

Religion and Reproductive Politics in the United States 4xxx/5xxx

Professor Samira K. Mehta

Office:

Email:

Office Hours:

Religion and Reproductive Politics in the United States focuses primarily on how Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish conversations about sexuality and reproduction have shaped access to and attitudes towards reproductive health in the US over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jews and Catholics provide an excellent way to think about how religious law/theology and religious practice/community needs diverge. Attention to Jewish thought on contraception, abortion, and reproduction helps to denaturalize any number of Christian assumptions about reproductive ethics that dominate the discourse in the US. While the course focuses on the three religious groups who were allowed to be policy influencers in the US political debate, the course allows students space to consider how other religious groups (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Indigenous) have interacted with and been affected by the dominant religious voices. By comparing the role of religion in US debates about reproduction to the Israeli version of those conversations, students will come to understand how these debates play out in another soil where the religious commitments are in some ways more embedded but also much more liberal on issues like abortion.

Course Materials

The following books are required for the class. Please purchase print copies of the books.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1998)

Atwood, Margaret. *The Testaments*. (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2019)

Kahn, Susan. *Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000)

May, Elaine Tyler. *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010)

Peters, Rebecca Todd. *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018)

Ross, Loretta and Ricki Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017)

Tentler, Leslie Woodcock. *Catholics and Contraception: An American History*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009)

Tone, Andrea. *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002)

Additional readings will be available on Canvas. Please bring hard (not electronic) copies of all readings to class.

Assignments and Evaluation

Requirements for 4xxx

1. Attendance and Participation – 25% of final grade

The heart of this course is our weekly seminar discussion. These sessions are opportunities to wrestle with challenging texts, ask and address difficult questions, and discover points of agreement while also honestly expressing disagreement. Punctual attendance is mandatory: you may miss one session with no questions asked, but further absences may require documentation from an appropriate source. Make sure to bring hard copies of the assigned readings to class sessions: because we will be looking at primary and secondary sources in part to learn how scholars build and construct arguments, it's crucial that we all have the texts in front of us. Active and responsible participation is also required: you are expected to listen open mindedly to your colleagues and contribute meaningfully to our conversations, expressing your own views while being open to having those claims challenged with charity and humility. Each of us has a responsibility to help create a space in which we can discuss sensitive matters on which we might hold very different positions—a space in which we can comfortably and confidently articulate our own commitments, while at the same time taking seriously (and being intellectually vulnerable to) views we might find objectionable.

2. Papers or Paper – 50% of final grade

Students will be required to submit two papers, each of which is worth 25% of your final grade. I will provide several prompts, but you are also permitted to write on your own topic with my prior approval. I encourage you to meet with me to discuss these papers; if you wish to select your own topic, you are required to meet with me to discuss your proposal.

Paper one, due midway through the semester (see schedule of readings), must be 5-7 pages long and is worth 20% of your grade.

Paper one, due during the scheduled final exam period, must be 8-10 pages long and is worth 30% of your grade.

We'll discuss these papers in greater detail as the semester progresses. All papers should be submitted via Canvas. Papers submitted after the deadlines listed below without an approved extension will be marked down by 1 grade per day (e.g., an A paper will become an A-). No paper without an approved extension will be accepted more than 3 days after the due date.

3. Responses (for WGS/JWST 4190) – 25% of final grade

Seven times during the semester, students will be required to submit a short (1 page) response to the weekly readings. Each response should call attention to a passage or topic in at least one of the assigned readings and then say something about the highlighted material—for example, raise a question, offer a critique, or suggest a connection to another text that we have read during the course. Each response should focus primarily on material from the required readings, but may also draw on material from the recommended readings. You may select the seven weeks on which you submit responses.

These responses are graded out of 10. You will receive a 0 if you fail to show that you have done the reading; a 6.5 if you demonstrate that you have done the reading but do not understand the material, or if you do not fulfill the requirements; an 8.5 if you mostly offer an accurate summary of what's in the readings; and a 10 if you both offer an accurate summary and share some original insights. In addition, if your paper has notably grammatical or typographical errors, I will deduct two points from the final grade. These responses must be submitted via Canvas by 10 am on the day before the seminar for which the material has been assigned. Because you can write a response for any week of the semester, barring highly unusual circumstances, no late work will be accepted for this assignment.

Requirements for 5xxx

1. Attendance and Participation – 25% of final grade

The heart of this course is our weekly seminar discussion. These sessions are opportunities to wrestle with challenging texts, ask and address difficult questions, and discover points of agreement while also honestly expressing disagreement. Punctual attendance is mandatory: you may miss one session with no questions asked, but further absences may require documentation from an appropriate source. Make sure to bring hard copies of the assigned readings to class sessions: because we will be looking at primary and secondary sources in part to learn how scholars build and construct arguments, it's crucial that we all have the texts in front of us. Active and responsible participation is also required: you are expected to listen open mindedly to your colleagues and contribute meaningfully to our conversations, expressing your own views while being open to having those claims challenged with charity and humility. Each of us has a responsibility to help create a space in which we can discuss sensitive matters on which we might hold very different positions—a space in which we can comfortably and confidently articulate our own commitments, while at the same time taking seriously (and being intellectually vulnerable to) views we might find objectionable.

2. Papers or Paper – 50% of final grade

Students enrolled in WGS/JWST 5XXX will be required to submit either two papers, drawing from at least 3 of the assigned readings and 2 outside readings.

Paper one, due midway through the semester (see schedule of readings), must be 7-10 pages long and is worth 20% of your grade.

Paper one, due during the scheduled final exam period, must be 12-15 pages long and is worth 30% of your grade.

We'll discuss these papers in greater detail as the semester progresses. All papers should be submitted via Canvas. Papers submitted after the deadlines listed below without an approved extension will be marked down by 1 grade per day (e.g., an A paper will become an A-). No paper without an approved extension will be accepted more than 3 days after the due date.

3. Presentation (for WGS/JWST 5xxx) – 25% of final grade

Students enrolled in WGS/JWST 5XXX will be required to give one class presentation. This will involve introducing the week's readings, highlighting some key passages for discussion, and guiding a portion of our class conversation. I encourage you to meet with me during the first two weeks of the semester to select a week and discuss these presentations.

Communication

The more opportunities we have to speak with one another—to discuss issues relating to the course material, as well as your broader interests—the more productive our time together will be. I strongly encourage each of you to meet with me at least once during the first five weeks of the semester. My office hours are listed at the beginning of this syllabus. However, if you have a prior commitment during those office hours, send me an email with three alternatives, and we will find a time to meet.

You can always contact me via email, and I will do my best to respond within 24 business hours. (This means that if you contact me by 10am on a Monday, you can expect a response by 10am on Tuesday and if you contact me by 10am on a Friday, you can expect a response by 10am on Monday. Please start your papers enough in advance that, if questions come up, you will have time to contact me and receive a response before the due date.) However, while email can be an excellent way to deal with administrative issues, it's rarely an effective way to discuss substantive questions. Questions about themes of the course, clarifications of the readings, follow-up conversations on class discussions, or questions about grades are best handled in person. Therefore, for substantive matters, I ask that you attend office hours or set up an alternate meeting time.

Time in the Classroom

As noted above, make sure to bring hard copies of the required readings to class sessions. Laptop computers may not be used during class, and you should put away (and silence) phones and other electronic devices before each class begins. Of course, if you have a specific need for a computer during class, please speak with me. Similarly, if you have a compelling reason to keep a phone (or phone-like device) turned on, let me know before class, and we'll work something out.

Schedule of Readings

Schedule of Readings

Week One: Introduction to the Course and Concepts

Reading: Lofton "Sexuality and American Religion" (Canvas)

Week Two: Telling the Story Without Religion

Reading: Tone, *Devices and Desires*, Part 1 Comstockery" and Part 2 "From Smut to Science" (pages 1-183)

Week Three: Religion in Secular History

Reading: May, *America and the Pill*, Introduction-Chapter 4

Week Four: Changing the Narrative Through Religion

Reading: May, *America and the Pill*, Chapters 5-7
Griffith, *Moral Combat*, Chapter 1 (Canvas)

Week Five: Public Religious Debates about Contraception

Reading: Mehta, "Family Planning is a Christian Duty" (Canvas)
Mehta, "The Diaphragm Debates: Protestants, Jews, and a Changing Culture of Contraception" (draft) (Canvas)
Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, Chapters 1-2

Week 6: Contraception and Religious Lives

Reading: Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, Chapter 3-Epilogue

Week Seven: Pro-Faith, Pro-Family, Pro-Choice

Reading: Kranson, "From Women's Rights to Religious Freedom: The Women's League for Conservative Judaism and the Politics of Abortion, 1970-1982" (Canvas)
Dirks and Relf, *To Offer Compassion: A History of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion*, Chapter 3 "To Offer Compassion," Chapter 6 "Brushes with the Law," and Chapter 7 "A Different Kind of Radical Group"
Stahl and Lynch, "Protecting Conscientious Providers of Care" (Canvas)

Week 8: Conservative Religious Backlash: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish

Reading: Dowland, "Abortion" in *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Canvas)
Dugan, TBD (Canvas)
Stahl, "The Privilege of Spirit: The Liberal Concern With Religious Liberty Claims" (Canvas)
Mehta, "Feminism, Pro-Natalism, and American Judaism" (draft—do not cite) (Canvas)

Week 9: Theological and Ethical Responses from Christianity and Judaism

Reading: Peters, *Trust Women*
Eisner, "Family Is a Jewish Value. Don't Let The Mistakes Of A Few Rob Us Of That Gift." (Canvas)
Sirbu, "Fertility Is Not The Enemy Of Feminism. The Way The Jewish Community Pushes It Is." (Canvas)
Stahl, "Single and Still Worthy" (Canvas)

Week Ten: Beyond Pro-Choice/Pro-Life: Understanding Reproductive Justice

Reading: Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*

Week Eleven: Spring Break

Week Twelve: The Religious Aspects of Israeli Pro-Natalism, a comparison

Reading: Kahn, *Reproducing Jews*, Chapter 1 "The Time Arrived but the Father Didn't," Chapter 2 "Not Mamzers," Chapter 3 "Jewish and Gentile Sperm," and Chapter 4 "Eggs and Wombs"
Ivry, "Kosher Medicine" (Canvas)

Week Thirteen: Contraception and Abortion in Israel

Reading: Raucher, "The Cultural and Legal Reproduction of Poverty: Abortion Legislation in

Israel." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30:1 (2014). 147-156. (Canvas)
Taragin-Zeller, 2019, "Conceiving God's Children': Toward a Flexible Model of Reproductive Decision-Making," *Medical Anthropology*, 26 Feb 2019 (Canvas)
Steinfeld, "Wars of the Wombs: Struggles Over Abortions Policies in Israel" (Canvas)

Week Fourteen: Palestinian Approaches to Israeli Politics of Reproduction

Reading: Kanaaneh, "New Reproductive Rights and Wrongs in Galilee" (Canvas)
Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*, Chapter 1 "Babies and Boundaries," Chapter 3 "Fertile Differences," and Chapter 4 "Modernizing the Body"

Week Fifteen: Religion and Reproduction in Popular Culture

Reading: Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Week Sixteen: Religion and Reproduction in Popular Culture

Reading: Atwood, *The Testaments*