

**African American Christianity**  
**TH2353**  
**Room: Schlegel Hall 120**  
**6:00PM-8:50PM**  
**Fall 2008**

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*This online syllabus should be used to gain a better understanding of the content and focus of a course. The syllabus given out in the class may differ from this online version and its content supersedes that of the online syllabus.*

### **Description**

The purpose of the course of study in African American Christianity is to help students understand the unique ways in which the African American experience contributes to the theology and praxis of the Christian narrative. The course recognizes that the African American experience with Christianity, forged out of the quest for freedom and human dignity provides critical resources for thinking analytically and constructively concerning classical dimensions of the faith, from the nature of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit to the witness of the Church in the world. Because of the interdisciplinary character of the African American Christian experience, the course will review a number of mediums and disciplinary sources, including films, African American literature, poetry, sermons, recordings, as well as key texts in the field.

### **Objectives**

- To identify the key movements, theological perspectives, and ideas that has shaped the historical and theological formation of African American Christianity.
- To gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the African American experience with Christianity contributes historical and doctrinal meaning of the Christian narrative.
- To think theologically reflecting on African American Christianity as a key source.
- To integrate multiple disciplinary and medium resources to think and write constructively related to key theological questions and issues.

### **Requirements**

- (1) Attendance and participation (10%). Students will be expected to attend all class sessions and to thoughtfully engage class discussions with informed contributions.
- (2) Write four short 2-page papers (30%). The 2-page papers will offer a critical response to the assigned readings. In the papers, students will address questions drawn from the readings.

*In these papers, students should demonstrate a clear understanding of the assigned readings and a critical theological engagement with the arguments and themes expressed. The papers should not simply be an exposition or outline of the reading (s). Rather, it should reflect your own particular response to what the*

authors are saying. At least half the papers should focus on what the readings are expressing and the other half devoted to your response. This could be done either by first articulating your impressions of what the authors are suggesting followed by your reaction; or by more of a dialogue with the readings throughout the paper. Please adhere to the 2-page requirement (i.e. 2 full pages) as well.

- (3) Midterm (30%). Students will have a take home midterm exam that will be administered during the class session prior to the due date.  
*In this exam you will draw together the themes of the course to this point. You will answer three questions, writing about three pages, double-spaced, per question, for a total of 8-10 pages. Questions will be distributed October 9. Exams are due on October 16. You are free to discuss these questions with your classmates, but your writing for the exam must be your own. You may use your books and notes in preparing for and writing the exam; any quotations or paraphrases from written materials must be properly referenced.*
- (4) Final paper (30%). The final papers will be a comprehensive reflection on a particular issue or theme within contemporary Christian theological discourse utilizing the theological, historical, and cultural resources of African American Christianity.

### **Academic Honesty**

All work you submit in African American Christianity is expected to be yours. Any quotation of the words of others must be clearly indicated, and all direct indebtedness must be acknowledged by citation of author and source. Students unfamiliar with issues relating to academic honesty can find help from the staff in the Academic Support Center and should make use of the available resources at an early date, since violations of Seminary policy on academic honesty can lead to a failing grade for the course.

### **Required Text**

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, original 1962, published with Vintage, February 1993).
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Penguin Signet Classic, 1995, originally published 1903).
- James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).
- Henry L. Gates Jr., General Editor, *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, A Novel (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990, originally published 1937).
- James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1990).
- Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, April 2003).
- Peter J. Paris, *Virtues and Values: The African and African American Experience (Facets)* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).
- Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

- J. Deotis Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000).

## Reserve Readings

9/4 Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1993), Intro - chapter, 1 & 2 (pp. 3-28).

9/11 Henry Highland Garnett, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States," <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=1843-henry-highland-garnet-address-slaves-united-states>

9/11 Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?," [http://afroamhistory.about.com/library/blsojourner\\_truth\\_womanspeech.htm](http://afroamhistory.about.com/library/blsojourner_truth_womanspeech.htm)

9/25 Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1998), reading "The Black Church Freedom Movement," "Black Power, Black People, and Theological Renewal" (chapters 5 & 9).

10/9 C. Eric Lincoln (Author), Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), reading "The New Black Revolution: The Black Consciousness Movement and the Black Church," "'Now is the Time': The Black Church, Politics, and Civil Rights Militancy," "The American Dream and the American Dilemma: The Black Church and Economics," and "The Pulpit and the Pew: The Black Church and Women" (chapters 7-10).

Anthony Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, Editors, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), reading "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority," Katie G. Cannon, "The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual"; Dwight N. Hopkins, "The Construction of the Black Male Body: Eroticism and Religion"; Kelly Brown Douglas, "The Black Church and the Politics of Sexuality".

10/9 Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break the Silence," <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html>

10/16 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999, originally published 1975); reading "Speaking the Truth" (chapter 2) and "The Social Context of Theology" (chapter 3).

11/13 Barack Obama, "Philadelphia Speech on Race," <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html>

## Schedule and Outline

### *Beginnings: Historical Perspectives on the African American Religious Experience*

#### September

- 4 “Before the Mayflower”—African cosmogonies
- i. Lerone Bennett’s classic
  - ii. Transcontinental migration and multidimensional religious systems
  - iii. Animism (lit., soul; unification of material and spiritual realities active in daily life; and artistic expression)
- b. Christianity and Islam in Africa
- i. Ethiopian Orthodox Church; Coptic Church communities
  - ii. Established as early as 451AD after the Council of Chalcedon;
- c. Ancient Islamic universities—Timbuktu and Jenne

Readings: Bennett, Intro.-ch. 1 & 2; Raboteau, ch. 1-3

#### ***Black Religion and Radicalism***

- 11 The Invisible Institution  
Claiming the “God of freedom”—subversive religious experiences  
Albert Raboteau’s *Slave Religion*  
*Communities of resistance and survival*

Readings: Raboteau, ch. 4-5; Johnson, *God’s Trombones*;  
Garnett “An Address to the Slaves to the United States”  
Gates, *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*; “Truth, Ain’t I a Woman”  
**Video: Slavery in America**

- 18 Negro Spirituals  
*“Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom; Oh Freedom over me; don’t know how and don’t know when but we gone be free someday”*  
*Deep river, deep river, my home is over journey; oh don’t you want to go to that gospel feast; don’t you want to go where all is peace”*

Readings: Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*; Gates, *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*;  
**Video: Toni Morrison’s Beloved**

- 25 Emergence of the Black Church: Social, Religious, and Economic Institution  
Black independent churches, denominations  
Example is Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in organizing the Bethel Methodist Church in Philadelphia. After leaving the racially mixed St. Georges Methodist Church, he built the congregation, primarily made up of newly freed slaves and helped to develop the Free African Society with Quaker philanthropists.  
Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century—Henry Highland Garnett and Frederick Douglas

*"Resistance, resistance, resistance" (Garnett); "There is no progress without struggle"; "Power concedes nothing without demand" (Douglas)*

Emergence of Protestant Evangelicalism  
Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam

Readings: Raboteau, ch. 6-7; Wilmore, "The Black Church Freedom Movement";  
Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
**Video: Oprah Present's *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

## **October**

2 Fall Break-Reading Week

9 The Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement  
Meaning of the Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. for today's world  
Competing visions—Protests and proposals

Reading: Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; Lincoln and Mamiya, ch. 7-10; Wilmore, "Black Power, Black People, and Theological Renewal", King, "A Time to Break the Silence"  
**Video: Eyes on the Prize Series**

### ***Theology and Prophetic Christianity***

16 Development of Black theologies of liberation  
Black Power movement and humanism (Kwame Ture, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale w/ the Black Panther party)  
Politicalization of the Black Church  
Merging of Faith and Politics

Reading: Cone, "Speaking the Truth" and "The Social Context of Theology"; "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority" (Cannon); "The Construction of the Black Male Body: Eroticism and Religion" (Hopkins); "The Black Church and the Politics of Sexuality" (Douglas)

23 African American Systematic Theology

Readings: Evans, intro.-ch. 3

30 African American Systematic Theology

Readings: Evans, ch. 4-7

## **November**

### ***Contemporary Movements***

- 6 Rise of the Pseudo-Pentecostal Church  
The Black “Mega” Church” and the “Prosperity” Gospel  
African American religious experience in a “post-denominational” context  
Role of technology, mass media, and travel in shaping the contemporary experience  
**YouTube Video: “T.D. Jakes 2 God Fights Your Battles For You”**

Paris, *Virtues and Values*

- 13 Black Freedom in a Nihilistic Age  
Hope against Hopelessness—confronting despair with Prophetic Rage  
Seeking justice as a process in the context of meaninglessness  
Engaging in “prophetic action”—speaking truth to power  
Redeeming the prophetic dimensions of “Hip-Hop” and its global character

Readings: Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*; Obama, *Speech on Race*;  
**Video: Something to Sing About; 8 Mile**

- 20 Afrocentrism and Christianity—Molefi Asanta and Afrocentrism  
Perspective on which to view the world

Readings: Roberts, *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry*

## **December**

- 4 Final Day of Classes