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Early Christian Women

Instructor

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Institution

St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia
 4000 students; Liberal Arts

Course Level and Type

year 3; lecture

Hours of Instruction

3 hours / week; full year course

Enrolment and Year Last Taught

20; 2000-2001

Course Description

The Course investigates women's participation in early Christian groups from the time of Jesus' ministry to the 6th century C.E. The lives of early Christian women will be examined in light of the experiences of women in Jewish and Greco-Roman societies. Various New Testament and other early Christian writings which reflect responses to women and ideas about women will be analyzed. The course includes a detailed study of Mary in the New Testament and the development of ideas concerning her status as "Mother of God". The work of feminist interpreters of the Bible and Early Christianity will be considered throughout the course. The relevance of material for such contemporary issues as women's leadership and violence against women will be discussed.

Texts

- C Newsom and S. Ringe, *The Women's Bible Commentary*.
- Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion*.
- Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol*.
- *The Bible*: Various versions are acceptable: NRSV; RSV; NAB; NIV; NJB, etc.

Assignments

- Selected readings to be indicated in class (taken from textbooks, handouts, material on reserve)
- Essays and other writing assignments
- Panel Discussions
- Examinations

***Check the regulations in the 1997-8 Academic Calendar, p.10, item 3.9 with respect to cheating and plagiarism and 3.8 with respect to attendance and course withdrawal.

Method of Evaluation

Term 1:

Paper = 30%

Participation (attendance, oral contribution, panel discussion) = 10%

Christmas Examination = 60%

Christmas Grade = 100%

Term 1 = 40% of the Final Grade

Term 2:

Book Review = 20%

Participation (attendance, oral contribution, panel discussion) = 10%

Learning Log = 20%

Final Examination = 50%

Spring Term Grade = 100%

Term 2 = 60% of the Final Grade

Final Grade = Term 1 (40%) + Term 2 (60%)

Panel Discussions: In order to encourage class participation, students will be encouraged to participate in panel discussions (one per term) on the meaning of particular texts. Students will give a five minute presentation and then join in a discussion with fellow panel members. This will be followed by a general class discussion. Students might explain how a text has usually been understood, explain their own point of view, or even raise interesting questions. Pay attention to the organization of your points. Aim for clarity both in the presentation and in answering the questions. Performance during the panel discussion will be taken into account when determining the class participation grade.

The Learning Log: The learning log is designed to encourage active participation in the course and to help students take responsibility for their own learning. This log should be approximately 20 pages long and is to be submitted during the final week of classes. Students are encouraged to build their learning log week by week during the course. The Log should be organized according to the major sections of the course (e.g. Women in the New Testament) and include several (dated) reflections concerning the material. Students can include anything else in the log which demonstrates that that they have thought seriously about the material and endeavored to further their knowledge of the subject. Some things which might be included: bibliographies, short descriptions of relevant books, web site addresses and descriptions, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, copies of Journal articles or extracts from books (be sure not to violate copyright).

Essay: Term 1: 6-8 double-spaced pages (about 1800 words). Essay topics are to be chosen by the students, but must fall within the parameters of themes described in the course outline. Essays must reveal thorough analysis of primary sources, i.e. particular text(s) selected from the New Testament or Early Christian Literature (e.g. the Samaritan Woman at the Well in John 4:4-42, The Acts of Thecla, etc.) Essays must also demonstrate familiarity with at least four secondary sources chosen from those in the course bibliography and/or discovered by the student's own research efforts (Include a bibliography at the end of the essay and cite secondary sources using endnotes or footnotes).

Book Review: Term 2: 5-6 double-spaced pages (about 1500 words). This will be a book review of Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol*. Guidelines for doing this assignment will be provided in Term 2.

Note:

1. Deduction of 2% for every day that a writing assignment is late unless a doctor's certificate is provided.
2. Examinations **MUST** be written during the period listed on the exam schedule. In case of emergency contact the Dean's Office.
3. Papers will not be accepted after the end of classes at Christmas or at the end of year unless a doctor's certificate is provided.
4. Computer failure or error will not be accepted as an excuse for late papers or assignments. The penalty for late work as described above will be applied.
5. Students who make a commitment to participate in a panel discussion must present themselves on that day. In the case where the student is absent, participation will not be rescheduled except in the case of serious illness (supported by a doctor's certificate).

Tentative Schedule

8 Sept, Fall term classes begin

7 October, Verify Paper topic with professor

13 Oct, Thanksgiving Day, no classes

4 Nov, Papers due

6 Dec, Term examinations begin

17 February, Papers due

3 April, Learning Logs due

13 April, Final examinations begin

Course Content

Section 1: Placing Early Christian Women within their Social World:

- past neglect of women in scholarship on early Christianity
- feminist theory and Christian origins
- understanding the lives of early Christian women within the broader context of the ancient world
- comparison of early Christian women to Pagan and Jewish women
- the issue of anti-Jewish bias in research on women in early Christianity as raised by Jewish feminist

scholars.

Section 2: Women in the New Testament

- evidence for the involvement of women among the followers of Jesus including Mary Magdalene and others
- presentation of Jesus and women in the four Gospels
- presentation of early church women in the Acts of the Apostles
- women in Paul's letters and other works reflecting Pauline tradition
- the involvement of such women as Phoebe and Prisca in Paul's team of missionary co-workers
- the declarations of Paul on women and gender
- the role of women in diverging 2nd century Pauline traditions: The Pastoral Epistles and the apocryphal work, The Acts of Paul and Thecla.

Section 3: Women in Early Christian Literature

A. Women's Leadership:

- involvement of women in church offices
- the widow and the deaconess
- attempts to limit women's leadership and to silence women
- the relationship between leadership and asceticism

B. Women Martyrs:

- involvement of women in mounting tension between the church and Greco-Roman society from the end of the first century to the fourth century C.E.
- references to women by the non-Christian critics of early church groups
- women and violence
- The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas

C. Women and Gnosticism:

- feminine symbolism in gnostic literature
- the involvement of women in gnostic groups and other groups labeled as heretical by Christian authorities
- the two women prophets in the Montanist movement, Maximilla and Priscilla

Section 4: Mary

- Mary in the New Testament
- development of ideas about Mary's identity
- development of beliefs about Mary against the background of the ancient world where such goddesses as Isis were worshipped
- Mary's importance as a divine figure in early Christianity
- the work of feminist scholars who call for revision of traditional theological concepts by incorporating feminine images of the divine from biblical traditions and from traditions concerning Mary
- the contemporary relevance of Mary

Bibliography

*Indicates that the material has been placed on reserve in the Library:

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- Benko, Steve. *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan & Christian Roots of Mariology* (1993) BT 612 B46.
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- King, Karen. *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (1988) BT 1390 143 1985.
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Weems, Renita. "Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?"*

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Pedagogical Reflections

Students really enjoyed the section of the course on Mary. I decided to do it in the second term after I had introduced the NT and early Christian material more generally, but many students said they wished we had begun the course with that section. The Learning Log received mixed reviews from the students. Some felt the assignment was too unstructured. But I noted that some students did much better with this than they usually do with more traditional papers and assignments.

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