

## RELG 342/ AFRO 342 African American Religious Experiences

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### Course Description:

The religious experiences and understandings of African Americans are unique, born of a combination of historical, cultural, social, political realities. This course will explore African American religious life from twin perspectives, 1) historical, cultural, and theological dimensions and 2) through cultural expressions, particularly music and art. The two come together in the final project of the course, a black church service visit and report that will be completed by each student. These different perspectives aim to increase the student's appreciation of the complexities of black religious life in the United States.

### Note:

Because of time constrictions, this course will focus primarily on black Christian expressions. However, it is not meant to suggest that no other religious expressions exist among African Americans. It may also be possible for the student to select a non-Christian black congregation to visit to fulfill that part of the assignment; to do so, see Dr. Mitchem first.

### Required texts:

- Jerma Jackson, *Singing in my Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (SING)
- Iva Carruthers et al, *Blow the Trumpet in Zion* (BT)
- Stephanie Mitchem, *African American Women Tapping Power* (TAP)
- Reading packet, available at Universal copies:
  - Excerpt, Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *Xodus*)
  - Cornel West, "The Crisis of Christian Identity in America"
  - Kelly Brown Douglas, "Daring to Speak"
  - Excerpt, Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*
  - Keith Gilyard, "The Bible and African American Poetry"
  - Melonee Burnim, "Biblical Inspiration, Cultural Affirmation"

## **Starting Norms for the class: (initial list; more to be added the first day)**

We will fully listen to and respect the experiences and feelings of others.

We will take care not to impose our views on each other.

### **The Importance of Writing:**

College level writing is critically important for this class. Your grade for the class will be at risk if you hand in late assignments, un-typed papers (except for in class assignments), plagiarized, undeveloped, etc. If you have any concerns about your own writing, make an appointment at the writing center.

### **Turning in Assignments!**

Because of the relationship of reading with class work and with group discussions, late papers are **NOT** accepted.

To avoid computer glitches, papers may **NOT** be turned in by e mail, only hard copies accepted for grading.

If papers are turned in to my office, they must be given to the secretary, not slipped under the door of my office.

Papers must be typed, double-spaced. Handwritten papers ARE NEVER accepted. When needed, you must use a notation format -- MLA, Chicago, APA -- consistently throughout any paper. In addition, poor grammar and spelling can be grounds for lowering a grade. The aim in these restrictions is to develop college level, critically sharp papers that (really!) say what you mean them to say.

Grades will be posted on Blackboard. It is the student's responsibility to track these grades. Students have **one week** from the date of posting to raise questions about the grade received.

### **IMPORTANT NOTE:**

The student's work will be graded on **at least** these considerations:

- Maintain the quality of your work throughout the course.
- Be creative in approaching class material; be willing to question.
- College level writing (which includes no handwritten papers) is mandatory.
- Clarity and precision of written and oral presentations demonstrate how well you have read assigned material and taken notes.
- Blackboard will be used in this class. The syllabus is available and any changes or updates to the class, meeting times, or due dates will be noted in this format.
- Attendance is critical to your success in this class. Class participation means to come prepared by having read the material and ready to discuss with the class. There may be written responses during class, which will be turned in, counting as part of this requirement.

**If you miss 4 classes = -10 points from final grade.**

**If you miss 6 classes = -20 points from final grade.  
If you miss more than 8 = -40 points from final grade**

**DESCRIPTIONS OF ASSIGNMENTS and GRADING (DUE DATES IN NEXT SECTION):**

- Attend the African American Studies lecture; the speaker this year is Dr. Darlene Clark Hine. (Information on time, date, and location will be announced.) Each student must bring a one-page synopsis to the class immediately following the lecture
- One on line research project. Student may select one of these topics: Aesthetics: black religious art **OR** praise dancing. Each student will individually present the research in class. Visuals are needed for this presentation.
- One test, a take-home final exam. Yes, it is cumulative!
- Group project: on black gospel music. Each group will select either a gospel artist/group or a style of gospel to present to the class. The group should have samples of the music and be able to explain the importance of the artist in the development of gospel. In addition, the group should aim to show theological or cultural relevance of the music they are showcasing. It is strongly suggested that each group also have written materials for each member of the class.
- Church visit to a black church of your choice will have two assignments due before the actual visit.
  1. Research the church. Go on line, get interviews as you can, and call ahead. Get general information, key features, size and age of church, reasons that people become members, etc. Also, is there a covenant for this congregation? Student will submit at least a single page answering these questions on the due date.
  2. Research the denomination of the church. What are its main beliefs? Are there any recent controversies (in the denomination itself)? (Point of information: Non-denominational IS a denomination.) on the due date, each student will have a two page discussion of the denomination of the church to be visited.
  3. After the church visit, a paper is due. Some questions that can be discussed in the paper: How does the worship service express denominational beliefs? What is unique / different about the congregation—in their minds and in what you observe? How is the local church community able to identify itself as a community—in other words, how is church community built? How does the church express black culture (this is often unconscious, not a deliberate effort to be "black"?) How does the church relate to the wider neighborhood / community? How does this relationship align (or not) with the congregation's expressed theology? This paper should be a minimum five (5) pages in length. **WHAT THE PAPER IS NOT:** "I got to the church at 10, parked in the spacious lot, and went up the steps. When I entered the church, a smiling usher handed me the church bulletin and a song book . . ."

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This paper should be approximately five (5) pages in length. **WHAT THE PAPER IS NOT:** "I got to the church at 10, parked in the spacious lot, and went up the steps. When I entered the church, a smiling usher handed me the church bulletin and a song book . . ."

### **Class Schedule**

January	16	INTRODUCTION
	18	On defining Black Church today.
	23	Cornel West essay
	25	BLOW, chapters 16-20
	30	
February	1	On black theology.
	6	BLOW chapters 5 - 10
	8	
	13	On black aesthetics and religion. Gilyard and Burnim essays
	15	
	20	BLOW chapters 1 - 4
	22	Church research paper #1 due
	27	This week: individual student presentations on black arts and religion
March	1	
	6	Raboteau excerpts
	8	
	13	SPRING BREAK WEEK
	15	
	20	SING, chapters 1 - 4
	22	SING, chapter 5 and epilogue
	27	This week, group presentations on gospel music.
	29	Church research paper #2 due
April	3	TAP, chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 7
	5	
	10	Baker-Fletcher excerpt

12

17 Douglas essay

19

24

26 Church visit paper #3 due.

Take home exams will be due in my office by 4 p.m. Monday, May 7.

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