

Interpreting religious history

Research sheds new light on women's roles in early Christian era

by Amy-Jill Levine

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Whether in the classroom, the cloister, or Kroger, the combination "women and religion" offers a mine, if not a minefield, of issues — from inclusive language in scripture to religious teachings on sexuality.

While women have always been involved in religious activity, their presence and influence have not always been acknowledged, recorded, or understood.

As a growing academic discipline, "Women and Religion" uses interdisciplinary methods to examine women's roles and representations in religious institutions and theologies, and thereby it brings new focus to a long-neglected subject.

The following three examples illustrate how, for one small vein of religious history — that of Christian origins — women's contributions, literary representations, and social roles are now finding new interpretations.

Paul's Epistle to the church at Rome sends greetings to several women, including Phoebe the deacon and Junia the apostle (Rom. 16:1, 7). However, Junia was for centuries read as "Junias," that is, a man, since many copyists, printers, and scholars could not imagine that Paul would acknowledge a female in such a role. Phoebe, too, has witnessed an historical make-over. Called *Diakonos*, "Deacon" (the form is not feminine) in Paul's Epistle, she has been consistently misidentified as a "deaconess," and therefore described as engaged in a different sort of ministry than the male deacons mentioned in the Christian scriptures.

Women and Jesus

The question of women's roles in religious communities extends to the relationship between women and Jesus. There is no unequivocal evidence that Jesus wanted to establish an egalitarian community; in fact, there is some evidence to the contrary (e.g., the 12 male disciples). Some Christian readers, anxious to present a Jesus pro-active on women's liberation, have depicted Jewish women of his

time as oppressed, repressed, suppressed, and depressed. Thus, whatever Jesus did regarding women became, by comparison, not merely good but anomalous. However, evidence both textual and archaeological argues that Jewish women in the Roman period led religiously rich and socially diverse lives.

From various ancient sites, we have inscriptions identifying Jewish women as "priestess"; "Mother of the synagogue"; and "leader of the synagogue." In the Gospels we find women who own their own homes (Martha); attend synagogue and temple functions (the 'bent over woman,' Mary); have independent wealth (the women who support Jesus and his followers); speak in public (the woman from the crowd who blesses Jesus by praising his mother's breasts and womb); and travel freely (Mary, who visits Elizabeth; the women who follow Jesus from the Galilee to Jerusalem; the women at the miraculous feedings). An early second century cache, the Babatha Papyri, preserves a woman's personal papers, from marriage contracts to legal documents concerning inheritance and property ownership. The historian Josephus reports on the conversions of many women to Judaism.

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Amy-Jill Levine oversees an interdisciplinary program at Vanderbilt Divinity School on religion, gender and sexuality. The program, as well as Levine's chair in New Testament studies, was funded by a \$2.5 million grant from the Carpenter Foundation to support publications, conferences, research and educational programs on religion and gender.



Amy-Jill Levine

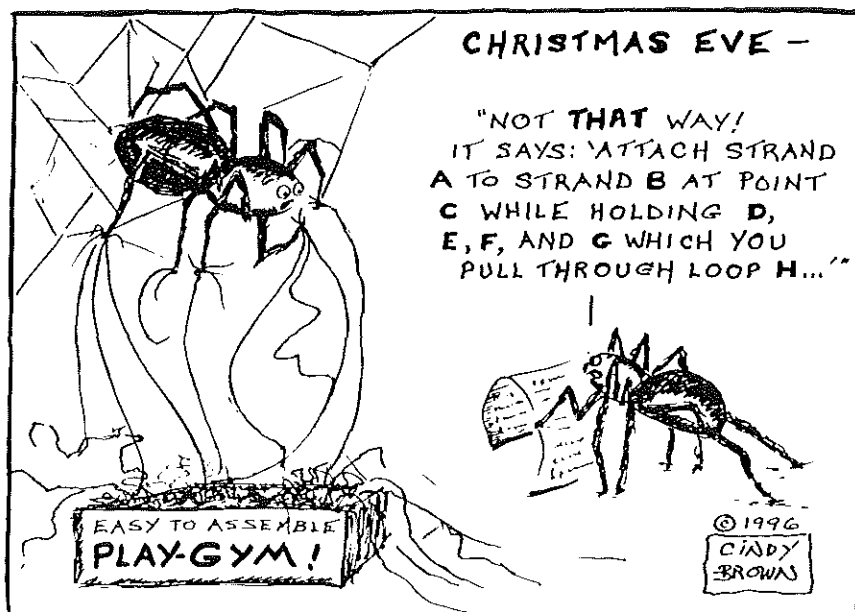
Levine, who has taught at the Divinity School since 1994, double majored in English and religion at Smith College, and received a master's and Ph.D. in religion from Duke University. She and her husband, Jay Geller, a lecturer in religious studies, have two children.

Women's Center seeks nominations for Mentoring Award

Nominations are invited for the Mentoring Award given annually by the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center. The award is given to a member of the university community who fosters professional and intellectual development of Vanderbilt women.

The deadline for nominations for the 1996 award is January 24. Forms are available from the Women's Center, 316 West Side Row.

For more information, call Martha Young, Awards Committee chair, at 4-4220, or e-mail young@library.vanderbilt.edu.



Women and religion, from page 1

Given these remains, two theses about the early Jesus movement become likely: first, the openness of the movement to women was a continuation of, rather than a shift from, the group's Jewish context. Second, women in the Galilee and Judea were likely attracted to the group for the same reasons that attracted their sons, husbands, and fathers, and not because the group "liberated" them from oppressive gender constructs.

In a third area of reinterpretation, noncanonical documents from the early church provide a context for many of the canonical statements concerning women's behavior. For example, the texts known as the "Pastoral Epistles" (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) express concern that women conform to contemporary, conservative, gentile mores: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through child-bearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Tim. 2:11-15).

The passage presents several problems: Do we translate "woman" and "man," or is the address to the "wife" concerning authority over her "husband"? How is the comment about Adam's innocence to be assessed, since he too ate from the forbidden fruit? Are women saved by giving birth, or is the focus on being saved from dying in the process?

One means of interpreting the Pastor's advice is to see why such instructions might have been warranted. We have from near-contemporary sources several texts which describe Christian women who insist on living a celibate life. Perhaps these are women who

took seriously, and literally, Paul's statement that "In Christ Jesus there is not male and not female" (Galatians 3:28). These stories, such as the "Acts of Paul and Thecla," encourage women to break engagements and to leave their marriage beds; Thecla did, to no small dismay on the part of her fiancé and family. Yet the Pastor is struggling to maintain a positive reputation in the wider community and likely concerned with society's tendency to persecute minority religions (see 1 Tim 5:14b). The advice offered therefore has a very practical component: the best way to encourage women to remain in traditional domestic arrangements is to tell them that those arrangements are necessary for salvation.

As these examples demonstrate, even brief sections of text can open upon a bonanza of meanings. By looking into the historical data with new eyes, and by placing the canonical material within its broader cultural context, we can find the presence of Jewish and Christian women who had differing views of the freedoms their faith and practices provided.

The field of women and religion is enormous, there are shining treasures hidden within, there are manifold tools for quarrying, and there are many types of interpretations through which we each find our own mother lode. ■

Women's VU is published monthly September through June at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
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Gay Welch puts faith into practice as VU chaplain

By Monica Coleman

I am scheduled to meet with the new university chaplain, Gay Welch. I eagerly walk into the building to find Gay Welch in fitness attire offering me a cup of tea as warmth for the rainy day outside. As she escorts me into her office I can't help but notice the decor: her bookshelves are lined with authors Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich; titles include *Earth and Ethics* and *Southern Folklore*; posters on the wall are titled "Women's Resources" and "Celebration of Womanhood." It is evident that Welch cares not only for religion, but also for women, health and wholeness.

Welch represents an impressive combination of administrative, ministerial, academic and interpersonal skills. She has served as a high school counselor and on the faculty at St. Luke's School of Theology at the Uni-

versity of the South and Scarritt College. She teaches courses on "Women in Religion" and "Ethics and Women." An ordained Methodist minister, she has worked

at Vanderbilt on and off since 1979. Last spring she was appointed university chaplain and director of religious affairs. So who is the woman behind the impressive résumé and the cozy office?

Welch attributes her success to incredible timing and outstanding mentors. Attending school in the 60s, Welch says, "The time was right for relating one's faith and education to what was going on in the world." She has always been interested in connecting theory with praxis. "I was interested in political realities," Welch states, "but also in acting out my faith." She saw no better arena for that than the study of ethics and the field of education.

Welch speaks lovingly of her undergraduate and graduate school professors who successfully combined intellectual mentoring with religious

mentoring. "They were faculty as well as functioning chaplains," Welch reminisces. It was the influence of these mentors that led Welch to her sense of vocation.

Feminism, on the other hand, caught Welch by surprise. When she began graduate school, the women's movement was just beginning. She met her first feminist professor in graduate school and was impressed that this woman thought of gender as a category. Welch replies, "I had thought of race and human rights and all that stuff . . . but I had not really applied anything to gender, which was one of those things I hadn't really noticed. Which is odd to say now because once you start noticing gender, you can never un-notice it."

Since that time, Welch has noticed gender everywhere. In her studies,

Welch realized that her whole education had been the education of white males. In the formation of women's studies curricula and women's rights, Welch has loudly

spoken out. In rearing her four children, she has challenged cultural norms for what is appropriately male and female.

Welch treasures her time teaching as an assistant professor in Religious Studies and says her access to students keeps her grounded in the life of the Vanderbilt community. She speaks of the classroom as a place of growth for both student and professor: "It gives me a place to test out my ideas and it gives me a place to challenge those students daily both intellectually and with regard to my own values and lifestyle. It's my functional equivalent of a pulpit, except my pulpit is more like a dinner table. I learn as much from the students as they learn from me."

The same passion and energy that sustains Welch's academic and personal interests carry over into her dis-



University Chaplain Gay Welch

cussion of religious life at Vanderbilt. She identifies one major issue for Vanderbilt students—how to put religious faith into practice. "Vanderbilt students tend to think more about individual private morality than they do about the public sphere and the common good," she notes. Her vision is to see conversation between students' personal religious convictions and what they learn in the classroom.

Welch also believes that patriarchy must be battled in the realm of religions. "Our religious traditions have imaged the Deity or the Sacred Source as male and that is a blow to a woman's self-image at no matter what level she deals with it," Welch argues. This has given her a special challenge in terms of leading female students: "I would like to help women claim their own sacredness."

Given her myriad commitments and experiences, I ask Gay Welch to label herself. For the first time during our dialogue, Welch becomes silent and pensive. Finally she says assuredly, "I'm religious but not doctrinaire. I am staunchly feminist, but I don't hate men. I'm a Southern white Protestant democratic, middle-aged wife and mother with pagan leaning." ■

Monica Coleman is a second-year graduate student in the Divinity School.

D E C E M B E R

Calendar of Events

Margaret
Cunninggim
Women's Center



Please save and post. Individual flyers for these programs may not be sent.

DECEMBER 2 / MONDAY

Proposal Writers Group, 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
Dissertation Writers, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.

DECEMBER 3 / TUESDAY

Women's Center Advisory Board, chair Joel Covington, 4:10 p.m., Branscomb Private Dining Room.

DECEMBER 6 / FRIDAY

Worried about exams? Frazzled at the thought of last-minute shopping for gifts? Just in time for the holidays, the Women's Center is offering a new workshop to help alleviate stress.

"Less Stress in Five Minutes"

will teach participants five brief exercises to combat tension. The exercises are designed to address specific aspects of the experience of stress such as physical tension (tight muscles, distracted thinking), anger, and negative thinking. After the 45-minute workshop ends, participants can examine books that tell more about stress and methods for coping with it.

Two sessions will be held, 11:30-12:15 p.m. and 12:30-1:15 p.m. The workshop will be repeated December 11. Facilitated by Nancy A. Ransom. By reservation only. Limited to 10. E-mail to womenctr@ctrvax.vanderbilt.edu or phone 322-4843.

Give yourself the gift
of a more relaxed
holiday season



DECEMBER 9 / MONDAY

Book Group meets to discuss *Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey. Facilitator is Elaine Goleski. This meeting will be held off-campus, beginning at 5:15 p.m. E-mail helferjt@ctrvax.vanderbilt.edu or phone 322-6518 if you plan to attend.

DECEMBER 10 / TUESDAY

Creative Life Planning Group will hear Deborah Narrigan, certified nurse-midwife, discuss RU-486. Narrigan was on the committee which recommended approval to the FDA last July. RU-486 offers a new choice for women seeking pregnancy termination, and it is expected to be available in the U.S. in 1997. The discussion will offer an update on this controversial drug and answer questions on how it works. Noon to 1 p.m. New members welcome. Call Judy Helfer at 322-6518 for more information.

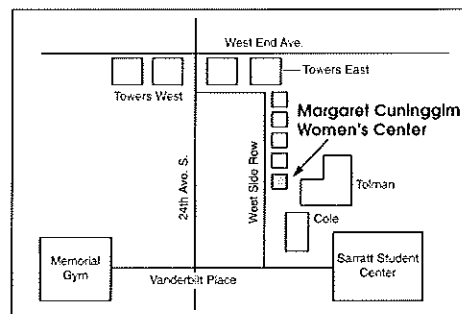
DECEMBER 11 / WEDNESDAY

Less Stress in Five Minutes. Workshop repeated. See listing for December 6.

DECEMBER 17 / TUESDAY

Creative Life Planning Group final meeting for the year. Bring your favorite tip for enjoying the holidays as well as a snack or sweet to share. Noon to 1 p.m.

How to find us . . .



Unless otherwise stated, all programs are held at the Cunningham Center, Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row. For more information, please call 322-4843.

In the library...

Sociologist rebuts 'dubious' views on teen pregnancy

Barbara Clarke,
Women's Center
librarian



Kristin Luker has an important message for policymakers and others who are concerned or infuriated about the problem of single teenage mothers. In *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Harvard University Press, 1996) Luker contends that poverty is the main reason unwed teenagers have babies. Her book aims to disprove the conventional view that teenage pregnancy itself is a fundamental cause of poverty.

Luker, a professor of sociology and law at the University of California, Berkeley, discusses a number of the myths surrounding teenage parenthood. The rate of teenage childbearing has not increased in the past couple of decades; in fact, it was at its highest in the 1950s. Most teenagers giving birth are aged 18 or 19 and this has always been the case; today these young women are legally adults. However, in years gone by the teenage mothers were usually married; today they are much more likely to remain single. They are also unlikely to give their babies up for adoption.

Single teenagers who get pregnant and decide against marriage, abortion and adoption are usually from very disadvantaged backgrounds. The writer shows that having babies does not make their lives of these teenagers much more difficult than they already were. Over 80 percent of single teenage mothers are poor long before they become pregnant. Most of these girls realize that their futures are limited, whether or not they have children. By middle-class standards most of these teenagers would never be ready for the financial responsibilities of parenthood. They are often better off hav-

ing babies when they are very young, as then they are more likely to have relatives — particularly mothers — who are willing and able to help them raise their children.

When many people think of teenage pregnancy they think of black urban girls having many children in order to get larger welfare checks. As Luker points out, most unmarried mothers are white (57 percent of single teenagers giving birth in 1990 were white), though the percentage of single mothers among black teenagers is higher. The percentage of mothers who are single has increased at all age levels, not just among teenagers. About two-thirds of single mothers are over 20.

Luker argues that the availability of welfare checks is not an enticement to have children. Doing away with welfare payments will not change the behavior of teenagers, she says, though it will probably further impoverish their babies. Many of the fathers of young girls' babies are adult men. For a number of reasons teenage girls increasingly decide not to marry or live with the fathers of their children. Many of the fathers cannot support their offspring and the young mothers believe that they are better off living without a man who may have no job or a poorly paid one, who may be unwilling to help with the housework and the children, and who may have substance abuse problems and opinions about women and gender roles that differ greatly from their own ideas.

The writer shows that tackling the problem of poverty should decrease the rate of single teenage childbearing. Stopping or reducing welfare payments will make little difference. She

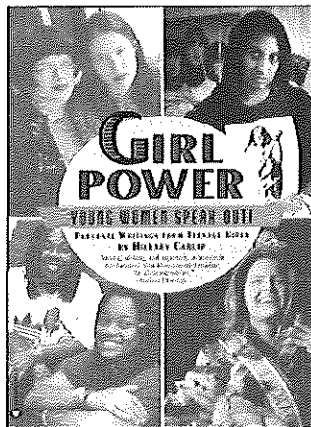
believes that the hysteria among politicians and others about teenage mothers results partly from discomfort about the profound sexual and economic changes of the past thirty years.

In *Girl Power: Young Women Speak Out!* (Warner Books, 1995) American teenagers write about issues and concerns of importance in their lives. According to the author, Hillary Carlip, younger teenagers often lose confidence and self-esteem, become self-conscious, and cease to speak freely.

Many will put on paper what they feel that they cannot say out loud. The author notes that putting their thoughts on paper can be a cathartic experience for the young contributors: "Through writing, not only are demons freed and mockeries banished, but through self-expression, I believe, they come into their power."

Selections from the girls' writings are interspersed with commentary and explanation by Carlip. She has arranged the contributions according to the backgrounds or interests of the young women, who come from all areas of the country. The thirteen chapters include selections from farm girls, sorority members, Native Americans, African-Americans, teenage mothers, surfers and skiers, future homemakers, teenagers who enter beauty pageants, girls involved in sports, young women in trouble with the law, and lesbians and bisexual girls.

The teenagers describe their concerns, problems, interests, feelings and various aspects of their lives, including difficulties at home, discrimination, how they are bringing up their own babies and their goals for the future. ■



Announcements

Internships

The **Feminist Majority** offers internships to young people interested in working behind the scenes for the women's movement. Past interns have conducted research for the National Sexual Harassment Hotline; assisted in preparations for the 1995 World Conference on Women; organized events; and coordinated media coverage. Apply to the Internship Coordinator, Feminist Majority, 1600 Wilson Blvd., Suite 801, Arlington, VA 22209.

Position Available

The **University of Toledo** is seeking a director for its Catharine S. Eberly Center for Women. The director is responsible for the administration and programming of the center, for supervising its staff, and for serving as a representative to various campus and community groups. A bachelor's degree is required, with a graduate degree preferred in sociology, psychology, women's studies or a related discipline. Review of applications and nominations will begin on Jan. 3, 1997. For information, contact the Personnel Department, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH 43606.

Fellowships

Fellowships for women in graduate programs are available from the **Educational Foundation of the American Association of University Women**. The AAUW fellowships support women doctoral candidates writing their dissertations; postdoctoral scholars conducting research; and women in selected fields where women's participation has been low. More information on these fellowships and their application requirements is available at the Women's Center.

Child Care

The **Vanderbilt Child Care Center** has expanded its program to offer new integrated classes for three-year-olds. In a joint effort with the Susan Gray School, the center will offer classes in which normally developing children interact with children who have special needs. The success of integrated classes for one and two-year-olds led to the expanded program. The Child Care Center is open to children with any Vanderbilt affiliation and currently has openings for two and three-year-olds. For information, call the center at 322-8076 or 322-8208.

Calls for Papers

Gender and Social Movements is the topic of a special issue planned by *Gender and Society*, a journal published by Sociologists for Women in Society. Papers are sought that demonstrate how attention to gender processes and their interactions with race, class and sexuality enlarges the understanding of social movements. Manuscripts must be submitted by June 1, 1997 to: Beth Schneider, Editor, Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106.

Papers are sought for a new anthology on **race, class and gender** with an international and comparative emphasis. Contact Rodny Coates, Director of Black World Studies, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056.

Publications

The American Political Science Association has published a collection of syllabi for courses on **Women and Politics**. Included in the collection are syllabi for courses on Gender, Power and Leadership; Women and Politics: Third World Perspectives; and the Politics of Reproductive Health. To order send \$14 to: APSA Publications, 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.



Happy Holidays from the Women's Center



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