

RELS 301: FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Rhodes College
Spring 2008 ♦ Tue/Thur 11:00-12:15
Asst. Professor: Michelle Voss Roberts
Office: Clough 400A
Office hours: Tue/Thur 1:30-3:30 pm
or by appointment
E-mail: robertsm@rhodes.edu
Phone: (901) 843-3740
(901) 679-1197 (until 9 pm)

REQUIRED TEXTS

- bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*
- Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*
- Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, Politics*
- Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*
- Sallie McFague, *Models of God*
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

All other readings will be available on Moodle. A copy of the syllabus, announcements, assignments, and other course documents will be available on the site as well.

THE COURSE

Christian feminist theology is critical reflection on Christianity done from the perspective of issues of concern to women. It challenges ideas and practices that damage women and constructs alternatives to them. The course begins with an introduction to the methods and diverse voices of feminist theology. With special attention to African American (womanist), and Latina/Hispanic (mujerista), and queer perspectives, we will assess some of the major topics in Christian theology: Who is God? What is the human condition? What is redemption, and is Christian narrative redemptive for women?

COURSE GOALS

- To introduce the student to the history of feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologies
- To help the student think through the central theological claims of the Christian tradition
- To enrich our particular religious values by careful examination and creative thought

COURSE FORMAT

Each week covers a major topic or work in feminist theology. The class format is two-fold. I will begin each Tuesday session by providing the necessary background material and instructions to guide the conversation. Thursday sessions will be discussion-based and will be initiated by lead/response papers. At its best, the course will be generated by engaged class discussion.

COURSE GRADES

Your final course grade will be based on the following scale:

Participation	15%
Lead and Response Papers	15%
Midterm Exam	15%
Critical Reading Journal	15%

Term Paper	25%
Final Exam	15%

GRADING SCALE

94-100	A	90-93.9	A-	88-89.9	B+	84-87.9	B
80-83.9	B-	78-79.9	C+	74-77.9	C	70-73.9	C-
68-69.9	D+	63-67.9	D	60-62.9	D-	0-60	F

PAPERS¹

In grading “thesis papers” ... I ask myself the following set of questions:

1. Does the paper have a thesis?
2. Does the thesis address itself to an appropriate question or topic?
3. Is the paper free from long stretches of quotation and summaries that exist only for their own sakes and remain unanalyzed?
4. Can the writer produce complete sentences?
5. Is the paper free from basic grammatical errors?

If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” I give the paper some kind of C. If the answer to most of the questions is “no,” its grade will be even lower.

For papers which have emerged unscathed thus far, I add the following questions:

6. How thoughtful is the paper? Does it show real originality?
7. How adequate is the thesis? Does it respond to its question or topic in a full and interesting way? Does it have an appropriate degree of complexity?
8. How well organized is the paper? Does it stick to the point? Does every paragraph contain a clear topic sentence? If not, is another kind of organizing principle at work? Are the transitions well made? Does it have a real conclusion, not simply a stopping place?
9. How well-supported is the paper?
10. Is the style efficient, not wordy or unclear?
11. Does the writing betray any special elegance?
12. Above all, can I hear a lively, intelligent, interesting human voice speaking to me (or to another audience, if that’s what the writer intends) as I read the paper?

Depending on my answers to such questions, I give the paper some kind of A or some kind of B.

Format: Every paper you turn in for this class should follow these guidelines:

- 12 point, Times New Roman font
- 1” margins
- Double spaced (DS)
- Longer quotations (over three typed lines) should be typed single-spaced, indented, with no quotation marks
- Page numbers on the bottom of every page
- Citations must give page numbers
- Include a bibliography of works cited

Papers are due by 5 pm on the due date. **I do not accept late submissions.**

PLAGIARISM AND SOURCES

I support the Honor Code of Rhodes College and expect that you pledge any and all work that you submit for this class. You should refer to the work of others in the Chicago style as outlined in Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual* (4th ed.) and *Rhodes College: A Guide to Effective Paper Writing*.

¹ “How I Assign Letter Grades,” borrowed from John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 264.

All written work in this course *must* be original to you. These examples are copied from the University of Albany web-site and may provide a fuller understanding of what falls under the plagiarism umbrella.

(http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html#integrity)

EXAMPLES OF PLAGIARISM INCLUDE: failure to acknowledge the source(s) of even a few phrases, sentences, or paragraphs; failure to acknowledge a quotation or paraphrase of paragraph-length sections of a paper; failure to acknowledge the source(s) of a major idea or the source(s) for an ordering principle central to the paper's or project's structure; failure to acknowledge the source (quoted, paraphrased, or summarized) of major sections or passages in the paper or project; the unacknowledged use of several major ideas or extensive reliance on another person's data, evidence, or critical method; submitting as one's own work, work borrowed, stolen, or purchased from someone else.

Encyclopedias provide summations of knowledge; they are not usually considered scholarly contributions. They can, however, provide a fine *starting point* for your research. Each entry usually contains a bibliography: these are the sources that should constitute your research. I do NOT want to see Wikipedia in your bibliography!

If you have questions about these policies, please feel free to consult with the professor.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

This course seeks to be inclusive of people of all genders, races, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations. Throughout the course, we will endeavor to embody the principles set out in the Rhodes College student handbook. Please be mindful that, when writing papers, you should use terms like people, world, us, human being, humanity, etc. instead of the terms man, mankind, and men. As a thought experiment in this course, we will also aim for gender inclusivity or neutrality when referring to divinity. Instead of using exclusively male or female pronouns for God, please use the term 'God,' even if it sounds repetitive (i.e. God's decision to love the world involved God's gift of Godself to the world). There are all types of exclusions that have taken place in the history of Christian theology; as theologians in contemporary society and in a global context, we want to make sure that we don't further the sins of the past. If you have questions about the policy, please feel free to consult with the professor.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS PREPARATION AND PARTICIPATION (15%)

Attendance at each class session is required. A good classroom experience requires a collaborative effort and a student's absence detracts from the learning process of the whole. If you are unable to attend a session, please let me know in advance. Any more than *two* absences will result in 1/3 grade demarcation (and an additional 1/3 for subsequent absences). Absence from class can occur in other forms as well. The expectation is that you will come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Discussion involves speaking, active listening, and raising questions that will move the conversation towards deeper insights. There will be several small group discussions in which you will be required to prepare a particular discussant role (see Small Group Discussions below).

ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

As part of the "Participation" portion of the course, each student will attend **four** "Engagement Opportunities" during the semester. Several are recommended in the course schedule below. You may propose others to the instructor. A one-page response to the content of the lecture or event is due on Moodle within two days of the event.

LEAD/RESPONSE PAPERS (15%)

Class discussions will be central to the course. In order to make them more effective, pairs of assigned leaders and respondents will initiate the discussion each week. 90% of the grade will be for the paper, 10% for the presentation/initiation of discussion. Partners will share the grade unless significant inequities in contribution become evident.

LEAD (10%): With your partner, write a 3-5 page reflection paper engaging the readings for the week. You may address, but are not limited to, the questions posed for the critical reading journals. This paper should not be a summary of the readings but, instead, should engage one or two key points that will help focus class discussion. This could take the form of a major critique of the reading, analyzing a significant contribution of the author, or connecting the reading to one of the other readings/themes in the class. Post your paper to your respondents via Moodle by **5pm on Monday** of your assigned week.

At the beginning of the discussion time, you will present your paper. Creativity in the presentation is encouraged: consider incorporating a feminist liturgical ritual, PowerPoint lecture, skit, discussion of a relevant current event or piece of popular culture, etc. The respondents will then present their response, raising critiques or critical questions to generate further discussion. At that time, you will be given the first opportunity to respond to their paper.

RESPONSE (5%): Based on your readings and thoughtful reflection on the leaders' main ideas, you and your partner will write a short response that you can either read to the class or summarize in opening comments. Your response should be no more than 3 pages and should not exceed 10 minutes. Remember: more is not always better; provide a clear and concise response. It is important to know that you are not responsible for class discussion; you just want to get it started.

CRITICAL READING JOURNAL (15%)

Beginning on week three, a question will be posed related to the assigned readings. You will write *a response of at least 250 words* to the question (please double space). The purpose of the reading journal is to: 1) provide a means by which you can step back and reflect on the reading; 2) prepare you for the weekly discussions; 3) prepare you for writing your final paper. The responses are not meant to be reflection or opinion papers, although you can feel free to supplement your reading journal with more personal reflections on the readings. The aim is to answer the question using the assigned materials. It is, primarily, a practice of listening to the author and presenting her ideas as fairly as possible. To be a critical reader, you critique only after you have done your best to represent the author's viewpoint.

There are ten weeks of Critical Reading Journals. On the weeks you are assigned to be the leader or respondent, you will not be expected to write an entry. Your lead/response paper will be in lieu of your entry. You can also take one pass, as needed. This means that you should have **seven** entries total. (If you turn in eight—i.e., do not take a pass—I will drop the lowest grade.) Please submit these every week **before class on Thursday** to Moodle, and also bring a hard copy to class. Upload your paper and name the file according to the week (i.e. Week 4). Late postings will not be accepted.

Grading for Critical Reading Journals

Your entries will be marked on a scale of 1-10.

1-3: Unsatisfactory. You display evidence that you have read the materials but have failed to: a) demonstrate basic understanding of the material; b) address the assigned question; c) critically engage or analyze the material.

4-7: Satisfactory. You address the question and display understanding of the material but have not engaged the ideas beyond basic comprehension.

8-10: Very good - Excellent. You display solid comprehension of, and engagement with, the material.

RESEARCH PAPER (25%)

The course offers you the opportunity to do independent research in a particular area of feminist theology that is of interest to you. You will select a topic in consultation with your instructor. Please note the due dates below for assignments related to the research paper. Of the four stages (draft prospectus, final prospectus, presentation draft, final version), only your final version will receive a letter grade. All other stages will be graded pass/fail. To pass, you must turn in an acceptable product on time. Penalties will be assessed on your final grade for the research project for failing grades on any preliminary stage.

MIDTERM AND FINAL EXAMS (15% EACH)

The dates of the examinations are February 28 and April 28. Exams will consist of short answer (identification) and essay questions that bring several theologians into conversation about the methods and content of contemporary feminist theology.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Students will be in the same small groups for all five of the discussions.

Process and Tasks

Your first task will be to work through the basic content of the writing. Answering the following questions will be helpful in this:

1. Who is the audience of this work?
2. What is the author's purpose in writing this work?
3. What are the author's main points?
4. How does the author support his/her main points?

This first task is very similar to writing a *précis*. Your goal is to first understand the text in its own terms.

The next step is to evaluate the texts. The following questions are suggestions for that evaluative part of your discussion:

1. How do the sources fit into their particular historical context?
2. How do ideas in them compare with ideas in earlier sources or theme discussed in class?
3. Are the authors persuasive? Why or why not?
4. What do you agree with in their ideas?
5. What do disagree with?

The questions are simply suggestions. Not every discussion will cover all questions, but they should give you some ideas for your discussion

Roles

During discussions some students will have a particular role in their groups and these roles will rotate so that each student will fulfill each role once.

1. *Leader/convenor*. The person's responsibility is to initiate the discussions, to keep the group on task, and to see that all members of the group have an opportunity to participate.
2. *Expert*. The responsibility of this person is to read the sources especially carefully and to prepare to take the lead in answering the content questions. That is not the same thing as being the only student to do the reading and answering all the questions for the rest of the group. All students are expected to read all of the sources and contribute to answering the content questions, but the expert should be especially well prepared with preliminary answers, page references, etc.
3. *Devil's advocate*. This person's responsibility is to raise possible questions and opposing points of view, first about the readings and also, as appropriate, about the group's discussion and conclusions. (You occasionally may step out of character to add to the discussion as well.)

4. *Recorder/reporter*. In addition to participating in the discussion, this person takes notes to summarize the group's understanding of the content as well as the group's evaluative discussion. The recorder will report on of the group's understanding of the content, and a description of the rest of the evaluative discussion.

Evaluation

I trust that everyone will prepare fully and participate enthusiastically. If this is the case, no written report of Small Group Discussions will be required. If it appears that some groups or group members are failing to maintain rigorous academic standards, I reserve the option of assigning written reports. The recorder would then submit a report to the instructor with the names of the students present, the role and contribution of each student, a summary of the group's understanding of the content, and a description of the rest of the evaluative discussion. This report should not simply be notes taken during the discussion but should be a coherent paper. It is perfectly acceptable for the recorder to ask other members of the group to read over what has been written and to suggest clarifications and corrections. Reports are due the next class period.

Group reports will receive a minus if they are sloppy, consistently inaccurate, or significantly incomplete. For each minus, you will lose one percentage point from your final grade. A check will be given for thoroughly acceptable work. For each check, there will be no change to your final grade. A plus will be given for work that is exceptionally thorough, complete, and insightful. For each plus, one percentage point will be added to your final grade. All students will receive the same grade for a given report. However, in the event of "freeloading," individual's grades may be adjusted accordingly. If you must be absent for a group discussion, work with your group members before and after the discussion to make up for your absence.

— COURSE SCHEDULE —

Unit 1: Introduction

- 1/10 **The Course, the Waves, and the Questions**
- bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*, vii-60
- 1/15 **What is a feminist?**
- bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*, 61-118
- 1/17 **How do we do feminist theology?**
- Alice Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go To Heaven is You've Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land & Out of Your Lover's Arms)"
- CRJ 1: *What (if anything) legitimates a feminist theological retrieval of selected strands of scripture?*
1/22 **The Bible in Feminist Theology**
- Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread"
 - Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 99-104, 160-199 (skim)
- 1/24 **The Bible in Feminist Theology**
- Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, chapter 3
 - Judith Plaskow, "Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God"
- Presenters: Kaitie Yeoman, Ben Church
Respondents: Sarah Brooks, Molly Ryan

Engagement Opportunity 1

Nel Noddings, Feminist Ethicist (Jan. 28, times TBA)

CRJ 2: *How does social location affect theology—in particular, the theologian’s view of the human condition?*
1/29

Experience in Feminist Theology

- Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, intro and ch. 1, 2, 4 (pp.1-33, 59-82)
- Prepare for Small Group Discussion #1

1/31

Case Study: Experience in Theological Anthropology

- Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”
- Isazi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, ch. 7 (pp. 128-145)

Presenters: Demetria Worley, Taylor Van Gilder

Respondents: Amy DeLong, Lars Nelson

CRJ 3: *Are bodies and sexuality essential parts of being human—or are we merely souls inhabiting bodies?*
2/5

Scripture and Experience

- Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics*: ch. 3, 5, conclusion (pp. 55-91, 123-46, 229-41)

2/7

Case Study: The Body in Theological Anthropology

- Moon, chapter 6 (pp. 147-79)

Presenters: Sarah Brooks, Colleen Callaghan

Respondents: Alison Williams, Michael Turco

2/8, 5 pm Draft Prospectus due: (a topic question and preliminary bibliography of at least five sources).
Schedule a meeting with the professor to discuss.

Engagement Opportunity 2

Laura Haas, International Development, date and time TBA

Unit 2: Doctrine of God: Creator, Christ, Spirit

CRJ 4: *Can Christian theology dispose of a divine ‘father’, and if so, is a divine ‘mother’ preferable?*
2/12

God/dess

- Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess”
- (Begin reading Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*: Introduction, chapters 1-2)

2/14

Beyond God the Father

- Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*: Introduction, chapters 1-2 (pp. 1-68)

Presenters: Mary Milam Granberry, Jennifer Ross

Respondents: Margot Tiernan, Demetria Worley

CRJ 5: *How effective is the symbol of the world as God’s body for dealing with the problem of evil?*
2/19

Metaphorical Theology

- Sallie McFague, *Models of God*: Preface, chapters 1-2 (pp. ix-57)
- Prepare for Small Group Discussion #2

2/21

God as Creator

- Sallie McFague, *Models of God*, selections from chapters 3 and 5 (pp. 59-87, 137-55 only)

Presenters: Alison Williams, Matthew Horton

Respondents: Mary Milam Granberry, Alex McCulloch

No CRJ
2/26

Ecofeminist Theology

- Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings*, chapter 7
- Vijaya Nagarajan, “The Earth as Goddess Bhū Devī”
- Prepare for Small Group Discussion #3

2/28:

MIDTERM EXAM

- Bring blue book(s)

3/4
3/6

SPRING RECESS: View the film *Breaking the Waves*
SPRING RECESS

CRJ 6:
3/11

What (if anything) can Bess McNeil, as a female Christ figure, contribute to a feminist view of Christ?

The Person of Christ

- Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can a Male Savior Save Women?”
- Kelly Brown Douglass, “A Womanist Approach to the Black Christ”.

3/13

The Work of Christ

- Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, pp. 161-177
- Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart*, pp. 25-27, 50-70, 105-108

Presenters: Jon Holt, Katey Orr

Respondents: Matthew Horton, Kaitie Yeoman

Engagement Opportunity 3

Linda Alcoff, feminist philosopher, March 13-14 (TBA)

No CRJ
3/18

The Spirit

- Karen Baker Fletcher, “The Strength of My Life”
- Shelly Rambo, TBA
- Prepare for Small Group Discussion #4

3/19, 5 pm Final Prospectus Due: Thesis, outline, and bibliography of at least 10 sources that reflects conversation with the professor.

3/20

Easter Recess

Unit 3: What’s Wrong with Us, and How Can We Be Healed?

CRJ 7:
3/25

Should feminist theology retain anything from traditional sin language?

Sin

- Serene Jones “Sin: Grace Denied”
- Begin reading Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, chapter 4-6

Engagement Opportunity 4

Participate in or attend the at least one panel in the Women’s Studies Symposium, March 26

3/27

Woundedness

- Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, chapters 4-6

Presenters: Michael Turco, Molly Ryan

Respondents: Jennifer Ross, Katey Orr

CRJ 8: *Is Beloved a work of feminist/womanist theology? (You might choose one or more doctrines, for example sin/woundedness, for your analysis.)*

4/1 **Beloved**

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Foreward and Part One, pp. 1-100
- Prepare for Small Group Discussion #5

Engagement Opportunity 5 Angela Davis, feminist activist, April 2, University of Memphis (TBA)

4/3 **Beloved**

- Morrison, *Beloved*, *Part One*, pp. 101-195
- Presenters: Amy DeLong, Emily Donelson, Matthew Kernodle
Respondents: Jon Holt, Daniel Frankel

CRJ 9: *How can Cannon's Black Womanist Ethics help to interpret Sethe's plight?*

4/8 **Ethics**

- Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, chapters I-III (pp. 31-98)

Engagement Opportunity 6 Sandra Harding, feminist philosopher of science, April 7-8 (TBA)

4/10 **Ethics**

- Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, chapter V (pp. 125-157)
- Presenters: Lars Nelson, Alex McCulloch
Respondents: Matthew Kernodle, Benjamin Church

CRJ 10: *What does redemption mean for feminist theology?*

4/14, 5 pm: Draft of research paper due to your group on Moodle.

4/15 **Redemption**

- Isazi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, chapters 5 and 6
- "Bellevue Baptist Goes on Global 'Mission,'" *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 25, 2007

Presenters: Margot Tiernan, Daniel Frankel
Respondents: Colleen Callaghan, Emily Donelson, Taylor Van Gilder

4/17 **Final Paper Presentations**

- Read student drafts
- Discuss in small groups

4/22 **Final Paper Presentations**

- Read student drafts
- Discuss in small groups

4/24 **Review and Evaluations**

4/24, 5 pm Final version of research paper due, hard copy to professor's office

FINAL EXAMINATION: Monday, April 28, 1:00 pm. Bring blue book(s)

Student Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that I have received and read carefully a copy of the syllabus for Religious Studies 301, “Feminist Theology” taught by Professor Voss Roberts in the Spring semester, 2008. I understand that I am responsible for fulfilling all obligations, for completing all assignments on time, and for adhering to all policies as specified in the syllabus. I also acknowledge that failure to do so will adversely affect my grade in this class. I further understand that the professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, and that I will be notified of any such changes by e-mail at my Rhodes College e-mail address.

Student Name: _____

Local Phone Number/E-mail Address: _____

Class Year: _____

What is your anticipated major / minor?

What have you learned in previous courses that you hope to continue thinking about in RS301?

What is your interest in taking this class, and what do you hope to learn?

Signature: _____

Date: _____