

# **WOMEN IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY**

## **CH 3P1040/CH 5P1030**

McMaster Divinity College  
Winter 2027

In person and Live Stream  
Wednesday 10:00am-12:50pm

Professor Gordon L. Heath  
[gheath@mcmaster.ca](mailto:gheath@mcmaster.ca)

Specializations: Christian Culture, Christian History and Worldview, Pastoral Studies

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

From the book of Acts to the contemporary church, women have played a key role in the life of the church in places such as monasteries, missions, schools, pulpits, home, and hostels. And many have been formally identified as “saints.” This class is a survey and analysis of the roles and impact of such women from the earliest churches to the modern period of global Christianity.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

#### Knowing

- to provide students with an understanding of how women have participated in, and contributed to, the life of the church over the centuries
- to help students place the contemporary debate over gender roles in the church in the larger historical context

#### Being

- to explore - and ultimately appreciate - the diverse ways that women have served in the church
- to create an awareness of the breadth and diversity of the Church, and provide a sense of “place” within the many church traditions

#### Doing

- to develop in each student an ability to assess documents and situations from an historical perspective, and, in particular, to be able to assess critically the various claims made about women in leadership throughout the church’s history

## REQUIRED TEXTS:

- Ruth A. Tucker & Walter L. Liefeld. *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987.
- Mary T. Malone. *Women and Christianity: The First Thousand Years*. Mary Knoll, Orbis Books, 2001.
- Kathryn Spink. *Mother Teresa: An Authorized Biography (Revised Edition)*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011.
- Gordon L. Heath. *Doing Church History: A User-friendly Introduction to Researching the History of Christianity*. Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2008.
- There may also be the occasional journal article to be read (distributed by the professor in class).

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at [books@readon.ca](mailto:books@readon.ca). The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY (*not* required for purchasing):

The following books are related to the course material and provide a helpful reading list for those who would like to pursue the course material further. Students are NOT required to purchase or read these books.

- Barbara J. MacHaffie, ed., *Readings in Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjection of Women Became Gospel Truth*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021.
- Amy Oden, ed., *In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. New York: Paulist, 2001.
- Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Roland Bainton. *Women of the Reformation in France and England*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973.
- Roland Bainton. *In Germany and Italy*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971.
- Roland Bainton. *From Spain to Scandinavia*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977.
- Paul F.M. Zahl. *Five Women of the English Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1983.

## COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENTS

- Position Paper (10%)

This assignment is a brief (two page) statement on one's own view of women in ministry, as well as one's view of the church's treatment of women in its history.

- Book Review (20%)

This five-page review should answer questions such as: what is the author's thesis? How did she go about arguing her thesis (structure, sources, methodology, etc.)? What are the weaknesses and strengths of the book? What is the value of reading the book? See *Doing Church History* for further instructions. A part of your analysis of the book should be an interaction between your specialization and the book.

- Research Paper (40%)

This ten-page research paper provides an opportunity for students to pursue an area of research that intrigues them. The topic for the paper should relate to the student's specialization. Results of research will be shared with the class at the end of the semester.

- Church and Culture

The primary focus of this research should be on a theological analysis of a past culture or our contemporary culture regarding Christian attitudes and actions towards women. The focus should be relatively specific, rather than scattered (eg. "the idealization of virginity in antiquity" rather than "how the church viewed women in antiquity"). The interplay between Christian theology and culture should be a critical part of this analysis.

- Christian History and Worldview

The research for this specialization should focus on developing critical knowledge of a key movement in Christian history, or a deeper awareness of Christian theology related to women and the church (eg. ordination, monasticism, sexuality). Research for this specialization should focus on a construction of one's theological position regarding an issue related to women and ministry (eg. women's ordination, women and the family, mothering, celibacy).

- Pastoral Studies Specialization

Research for this specialization can go in one of two directions. First, it can focus on a theological construction of one's theological position regarding an issue related to women and ministry (eg. women's ordination, women and the family, mothering, celibacy). Second, it can deal with developing a strategy for dealing with issues related to women and ministry in the local church.

- Biographical Presentation (20%)

Students will deliver a five minute "TED Talk" on a woman of their choice from any period of the church's history. A one-page outline and bibliography are to be submitted with this oral presentation.

- Participation (10%)

## GENERAL COMMENTS:

### Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresenting the authorship or ownership of written work through deception or other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include copying or using unauthorized aids during tests or examinations; plagiarism, that is, presenting another person's (or generative AI's) words, ideas, data, or creative work as one's own without appropriate acknowledgement and citation; or submitting work for credit in more than one course without instructor permission.

**A special note about Generative AI:** Students are expected to do their own thinking and write their own papers and assignments. Generative AI is not to be used to do this work. The use of AI to produce content that is then submitted as though it were the student's own work constitutes plagiarism and is a violation of the Academic Honesty Policy. While AI tools may be used to correct errors in English grammar, usage, and mechanics, Generative AI must not be used to translate assignments from a student's native language into English. All degree programs at MDC are taught in the English language. Students are expected to be sufficiently proficient in English to engage fully in academic discourse in these programs.

### AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), McMaster Divinity College (MDC) is committed to supporting a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. Students who require academic accommodations to participate fully in this course must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) (<https://sas.mcmaster.ca/>) of McMaster University. SAS will work directly with the MDC Registrar to ensure reasonably appropriate accommodations are in place. Students with accommodations must use the SAS portal to activate the accommodations relevant to each course at the start of each term in which they are enrolled. Please note that accommodations must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation. Accommodations are not retroactive and will not be applied to coursework or activities that have already concluded.

Contact Information:

- **Student Accessibility Services General Inquiries:** [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca)
- **Roksana Sobota (SAS Representative for MDC):** [sobotar@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sobotar@mcmaster.ca)
- **MDC Registrar:** [mdcreg@mcmaster.ca](mailto:mdcreg@mcmaster.ca)

### Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that student will use inclusive language in all MDC assignments. When referencing biblical texts, students should preserve the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God while using gender-inclusive language when referring to human beings. Biblical quotations should be taken from a gender-inclusive translation such as: NRSVue (2022), NIV (2011), CEB (2011), NLT (1996), or CEV (1995).

## Livestream Students

Unless given permission by the professor, students are expected to have their camera on for live Zoom sessions.

### ***College Style for Submission of Written Work***

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the **McMaster Divinity College Press Style Guide** <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

Essays must be handed in at the beginning of the class on the day they are due. All other essays will be considered late. Students may be exempted from the late penalty of 5% per day (not including weekends) if they attach to their essay a letter explaining the genuine emergency that delayed them. Late assignments (even ones with an extension) will not receive comments and constructive criticism from the professor and may not be returned at the same time as the papers submitted on the due date. Submit an electronic copy on the due date or a hard copy before the due date if you are unable to be in class on the due date because of a foreknown absence.

Please turn off your cell phone and/or pager before the class begins.

Please do not attend class if you are ill and contagious (e.g. the flu).

## **CLASS SCHEDULE:**

Jan 13: Introduction to the Class

Reading: *Doing Church History* (all)

Jan 20: Women in the Early Church I

Reading: *Daughters of the Church* (chs.1-3), *Women and Christianity* (chs.1-4)

\*Position Paper Due\*

Jan 27: Women in the Early Church II

Reading: *Women and Christianity* (chs.5-7)

Feb 3: Medieval Female Monastic Orders

Reading: *Daughters of the Church* (ch.4), *Women and Christianity* (chs.8-10)

Feb 10: Medieval Women: Sainthood and Motherhood

Feb 17: *Reading Week (no class)*

Feb 24: Biographical Presentations (as well as some themes chosen by professor – TBD)

\*Biographical Presentations Due\*

Mar 3: Women as Reformers in the Reformation

Reading: *Daughters of the Church* (ch.5)

Mar 10: Evangelicalism, Missions, and Women

Reading: *Daughters of the Church* (chs.6-8)

\*Book Review Due\*

Mar 17: Women in the Global Church I

Reading: *Daughters of the Church* (ch.9)

Mar 24: Women in the Global Church II

Reading: *Daughters of the Church* (chs.10-11)

Mar 31: Canadian and American Issues

Apr 7: Research Paper Presentations

\*Research Paper Due\*

Apr 14: Looking to the Future