



Alexandra Cuffel is Professor of Jewish Religion in Past and Present Times at the Center for Religious Studies, Ruhr University Bochum. Until 2012 she has been Adjunct Professor of History at the College of New Jersey and Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, NYC.

Her research focuses on relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims during the Middle Ages, specifically on the intersections of religious polemic, medical theories and gender both in Western Europe and the Middle East. Further research interests are shared saints' cults and festivals in the medieval and early modern Mediterranean and "racial" attitudes in the Middle Ages.

Her lecture will be on

From Visionaries to the Prophetically Possessed: Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Women as Spiritual Leaders

Abstract:

In the early thirteenth-century the Cistercian, Caesarius of Heisterbach told a tale of a Jewish woman who claimed to be pregnant with the messiah in order to disguise her sexual misdeeds. Her intended deception was revealed when she gave birth to a girl, causing consternation among her fellow Jews and making her and the Jewish community the subject of ridicule by the Christians. Seemingly the child's gender was enough to disqualify her, in Caesarius' imagination, as a messianic figure for Jews and Christians alike. Yet Jewish women were integral to messianic speculations and endeavors within a Jewish context, and while only rarely messianic pretenders in their own right, they increasingly lay claim to visionary and prophetic abilities, and so the right to direct men and women alike. This paper will examine the medieval precedents for such claims and then focus on Jewish women visionaries and practices of divination and possession in the Islamic world, most particularly Safed in Ottoman Palestine. Jewish women's prophetic practices will be placed in context with similar Muslim practices in North Africa and the Middle East as with European concerns over possession and magic. I will tentatively suggest that within an Islamic milieu, in which women could be spiritual leaders within pious or mystical circles, Jewish women and men began to conceive of women in new spiritual roles, as potential leaders and prophets of the community.

The lecture will take place on

Wednesday, November 21st, 2018 at 6 pm c.t., Cas. 1.801 (Renate von Metzler Hall), Campus Westend