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# Survival Manual for Women in Religious Studies

—Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

*Guide to the Perplexing: A Survival Manual for Women in Religious Studies* by the members of the AAR Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession: Rita Nakashima Brock, Kelly Brown Douglas, Paula Fredriksen, Adelle McCollum, Judith Plaskow, James Poling, and Susan Thistlethwaite

Are faculty women in religious studies more likely to be unemployed, untenured, have lower salaries and hold lower rank than men? According to a 1988 study of *Women of Academe* by Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington, the status of academic women in general "has not improved substantially since 1964," despite the perception of sweeping changes and dramatic progress. Women have made strides in the academy, but in many regards we remain "outsiders in the sacred grove."

From Jessie Bernard's 1964 landmark book, *Academic Women*, to Angela Simeone's 1987 publication of the same title, we have careful analyses of the many *why's*—the roadblocks, glass ceilings, and internal and external prejudices against and pressures on women. What we have not had is a comprehensive overview of the many *how to's*. We have relied mostly on informal conversations at the edges of professional gatherings and outside faculty meetings to relay the practical strategies that have helped us negotiate the hurdles. No one in the field of religion has systematically ordered these insights. *The Survival Manual* takes up this important task as part of the work of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession. Although intended primarily for those who currently face these dilemmas, its potential audience stretches to others who want to promote women and to those who want to comprehend more fully the hurdles women face.

While the manual is not organized "A to Z," it does intend to navigate comprehensively the initial course of a professional career in religious

studies. It answers the obvious questions: How do I find a position that best suits me? How do I compose a curriculum vitae? How do I prepare for a job interview? Once hired, how do I ferret out the essential faculty expectations from the unessential demands? How do I prepare for tenure and promotion and generally pursue professional development? In answering a range of questions, the overall intent is to be a ready, useful resource; chapters go step by step through these issues and then end with a helpfully enumerated summary of their fundamental insights.

But, more importantly, the manual answers less obvious, more troublesome dilemmas: How do I make sure I do not get a lower salary offer than a man in a similar position? How do I deal with sexual harassment or questions during an interview that assume a certain amount of self-disclosure about my partner, my plans for children, my age and race? Once employed, how do I handle the extra demands on the time and energies of women faculty? How do I deal with presumed stereotypes that dismiss me for either not acting like a man or acting too much like a man? How do I weigh the advantages and disadvantages of being "out" as a lesbian? How do I negotiate maternity benefits, pregnancy, maternity leave and reentry into work that combines the daily grind of carpools and faculty meetings?

Particularly helpful in this regard are sections addressing special issues affecting women of color, lesbians, women who have or plan to have children and a section on sexual harassment. These sections and the entire manuscript is written with a first-person sensitivity, relying upon the particularity of an author's experience and voice, and sometimes with a bit of the dry humor necessary to survive intact. My favorite example: "You weathered morning sickness...you taught while blind with fatigue and green from nausea...you maintained your composure while subject to hormonal tsunami and tedious jokes...you delivered the baby. The easy part is now over." Most people will find

Whichever position you take, it is evident that the whole point of assessment collapses without faculty ownership and a basic trust between faculty and administrators.

## The AAHE

If any of the above information sparks your interest, I encourage you to contact the AAHE for information about publications and future conference dates. As leaders in the assessment movement since 1984 they have held seven annual conferences attended by faculty and administrators from the United States and other countries. They also sponsor many publications and smaller gatherings. Call or write:

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this manual a fun, entertaining confirmation that they are not alone in their struggles to work and to love.

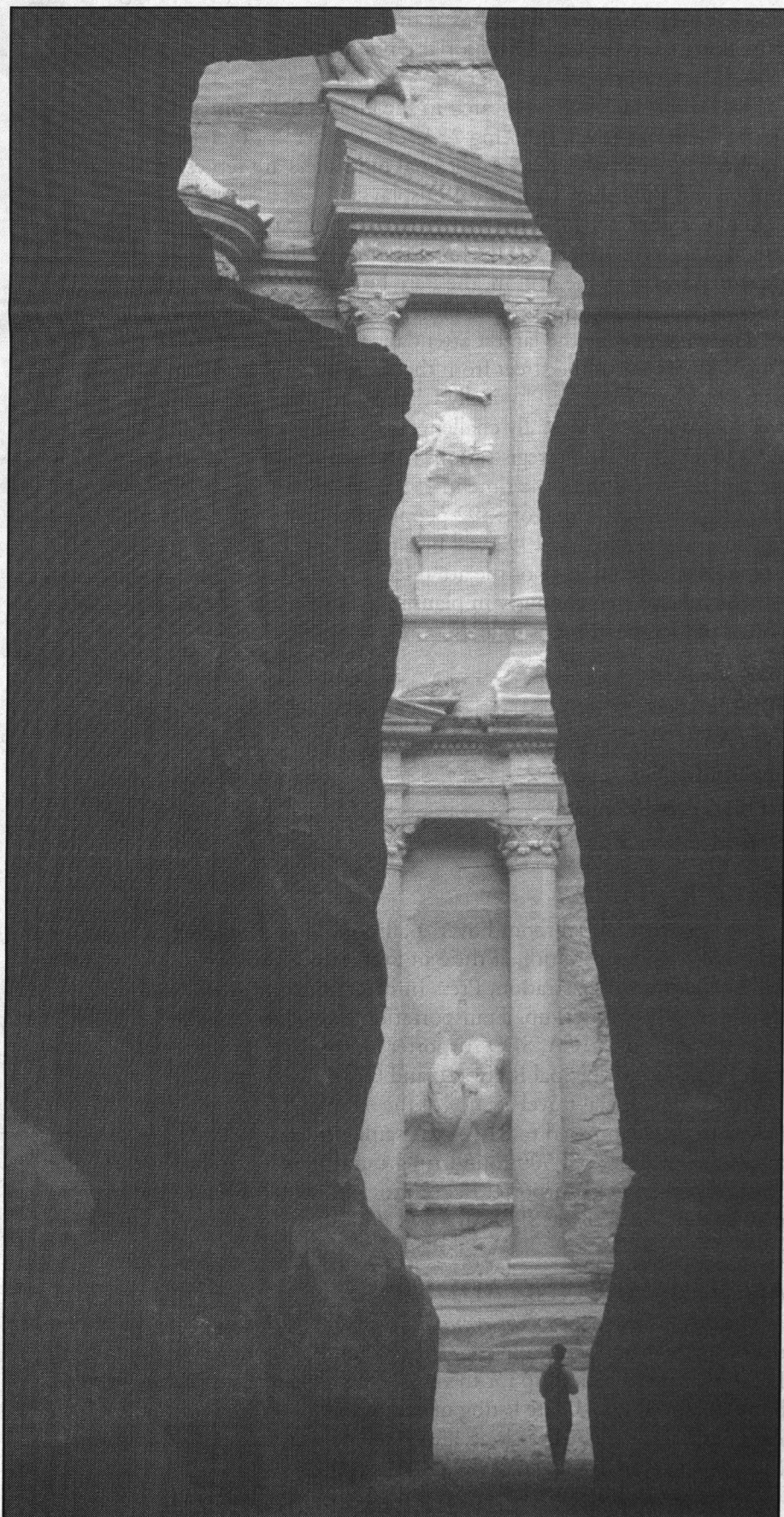
At the same time, in a manual like this one, everyone is bound to have a personal gripe or two about what is left out. The manuscript might have benefitted more from personal stories that tell more about the struggles than a description of the routine processes of career advancement. For many of us, the few pages on professional development fail to address questions about moving into new area of post-doctoral research and publication, pursuing grants, editing and co-authoring volumes, maintaining one's private life with integrity and so forth. For mothers or prospective mothers, the separation of the section on motherhood from the chapters on seeking a job and pursuing advancement simply replicates the false separation of public work and private family that aggravates the problems. According to the criteria of this handbook, I guess I have "survived" thus far, but I have had plenty of other questions along the way that the manual does not answer.

But had I had a survival manual like this one earlier, it would have im-

proved the quality of my life and it aims to do just that for women who read it. This is a good beginning, even if it is not enough. And that is less a criticism than a statement about where we are today and where we still need to go. From the perspective of the authors, we will welcome the day when we can talk not just about surviving but thriving. Maybe, some day, this kind of survival manual will be an obsolete period piece that anthropologists study with incredulity. Since we are not there yet, it is great to have something to get us through the day. The manual's authors seek feedback from its readers, so that the second edition can address other important issues.

*Editor's note: The Survival Manual is published by Scholars Press for \$9.95 (members) and \$14.95 (non-members). Galley proofs will be available for examination at the AAR/SBL booth at the Annual Meeting in San Francisco and attendees may order their copies at the booth at a special discount price. Orders may also be placed by calling 1-800-437-6692 or 404-475-9245.*

The narrow entry to the Rock City of Petra, Jordan



## ASSESSMENT

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"Any dean worth his/her salt would want to see the report. And any dean worth his/her salt would know it is better if the results are not revealed." He believed that when faculty know the results will not be used to attack their department, they more readily jump at the chance to make improvements. Other conference participants felt that so long as the process was faculty owned and open, assessment information should be shared as widely as possible. They argued this was precisely the kind of information which would be helpful in building a constructive relationship among administrators, department chairs and faculty. Departments that do a good job of assessing their effectiveness are often in a better position to defend their place by pointing out clearly the impact they have had on student learning.