

Course: Origins of Western Morality  
Professor: Mikael Haxby  
Schedule: Tuesday-Thursday 2:50-4:10  
Location: Frelinghuysen Hall A1  
Office Hours: Tuesday 12:00-1:30  
Office: Loree 102

What is the early Christian heritage of sexual morality? When people talk about questions of gender and sexuality in the modern world, they invoke religion. Maybe because canonical New Testament texts have authority in these debates. Maybe because we just need to get beyond the ancient ideas that religion has saddled us with. Maybe because there was a better, purer way of living in the world that can be unearthed from the ancient texts. However people construe the importance of early Christianity, the ancient world is still alive when contemporary folks talk about sex, gender and sexuality.

This course aims to examine that ancient story. What were the perspectives on questions of sex, gender and sexuality put forth in ancient Christianity? Were there just one or two ways of thinking about these topics, which constitutes an “early Christian heritage”? Or was there a wide-ranging debate? We will engage with a variety of ancient materials, including both canonical and non-canonical, orthodox and heretical, to get a sense of the diversity of early Christian thought and practice.

#### Course Books:

Ross Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins*  
Stephen Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor*

#### Course Requirements:

- 1) Attendance and participation. We will be engaging in regular discussion in class, so coming prepared with copies of the course texts, is required. Missed classes for illness or other reasons can be excused, but you have to contact me in advance to let me know. More than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for attendance.
- 2) Reading Responses. There are three short response papers required over the semester. These are not due on a specific date, but one must be turned in by February 17<sup>th</sup>, another must be turned in by March 19<sup>th</sup>, and the last is due by the final day of class (April 30). These are papers of about a page in length. You are expected to engage with course materials, but you have freedom to choose your topic. The questions for “discussion” each week can help guide your response.
- 3) Exams. There will be two in-class exams, both consisting of essay questions. The topics will be given to you in advance to prepare, but you will be required to write the essays in class during the exam time.

4) Paper. The final paper project is a 6-8 page paper due by Thursday, May 7. The final draft should be submitted to me by email. We will spend time in class working on these papers in rough draft form as well. Part of your paper assignment is not only to draft your own paper, but to work with your classmates to help with theirs. You will participate in reading groups of 5-6 students, and you will read each other's first drafts and give feedback to help in the revision process. The first draft of the final paper will be due both to myself and to your reading group on April 9<sup>th</sup>.

January 20:

**Discussion:**

January 22:

**Discussion:** Creation. What exactly is created in Genesis? Does it lay down a definite story of gender and sexuality?

**Reading:** Genesis 1-3

January 27:

**Discussion:** Theory. What are sex, gender and sexuality? Why are we using three different words all the time? Also, how do we deal with the problem that we're interested in how sex, gender and sexuality affect everyone, and most of our ancient materials are just about a pretty small subset of rich men?

**Readings:** Moore, *GBP*, 1-20; Kraemer and D'Angelo, *WCO*, 3-10

January 29:

**Discussion:** Thecla. This text tells the story of a young woman, Thecla, who sees the apostle Paul and becomes deeply devoted to Christianity. Paul, whose letters we will read later, was a Jewish man who became a devotee of Jesus about 10-15 years after Jesus' death. He traveled as a missionary and helped to form some of the earliest communities of Jesus-followers outside of the area of Jerusalem and Galilee, where Jesus had lived. He wrote in Greek to non-Jewish audiences in Greek cities like Corinth and Thessaloniki, as well as to Rome.

One of the questions I have in this class is, how important was Paul? Paul's opinions on marriage, women's authority in church, and homosexuality often form the basis for Christian thought on these topics. When we talk about an "early Christian heritage" is it really at base a Pauline heritage?

We start with Thecla in order to get a different perspective. What does Thecla tell us about the lives of ancient Christian women? What sort of power and agency was available to them, and how could they take it? Note how Thecla is regularly at risk of violence. What is the text saying about violence and gender? Further, who is Paul in this text? What is important about him? What does he have to say about gender and sexuality?

**Reading:** Acts of Thecla

February 3:

**Discussion:** These readings survey what is known about women's lives in the ancient Mediterranean world. What in here is surprising? What is paralleled in Thecla's story, and what is different?

**Readings:** Hallett, "Women's Lives in the Ancient Mediterranean" and Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Christian Origins: Some Caveats," *WCO* 15-49

February 5:

**Discussion:** 1 Corinthians is a letter written by Paul to a community of Jesus-followers in the Greek city of Corinth. In this community, many debates had arisen. Struggles for power were ongoing between different groups. Paul writes a letter and sends one of his co-workers to read it to everyone at their gathering.

The letter responds to claims people in the community have made, such as "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (7.1) and "food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food" (6.13). He will both agree and disagree with the Corinthians on these points. He will lay down rules for sexual ethics (5-6), marriage and divorce (7), for women's dress (11) and for women's leadership (14). What are his opinions? What kind of evidence does he cite as the basis for his opinions?

As you read the letter, I want you to remember the context. Paul is laying down rules, but he's not actually there. His messenger is. Does Paul sound confident and assured that people will do what he says? Imagine yourself as a Corinthian hearing this letter read aloud—would you agree with what he is saying?

**Readings:** 1 Corinthians; Castelli, "Paul on Women and Gender," *WCO* 221-235

February 10:

**Discussion:** We will look at Romans 16 as well as back through 1 Corinthians with a new focus. What can we learn about the people of Rome and Corinth from these letters? Are there women (and men) who held different opinions from Paul who are being lost in the flurry of letters and debates? What about the women who allied with Paul? What do we learn about these people, what they believed and what they did?

**Readings:** Romans 16, MacDonald, "Reading Real Women through the Letters of Paul," *WCO* 199-218

February 12:

**Discussion:** In these sections of letters he wrote to people in Rome and in Galatia (present-day Turkey), Paul returns to questions about creation in talking about the nature of the new Christian community. In Romans 1.26-27, he appears to condemn homosexuality. In Galatians 3.28, he appears to describe the new Christian community as one in which all people can be included as one, where old divides of gender and class and nationality do not apply anymore. Is Paul contradicting himself?

In both cases, a reading of the creation story appears to lie behind Paul's words. What are Paul's readings of creation? How can he read the creation story in two ways that lead to such different outcomes.

**Readings:** Romans 1-2, Romans 5, Galatians 3-4, Genesis 15-21

February 17:

**Discussion:** Stephen Moore picks up on many of the topics we've been talking about and makes his own argument about what Paul has been talking about. We'll try to work through Moore's argument and figure out if it solves our problems—does Paul make sense after you read Moore? Or is he just as confused and confusing as ever?

Further, what does Moore suggest is the proper modern response to Paul and Paul's legacy?

**Reading:** Moore, *GBP*, 133-172

February 24:

**Discussion:** We are not the only readers of Paul. In the ancient world, people read Paul and found him compelling. So compelling that they were moved to write letters in his name, to expand upon his thought, clarify points where he might have been unclear. These are called the "Deutero-Pauline Epistles." One of the most striking aspects of the "Deutero-Paulines" for our purposes are the household codes in Colossians 3.18-4.1 and Ephesians 5.21-6.9. These lay out how people should behave in the most common relationship in the ancient household (parents/children, husband/wife, masters/slaves).

Compare the texts of Colossians and Ephesians. Where are they similar and where are they different? What do both have to say about the power structure of the ancient household?

**Readings:** Colossians, Ephesians, Aristotle *Politics* I.3-13 (1253b-1260b)

February 26:

**Discussion:** Between Ephesians, Colossians and Thecla, we have some very different ideas of what Paul meant to say when he talked about sex, gender and sexuality. What do you make of the disagreements between people who all claim to be followers of Paul?

**MacDonald**, "Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender," *WCO* 236-255

March 3:

**Midterm Exam**

March 5:

**Discussion:** The contemporary legacy, part one. How have these stories from the Bible informed the way people in our time think about sex, gender and sexuality? Are our sexual ethics still, in some obscure way, related to Paul's sexual ethics? To Thecla's?

**Reading:** Jennifer Wright Knust, "Why the Bible is Not a Sexual Guidebook"

March 10:

**Discussion:** 1 Timothy is another of the letters written in Paul's name. Tertullian is a Christian minister from North Africa who lived about 150 years after Paul. Both the unknown author of 1 Timothy and Tertullian invoke the story of Genesis and in particular the character of Eve when they seek to talk about women and gender. What do they have to say about Eve? What are their readings of Genesis 2-3? Do you agree with these readings of Genesis?

**Readings:** 1 Timothy, Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* 1

March 12:

**Discussion:** The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is an ancient Christian text that was probably written at about the same time as Tertullian was writing on the apparel of women. It, however, offers a strikingly different interpretation of Genesis.

*Hypostasis* begins by quoting a letter of Paul. This is from the letter to the Ephesians verse 6.12, which we read earlier, where someone writing in Paul's name says, "our contest is not against flesh and blood; rather, the authorities of the universe and the spirits of wickedness." The text begins with this question: Who are these "authorities of the universe"? (The Greek word for "authority" is "archon.")

From there, it engages in a long re-telling of the Genesis creation story in which nothing is what it seems. The God who creates is not the highest God. It is the true divine spirit inside the woman which compels her to eat of the fruit. This woman, despite her great insight and power, is subject to violence and attempted rape from the "authorities."

What does this text have to say about gender and sexuality? How does it read Genesis? How different is the reading of Genesis from what we saw in Paul, 1 Timothy or Tertullian?

**Reading:** *Hypostasis of the Archons*; Karen King, "The Book of Norea," (reserve)

March 17:

**Discussion:** Irenaeus was a minister who wrote a massive book of theology called "Against the Heresies" as a response to Christian writings like *Hypostasis of the Archons* that he considered to be non-Christian in their thought.

He felt he needed to explain human salvation in terms of, again, the Adam and Eve story. What role does Eve play in human salvation? Does this mean that women's salvation and men's salvation are different? How do you understand Irenaeus' argument about gender and salvation?

**Reading:** Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* (selections)

March 19:

**Discussion:** Benjamin Dunning offers a possible theory to explain what is going on in Irenaeus, and by extension a theory to explain what is going on with the problem of creation in these discussions of gender and sexuality. What is Dunning's explanation? Why does it keep coming around to Paul and creation? Is Dunning convincing?

**Readings:** Benjamin Dunning, "Virgin Earth, Virgin Birth: Creation, Sexual Difference, and Recapitulation in Irenaeus of Lyons."

March 31:

**Discussion:** The book of Acts tells the story of what happened after the death of Jesus. It focuses first on the apostle Peter and then on the apostle Paul as they travel around the Mediterranean and form a new community. The book of Acts was written by a Christian who sought to tell a story of harmony and unity in the early Church. Pay attention to the ways in which stories are told to emphasize unity and oneness of Christians.

My question here is, does Acts' desire for unity also demand sacrifices from women? What were the opportunities for women in early Christian communities for power and authority? In Acts, how is women's power presented and in what ways is it restricted? In reading D'Angelo, focus on her discussion of Acts.

**Reading:** Acts, D'Angelo, "Re-presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke/Acts," *WCO* 171-197

April 2:

**Discussion:** While Acts is the only narrative of the lives of the apostles which is found in the Christian New Testament, it is far from the only such narrative written. We already met Thecla in the Acts of Thecla. Here we meet Mary of Magdala, the disciple of Jesus, in the gospel written about her, the Gospel of Mary.

This text is sadly fragmentary, as there are several important pages missing from the only known copy. Focus instead on the text's opening and conclusion. There are two key discussions between Mary and the other disciples. What do they discuss? How are Mary and the other disciples characterized? Who do you think the author wants us to sympathize with?

How is this story different from the story in Acts? What is the Gospel of Mary trying to say about the nature of the early Christian community, as compared to the book of Acts?

**Reading:** Gospel of Mary

April 7:

**Discussion:** By the end of the first century CE, it was illegal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire. The law held that while being Christian was against Roman law, governors and magistrates should not accept anonymous tips about who was and who was not a Christian. The result was a strange situation where persecutions were exceptionally rare, but the threat of persecution remained over the heads of most Christians.

The *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* tells the story of a Christian woman, Perpetua, who was executed in Carthage (North Africa) in the year 203. She kept a journal her experiences in court and in prison, as well as of her visionary experiences. The core of this text is her story, but a narrator has added both an introduction and a final narrative of Perpetua's death in the arena.

What do we learn from Perpetua about the opportunities for women in the early Church? What does Perpetua have to say about gender and sexuality. (Note in particular her final vision, in which she becomes a man to fight in the arena.) Consider the contrast between Perpetua and the narrator. How does she tell her own story differently from how the narrator tells her story?

Further, this is not just Perpetua's story. It is notably also the story of her slave Felicitas. What do you imagine is Felicitas' story? Why do we learn so little about her?

**Reading:** *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*; Elizabeth Castelli, "Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity."

April 9:

**Discussion:** The book of Revelation was written toward the end of the first century CE. It contains first a series of letters to communities in cities in Asia Minor (Turkey). The book then goes on to describe a vision of the apocalypse, of a world order overturned from the rule of “Babylon” to the rule of God.

In much ancient Jewish writing, “Babylon” is used as a stand-in for present-day oppressors. Toward the end of the first century, the Jews had fought a series of revolutionary wars against the Roman Empire and been defeated. The vision of a world overturned seems to recall a desire for these losses to be avenged by God and for the Romans, imagined as Babylon, to receive punishment in turn.

This text speaks of witnesses, who are male, who die for God. What is the text saying here about gender and the suffering of violence? Further, this is a text shot through with violence. How is one supposed to read it in the contemporary world? Obviously the contemporary world has seen innumerable examinations of how Revelation speaks to our situation today. Should Revelation be seen simply as an ancient response to ancient questions? Why does it still speak to people so powerfully today?

**Reading:** Revelation

April 14:

**Discussion:** Moore emphasizes in his reading of Revelation the masculinity of Jesus and God. He considers how this vision of masculinity fits with the violent imagery of the text. Do you think his analysis is convincing? Is masculinity fundamentally what Revelation is about? Further, we have seen violence as a topic of discussion in other texts, most notably the *Acts of Thecla* and the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*. Does Moore’s analysis apply to those texts as well?

**Reading:** Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor*, 173-200

April 16:

**Discussion:** The *Thunder, Perfect Mind* is a Christian text of probable Egyptian origin. It contains a self-revelation by a deity who identifies as female, but also at times as male. The rhetorical strategy of the text is one of self-contradiction, where never does the deity describe herself (himself?) without almost immediately describing herself as the opposite.

What is different about the theology of *Thunder, Perfect Mind* and the theology of texts like Revelation, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, Irenaeus or Paul? What is similar?

Moore has emphasized the effects of a masculine image of the deity on not only theology but also sexual ethics and ideas about sex, gender and sexuality. How might the image of the divine in *Thunder* cause readers to rethink the character of sex or gender or sexuality?

**Reading:** *Thunder, Perfect Mind*; Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor*, 201-207

April 21:

**Discussion:** The contemporary legacy, part two. How have these ancient Christian texts influenced modern discussions of sexual ethics?

**Reading:** Brooten, *Love Between Women* (selections)

April 23:

**Discussion:** The contemporary legacy, part three.

**Reading:**

April 28:

**Second Exam**

April 30:

**Reading group revision day.** Your comments on your reading group colleagues' papers are due, both to them and to me. During class time you will meet in your groups and discuss each of the papers, offering suggestions for revision, expansion and debate. Attendance at revision day is extremely important, and I expect everyone to show respect for their classmates and come prepared to help one another work through their papers.