

Powerful and Powerless: Women and Religion

Instructor

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Institution

Emmanuel College

Emmanuel College is a 4-year liberal arts college for women, in the Roman Catholic tradition. The college is operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Pedagogical Reflections

This course is offered each semester and fulfills a General Education requirement that all students take two courses in Religious Studies. The course also counts towards our Minor in Women's Studies. In Fall of 1998, the course was re-numbered to become an upper level seminar. This means that students must have a previous RS course, or Junior or Senior status, or permission of the instructor. The course is also limited to 15 students, in order that it can operate as a seminar. This past year, the course was offered in a format that met twice weekly for 75 minutes; sometimes it is offered in a once-a-week 3-hr format in the evening, to accommodate students in the Center for Adult Studies.

As with most undergraduate courses, particularly those that fulfill a general requirement, the class varies considerably according to the particular students who end up in the classroom. In Fall of 1998, I had 9 students who were highly motivated and interested in exploring some dimension relating to women and religion. The idea of presenting "works in progress" appealed immensely to these students, and they expressed much appreciation for the assistance they got both from me and from each other in clarifying their topics and streamlining the research they still needed to do. Their final papers ranged from a splendid assessment of the extent to which Hildegard of Bingen's works, particularly her art and music, expressed "feminist" consciousness to a project examining the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish teenage women in Europe, mainly through their diaries and autobiographies.

The reflection papers in response to "Inheriting our Mothers' Gardens" were generally wonderful, and a highlight of this particular incarnation of the course. One student's mother was taken suddenly and seriously ill during the early days of the semester. M's 4-page poem in response both to this assignment and to her mother's illness, reflected on her relationship with her mother, her mother's past (which severely limited her options), and the ways in which M and her mother are re-creating both their relationships and their ways of being as women in the world.

Course Description:

In this course, we are interested in the historical and contemporary experiences and roles of women, with particular attention to the ways in which religious beliefs and ideology have affected women's lives in relation to religious and other social institutions. We begin from the assumption that, regardless of how "religious" women claim to be, their lives are affected by religious ideologies past and present. In our historical investigations we will encounter ways in which women's opportunities for development have been both hampered and enhanced by these institutions. We will acknowledge the heritage of women's strength, resistance and celebration which dates back beyond biblical times, look at some of the ways in which women today are seeking full and authentic participation in the life of their religious traditions and their communities, and consider some of the promises and the problems of the "globalization" of the women's movement.

Course Objectives:

You are encouraged to think carefully about your own objectives in registering for this class. Even if you are here to fulfill your religion requirement at a convenient time, it is our mutual responsibility that you get more

out of this course than simply a passing grade! My objectives are:

1. To encourage reflection on and articulation of our own gender-related experiences of both struggle and empowerment, and the ways in which these experiences are influenced by religious traditions, whether our own or others'.
2. To facilitate understanding of some of the social and institutional pressures and interests that maintain gender inequity.
3. To appropriate and appreciate the heritage of women's strength and resistance found in the faith stories of our forefathers.
4. To expand our worldview by considering the lives of women in diverse religious communities, in their similarities and their differences.
5. To think constructively of strategies and visions for more humane and mutual relationships within the religious and other social institutions in which we live our lives.

Required Texts:

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Ferguson, Marianne. Women and Religion. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995.

Russell, Kwok, Isasi-Díaz & Cannon. Inheriting our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988.

In addition to these texts, you are invited to bring to class relevant articles, music, poetry etc. to share. These will be part of the "resources" for the course.

Course Requirements:

1. Class participation (15%): Class discussions and the input of both instructor and other students are central components of this class. Your informed participation is essential. 5 of the points will be for timely attendance, and 10 for your contributions to class discussion, both during class sessions and on the course Listserve.
2. *Reflection papers (15% each): Two short papers integrating the content of the Belenky and Russell text books with your own reflections.
3. *Presentation of work in progress (10%): This is your opportunity to research and present material on a topic of your choice that is related to the course objectives.
4. *Paper (30%): This is the final written version of the research material you present in class.
5. Take-home final (15%): To be distributed at the last class session (December 7); due one week later (2:30 p.m., December 14).

*See guidelines and details at end of syllabus.

Class Format:

Our class sessions will generally be in discussion format. This means that it will be particularly important for you to have read assigned material ahead of time, and to come to class prepared to engage the issues and insights that have emerged for you in your reading and reflection. Your own questions and concerns are an important part of the course content, both in your more formal presentation of your work and also in your responses to readings and class discussions. We will begin each class with "ritual space"—time for you to

share poetry, music etc. that is important to you, and leave space for you to announce events that you know about that might be of interest to the class.

General Grading Note:

All written work drops one point (e.g. from B to B-) for each day that it is late, except in documented medical or other emergencies. Permission from me to turn in a late paper does not change this: it merely means that I will read your work.

The chart of criteria (p.7) is what I will use to grade your final paper. In my experience, most papers fall predominantly in the satisfactory/good range in most categories. This generally results in a grade range of C- to B+. Although the range of criteria are not exactly equivalent to letter grades, an A requires an excellent rating in all categories.

Course Outline and Reading Assignments:

	<p>Wednesday, September 2</p> <p>Introduction to course and syllabus.</p> <p>Hopes and expectations.</p> <p>Demystifying the "f" word.</p> <p>For next Wednesday, read Belenky, pp. 3-86</p>
<p>Monday, September 7</p> <p>Labor Day: No classes</p>	<p>Wednesday, September 9</p> <p>Ways of knowing: barriers to "knowing"</p> <p>For Monday, read Belenky, pp. 87-152</p>
<p>Monday, September 14</p> <p>Ways of knowing: how do you know you know?</p> <p>For Wednesday, read Belenky, pp. 155-229</p> <p>FYI: At Simmons tonight: presentation on cults. Come and bring your friends.</p>	<p>Wednesday, September 16</p> <p>Ways of knowing: knowledge and educational and other social systems.</p> <p>For Monday, read Russell, Part One (21-72)</p>
<p>Monday, September 21</p> <p>The significance of our personal histories.</p> <p>For Wednesday, read Russell, Part Two (75-106)</p> <p><u>1st Reflection paper due</u></p>	<p>Wednesday, September 23</p> <p>The effect of issues of social location on our personal and communal histories</p> <p>For Monday, read Russell, Part Three (109-155)</p>
<p>Monday, September 28</p> <p>The importance of differences among women.</p> <p>For Wednesday, read Ferguson, Preface and pp. 1-27</p>	<p>Wednesday, September 30</p> <p>Images of the goddess/goddess cultures</p> <p>For Monday, read Ferguson, pp. 157-172</p>
<p>Monday, October 5</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 7</p>

<p>Features and attributes of goddess images and deities.</p> <p>The importance of symbol and language</p> <p>For Wednesday, read Ferguson, pp. 28-55</p> <p><u>2nd</u> <u>Reflection paper due</u></p>	<p>The development of patriarchal culture</p> <p>For Wednesday Oct 14, read Ferguson, pp. 56-74</p> <p>FYI: At Simmons tonight: Feminism goes to the movies. Join others from Colleges of the Fenway to share food and discuss some recent films.</p>
<p>Monday, October 12</p> <p>Columbus Day: No classes</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 14</p> <p>Creation myths: influence and impact on culture</p> <p>For next week, read Ferguson, pp. 75-119; read excerpts on reserve in library (photocopies)</p>
<p>Monday, October 19</p> <p>Women and sin, Part 1</p> <p>Historical developments</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 21</p> <p>Women and sin, Part 2</p> <p>What are "women's sins?"</p> <p>For Monday, read Ferguson, pp. 120-156</p>
<p>Monday, October 26</p> <p>Women of power: women's influence in religious traditions</p> <p>For Wednesday, read Ferguson, pp. 157-172</p>	<p>Wednesday, October 28</p> <p>Attend tonight's panel discussion, "Students speak out on Feminism," or view the video if you are unable to attend. We will use content of this discussion in class as we continue to develop our own understandings of "feminism" as it relates to religion.</p>
<p>Monday, November 2</p> <p>Student works in progress</p>	<p>Wednesday, November 4</p> <p>Student works in progress</p>
<p>Monday, November 9</p> <p>Student works in progress</p>	<p>Wednesday, November 11</p> <p>Student works in progress</p>
<p>Monday, November 16</p> <p>Student works in progress</p>	<p>Wednesday, November 18</p> <p>Student works in progress</p>

Monday, November 23 TBA	Wednesday, November 25 Thanksgiving vacation: no classes
Monday, November 30 Student works in progress For Wednesday, read Ferguson, pp. 173-212	Wednesday, December 3 Some contemporary feminist religious movements
Monday, December 7 The problems and promise/value of religious traditions for women: retrospective and evaluations	

Reflection Papers

Each of these autobiographical papers should be 5-6 pages in length, typed and double-spaced, and is to be your personal reflection on the content of the book in light of your own experiences.

1. Belenky et al, Women's ways of knowing: In your paper, you should demonstrate that you understand the concepts the authors discuss in terms of their interviews with women and the conclusions they reach regarding the ways in which women approach the acquisition and sharing of knowledge. Thus, you might begin by giving a brief overview of the ways of knowing and their implications for women. The main part of your paper, however, should center on your personal experience of acquiring "knowledge," and the ways in which your experiences approximate or differ from those discussed in the book. You may agree or disagree with the authors, or find them partially accurate, but be sure to demonstrate with personal examples why you take the position you do. It is also appropriate to give examples from other women you know or know of; you may want to avoid using actual names in this case. Due Date: Monday September 21.
2. Russell et al, In search of our mothers' gardens: Using the theme selected by the authors in this text,

reflect on your own "mother's garden." Like the women in the book, you need not be limited to your biological mother, but may include women who have been particularly influential in your life. Remember that this influence may have positive and/or negative connotations. In particular, reflect from your present perspective on the dimensions of your "mother's garden" that you feel you need to uproot (weed out) and those that you want to nourish and tend. What has brought you to those decisions? What kind of garden do you want to hand on to your own daughters, biological or metaphorical? Due Date: Monday October 5.

Class Presentation and Final Paper

Your class presentation and your final paper comprise the two parts of your major research project for this course. In determining your topic for this project, you should consider your own interests first and foremost. Is there a particular dimension of the broad subject of women and religion that is of specific interest to you? I suggest that you approach this in one of two ways:

1. You might be interested in exploring further the historical and/or contemporary situation of women in a particular religious tradition or lifestyle. In this case, you will need to develop a specific focus to allow you to narrow down your field of investigation. For example, women in Christianity, Islam, Judaism or Hinduism is too broad. Instead, you might decide to compare the lives of women in a more liberal and a more conservative Christian denomination; explore the specific effect of an event like the holocaust on the lives of Jewish women; examine the ways in which women are responding to fundamentalist expressions of Islam in some Middle Eastern countries; discuss the importance of some particular Hindu gods and goddesses in the lives of Indian women.
2. You might select an issue in the broader culture where you think religion has played a significant role in the way the issue affects women's lives. Some examples might be the extent to which traditional religious concepts of women have influenced images of women in secular culture, including the contemporary media; the relationship between women's lack of access to high profile roles in secular society and their traditional exclusion from leadership roles in their religious traditions; ways in which religious traditions have operated both to sustain and to intervene in situations of domestic violence.

We will discuss possible topics in class. If you have an idea for something you would love to do and are not sure whether it meets the criteria, come and discuss it with me.

Presentation: You should not see this as a formal, "finished" production but rather as an opportunity to present some of your ideas to your classmates, in seminar format, for general discussion and development. Those of you who elect to present earlier in the semester will obviously have done less prior development of your topic. What you need to have accomplished is to define your general area of interest clearly, including your own particular interest in the topic, and to develop a preliminary overview of some of the points you intend to investigate. It is usually helpful to give some preliminary data, and to have selected a couple of questions that are formulated to stimulate discussion that will be helpful to you in the ongoing development of your project.

Paper: Your final paper will be 12-15 pages, typed, double-spaced, and formatted according to general academic style guidelines. See attached style guidelines and criteria for papers.

Paper Evaluation Form

Criteria	Unacceptable	Minimally Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
	Focus unclear	Focus stated but not always	Focus generally clear	Whole paper developed

Clarity and focus of topic		central	throughout paper	around clear focus on topic
Resources used	Relies solely on text book and/or popular resources*	Some academic resources used along with popular materials	Significant use of academic resources	In-depth research into the topic using academic resources
Integration of women and religion as central focus	Pays little or no attention to religious dimensions of issue, and/or to significance for women	Shows some attentiveness to religious dimensions and to significance for women	Clearly articulates the significance of religion in addressing the issue in women's lives	Shows clear integration of importance of religion and feminist thought in addressing the issue
Exposition of different perspectives	Focuses on one view only	Shows some awareness of diverse views	Clear understanding of differences among women in addressing the issue	Demonstrates deep understanding of the complexity of the issue in diverse women's lives
Evaluation of different perspectives	Fails to evaluate perspectives, or gives no reasons for judgments	Offers some evaluation and conclusions in light of research	Well reasoned conclusions in light of research and personal reflection	In-depth assessment of positions researched and clear articulation of own reasons for conclusions
General organization of paper	Little overall organization	Paper generally organized in logical progression	Clear introduction, body, and conclusion; logical progression and development of ideas	Ideas are systematically presented and developed in a clear, easy-to-follow progression
Mechanics (grammar, spelling etc.)	So many errors that paper is difficult to follow	Significant number of mostly minor errors	Very few errors	Error-free
In-text citation of sources	Sources not cited	Most but not all sources cited; some not in correct format	Sources cited; minor errors in formatting	All sources cited and correctly formatted
Reference list	Absent	Attached, but incomplete or incorrectly formatted	Complete reference list attached; some inconsistencies in formatting	Comprehensive reference list, correctly formatted
Length	Fewer than 12 pages (not including cover page and reference list)	12- pages	12-15 pages, no padding	12-15 pages
Timeliness	One or more days late	On time	On time	Early

*NOTE: "Popular sources" includes dictionaries, encyclopedias (including those on-line and on CD Rom) and most Internet sites. These are often useful for general background information but do not, on their own, constitute adequate sources for an academic research paper.