

# Barbara R. von Schlegell

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## Honors Seminar: Women and Religion

Religious Studies 005 (Women's Studies 109)

### Course Description

The Women and Religion course this term focuses on Muslim women and the understanding of gender in Islam and in comparison with Jewish women's experience. Attitudes toward the body (sex, purity, fertility, clothing, and seclusion) will be considered comparatively. Beginning with the generation of women exemplars in the Prophet's community in Medina and with evidence of women's activities in scholarship, mysticism, and the economic sphere over fourteen hundred years, we consider current Western views of Muslim women in a critical light. Why are modern Jewish and Muslim women choosing to practice their religions traditionally? How are women re-interpreting the sacred texts of Judaism and Islam at the end of the twentieth century? How has feminism affected the participation of women in public religious discourse and in the modern revivalist movements?

### Course evaluation

Seminar attendance, participation, and leading a discussion session. If you have to miss a class meeting, please email or phone before class time 30%

Journals (handwritten or wordprocessed) weekly responses to at least two of the week's assigned readings, all films, and mosque and synagogue visitation. Turned in three times in the semester. 2 pages each piece. 35%

Research paper (15-20 pages) and presentation of preliminary findings to seminar 35%

There are no exams for this class.

# Textbooks

Unless otherwise stated, all textbooks are available at the Penn Book Center, 3726 Walnut Street  
Telephone 222-7600

Susannah Heschel, ed. *On Being a Jewish Feminist*

Judith Baskin, ed. *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*

Fatima Mernissi *The Veil and the Male Elite*

Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron, eds. *Women in Middle Eastern History*

Barbara Stowasser *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*

Lila Abu-Lughod *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*

H.A.R. Gibb *Mohammedanism* (in spite of its unfortunate title, an excellent little book)

## Reserve books

The assigned texts, and many others related to our seminar, will be on reserve in Rosengarten under my name.

B.R. von Schlegell and M. Kimball, *Muslim Women throughout the World*, a comprehensive bibliography, should be consulted for all topics on Islam.

## Schedule

**January 15: Introduction - Judaism and Islam. Common heritage, parallel traditions. Modern approaches in scholarship on women in Islam.**

- Readings: Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (for background on Islam)
- (Handouts) Plaskow, "It's Feminist, But Is It Jewish?" *Standing Again at Sinai*; Badran, "Independent Women: More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt;" J. Tucker, ed., *Arab Women*; Arebi, "Gender Anthropology in the Middle East: The Politics of Muslim Women's Misrepresentation" *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*

**January 22 and 29: Guest lecture, Ross Kraemer "Judaism Basics and Jewish Women." Feminism and Orientalism. Defining the "Other." Methodology in studying women and religion.**

- Readings: Nachtrieb "Women in Islam;" Shareef "Sermon from Canada;" Sommer and Zwemer *Our Moslem Sisters*; al-Hibri "Who Defines Third World Women's Human Rights?" Jameelah "The Feminist Movement vs. the Muslim Women;" Greenberg *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (selection); Davidman *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (selection)

## **February 5: Women in traditional texts. Torah and Qur'an. Women's interpretations.**

- Readings: Heschel *On Being a Jewish Feminist*; Cantor "The Lilith Question;" Baskin *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*; Niditch "Portrayals of Women in the Bible;" Stowasser *Women in the Qur'an*: pp. 25-82; von Schlegell "Hagar: Mother of Islam;" Matter "The Virgin Mary: A Goddess?"

## **February 12: God-talk. Can the divine be gendered? Does a goddess equal egalitarian society?**

- Readings: Heschel; Plaskow "The Right Question is Theological;" Gross "Steps;" Green "Bride, Spouse, Daughter"
- S. Murata *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islam* (selection); Eller *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, "The Birth of a New Religion;" Encyclopaedia of Islam "Allah" and "Ilah"
- Film: "In Her Own Way" by Barbara Myerhoff
- **Journal due.**

## **February 19: Women exemplars in Jewish and Muslim history. Political leadership. Sex segregation. Public religious life.**

- Readings: Baskin: Baskin "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages;" Kraemer "Jewish Women in the Diaspora World of Late Antiquity;" Melammed "Sephardi Women;" Weissler "Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women" Keddie and Baron *Women in Middle Eastern History*: Keddie "Introduction;" Spellberg "Political Action and Public Example: 'A'isha and the Battle of the Camel;" Ahmed "Early Islam;" All of Chapter 2 ("The Mamluk Period")
- (Bulkpack) Siddiqi "Women Scholars of Hadith;" Fadel "Two Women, One Man: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in Medieval Sunni Legal Thought;" Goitein "Professions of Women" (Jewish and Muslim); Mernissi "How Does One Say 'Queen' in Islam?"

## **February 26: Mysticism**

- Readings: Keddie and Baron: Clancy-Smith "The House of Zeinab"
- Eichenbaum "Sacred Unions: A Comparative Study of the Portrayal of Sex and Sexual Union in the *Zohar* and the Writings of Ibn 'Arabi;" Roded *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections* "Mystic Women;" Hoffman-Ladd "Mysticism and Sexuality in Sufi Life and Thought;" Elias "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism;" von Schlegell "Sufism and Social Innovation among Women Masters of Contemporary Damascus"
- Evening film: "Door to the Sky" (Moroccan Sufi women)

## **March 5: Religious law and modesty guidelines. Female hair, female skin.**

- Readings: Mernissi *The Veil and the Male Elite* (entire)
- Article "What is *hijab*?" Rippin "Feminism's 'New Islam'" Toronto op-ed pieces
- Films: "The Veiled Revolution" and "The Price of Change" (Egyptian Islamist women)

## **March 12: Purim and University Break - No Classes.**

## **March 19: Circumcision, male and female. History and meanings.**

- Readings: Anees "The Clitoral Inferno;" Brooten *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* "Clitorectomy" Toubia "Female Circumcision as a Public Health Issue" Abu-Salieh "To Mutilate in the Name of Jehovah or Allah;" Internet pieces: Epps "Circumcision History" and Rothenberg "Men's Oppression"
- **Journal due.**

## **March 26: Purity taboos. Is menstruation contagious?**

- Readings: Heschel: Waskow "Restoration of the Moon" Wagner "The Image and Status of Women in Classical Rabbinic Judaism"
- Reinhart "Impurity/No Danger;" Mawdudi *Towards Understanding the Qur'an* ( Q 2: 222-241 )
- Philips *Islamic Rules on Menstruation and Post-Natal Bleeding* (selection)

## **April 2: Sex and marriage. Masturbation. Outside the bounds: Lesbianism, fornication, adultery.**

- Readings: Abu Lughod *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (entire) Heschel chapter "Jewish Lesbians"
- Haeri "Temporary Marriage and the State in Iran;" Goitein "The Sexual Mores of the Common People;" Musallam *Sex and Society in Islam* (selection on contraception and abortion); Murray and Roscoe *Islamic Homosexualities* (selection on lesbianism)

## **April 9: Marriage and divorce. Domestic violence. New interpretations of the role of men in the family.**

- Readings: Heschel: Scarf "Marriages Made in Heaven?"
- Wegner "Status of Women in Jewish and Islamic Marriage and Divorce Law;" Esposito *Women in Islamic Family Law* (selection)
- Film: "A Wedding in Galilee" (Palestinian and Israeli)

## **April 16: Choosing the tradition - "Fundamentalism" Orthodox and Islamist in Modern Societies.**

- Readings: Heschel: Kendall "Memories of an Orthodox Youth" (Discussion leaders, read and introduce novel *The Romance Reader* about Orthodox teen and *The Gates of Damascus* a biographical account of a secular women and Islamist trends in Syria. Borrow from BRvS) El-Or *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (selection); Och *Words on Fire* (selection); Muslim Women's League "Issues" statement Films: "The Fundamentalism Project" (Judaism and Islam)
- **Journal due.**

## **April 23: Student Presentations**

**Paper due:** May 1st under my door, 212 Logan Hall.