

Religious Studies 152: African American Religions

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Spring 2005
T, Th 1:00-2:20 pm
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Context:

The University of Redlands is a private liberal arts college with a student body of approximately 2400. African American Religions is an introductory level course in the Religious Studies department that, in addition to counting towards the major, fulfills two general education requirements. The class size varies between 20-25 students. I give mini-lectures to frame the readings and issues, but I run the majority of the course seminar-style, facilitating and guiding the student-centered discussion of the material.

Approach:

I chose to do the course chronologically as a way of examining changes over time and recurrent themes in African American religious history. While the precise focus for each unit varies, throughout the course I encourage the students to reflect upon and problematize each aspect in the title of the course: How “African” is African American religion? Although excluded from many freedoms extended to others, are there elements that are distinctly “American?” How can we nuance notions of “religion,” “sacred/secular,” etc. when applied to various historical contexts and cultural expressions?

What’s at Stake?:

There are a number of often unarticulated assumptions that undergird both the historical study of African American religions and accompany students as they enter the course. The title of the course implies that there is something distinctive about African American religion, particularly when compared to other traditions. Yet, only in certain contexts do we apply a racial or ethnic descriptor for not only a particular community, but to an entire approach to religion. To illumine this distinctiveness, to what should we compare these religious expressions: Africa to America, black to white?, etc. This comparative approach also influences the way we read particular primary documents. Given the often hostile racial and political climate of America, how do we read white observations of African religious practices, plantation masters’ accounts of slaves, journals of African Americans who might meet harsh punishment if its contents were discovered, etc?

Beyond comparisons, what do we do with the startling diversity of beliefs, practices, and communities that we place under the umbrella category of “African American religion?” What is it that holds this spectrum of religious expressions together? If the answer is partly based on notions of race, what language can we use to articulate these uniting elements without slipping into stereotypes and monolithic portrayals that mask the unique experiences of men and women, slave and free, northerners and southerners, etc. By moving chronologically, my hope is that students will recognize that what it means to be “African,” “American,” and “religious” has been in a constant state of flux and that many people have understood these identities very differently in any particular historical moment.

Course Description:

This course offers an introduction to African American religions. The class moves chronologically, examining African religions in the Americas (Santeria, Candomble, and Vodou), cultural continuities between African and African-American religions, slave religion, and the development of independent African American churches. We will examine the rise of African American new religious movements such as Father Divine and the Nation of Islam, and the religious dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement. Moving through African-American religious history, we will consider topics such as slave resistance, gender and race, and emigration to Africa.

Required Texts:

- Bailey, Julius H. *Around the Family Altar: Domesticity in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865-1900* (University Press of Florida, 2005)
 - Fulop, Timothy E. *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (Routledge, 1997).
 - Holloway, Joseph E. *Africanisms In American Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1990).
 - Malcolm X *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley (Ballantine Books, 1965).
 - Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion* (Oxford University, 1978).
 - Sernett, Milton C. *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Duke University Press, 1999).
 - Reserve Readings (These are available at the Circulation Desk in Armacost Library and are indicated by an asterisk "*" in the syllabus.)
- ✓ Students should bring the books and readings to class as indicated on the schedule.

Prerequisites:

None. This course assumes no prior knowledge of the subject.

Grading:

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| ▪ Participation | 10% |
| ▪ Attendance | 10% |
| ▪ Exams (4) | 60% |
| ▪ Book Review | 20% |

Requirements and Assignments:

- **Participation:** Students are expected to attend each class session and have completed the readings indicated on the schedule for that day. Students should come to class with thoughts and questions from their reading of the materials and participate in class discussions.
 - Outstanding participation is characterized by consistently thoughtful comments and questions that demonstrate a careful reading of the material, draws others into the conversation, and points to broader themes and issues in the course.
- **Attendance:** Because discussion and in-class activities are essential components of the course, for each subsequent absence after the first class missed, 10 points will be deducted from the overall attendance grade.
(2 absences = 90%, 3 absences 80%, etc.) More than four absences will result in failure in the course.
- **Exams:** At the end of each unit, students will complete exams that address that section of the course. The questions will be handed out a week prior to their due date. The assignments will be due on the following dates: Exam #1 – Feb 3, Exam # 2 – Feb 22, Exam #3 – March 17, Exam # 4 – March 31, and Exam #5 – April 18. Students must complete at least four of the exams. If a student chooses to complete all five exams, their lowest score will be dropped, and only their four highest scores will be calculated in their final exam grade. The exams should be typed and there will be no make-ups of missed exams. The assignments will be evaluated on the level of critical analysis that each response demonstrates. Further description of the assignment will be provided in class.
- **Book Review:** During the course of the term, students will write a 7-8 page review of a book addressing a topic in African-American religious history. This assignment provides students with an opportunity to investigate the aspect of African American religions that they find most interesting. The book review is due in class on April 14.

Meetings and Assignments:

Introduction

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| Jan 11 | Introduction and Requirements |
| Jan 13 | Introduction to the Study of African-American Religions
Readings: Fulop – Chapters 1-2 |
| Jan 18 | The African Diaspora
Readings: Raboteau – Chapter 1 |

Sernett – Article 9

***** Exam # 2 – Due in Class *****

Black Churches North of Slavery

- Feb 24 The Rise of Independent African-American Churches
 Readings: Raboteau – Chapter 4
 Fulop – Chapter 7
 Sernett – Articles 14-17, 19-24
- March 1 & 3 No Class – Spring Recess
- March 8 Emancipation, Reconstruction, & the Nadir
 Readings: Raboteau – Conclusion
 Fulop – Chapters 5, 8
 Sernett – Articles 25-29
- March 10 Readings: Fulop – Chapters 9, 11
 Sernett – Articles 30-31, 34-35, 37
- March 15 Family Religious Life
 Readings: Bailey – Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2
- March 17 Readings: Bailey – Chapters 3 & 4 and Conclusion
 ***** Exam #3 – Due in Class *****

New Religious Movements

- March 22 The Great Migration
 Readings: Fulop – Chapters 14, 15, 18
 Sernett – Articles 38-42
- March 24 The Study of New Religious Movements
 Readings: Fulop – Chapter 12
 Sernett – Articles 47-51
- March 29 The Nation of Islam
 Readings: Fulop – Chapter 13
 Autobiography of Malcolm X – Chapters 10-12
- March 31 Readings: Sernett – Article 52
 Autobiography of Malcolm X – Chapters 16-17,
 Epilogue, On Malcolm X
 ***** Exam #4 – Due in Class *****

Civil Rights, Black Theology, and Revisiting African Religion and Culture

- April 5 The Black Church
 Readings: Fulop – Chapters 10, 17
 Sernett – Articles 44-46
 *"Sojourner Truth" (*On Reserve)
- April 7 The Civil Rights Movement
 Readings: Fulop – Chapter 16
 Sernett – Articles 53-59
- April 12 African Religion and Culture Revisited
 Readings: Fulop – Chapter 20
 *Karen McCarthy Brown – "Writing About 'the Other'"
 *Bailey – "The Final Frontier: Secrecy, Identity, and the
 Media in the Rise and Fall of the United Nuwaubian
 Nation of Moors"
 (*On Reserve)
- April 14 Conclusion
 ***** Book Review – Due in Class *****
- April 18 ***** Exam #5 – Due to my office by 5 pm *****

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