

The Idea of Black Religion
Young Scholars of American Religion
Fall, 2019

Institutional Setting

Florida State University is a public university with a total student population of roughly 41,000. Graduate students comprise of 9,320 of the total student population, working in 121 degree programs at the master's level, 24 degree programs at the specialist level, and 78 degree programs at the doctoral level. The graduate program in the Religion Department has roughly 68 students across four different tracks with approximately 16 M.A. and PhD candidates in American Religious History. Florida State University students come to the Religion Department well prepared and motivated to meet the challenges and expectations of the classroom. They are well prepared after graduate school due to their demanding expectations and schedules around coursework, research, and teaching.

Curricular Context

My appointment at Florida State University is in the Religion Department. With four separate tracks in the Department (American Religious History; History and Ethnography of Religion; Religion, Ethics, and Society; Religions of Western Antiquity), I am part of the American Religious History track (ARH). As a rule, I teach four courses with at least one graduate course in an academic year. Since my tenure in the department, I have taught surveys on Religion in the U.S.; Race, Ethnicity, and Religion; and African-American Religious Experience for undergraduate students. I have taught courses on the Problem of Race in American Religious History and co-taught a course on Religion in the Civil Rights Era in North and Latin America(s) for graduate students. The graduate courses are usually organized in a seminar-format. The syllabus I have attached here is a graduate seminar, and will be offered next fall (2020) in the Religion Department.

The Idea of Black Religion is a graduate seminar (15-20 students) that generally falls within the objectives of the ARH track in the Religion Department. I think most of the students enrolled in the course will be affiliated with the ARH-track, and plan to pursue doctoral degrees, and professorships on a college and university level. These students have an impressive background in the study of religion and are highly motivated. The M.A. and PH.D. programs, particularly in the ARH-track, have been successful at student placement in doctoral programs and departments at competitive colleges and universities. With its content in race, African-American diasporic history and culture, and politics, I hope the course will draw other MA and PhD students in different tracks to the Religion Department and other programs across the university.

Teaching Methodology

This course is organized in a seminar-style format, that will depend mainly on the students' preparation and contributions in the classroom. I will begin each seminar with introductory remarks, which will be complemented by a presentation of one student on the

assigned reading for the week. If previous experience proves predicative, most of the students will have had prior background knowledge in the study of religion, and American Religion in particular. Yet, they more than likely would have little to no background knowledge of African-American Religion and its relationship to American Religious History and Culture. This course is a provocation of sorts and is organized around the question, “what is black religion?” It is designed to show how the making of black religion was central to the creation of “American Religion,” as demonstrated in different historical epochs. The course historicizes black religion (and American religion) in different social and political contexts, and shows how the discourse around blackness led to the formation of the “American” in American religion.

REL 5195
The Idea of Black Religion: A Modern Problem
Fall 2019
Thurs., 2:00-4:45pm

Professor: Jamil Drake, Ph.D.
Office: Dodd Hall, MO6
Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Description

Black religion is a familiar category in American history and culture. It has been a reliable category to describe practices, institutions, and experiences of people of African descent. For a little over a decade, Sylvester Johnson, Barbara Savage, Curtis Evans, and other scholars of religion have called attention to how black religion is more a proscriptive and ideological than descriptive idea in human history. Following these scholars of religion, this course suspends the familiarity of black religion in order to assess its meaning(s) and function(s) in American history. Moreover, this course examines how the meaning and function of black religion was formed and constituted in conjunction with ideals used to differentiate “modern” and “premodern” social groups, behaviors, and institutions. The idea of Black religion coalesced with contested ideas and norms such as civilization and the nation-state; freedom and the human; science and rationality; morality and crime; and health and medicine. In the end, this course will demonstrate how the idea of black religion is not only central to the making of racial and ethnic identities, it is also important to the making of modern America.

Course Requirement

Participation/Attendance (10%)

Your participation is strongly encouraged in this seminar. Your participation will enhance the discussion in the course.

Presentations (25%)

Students are required to present and lead a discussion on one of the readings for the week. Students should situate the text within the broader scholarly field and/or historical contexts, identify the main arguments and contributions (or lack thereof), and finally, offer critical points and questions for the class to consider. Your presentations should be at least 15 minutes. Please do not exceed 20 minutes. Student should also turn in a précis (4-6 pages) of their presentation. The précis is due the Thursday following the presentation.

Respondents (25%)

Students are required to respond to a presentation by a peer. The response should be at least 15 minutes. Please do not exceed 20 minutes. Your respond should engage the presenter’s interpretations of the text, especially the critiques and questions.

Final Paper (40%)

Students are required to write an original research paper (20-25 pages) on any topic on both race and religion in U.S. history. A hardcopy of the paper should be submitted to my office box (Main Floor of Dodd Hall) by the date of the final exam.

Required Books:

- Hizkias Assefa, *The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia: Extremist Groups and Conflict Resolution*
- Wallace Best, *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem*
- Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*
- George Frederickson, *The Black Imagine In the White Mind: The Debates on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*
- Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy*
- Melissa Cooper, *Making of Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination.*
- Terence Keel, *Divine Variation: How Christianity Became a Racial Science*
- Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down Our Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories*
- Sylvester A. Johnson, *African-American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy and Freedom*
- Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*
- Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Voodoo and Power in Haiti*
- Adolph Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in African-American Politics*
- Barbara Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion*
- Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949*

Reading Schedule

Week 1: Framing the Problem of a Modern Idea

Introduction

Syllabus/Course Requirements

Readings:

Charles H. Long, "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem," *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretations of Religion*, **Canvass**

Josef Sorett, "Secular Compared to What?" Toward a History of the Trope of Black Sacred/Secular Fluidity," *Race and Secularism in America*, **Canvass**

Eddie Glaude, "The Category of African American Religion," **Canvass**

Week 2: Colonial Precursors

Sylvester Johnson, *African-American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*, p. 1-145

Recommended Readings:

J. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*, chapters: 1 and 3. **Canvass**

Week 3: The Problem of Black Religion: (Re)Assessing the Meaning of the “Burden”
Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*

Week 4: The Myth of Modernity or Alternative Modernities

J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Traditions, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in Afro-Brazilian Candomble*

Week 5: Anti-Superstitious Laws and Meaning of Irr/religion

Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*

Week 6: The Meaning of Freedom, Democracy, and History

Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down Our Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories*

Week 7: American Romanticism and Racial Ethnologies

George Frederickson, *Black Image in the White Mind:*

Recommended Reading:

Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925*, p. 13-75, **Canvass**

Week 8: Human Sciences, Civic Morality, and the Criminalization of Blackness

Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*

Week 9: Cultural Industry and Representation of Black Religion

Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name*

Week 10: Religion in the Long Civil Rights Movement

Savage, Barbara, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*

Week 11: Spring Break

Week 12: Reassessing the meaning of “African Gods”

Melissa Cooper, *Making of Gullah*

Recommended Readings:

Dianne Stewart and Tracy Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field"

Week 13: Health, Race, and Religion

Terence Keel, *Divine Variation*

Week 14: Citizenship, Postwar Liberals, and the Culture of Poverty

Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights*

Week 15: Views from the Left

Adolph Reed, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*

Cornel West, "The Indispensability yet Insufficiency of Marxist Theory," in *The Cornel West Reader*, **Canvass**

Week 16: Black Nationalism, Racial Secularism, and the Meaning of Religious Freedom

Hizkias Assefa, *The MOVE Crisis In Philadelphia: Extremist Group and Conflict Resolution*