

African-American Religious History

Institution: Hope College, Holland, Michigan; 3,000 student liberal arts college, affiliated with the Reformed Church in America

Level: Intermediate (Mainly but not exclusively majors, most students were upperclass)

Hours: 3 hours/week for fifteen weeks

Enrollment: 25 students in spring 2000

Instructor: Daniel Sack, visiting assistant professor (dansack@earthlink.net)
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This is the first time a course like this had been taught at Hope, which is a largely white school. The course drew a lot of interest; a lot of the people in the class sang in the college's gospel choir and had a somewhat sentimental understanding of the black religious experience. My first goal was to broaden this understanding, showing the complexity of African-American religion. The second was to reflect on how a religious tradition changes as it develops, using the African-American tradition as a model.

The course had three major elements. The first part of the course provided a narrative outline of African-American religious history, using a cultural contact model. The second part of the course used several films and a field trip to a local black church to demonstrate the diversity of the tradition. The last third of the course required students to do original research and present their research to the class. Not all of the students were prepared for this kind of research, but in general the results were impressive.

As anyone who has taught this kind of class knows, the prime handicap is the lack of a textbook with a general historical narrative of African-American religion. The texts I used were good, but not enough.



Religion 349

African-American Religious History

Spring 2000

Instructor: Dr. Daniel Sack

The history of Africans in America cannot be separated from the history of African-American religion. Issues of faith, race, identity, violence, compassion, hope, and fear are tightly intertwined. With great creativity

African-Americans have formed religious traditions from a variety of influences—including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and African religions—to strengthen their communities and feed their souls. Over the course of this semester we will trace this creative process, identifying the richness and strength of African-American religious life.

The goals of this class are to:

- Identify the sources of African-American religion
- Trace its developments
- See the results of its interaction with the larger culture

Expectations

Despite its size, this class will operate as a seminar—that is, each class session will center on class discussion. Students will take substantial responsibility for leading discussion, teaching themselves and each other. As part of this process, you will:

- Lead a class **discussion** in the first half of the term. This entails doing an extra-close reading of the material for the day, bringing to class a few pointed questions to get the discussion going. (We will sign up for this responsibility on the first day; on some days we will have two leaders, who may work as a team.)
- Make a **presentation** to the class on your research. During the last several weeks of the term, each student will make a 20 minute presentation about their research. More details on this process soon.
- Since this will be a seminar, class **participation** will also figure into your grade.

In addition to these in-class responsibilities, we will have three writing assignments:

- A **book review**, due February 17. A list of suggested books and suggestions for writing a good book review are coming soon.
- A short **reflection** on your visit to an African-American church, due March 7.
- A **paper** based on your research, due a week after your in-class presentation.

Grades

Attendance and participation: 10%

Book review: 25%

Reflection: 15%

Presentation: 15%

Paper: 35%

Books

Required

- E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).
- Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
- Milton C. Sernett, *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999)

The Standard Rules and Regulations

1. **Deadlines:** Due dates for papers are clearly stated here in syllabus and will be adhered to. Grades will decline a half-grade for each day a paper is late. Medical (with doctor's note) and family emergencies may excuse a late paper. Please plan ahead, and let me know if you think there will be a problem—we might be able to make some arrangements. To prevent computer problems, back up your work!
2. **Preparation:** Please come to class having done the reading and having thought about what you read. Bring along the readings for the day.
3. **Office hours:** Please take advantage of them. I am happy to discuss intellectual and personal questions about the material, as well as ideas and concerns about assignments.
4. **Identification:** Please put your name and the class number on everything you turn in.
5. **Academic integrity:** Plagiarism (using words from other authors without proper credit) is cheating, as well as a sign of sloppy thinking. We will discuss how to avoid plagiarism when discussing the paper assignments.
6. **Respect:** Religion touches many people very deeply; that makes it fascinating to teach and to study. But it can also stimulate complex emotions, as people make categorical statements about their views of reality. Not everyone in this class is a Christian, or is the same kind of Christian. Please show respect for the convictions of your classmates by making thoughtful and gentle arguments

A few notes on grading:

I don't use grades as punishment for "bad students" or as a reward for "good students." They are simply ways of testing your achievement of the goals for the course. For each assignment I will have a set of expectations, and your grade will depend on your fulfilling those expectations. The class participation grade will take into account your response cards as well as how your participation furthers the class discussion. On papers, I will look for:

- A thesis, clearly stated and clearly defended
- References to important personalities, events, movements, and ideas in the history of African-American religion
- Understanding how your work fits into the larger historical scheme
- Proper citation of sources

I will not be looking for "correct" views, but for well-argued (but respectful) statements. Also, spelling and grammar do count; they show you take your work seriously. Papers that meet these expectations and show particular insight will get As. Work that meets expectations will get Bs. Work that misses some of these expectations will get Cs. Work that misses most of these expectations will get Ds. If you would like to re-take an exam or rework an essay, I am open to that. Please discuss it with me.

If you have questions about expectations for exams and papers, please ask.

Course schedule

Notes:

- There's a good deal of reading for this course. I recommend you keep up and—if possible—get ahead. Please let me know if it becomes overwhelming—we may make some mid-term adjustments.
- When just a simple number is listed, that indicates a chapter number. "Frazier 1," for instance, is the first chapter in the Frazier book.

1/11 Introduction(s)

1/13 Religions in the Atlantic World

1/18 African religion

Sernett 1-4

1/20 Slave Religion I

Frazier 1

Fulop/Raboteau 5

Sernett 7-9

1/25 Slave Religion II

Fulop/Raboteau 6

Sernett 10-13

1/27 Free blacks

Frazier 2

Fulop/Raboteau 7

Sernett 14, 21

2/1 Emancipation and its aftermath

Sernett 25-27

2/3 Women's roles

Sernett 16, 37

2/8 The nadir

Frazier 3

Sernett 31, 34, 36

2/10 From plantation to ghetto

Frazier 4

Sernett 46

2/15 No class—winter break

2/17 Alternatives I

Sernett 47-49

Book review due

2/23 Alternatives II

Sernett 50-52

2/24 Traditions continue: Vodun

Fulop/Raboteau 20

2/29 The Performed Word—Worship I

Fulop/Raboteau 18

Film: *Say Amen, Somebody*

3/2 The Performed Word—Worship II
Fulop/Raboteau 14

3/7 Civil Rights I
Lincoln pp. 101-134
Film: *Eyes on the Prize*, Part I
Worship paper due

3/9 Civil Rights II
Sernett 54-55

3/14 Black power I
Lincoln 135-168

3/16 Black power II
Malcolm X (excerpts)

3/28 Retrospect and prospect
Fulop/Raboteau 1

3/30 Presentations

4/4 Presentations

4/6 Presentations

4/11 Presentations

4/13 Presentations

4/18 Presentations

4/20 Presentations

4/25 Presentations

4/27 Conclusion