History 490: The Transformation of Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe

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This course attempts to define and describe a distinct era in Jewish cultural and social history roughly between 1500-1800. Early modernity for Jews represents more than a transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity and needs to be viewed as a critical stage in the formation of Jewish civilization. The course focuses on five markers of the period: enhanced mobility of communities and individuals; communal cohesiveness and laicization; a knowledge explosion engendered by the printing press and the University; a crisis of authority precipitated by radical messianism; and the blurring of religious, social, and cultural boundaries, especially between Jews and Christians. The course looks at these trends by studying comparatively the Jewish communities of Italy, the western Sephardim, the Germanic communities, and those of Poland-Lithuania and the Ottoman Empire.

General Requirements: Assigned readings for each class plus a research paper 12-15 pp. in length to be chosen in consultation with the instructor

Required and Supplementary Reading:

David. B. Ruderman, Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History (Princeton, 2010) [individual chapters to be read in preparation for each week]

For additional bibliography, consult David B. Ruderman, “Early Modern Jewry”, Oxford Bibliographies on Line

1. January 21, 2014: Organizational Meeting, Preview of the Class: Course Objectives and Design

Some General Perspectives about Cultural Transformation in Early Modern Europe

Readings:

Jonathan Israel, European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1750, pp. v-xiii, 1-28


Readings:


Moshe Rosman, How Jewish is Jewish History?, 2007, pp. 56-81


Readings:


Readings:

europäischen Judentums in der frühen Neuzeit (Heidelberg, 2000), 333-349


6. February 25, 2014: C. Knowledge Explosion I: The Printing Press as an Agent of Cultural Change: Books and New Modes of Reading; The Breakdown of Cultural Barriers between Jewish Communities; Jewish Writers in the Vernacular; Printing and the Emergence of Secondary Elites

Readings:

Joseph Hacker and Adam Shear, eds. The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy, 2011, pp. 1-16


Readings:


David Ruderman, Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe, 2000, pp. 100-17, 229-55


8. March 18, 2014: D. The Crisis of Traditional Authority: Messianism, Radical Enthusiasm, and Heresy
Readings:

Elisheva Carlebach, The Pursuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the Sabbatian Controversies, 1990, pp. 75-121


9. March 25, 2014: E. The Blurring of Religious Identities, or Mingled Identities: Conversos, Jewish Converts to Christianity, Syncretism and the Secularization of European Culture

Readings:


10. April 1, 2014: Epilogue: The Early Modern Period and the Haskalah: Rethinking the Beginnings of Modernity in Jewish History and guest speaker

11. April 8, 2014: guest speaker

12. April 22, 2014: To be rescheduled: oral presentations of research papers

13. April 29, 2014: Participation in the Gruss Colloquium of the Katz Center Research Paper Due