

Interview with Dr. Eliza Rosenberg

What was your Alma Mater?

I did my bachelor's degree at Oberlin College in Ohio with a major in religion. My emphasis was in Jewish and Christian scriptures, with a minor in Latin Language and Literature. I did my graduate work at McGill University in Canada in the School of Religious Studies.

How did you discover your interest in Religious Studies?

It's something that always captured me. I was not raised in a religiously observant household. My parents had some good basic knowledge and were always happy to answer my factual questions, of which I had a great many. But I can't remember a time when I wasn't fascinated by religion. As long as I've had a concept of what religion was, it's interested me.

Is there a specific religion or group of religions that you particularly enjoy?

I couldn't say that I enjoy one more than the other. My own area of specialization is biblical studies, in terms of both history and interpretation. That puts itself squarely in the middle of early Judaism, early Christianity, and Greco-Roman religions as well.

What aspect of religious studies are you most interested in or passionate about?

As a whole religion fascinates me. I'm very drawn to religious narratives, whether those narratives are scriptural or in other forms. I'm also drawn to religious artwork, especially literature, paintings, and those kinds of visual arts. I guess you could say narrative and the aesthetic realms. And I find that religion informs a lot of art that people don't necessarily automatically think of as religious. Especially in speculative fiction, often you have narratives that are deeply imbedded in religion without explicitly saying so.

Was there anyone who really inspired you to pursue religious studies?

The person who most inspired me and whose memory I would like to honor all my life is my lead graduate advisor Ellen Bradshaw Aitken. She ran the religious studies program at McGill while also being an active advisor and scholar. And she was an Anglican priest, or it would be an Episcopal priest in this country. She was an incredible woman, an incredible scholar, incredible teacher, and an incredible mentor. My consulting advisor, Ian Henderson is one of the most thorough, rigorous, thoughtful and humane people you could hope to encounter. He's constantly encouraging you to learn more, to pursue other angles of thought, to consider what you don't know and to be okay with what you don't know. My Oberlin advisors, Paula Richman and Cindy Chapman, both of whom always combined very zealous devotion to teaching with very active research agendas. A good share of either credit or blame also goes to Michael Penn. Right now he teaches religion at Stanford, but when I was in high school, he was finishing up his Ph.D. and coaching high school debate for a little extra money. He was the one who first turned me on to the fact that you could do this whole religious studies thing professionally. My high school history teachers – Mr. Gehmen, Mr. Beckmann, Mr. Lawrence, and Dr. Smith.

Is there any media that left an impression on you or inspired you that you would recommend for others?

I always tell my students if they want to understand Christian atonement theology and they're not quite getting it from the main theological sources they should watch *Blade Runner*, the director's cut. I'm going to leave it at that to avoid spoilers. If they want to understand Judaism there's a wonderful graphic novel called *The Rabbi's Cat* (by Joann Sfar). I love the *Life of Pi* (by Yann Martel). I think that novel answers the question of "what do we mean when we say religion, what really is a religious experience?" better than 150 years of scholarly work will ever have, and a good deal more entertainingly.

Any current projects or research?

Right now I'm working on shaping what was originally my dissertation into a book manuscript. It's on issues of slavery and freedom in the Book of Revelation, and abolitionist as well as pro-slavery readings of Revelation historically and in the modern period. You have to understand that for me, an 1850 sermon on Revelation is modern. After that project is completed, I'm looking to expand into more issues of slavery, freedom, and justice in some key biblical texts, including wrestling with more violent aspects of justice. I'm interested in how older historical and more recent historical concepts intermesh. I'm also interested in Bible and environment.

Do you have any tips for prospective students in Religious Studies?

Be prepared to be "the expert." As soon as people hear you're majoring in religion or even just taking a Religious Studies class, they'll want to know exactly what that entails. You are also going to be their information point, the person they ask, "Is it true that religion X does Y?" You're going to be their expert, whether you planned it or not and whether you're comfortable in that role or not. I'm of the age where I was in my teens when the internet was becoming a real phenomenon and there was all this excitement over how much more information would be at people's fingertips and how productive they would be. What no one saw coming, but maybe should have, was how much disinformation would be there. Now we have a situation where people are exposed to more contradictory information and more misinformation than ever, and at least some of them know that. They'll turn to someone they think might have a firmer base of knowledge. Be ready for that, and don't worry about not knowing everything. And understand that you will never know as much as you would want. Also, the fact that the subject matter can be so serious is all the more reason to have a sense of humor about yourself.

What brought you to USU?

When the position was first advertised I was really attracted to a couple of things. First, Utah State's commitment to being a research university that makes undergraduate instruction a top priority. The dedication and the resources that Utah State puts into helping faculty constantly improve their teaching really impressed me, especially the way that effort reaches all the way across the spectrum from Ph.D. students teaching their first courses to very established senior scholars. I also appreciated the value that the department places on both broad surveys and specificities, the fact that across the board both breadth and depth humanities are stressed. Those two categories are interdependent, and it's good when they're approached as such. I also like Utah State's liberal arts vision of producing competent citizens with lifelong learning skills. It's going to graduate students humanities majors who are literate in scientific methods and engineers who understand that history is a powerful and ongoing force.

Were you a professor elsewhere before coming to USU?

Previously I was at Eastern Kentucky University, in Richmond, in the department of Religion and Philosophy. Wonderfully supportive people, and you have students from a wide variety of majors who are interested in becoming more literate about religion. EKV has one of only two fire sciences programs in the nation. It also has a huge ASL program which really gave me the opportunity to think more about communicating religious ideas. I really appreciated being in a position where I could learn more in depth and in person about Deaf culture and the way language and communication interact with spoken versus signed and expressed language. That gave me a much wider perspective how religious ideas are understood and internalized.

What classes are you teaching this fall?

I'm teaching one section of World Religions. Ravi Gupta is teaching another section, and I'm very much looking forward to working with him on site visit and analysis exercises. We're having students actually visit and take an informed look at worship or religious practice outside the zone of familiarity and really reflect on those experiences. I'm also teaching Introduction to Judaism and aiming to have a global, historical-thematic approach. I'll be teaching Women in the Bible in spring and am really excited about that.