
 Northeastern University

The Robert D. Klein
University Lectureship
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Religious Revival in America:
Awakening the Feminine

Debra R. Kaufman
Professor of Sociology

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Noon

The Robert D. Klein University Lectureship

Established in 1964 upon recommendation of the University's Faculty Senate, the University Lectureship was renamed in 1979 in honor of the late Professor Robert D. Klein. The lectureship pays tribute to members of the Northeastern University faculty who have contributed with outstanding distinction to their fields and allows the University community—faculty, students, and alumni—and the general public to share in the fruits of the lecturer's scholarship and research. This year's lecturer, Professor Debra R. Kaufman, has been appointed by President Kenneth G. Ryder upon the recommendation of the Klein Lectureship Selection Committee.

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Religious Revival in America: Awakening the Feminine

Toward the end of the 1960s apostles of atheism had pronounced God dead. Eminent scholars predicted that secularism and religious decline would sweep the United States. While heralded by some as a step toward human maturity and personal liberation, other scholars warned of a coming crisis in values. If moral, cultural, and political behavior could no longer draw legitimacy from a higher authority, all standards were equally viable. Had utilitarian ethics become the secular counterpart of a religious world-view, setting each individual at the center of her/his own universe of calculated consequences? Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, some scholars concluded that under such conditions we could conceivably end up knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.

As with all historic dialectics, that crisis seems to be stimulating a religious resurgence in America. Although the magnitude of this revival cannot be clearly documented nor can its longevity be estimated, there is little doubt that a religious resurgence is occurring in this country. The return to fundamentalist Biblical religion among the New Christian Right in America has been accompanied, with less media attention, by a renewed interest in Jewish orthodoxy. Irving Howe's poignant stories of Yiddish-accented, immigrant, working-class parents heartbroken by their children's embracing of gentile values and practices have turned into very different vignettes: of middle- and upper-class, assimilated children breaking their parents' hearts by returning to their grandparents' old world habits, dietary laws, and rules of Sabbath observance.

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What would attract these well-educated, fairly affluent, middle-class, and highly assimilated youth to the most fundamental arm of Judaism? Moreover, what would attract women to the arm of Judaism that espouses the most patriarchal and conservative assumptions about the feminine and the familial? Professor Kaufman's recent ethnographic study of women who have returned to Orthodox Judaism, serves as a case study of the Religious Right's appeal to women, and about religious revival in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Debra Renee Kaufman is a professor of sociology and the coordinator of women's studies at Northeastern University. She received her Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1975 and came to Northeastern in 1976. Her contributions have been in the fields of the professions and occupations, family, gender roles, women's studies, and most recently, religion. Her first book, *Achievement and Women: Challenging Assumptions*, was nominated for the C. Wright Mills Award for notable contributions to sociological thought. In addition to publishing numerous articles and chapters on women in the professions and the labor force, she has edited a volume of essays entitled *Beyond Women's Studies*. Her forthcoming book, *Coming Home*, based on interviews with Orthodox Jewish women in five major United States cities, presents a feminist analysis of the appeal of the Religious Right to women in the closing decades of the twentieth century.