

RELIGION 10: AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIONS

This course is an introduction to religion among Americans of African descent. We will begin with the period of African-European contact and move through to the evolution and transformation of African religion in the present day. Readings will explore the relationship between the ecclesial and non-ecclesial dimensions of religion and black sacred culture, including ritual, music, folk tradition and performance practice.

Each week we will consider a different topic in the study of African American religion. On Mondays, there will be a lecture and Wednesdays will be devoted to discussion of the readings and the lecture material. Fridays will be reserved for field trips, films, guest speakers, or continuing discussion.

The required text for this course is Milton Sernett, *AFRO AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY: A DOCUMENTARY WITNESS*. This and all other books for the course are on reserve at McCabe. Where available, texts may also be obtained at the College bookstore. Readings marked with an asterisk are xeroxed and on reserve in a class binder.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance, *active* participation, oral reports **25%**
Midterm examination **25%**
Final examination **50%**

9/4 - Introduction

9/6-9/8 THE RELIGIONS OF AFRICA

Benjamin Ray, *AFRICAN RELIGIONS*, Chapter Two, "Divinity and Man"

Peter Paris, *THE SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN PEOPLES*, pp. 27-49

*Willem Bosman, "Letter X," in *A NEW AND ACCURATE DESCRIPTION OF GUINEA*

Questions for discussion: What, if any, is the common thread - or orientation - of traditional religions in Africa? What are the institutions that are central in African religions? It has been argued that traditional African religions minimize theological reflection and instead place an emphasis upon experience and ritual invocation of the divine. Do you agree with this characterization?

9/11- 9/15 BLACK RELIGIONS IN THE NEW WORLD

Robert Farris Thompson, *FLASH OF THE SPIRIT*, pp. 3-97

Daniel Mannix, *BLACK CARGOES*, pp. 104-130

Film: *Bahia: Africa in the Americas*

Questions for discussion: What can the study of art and iconography tell us about spirituality? What is the significance of material artifacts in the transfer of African culture in the New World? How do visual and theological forms merge in the religions of Haiti, Cuba and Brasil?

9/18 - 9/22 "AFRICANISMS" IN RELIGION IN THE UNITED STATES

Melville Herskovits, *THE MYTH OF THE NEGRO PAST*, pp. 1-32, 207-260

E. Franklin Frazier, *THE NEGRO CHURCH IN AMERICA*, pp. 9-25

**DRUMS AND SHADOWS*, appendix selections

Questions for discussion: According to Herskovits, what are the cultural symbols, images and practices that appear to have carried over most prominently from Africa to the Americas? Who makes the strongest case for or against African retentions? What ideological and political considerations might have informed each author's position?

9/25 - 9/29 SLAVERY AND RELIGION

Donald Mathews, RELIGION IN THE OLD SOUTH, pp. 185-236

Vincent Harding, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes," in Elliot Rudwick, THE MAKING OF BLACK AMERICA

*Lathan Windley, RUNAWAY SLAVE ADVERTISEMENTS (selections)

Sernett, pp. 88-99

ORAL REPORTS

Questions for discussion: How significant is slavery as a defining element in the evolution of African American religion? Does the sharing of beliefs, practices and institutions by both blacks and whites in the old South make the argument for Africanisms any less plausible? To what extent did black and white religious beliefs influence each other? Do you agree or disagree with the statement that for African Americans "Christianity helped to create a slave mentality"?

10/2-10/6 THE MISSION AT HOME AND ABROAD

Milton Sernett, BLACK RELIGION AND AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM, pp. 110 135 (in binder and book on reserve)

Sernett, 135-159, 229-266

Albert Raboteau, "Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands: Black Destiny in Nineteenth Century America," in A FIRE IN THE BONES (and in binder)

Field visit to Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, Philadelphia

Questions for discussion: What was the attraction of the Methodist and the Baptist churches for African-Americans? What religious elements distinguish the black communities in northern urban areas from those of the rural south? Do you think that the institutionalization of the black church represents an attempt at cultural autonomy for African Americans or a response to exclusion and segregation in white religious bodies? What are the differences and similarities between the black American concept of destiny and Euro-American conceptions of missionary evangelicalism?

10/9 - MIDTERM EXAMINATION REVIEW

10/11 - MIDTERM EXAMINATION

10/13 - NO CLASS ** Start reading Watts, GOD, HARLEM, U.S.A.**

10/13 - 10/22 FALL BREAK

10/23 - 10/27 THE FATHER DIVINE PHENOMENON

Jill Watts, GOD, HARLEM, U.S.A.

Sernett, pp. 390-398

ORAL REPORTS

Field visit to Father Divine's Peace Mission and estate

10/30- 11/3 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND RELIGION

Sernett, pp. 160-179.

Theresa Hoover, "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy," in BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

Questions for discussion: How do black women's struggles for religious autonomy parallel the historical African American struggle for freedom and self-determination in America? How do they parallel white women's similar struggles? It has been argued that the repression of black women in the church has

historically functioned as a political strategy adopted by African American male leadership. Do you agree with this characterization?

Film: Daughters of the Dust

**** Start reading Baldwin, GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN****

11/6 - 11/10 AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIONS IN THE CITIES

James Baldwin, GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Sernett, 349-363

Film: Two Black Churches

Questions for discussion: Historian Miles Mark Fisher has characterized black urban sectarian movements as "cults," suggesting that they are in some way marginal to a discernible religious norm. Does his characterization imply that there is a margin and a center in African American religions?

11/13 - 11/17 INVISIBLE INSTITUTIONS : SACRED MUSIC, PREACHING AND FOLK TRADITIONS

Zora Neale Hurston, THE SANCTIFIED CHURCH, pp. 95-102

Lawrence Levine, BLACK CULTURE AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS, pp. 55-80

Albert Raboteau, "The Chanted Sermon," in A FIRE IN THE BONES

W.E.B. DuBois, THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK, Chapter 14, "The Sorrow Songs"

Films: Huie's Sermon/The Performed Word

Questions for discussion: Why has the black liturgical tradition been called a performative tradition? What is the relationship of music and ritual in African American religion?

Conjure and magical folk beliefs are interpreted by some scholars as theories of explanation. How do these practices and beliefs function as religions of affliction? What is the relation of black folk traditions to African cultural survivals?

11/20-11/22 BLACK RELIGION AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Sernett, 423-445, 458-464

Film: Eyes on the Prize

Questions for discussion: Why was the American Civil Rights movement so dependent upon the involvement of black church membership? To what factors do you attribute the resistance of some African American clergy to King's tactics for social change?

11/22-11/27 THANKSGIVING BREAK

11/27-12/1 AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

James Cone, FOR MY PEOPLE, 5-30, 78-98

Sernett, 477-488

Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology," in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, WEAVING THE VISIONS, pp. 179-186

ORAL REPORTS

Questions for discussion: James Cone's rethinking of black theology stems from the criticism that most African American theologians are academically oriented and as a consequence created theologies that were distanced from church life and religious experience. Do you agree? What do you think constitutes a "genuine" black theology, one that is modelled according to the rules and definitions of formal academic/theological discourse, or one that is "church centered?"

12/4-12/8 BEYOND AFRO-CHRISTIANITY: NEW BLACK RELIGIONS

Joseph Murphy, WORKING THE SPIRIT: CEREMONIES OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, pp. 81-113

Beverly Aminah McCloud, AFRICAN AMERICAN ISLAM Introduction, pp. 49-88

*E. Muhammad, MESSAGE TO THE BLACKMAN IN AMERICA, selections

Explore religions on-line, at the following Web Sites:

<http://www.reed.edu/~kday/KemetFAQ.html> (Kemet tradition)

<http://www.afrinet.net:80/~islam/> (Nation of Islam)

<http://sunsite.unc.edu/nge/> (Five Percenters)

Films: Voices of the Gods/Legacy of the Spirits

Questions for discussion: Is there a common cultural thread that unites African American religions, be they Christian, neo-African or Muslim?

What do you think is the appeal of neo African and Islamic religious alternatives to persons of non-African descent in the United States?

12/11 FINAL EXAMINATION REVIEW