

Mary Jo Weaver

Two of Mary Jo Weaver's most influential publications—*New Catholic Women* (1985) and *Springs of Water in a Dry Land* (1993)—typify the pioneering role she has played in religious studies during her 31 years at Indiana University. With its six superbly documented, ethnographic chapters, *New Catholic Women* was praised by many reviewers as elucidating the sexual politics at work in the history, church practices, and theology of American Catholicism. Similarly imaginative and inventive, here in its approaches to goddess feminists, mystics, and liberationists, *Springs of Water in a Dry Land* managed, like its predecessor, to speak to scholars interested in the intersections between gender and religion as well as to people outside the academy dedicated to finding a belief of their own. Both of these exceptionally original and strikingly lucid volumes typify Mary Jo's fascination with the margins. What does not abide in the middle but instead gravitates toward the extreme or edge? This query has informed all her pedagogic and editorial activities, even as it evolved out of her own past.

As a Catholic growing up in Coshocton, Ohio, Mary Jo found herself in a decided minority and stigmatized along with her family. After receiving her B.A. in chemistry at Ohio Dominican College in Columbus, she went to work as an assistant research chemist at Parke, Davis, & Co., where many of her colleagues asked, "How can you be a chemist and a Catholic?" The subsequent decision not to be a chemist ought not be taken as her answer to that question; however, she did soon enroll at the University of Notre Dame, where in 1973 she received her Ph.D. in Theology. That she was the first lay woman to receive a Ph.D. in theology there may have suggested to her that it might be difficult to be a theologian and a woman, a point driven home during her three years as an assistant professor of religious studies at Pontifical College Josephinum: her hiring had to be approved by the Apostolic Delegate (the pope's representative in America), and so she was presented to him on paper as the sexually indeterminate "M. J. Weaver with a Ph.D. in History"!

During the scholarly career on which she embarked after she arrived at Indiana University in 1975, Mary Jo's colleagues in religious studies frequently questioned the pertinence of her feminist inquiries, while her colleagues in women's studies often queried the relevance of her religious inquiries. Perhaps her sense of being on the margins of both disciplines turned her toward her first publication, *Letters from a "Modernist"* (1981), where she studied a group of Catholic intellectuals generally condemned by Catholic authorities. Yet the many grants she obtained from the Lilly Endowment and the National Endowment for the Humanities proved her rising national reputation in the field she helped found—feminist approaches to religion—as did such courses as Introduction to Christianity and Women and Religion. Her textbook, *Introduction to Christianity* (1984), has remained popular with teachers and students thanks to its clear writing and even-handed approach. Currently forthcoming in its fourth revised edition, this book describes the diversification of Christianity in the United States, even as it emphasizes Christianity's birth from within the traditions of early Judaism.

Inside her department, Mary Jo expressed her dedication through four terms as director of graduate studies. She shepherded numerous students through the department's degree programs, and was a key player in the development and launching of the department's doctoral program in the 1980s. Few scholars could have directed, as Mary Jo did, doctoral dissertations on the cult of the Virgin Mary in late ancient and medieval Europe and on the religious dimensions of the Ku Klux Klan in twentieth-century America. She gave years of service to university and College of Arts and Sciences committees, including two terms on the college's tenure committee and six years on the university's Athletics Committee. Legendary among undergraduates, Mary Jo's courses on mystical prayer and spirituality tended to focus on the medieval period, but often branched out to such twentieth-century figures as Thomas Merton and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and to popular culture venues, including the television series *Star Trek*.

At mid-career, Mary Jo's scholarly pursuits turned to two related and edgy topics. First, her interest in female mystics issued in two volumes, both dedicated to documenting the Carmelite Monastery in Indianapolis: *Carmel of the Resurrection, 1922-*

1997 (1997), with Jean Alice McGoff, and *Cloister and Community: Life Within a Carmelite Monastery* (2002). About the latter, the novelist Mark Salzman has explained that, “part architectural biography, part history,” it provides “a portrait of a community of women dedicated to finding the sacred in the ordinary.” Second, and in uncanny anticipation of the current religious climate, Mary Jo received a number of grants from the Lilly Endowment that eventuated in a series of workshops and publications focused on fundamentalism: *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (1995), with R. Scott Appleby, and *What’s Left? Progressive Catholics in America* (1999) bring together eminent thinkers from the conservative and progressive wings of the American Catholic intellectual community. No wonder that throughout the 1990s Mary Jo became a prominent voice on National Public Radio, specifically in its efforts to display the spectrum of Catholic opinion to the American public.

Taken together, all of Mary Jo’s scholarship reflects her profound commitment to understanding how religion confronts, resists, and adapts to modernity. Because of her extraordinary dedication to undergraduate education at Indiana University, which earned her the President’s Award in Recognition of Distinguished Teaching in 1989, it is fitting to conclude by quoting the words of one of the hundreds of students who have profited from her instruction:

Professor Weaver is a great teacher in every sense of the word. Not only does she have a gift for transmitting ideas to students, but she has the unique ability to get her students excited and passionate about the material. For a professor at a public research university, I can think of no greater accomplishment than this.

David Brakke
Susan Gubar