SHAKERS IN AMERICAN RELIGION, DIVINITY 2563.01
DIANE SASSON   WEDNESDAYS, 11:10-1:00 PM, 225 Divinity Library

***Note*** Additional materials, including recommended readings, appeared on OAK

This seminar will focus on the Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, better known as the Shakers. The Shakers offer a case study in the development of a religion, from charismatic beginnings to institutional formation and decline. Shakerism will be a lens through which to explore topics in American religious history such as: revivalism and the Second Great Awakening, utopian communal societies, experiments in sexual equality and the restructuring of family relationships, spiritualism, and religious expression in ritual, music, and material culture.

Books

Stein, Stephen. *The Shaker Experience in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. This is our "text" for the class, the definitive history of the Shakers, which we will read in sections over the course of the semester. A copy is on reserve, but I suggest that you purchase a copy.

Humez, Jean. *Mother's First-Born Daughters*. Amherst: U. Mass Press, 1987. This is a collection of primary texts that we will use a number of times during the semester. A copy is on reserve.


Materials on Reserve

Materials on reserve at the Divinity School Library are listed in the first session on the syllabus in OAK. If readings are available in electronic version, I note it on the syllabus. In some cases, I have provided a link to articles that I have downloaded.

Bibliography

Rather than provide my own bibliography, I refer you to Stephen Paterwic, *Historical Dictionary of the Shakers*, Scarecrow Press, 2008, pp. 293-325, which is located in the Divinity School reference collection. You may want to copy the bibliography for your own use. It includes information on web sites, Shaker communities, etc. and is the most complete and up-to-date source of bibliography on the Shakers. The Dictionary is also invaluable as a source of information about specific people, places, and historical events.

Assignments
The course requires six short interpretive, creative and analytical papers. Each paper, along with discussion of it in class, counts 15% of the course grade.

1. January 21, Paper 1:

The past two decades have witnessed a profusion of scholarly examinations of the Shakers from a feminist point-of-view. Scholars have examined evolving conceptualizations of founder Ann Lee by both Shakers and non-Shakers, revealing that there many images of Ann Lee, which leave open room for interpretation.

Dialogue with Ann Lee. You are a religious seeker and hear about a “woman in the wilderness.” What would impel you to seek her out? What questions would you ask? How would Ann Lee answer? Draw both your readings about the religious and historical context for the rise of the Shakers and on the accounts of those who converted as found in the readings for today’s class to create a historically plausible encounter between Ann Lee and potential convert.

2. January 28, Paper 2:

Pick out a key theological term, or a biblical story, and explain how it was understood by the Shakers. What passages from scripture are used and how are they interpreted? I have suggested several texts of Shaker theology that you may use. If you are ambitious, you could compare the idea in more than one text (each text comes from a different era in Shaker history). Each of these texts is available in searchable form on Google books.


Calvin Green and Seth Youngs Wells, A summary view of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers. Albany, 1823. [in Google Books you can access the revised, 1848, edition].

Suggested terms: Jesus, Christ, atonement, sin, Eden, salvation, baptism, regeneration, confession, sacrament, circumcision. Another approach would be to focus on a particular biblical story: Adam and Eve and the fall; Jesus and the resurrection; sacrifice of Isaac.

PLEASE BRING TO CLASS A COPY OF THE PASSAGE(S) FROM THE TEXT THAT YOU ARE ANALYZING.

3. February 4 OR February 11, Paper 3:

Choose either the assignment for Feb. 4 OR for Feb. 11:

Having chosen to join the Shakers over the opposition of your family, you are writing a letter explaining your choice of a celibate life. Create a personae for the writer of the
letter and imagine the person to whom it is written. You may, of course, draw on ideas from the readings for this session.

**February 11**
The same assignment as above, but defend your choice to join the Oneida Community.

4. **February 25, Paper 4:**
Choose one example of Shaker material culture (a building, piece of furniture, fancy good, recipe or cook book, item of clothing, village plan, et al.). What does the object reveal about the Shaker vision? What does it tell about the beliefs, practices, economy, gender relations or satisfaction of its maker(s) or user(s)? Does the object belong to a specific time or geographical location?

On Reserve, you will find additional sources of information on Shaker material culture. See Paterwic’s bibliography, for sections on architecture, industries and crafts, and even “culinary.” There are many other resources in the library: feel free to explore.

5. **March 25, Paper 5:**
Pick ONE example of a “text” from the Era of Manifestations—a gift song, spirit drawing, a visionary or prophetic text—and analyze it in a 3-5 page paper. What does it tell you about Shakerism? About social relationships or tensions within the society? Be sure that your analysis situates the text within a specific community and context.

Paterwic’s bibliography has a section on “Architecture, Art, and Music.”

6. **April 4, Paper 6:**
Pick out an issue in late nineteenth-century American religious/social/cultural history. Use the Hamilton College Web Site to explore it using *The Shaker and the Shaker Manifesto*. See: http://library.Hamilton.edu/collections/. You can also search these periodicals using the American Periodical Index.

What position were Shakers taking on the issue? Do you see distinctive approaches or arguments based on Shaker theology? Did all Shaker writers agree or do you find differences of opinion? Possible topics: Suffrage, Women’s Rights, Sabbath keeping, censorship, separation of church and state, Peace movement, vegetarianism, prostitution, polygamy, racial equality, immigrants, eastern religions, economic equality, labor, wealth. Print out at least one example of Shaker writing on this issue to discuss with the class when you present your paper.

**OUTLINE OF TOPICS AND READINGS:** You must use OAK to link to downloaded articles, and for additional information on each session and suggestions for readings that may be helpful in writing papers.

**January 7:** Introduction

**January 14:** Awakenings: The Evangelical Context


**January 21: Ann Lee: The Construction of a Religious Leader**

Humez, “‘Ye are my Epistles.’” Link in OAK

Marini, “Mother Ann Lee”. Link in OAK.

*Primary Sources*

The *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee*, 1888. On Reserve. Skim chapters 1-10 for memories of Mother Ann’s early followers.

Additional excerpts are available at: [http://www.passtheword.org/SHAKER-MANUSCRIPTS/Testimonies/tstmonys.htm](http://www.passtheword.org/SHAKER-MANUSCRIPTS/Testimonies/tstmonys.htm)


**January 28: The Development of Shaker Theology**


**February 4: Celibacy**

READING FOR TODAY’S CLASS ARE ON RESERVE


**February 11: Religion and Sexuality: The Oneida Community**

ALL READINGS ARE ON RESERVE:


Foster, Lawrence. *Religion and Sexuality*. Chapter III, pp. 72-122, “That All May Be One.”


**February 18: Daily Life in Shaker Communities**


ON RESERVE:


**February 25:** Material Culture

ON RESERVE


**March 4:** Spring Break

**March 11:** Era of Spiritual Manifestations

Stein, “Shaker Gift and Order” Link in OAK


Humez, *Mother’s First-Born Daughters*, pp. 207-272; “’The Heavens Are Open’”.

**March 18:** Rebecca Jackson and Sisters of the Spirit


**March 25:** Gift Drawing and Song


**April 1:** Transformations
“Shaker Yankee,” Link in OAK


April 8: No Class: Passover: We will make up this class by making a visit to a Shaker site and/or library.

April 15: Wrap-Up