Bring to class and be prepared to hand in: references to 4 different pages/paragraphs you have read, the theme/question that is raised, and your own question/insight/comment in response

Unit Six

April 25 Research Roundtable begins!

Each student will have 20 minutes to provide us with an overarching summary of her/his research and findings. This also is an opportunity to practice constructive and supportive feedback and applaud our good work at this semester's end!

April 27 Research Roundtable concludes! Wrap-up of our course! The hardcopy version of your research paper is due today.

