

Religion & African American Studies (Undergrad) Introduction to African American Religion
Spring 2013

Religion 3139/AFA3930:
Undergraduate - Introduction to African American Religion
Spring 2013

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Ph.D.	Instructor
Class Meeting Times	Tuesdays 8 th & 9 th Period (3:00 – 4:55pm) Thursdays 9th Periods (4:05 -5:00 pm)
Class Location	Flagler 0245 - Tuesdays Matherly 0018 - Thursdays
Office Location	107 Anderson Hall
Office Phone Number	(352) 273-2940 /Fax 392-7395
Office Hours	Mondays & Wednesdays 2:30– 4:30 pm & by Appointment
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Course Description & Objectives:

This course is designed to give the student a coherent, interdisciplinary understanding of the African American religious experience from the beginning of the African sojourn here in North America until the present. This understanding, by necessity, must be grounded in some knowledge of the enslaved Africans concept of the sacred before they were snatched from their moorings and transported to the Americas. As Mechal Sobel a scholar of African American religion has written:

.... Africans brought their worldviews into North America, where in an early phase of slavery, the core understandings, or Sacred Cosmos, at the heart of these worldviews coalesced into one neo-African consciousness- basically similar yet already significantly different from West African understandings. (Mechal Sobel, Trabelin' On.)

African American Religious Studies refers to the investigation, analysis, and ordering of a wide variety of data related to the religious beliefs and practices of persons of African descent. We will examine the system of sacred symbols that African people have passed down from generation to generation, which have given meaning and direction to their lives in this hemisphere and the Caribbean for more than 400 years.

OBJECTIVES:

- To provide the student with an understanding of African values and ideas and their transmission and early developments in the Americas.
- To provide the student information about African American religious expression as it developed during slavery and how it has evolved since that period.
- To provide the student with information on the “how” and “why” of African Americans almost wholesale adoption of Christianity.
- To explore the history of Islam and other religious traditions (Voodoo & Rastafarianism for example) in the African American religious experience.

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- To explore the role of the quest for freedom and equality in the development of African American religious thought in all of its permutations.
- To explore the impact of African American religion upon mainstream Christianity and Islam.

Required Course Materials:

Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998. (pbk)

2). Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, *This Far by Faith: Stories from the African American Religious Experience*. New York: Amistad – An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2003, ISBN 0-06-0188634-4. (pbk)

3). Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggle*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

4). Edward E. Curtis IV & Danielle Brune Sigler, eds., *The New Black Goods: Arthur Huff Fauset And the Study of African American Religions*, Bloomington: Indiana U.P. 2009.

5). Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

Additionally we will read chapters from the following books which will either be on our Sakai Class Site or will be sent to you as a pdf via our e-mail Class List. They are:

Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, Syracuse, N.Y. Syracuse U.P. 1995.

James H. Cone, *Liberation: A Black Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990.

In addition to our readings we will view numerous documentaries and films during the term. These films and documentaries are a significant part of the course and greatly enhance our understanding of African American religious traditions. Documentaries we will view include segments from the “*This Far By Faith*” documentary series, and some of the “*Eyes on the Prize*” series as time permits. Additionally, I want us to watch as a class, the film, “Malcolm X”, and the film “Boycott” as well as the documentary, “From Memphis to Montgomery.” Because of the heavy film content of this class, we need to schedule several extra class meeting times, when everyone can be present to view these feature length films. Viewing these films is a part of the assignment for this class. At the second class, a sheet will be distributed where everyone will state the day and time that can meet to watch a movie for 90 minutes three times

during the term to watch these feature length films. (This means a time when you do not have other classes or work.) Evenings are ok or even on a weekend is possible for me.

A class trip to an African American church in Gainesville is planned for this semester. We will either visit a Baptist Church because it is the largest Protestant denomination of black Americans in the US, contemporarily or we will visit an African Methodist Episcopal church, (the first independent black church in the U.S.) as the founding of this denomination is such an important part of African American Christianity. To experience African American church services is an important part of learning about the religious life of black people in America. I would also like for us to experience a traditional African religious ceremony which still has small followings in large metropolitan areas of the country but this is often difficult to find in a small city like Gainesville due to its small number of non-Christian African American religious communities. If I learn of the possibility of our participating in such an event, I will inform the class. Alternately, I may be able to find a film of such a service. We will see clips of the Nation of Islam – the black nationalist Muslim group which is still active here in the states, in parts of Europe and in the Caribbean

Required Writing Assignments for the semester:

1). **Four Reaction Papers:** This is a reading intensive course with no tests, quizzes or exams. Grades are based on written assignments, oral presentations and class room participation. Each student will prepare four reaction papers on four of the assigned readings during the term. You will select your dates from the Course Outline (*this is a separate document which lists the readings and other activities for each class. It will be handed out in class on Thursday*). These Four Reaction Papers account for 40% of your grade.

Also each student will serve as class facilitator for one class period where you will lead the class discussion. This should be one of the dates on which you are writing a Reaction Paper. You will also have a hand-out for the class which can be a Power Point Presentation, an outline of the Readings or a prepared lecture. When facilitating our class discussion, you are to do as you will do in your written Reaction Paper: Present the key ideas in the readings; Additionally you should prepare questions for the class from those readings; and each presented should be prepared to answer questions from you class mates about the assigned reading for that date. I will assist you in this class facilitation. One class facilitation accounts for 10% of your grade.

A sign-up sheet will be circulated at our second class where you will sign up for both the Four Reaction Paper dates you will write during the term and the date on which you wish to serve as the facilitator. In some cases, there may be more than one person signing up to make their oral report on the same date. In which case, I will work with you to select another date for your class facilitation.

I will provide written Guidelines for your Reaction Papers via e-mail.

2). **Group Research Project & Research Paper:** Members of the class will decide on a group research project they would like to do research on with other members of the class. This Research Project will result in each member of the group writing an end of term minimum 10

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page paper on some aspect of the Group's Topic. In the third meeting of the class, the class is to divide into Interest Groups. Some Suggested Topics for these interest groups could include but are not limited to the following:

- *The history and practice of African Traditional Religions in the U.S. such as Voodun, Santeria, and Condomble.*
- *The Rastafarian Religion, its origins and practice in the U.S.*
- *The history and contemporary significance of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*
- *The National Black Baptist Churches*
- *The Role of Religion in the Civil Rights Movement*
- *Bishop Richard Allen and the Free African Society*
- *The Nation of Islam*
- *Mr. Elijah Muhammad*
- *Malcolm X and his impact on Islam*
- *Role of Women in the Black Church*
- *Black Hebrew Congregations in the U.S.*
- *The Pentecostal Church and African Americans*

You are free to come up with another suggestion for a group and if at least two people are interested, this meets the criteria for an Interest Group. We will discuss the Interest Group and the Final Research Project in class. I will provide written Guidelines for the Final Research Paper. Your participation in The Interest Group and your individual Research Paper will account for 40% of your grade.

3). Participation in the Class Trip to an African American Religious Service will account for 10% of your grade.

Classroom Environment:

We will be discussing and watching sensitive, controversial and sometimes volatile issues in this class, including; slavery itself and the harsh and often brutal treatment of enslaved Africans by their Euro-American captors and owners, racism, slave revolts and the racialized killings those who revolted advocated, black nationalist thought and other racially sensitive issues. Therefore we must all agree that "everyone has the right to their own opinion and the right to a classroom free from hostility, ridicule, or embarrassment".¹ Every student is expected to be mature, to act responsibly and understand that we are engaged in the Academic Study of Religion, in which all issues are open for critique and discussion. No relevant topics are off limits. No one is expected to agree with me or with any of the readings, video documentaries or films that we will read and watch this term. Your grade will not be based on your agreement with me or the authors of the readings. Everyone is encouraged/urged to state his or her opinions. The only requirement is that your views are to be based upon rational thought and are presented in a non-threatening or hostile manner..

Ethical Conduct:

¹ Crawley, 2.

The university and I expect the highest degree of ethical conduct and comportment in this class. Getting caught cheating will lead to failure in this class as well as university disciplinary action. Examples of cheating include: plagiarizing written assignments.

My view of the classroom experience: your role and mine:

I see the optimal learning environment as one in which the students and the teacher are actively engaged in the learning and teaching process. The class belongs to everyone in it and everyone has the responsibility to make the class interesting and inviting. "I will not be feeding you facts that you will then regurgitate."² This is an intensive reading, film viewing, and discussion class. Everyone needs to read the assignments before the class and be prepared to fully engage in our discussions. If the class room set up allows we will sit in a circle during our discussions so that everyone is facing the group and actively engaged in the teaching and learning process.

Attendance and Participation:

We will attempt to cover a large amount of material during the term, therefore your participation and attendance in class are very important. You are permitted two unexcused absence without penalty. However, unexcused absences after the first one will impact negatively upon your grade. Each class missed is extremely important. For each unexcused absence after the first two, you can lose up to 2 grade points from your cumulative grade.

Excused absences include the following: an illness verified by a note from the UF infirmary or your doctor or dentist on their letterhead saying that you were ill during the day (s) you missed. Also a death in the family documented by an official notice of the death and your relationship to the deceased qualifies as an excused absence. If you are on a UF sports team, in the band, glee club, choir, orchestra, etc and you need to miss class because of an engagement, I need documentation from your organization stating that you will be away on University business on a day that this class meets. I will appreciate your letting me know in advance of such trips or engagements. If you are a graduating senior and have scheduled job or intern interviews or the like, these also qualify as excused absences. Please let me know in advance that you will be away for this purpose and provide documentation. Please do not miss class unnecessarily. After all you and/or your parents are paying for you to go to college. It is in your interest to do your best.

Completion of the assigned readings as scheduled and participation in class discussion are required. (Please remember that your participation can only be accomplished if you have read the assigned materials).

Penalties for Lateness and Living Class before it ends: Unexcused lateness to class will also take points from your final grade. If you know that you will be late, send me an e-mail

² Sara Crawley, Syllabus for "Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Women", Summer A 2000, p 2.

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beforehand to alert me giving your reasons for your anticipated lateness. Also leaving class at the break or anytime before the class has ended without a valid excuse will take points from your grade. You must alert me before class meets (by e-mail) that you need to leave early and the reasons why in order not to have points deducted from your grade.

To Recap - Grades will be based on the following:

• Four (4) page reaction papers–	30%
• Facilitation of one class with handout	10%
• Group Project with End of Term Research Paper	30%
• Oral Presentation of your Research Project	10%
• One Class Trip to an African American Churches	10%
• Overall Class Participation	10%
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• Total	100%

Please Note: I have set up a list serve for the class by which I will communicate with you on a regular basis. I will send notices about up-coming events that might be of interest, study questions for the assigned readings, articles off the web of interest, etc. I am hoping to place these items on the classes' Sakai Site also. I invite members of the class to send me articles and information, which I will forward to the rest of the class. Also, some of the chapters we will read will be on E-Reserves and or sent to you as a pdf via our Class List.

I look forward to an intellectually stimulating and exciting semester. Welcome Aboard!

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