

WTM 503 SYLLABUS (Draft)**ISSUES OF WOMEN AND THEOLOGY IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION
Fall 2001**

Mary Elizabeth Moore
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Bishops Hall 304
Mondays, 3:00-6:00

The purpose of this course is: to evoke the theological passions of the class, to explore the passions and perspectives of women in theology and ministry, to engage theological questions with critical imagination, and to construct theological perspectives and actions for the sake of future, especially for the wellbeing of women in the church and world.

Some years ago, Irving Greenberg said that no theology could be considered adequate if it did not make sense in the presence of burning children. Such a test of theology opens our eyes to the anti-Jewish threads in Christian theologies, and it stirs Christians today to reshape their perspectives and actions. In a parallel way, we can say that no theology is worthy that does not make sense in the presence of the most abused and oppressed women of the world. Such a test can open our eyes to the anti-woman threads in Christian theologies and can stir Christians today to reshape their perspectives and actions. Such is the task of this course—to discern destructive threads and life-giving threads in Christian theologies, to raise critical questions, and to discern new possibilities for faithful theology and ministry.

The perspectives, concerns, and ministries of women are underrepresented—often neglected, demeaned, and destroyed—in the history of Christianity. However, women's theologies and ministries have often been represented and embodied quite boldly by women in religious orders. Through history, the orders have been fertile seedbeds for theological reflection and ministerial action. They have traditionally been communities where devotion is practiced, questions raised, theological texts written, and new social forms developed by women. In this class, we will not study the religious orders as primary texts, but the historical communities inspire the kind of learning community which we will seek to be.

For these reasons, the class is designed to follow rhythms similar to the rhythms of a religious order. The hope is that we will attune ourselves to rhythms that have sustained women for generations of religious devotion, service, reflection, and subversive action. Out of the context of religious orders have come women who were spiritual mentors for others, mystics, leaders in the church, servants in the larger community, social activists, political advocates, protestors and change agents. Although these women have sometimes been hurtful to one another and to people in the larger world, they have also been a beacon of light and hope in generation after generation. They have expressed themselves through teaching, worship, music, medical care, community organizing, administrative roles, and direct services to the poor and disenfranchised.

At many times in history, the orders provided a vocational option to women whose people expected and pressured them to marry; the only alternative for other vocations was through the religious orders. The orders themselves also had a vocation. They were often organized around a particular *charism*, calling the church's attention to the needs and yearnings of those with whom they were distinctly called to minister: people who were sick and dying, people who were poor and homeless, the endangered eco-system, a spiritually hungry community, children in need of good education, parishes in need of leadership, communities in need of social justice and wellbeing, and people longing for fuller life. The orders functioned in cities and rural areas, at home and in other lands. Often the women in these orders gave leadership that pushed the margins of conventional action, and often they served the status quo. Each order was distinct from the other, and each served according to its unique *charism* and calling.

RHYTHMS

Drawing from the legacy of women religious (women in religious orders), we will seek our unique *charism* and calling as a class, and each individually. We will also seek to live our communal life through the semester in the rhythms of a religious community. This will involve ritual, study, shared eating, and work. Each session will have these four dimensions, and each will follow a similar structure; the rhythms can, thus, hold and sustain the learning community.

3:00 Gathering ritual

3:15 Study

4:50 Shared eating

5:10 Work

5:55 Closing ritual

REQUIREMENTS

In the context of these rhythms, students are asked to play four roles: participant, student, teacher, and creator. The requirements of the course can be described in accord with those roles.

Participant:

- Participate fully in the class through presence, reading, reflection and weekly assignments. Everyone in the class has a role in creating a learning community; thus, you are students, teachers, and creators as you participate in the class. This is described in more detail in the following descriptions of requirements. Note: If you have to miss a class session due to unavoidable conflict, please take initiative to make an appointment and discuss the readings and assignments you have missed with the professor.
- With a small working group, plan and lead the class in one gathering ritual or one meal during the semester. The gathering ritual will be brief (15 minutes) and related to the theme and readings of the class session. The meal can be simple, and also related to the theme and readings. In both, follow your unique inspiration.

Student:

- Read all assignments with care, reflecting on what the author wishes to communicate; what the author's contexts, traditions, and religious experiences have impelled her to say; and the unique contribution of the work. We will engage in critical reflection in class, but your primary challenge in preparing for class is to read empathically so that the author's passions and ideas are clear and understandable to you, as well as the shaping influences and purposes of the author(s).
- Choose one theological theme to explore in depth. The thematic work will begin on October 8, when you are asked to begin your explorations in earnest. Choose one theological theme that has emerged for you in the readings (e.g., salvation, hope, suffering, play, creation, sacraments, ethics, spirituality, liberation, Christology, God, and so forth). Bring this theme to bear on your readings between October 8 and November 19. Ask of these readings: What does the author reveal about your chosen theme (explicitly, implicitly, or by non-attention)?
- Oral Exam: Reflect on ideas and questions that thread through our texts, as well as the integration and contradictions among them. Oral exams will be given in small groups between November 6-15. The best way to prepare is to reflect on the questions that we are using through the semester:
 - (1) What do the authors most want us to understand and to question? Why?
 - (2) What in the authors' contexts, traditions, and religious experiences have impelled them to write these books and essays?
 - (3) What are the unique contributions and limitations of each work, and of all of them taken together?
 - (4) What do the authors reveal about your chosen theme (explicitly, implicitly, and by non-attention)?
 - (5) What is the most important insight you have thus far on your theme? (This last question will be the first one asked and will help shape the dialogue in the oral exam. This is because the oral is designed to be a significant conversation about your unique reflections, as well as about the readings to date.)

Teacher:

- Teach the class about your theme as we discuss the readings between October 8 and November 19. You are not asked to make formal presentations at this point, but simply to ask thematic questions of the texts and be prepared to share these as part of class discussion. This sharing will sometimes take place in small groups and sometimes in the total group. We will discuss each text for its own sake and, also, with these thematic questions in mind.
- Present your theme in a Festival of Theological Sharing on December 3. The explanation of this assignment is given in the Class Schedule for that day.

Creator:

- Special assignments. These assignments will include the two short papers presented on September 17 and 24 (submitted on October 1), as well as in-class projects done during "Work" time. The class will make a group decision as to whether to publish a resource book. If the decision is affirmative, you will be asked to submit a final version of four creations (your selections from the short papers and other projects, such as poetry and liturgies) on December 14. From these four, the editors will select two for the book. Editors are Jennie Knight, Mary Elizabeth Moore, Ayanna Kyles.

- **Major Paper:** Submit a major paper (12-15 pages) on the theological theme that you have chosen. What perspectives and actions are most significant as regards this theme, especially as you reflect on the theme in relation to women's lives? The papers are due on December 14. Please deliver them to Mary Elizabeth Moore's mailbox by 5:00 on that day. In your paper, consider specifically:
 - What perspectives on the theme are most urgent to name or reshape (drawing from the readings of the semester and from your own passions and wrestling)?
 - What transformations of human action and response to God are called for if the theme is conceived or reconceived in this way?

COMMUNICATION

We encourage you throughout the semester to work and learn with one another; much of what is learned in this class will be shaped by the learning community. We also encourage you to speak with us if you have questions, suggestions, or ideas for discussion. You can reach Mary Elizabeth Moore at: 404-727-6388, Office 8 Bishops Hall, or maryem621@aol.com. You can make an appointment by calling Ayanna Kyles (404-727-4180) or stopping by her office (6BH). You can reach Jennie Knight at jsknigh@emory.edu.

CLASS SCHEDULE

September 10 **INTRODUCTION: Women's Lives—Theological Threads**

Meditative Action: View a woman's film made between 1990 and 1999. This may be a film written, acted, or directed by women, or focused on women's lives. We will discuss the film during class time.

September 17 **HUMAN LIFE IN CREATION: Struggle and Hope**

Reading: Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be Sun Again*. Ask the following questions of this book and of every reading through the semester:

- (1) What does the author most want us to understand? to question? Why?
- (2) What in the author's contexts, traditions, and religious experiences have impelled her to write this book or essay?
- (3) What is the unique contribution of this work?

Meditative Action: Write a 1-2 page paper on a struggle in your life or in the life of a woman whom you know well; reflect on how this struggle is illumined or impaired by theology. We will discuss the papers in class on this evening, but they are not due until October 4.

Guest: Our guest for this session will be Heejung Kwon.

September 24 **Revelation and Suffering**

Reading: Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Read approximately 100 pages, choosing pages that help you understand the most important ideas of Williams, as well as pages that are of particular interest to you.

Meditative Action: Write a 1-2 page paper on a deep passion in your life and the ways it is expressed in your life. We will discuss the papers in class on this evening, but they are not due until October 1.

- October 1 **Strength and Community** (Class will formally begin at 4:30 on this day so that persons may participate in the Art Workshop of Women's Week. Our shared eating will begin informally at 4:20 p.m. so that we can begin shortly after 4:30 with study, engaging with our guests on the content of their two papers.)
Reading: Veronice Miles, "Strong Women in Congregational Life" (an ethnographic study), and Renee Harrison, "In Search of Our Mothers' Sacred Playground: Black Women and the Ethic of Re-creation" (handouts).
Writing: Submit the two brief papers discussed on September 17 and 24.
Meditative Action: Participate in at least one workshop and one plenary or worship service in the Women's Week events, October 1-5. Reflect on what these events reveal about women in Christian tradition, particularly about women's strength and community life.
Guests: Our guests for this session will be Veronice Miles and Renee Harrison.
- October 8 **Faith and Resistance**
Reading: Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En la Lucha*; Kwok, Pui-lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World: The Journey Continues" (handout)
Meditative Action: Choose one theological theme that has emerged for you in the readings (e.g., salvation, hope, suffering, play, creation, and so forth). Bring this theme to bear on your readings for this week and on all readings through November 19. Ask of every reading the same questions listed above, plus: What does the author reveal about your chosen theme (explicitly, implicitly, or by non-attention)?
- October 15 **GOD: Naming and Imaging God**
Reading: Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*. Read approximately 120 pages, choosing pages that help you understand the most important ideas of Johnson, as well as pages that are of particular interest to you.
Meditative Action: Attend, and attend to, one worship service. Be aware of how God is revealed, to whom God is revealed, what is revealed, and what is not revealed of God in this service.
- October 22 **God's Presence: Ministering with Creation** (Our normal rhythms will be somewhat different in this session, primarily with a reversal of the study and work times.)
Reading: Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Ministering with the Earth* (120 pages, as described above).
Meditative Action: During the week, meditate in silence on the presence

of God.

Guest: Eloise Carter, Professor of Field Biology at the Oxford campus of Emory University, will be our guest during this session. She will introduce us to the eco-system of the Piedmont and propose an ethic of stewardship for this region. She will also lead us on a walk in Baker Woods, which will include time for pulling ivy—an intrusive, non-native species—in order to contribute to the regeneration of the natural forest. (Note: Dress comfortably for the outing and work.)

October 29 **God's Action: Discerning Redemptive History**

Reading: Sallie McFague, *Super-Natural Christians*, or Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption*. Choose 120 pages from your selected book. As before, choose pages that help you understand the most important ideas, as well as pages that are of particular interest to you. Whichever book you choose, give attention to God's action in relation to all of creation, reflecting on how women and the non-human world are understood, as well as humanity in general.

November 5 **God's Revelation in Jesus Christ**

Reading: Read either Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, or Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*. Read approximately 120 pages in your chosen book, as described above.

November 12 **No class session.**

Oral exams: Meet in small groups with Mary Elizabeth Moore between November 6 and 15 to discuss the readings to date and your chosen theological theme. (See the description under "Requirements.")

November 19 **No class session.**

By not having a class session during Thanksgiving Week, you will have time to reflect further and prepare for a presentation and paper on your theological theme. In place of this class session, we will have an extended session on December 3.

November 26 **MINISTRY: Women and Theological Action**

Reading: Read either Christie Cozad Neuger, *The Arts of Ministry*, or Marjorie Procter-Smith and Janet Walton, *Women at Worship*, or some chapters from each. Choose approximately 120 pages for your reading and reflection.

December 3 **Presentations: Festival of Theological Sharing.**

This class session will be extended, meeting from 2:00-6:30 p.m.

Meditative Action: Prepare a presentation (3-5 minutes only) of your theological theme. What perspectives and actions are most important for you to communicate about this theme? For example, if your theme is

salvation, what perspectives on salvation are most urgent to name or reshape (drawing from the readings of the semester and from your own passions and wrestling)? What transformations of human action and response to God are called for if salvation is conceived or reconceived in this way? Note: Choose one aspect of your theme to present and plan to present it creatively. The fuller development of your ideas can be presented in your major paper.

December 14 **Papers Due, along with the final submissions of four creations for the Resource Book of the class** (if the class decides to do a resource book).