

## **HIST391-902: Topics: Politics of African American Religion in Historical Perspective**

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Office: History Department, Room 104

Office Hours: Wednesdays 9-11 AM; Fridays 1-2 PM (via Google Hangout)

### **INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**

Virginia Commonwealth University is an urban, public research institution located in Richmond, Virginia. It enrolls over 24,000 undergraduates and 5000 graduate students. In accordance with the University's strategic "Quest for Distinction," it centers engaged student learning, fosters interdisciplinary research, fosters a climate of inclusion, and encourages university-community partnerships that enrich surrounding communities and the state. The University has several schools including the College of Humanities and Sciences, which houses the History Department, eighteen other departments and programs, and almost 60% of all undergraduate majors. The majority of the students (82%) are enrolled full-time and the composition of the student body is more female (59%) and racially diverse (50% African American, Asian American, LatinX, Other). One-third of the students are first-generation college attendees.

### **CURRICULAR CONTEXT & APPROACH**

This is 300-level topics course that is designed to give history majors and non-majors exposure to a focused thematic topic in the study of history with emphasis on "in-depth reading and writing" on the topic. Students may enroll in this course at any point in their academic career and the course has no prerequisites. This course may draw students from African American Studies and Religious Studies, but is not currently cross-listed in these departments. With enrollment capped at 40 students, this course will operate best as part lecture and part discussion. Once-a-week meetings allow for more developed discussions and in-depth small group work, as well as field trips.

This course approaches the study of African American religious history with a sharp focus on historical social and political context. This approach invites greater attention to the social and political constructions of power in and through African American religious communities. Consequently, the course works to unseat the notion of inherent religiosity of black people that implicitly affirms biological definitions of race. The course accomplishes this aim by providing a collection of readings that allow more nuanced understanding of the factors that have shaped the role of black religious institutions across time to emerge. Additionally, the course aims to disrupt binary notions of black religious politics and encourage a dialectical understanding of black religious politics. The course proceeds chronologically through time in order to illuminate the changes happening around and in African American religious communities, but it also engages some thematic topics central to understanding African American religious communities and their history.

This course is structured to allow both lecture and in-depth discussion to take place in one meeting. Lectures offer historical context and situate the readings in historiographic discourses, laying out the debates and interpretive themes and shifts that inform the readings for the week. Through these lectures, I aim to provide additional content for the final essay in which students grapple with the central premise of the course. Lectures are interactive and use a variety of sources—films, images, art—to supplement the discussion.

While lectures take up to half of the class time, student-led/instructor-facilitated discussions anchor the other half. Three to five students serve as primary discussants and use their prepared critiques of the readings as a launch point for a 15-20 minute free form discussion in which discussants primarily engage each other. They articulate their own points, ask questions and connect their insights to one another's. From there, they open up discussion to the class, where class members can ask further clarifying or extending questions or I use the questions and themes from the 3Q assignments to shape a discussion that delves deeper into the topics and themes brought out in the discussants' round table. At times, I may also introduce an additional text for consideration. On occasion, we devote a portion of this discussion time to guest speakers or more formally organized workshops.

The discussion and paper assignments work together to get students engaging the readings, analyzing the sources, establishing and defending their own interpretations with evidence from the readings in preparation for the final essay.

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course explores the history of African American religious communities from the colonial times to the present. It explores the organization and politics of these institutions and how the various historical forces and major events of slavery, emancipation, migration, urbanization, racism, race consciousness, gender and class have shaped black religious communities across the centuries. It uses a diverse grouping of primary and secondary sources and experiential learning activities to further these aims. Course materials include scholarly monographs, chapters and articles, primary accounts of religious life and records of religious organizations. Students will come away from the course with an enhanced sense of the complexities of black religious life and the evolution of black religions as central social and political agents in black life and the black freedom struggle. The culminating project for the course is a critical analytical essay evaluating the central premise of the course.

This course is designed to introduce you to the academic study of religious history and uses historical methods to understand the history of black religious people and institutions. Students of every faith and no faith traditions are welcome to take the class. The course will explore different traditions and beliefs but does not advocate or catechize its participants. Our class discussions and analyses will enhance your training as a historian and fill your toolbox with both methodological approaches to primary sources, as well as, technical tools for writing.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Readings, discussions and assignments are designed to enhance your ability to:

- Describe the evolution of black religious life in the Americas from the colonial period to the present.
- Explain the development of African American religious community and African American religious politics in light of the shifts in gender, race and class dynamics across time.
- Analyze and evaluate primary source accounts of religious life and experience
- Evaluate arguments and methodology in historical writing.

### **READINGS (subject to change)**

**Required Texts** (will be available for purchase at the VCU Bookstore, from online booksellers, as e-books and on reserve in Cabell Library)

### *Monographs/Books*

1. Matthew Harper, *The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2016)
2. Lerone Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York University Press, 2014)
3. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past*
4. Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2010)

### *Primary Source Reader*

5. Milton C. Sernett, ed. *Afro-American Religious History: Documentary Witness* (Duke University Press, 1995)

### **Other Readings**

Additional readings for the course—book chapters and primary source documents—can be found on the course’s Blackboard (BB) website under Course Documents or in Cabell Library on reserve (CL). (Blackboard: <https://blackboard.vcu.edu/> )

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

#### ***Weekly Discussion Leader (15% of your final grade)***

Three (3) times during the semester you will provide a brief critical analysis of the readings and two (2) discussion questions prior to class and will serve on a discussion panel about the weeks’ readings. The critical analysis should include a summary of the main points and ideas as well as your response to the ideas. Discussion questions should focus attention on the author’s arguments, use of evidence/methodology, historiographic significance and be open-ended so as to promote discussion and alternate interpretations. Questions that focus attention on specific passages and broaden out to larger themes in the text or course, or that draw comparisons between readings are especially welcome and productive.

Post Critical Analysis and Questions by Sunday at 5 PM.

#### ***3Q (Quote, Question, Quandary) (10% of your final grade)***

In order to more carefully digest and dissect the readings and to help shape and direct discussions, nine (9) times during the course, you will post a 3Q to the Blackboard Discussion section by 8 AM on Monday. The 3Q is a brief (no more than one page) document with one *question* for discussion, one key *quote* from the week’s reading and a brief explanation of why you selected that passage and one *quandary*, lingering question or idea that the readings have inspired. Though short, these assignments are designed to inspire carefully and thoughtful reading and engagement with the texts and may address issues of argument, evidence, and interpretation.

***Three (3) Short Essays (3-5 pages) – (50% of your final grade)***

You will write and submit 3 short essays using the course readings and lectures to respond to the thematic questions posed in the syllabus.

Due: Weeks 3, 7, and 11

***Final Critical Analytical Essay (10-12 pages) - (25% of your final grade)***

In this paper, you will interrogate the central premise of this course—that black religious institutions shaped and were shaped by the changing social and political landscape of America. Using the readings and lectures, analyze and evaluate the strength of this claim.

Due: During Finals Week

## **READING SCHEDULE**

(subject to change with notice)

### **Race and the Roots of African American Religions**

*How have definitions of blackness shaped the definition, interpretation and study of African American Religion?*

- Week 1. Introduction: Religion, Race and Politics in African American Religious History  
Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, chapters 1-2  
Sernett: Du Bois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers"
- Week 2. Race and Religion  
Curtis Evans, "The Meaning of Slave Religion," chapter 1 in *The Burden of Black Religion*  
Glaude, "African American Islam," chapter 7 in *African American Religion*, [BB]
- Week 3. Enslaved Communities  
Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, chs. 1-2 [BB]  
Francis LeJau, "Slave Conversion on the Carolina Frontier" [BB]  
Watson, "Negro Primitive Religious Services," "A Preacher from a God-Fearing Plantation," "A Man in a Man" in *God Struck Me Dead* [BB]  
Confessions of Nat Turner – *excerpt* [BB]

**\*DUE:** Short Essay #1 due in class and online (3-5 pages)

### **Religion and Freedom**

*How did independent black religious institutions of the antebellum and postbellum period shape the meaning and expression of freedom?*

- Week 4. Antebellum Religious Life  
Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past*, chapters 1 and 2  
Sernett: Liele and Bryan, "Letters from Black Pioneer Baptists" [BB]  
Richard Allen, "Life Experience and Gospel Labors" [BB]  
Jarena Lee, "Female Preacher among African Methodists" [BB]
- Week 5. Antebellum Religion and Colonization  
Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past*, chapters 3 and 4  
Sernett: *David Walker's Appeal*; Peter Williams, "To the Citizens of New York"
- Week 6. Emancipating Religion  
Harper, *End of Days*, chs. 1 and 3  
Virginia Baptist State Convention Minutes, 1879 [BB]

- Week 7. Religion in the Age of Empire  
 Harper, *End of Days*, chs. 4-5  
 Little, “Redeem the World: The Influence of Black Theology” chapter 3 in *Disciples of Liberty*  
 Sernett: Alexander Crummell, “The Regeneration of Africa”  
 Henry McNeal Turner, “Emigration to Africa”

**\*DUE:** Short Essay #2 due in class and online (3-5 pages)

### **Religion and Movements**

***How did black religious institutions change and shape change in the midst of the great migration and the evolution of the civil rights movement?***

- Week 8. Religion and the Great Migration  
 Martin, *Preaching on Wax*, ch. 2-4  
 Sernett: Drake and Cayton, “The Churches of Bronzeville”
- Week 9. Religion Off the Mainline  
 Weisenfeld, “Geographies of Race and Religion,” and “Religio-Racial Self-Fashioning,” chapters 1 and 2 in *New World A-Coming*  
 Morrish Science Temple FBI Files:  
<https://vault.fbi.gov/Moorish%20Science%20Temple%20of%20America>  
 Sernett: Rabbi Matthew, “Black Judaism in Harlem”
- Week 10. Civil Rights and Religion  
 Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us*, chs. 5-6  
 Sernett: Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,”  
 National Conference of Black Churchmen, “Black Power Statement” and “Black Theology” Statement
- Week 11. Malcolm X & the Nation of Islam  
*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chs. 1-3, 10-14, Epilogue

**\*DUE:** Short Essay #3 due in class and online (3-5 pages)

### **Thematic Analytical Frames for the Study of Black Religious History**

- Week 12. Politics of Black Religion  
 Glaude, “The Black Church is Dead!” *HuffPost Blog* (2010) [BB]  
 Sernett: Nichols and Mays, “The Geniums of the Negro Church”
- Week 13. Religion, Gender & Sexuality

Douglass, "Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community," in West and Glaude, eds. *African American Religion: An Anthology* [BB]

Jones, "'Make us a power': African American Methodists debate the 'woman question,' 1870-1900" in Griffith and Savage, eds. *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora* [BB]

Week 14. Religion in the Age of Hip Hop

Sorrett, "Believe Me, This Pimp Game is Very Religious: Toward a religious history of hip hop" [BB]

Woodbine, "An Invisible Institution: A Functional Approach to Religion in Sports in Wounded African American Communities," chapter 18 in *The Black Church in Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide* [BB]

**Final Critical Analytical Essay (10-12 pages)  
Submit via Blackboard Submission**



## ABOUT THIS COURSE

### Course Expectations

#### *Preparation*

This class will be conducted in a lecture-seminar style. This format requires all participants to read thoughtfully and carefully in preparation for class. Submitting questions for discussion at the start of each class will reflect this preparation. Attentive listening and active participation of all members is valued and necessary.

Timely and thorough completion of each week's readings and writing assignments is necessary for successful completion of the course. In order to fully appreciate the lectures and participate thoughtfully in the conversations, you must read and digest each week's assignments by the dates listed on the syllabus.

Bring copies of the reading and/or your notes to each class session. We will engage in close-readings of the texts and I will expect you to refer to specific passages of the texts in our discussions.

#### *Participation: selective verbal contributions, active listening, engaging other participants*

We can learn from the variety of perspectives, experiences, and skills we each bring to this class. Active participation in each class is expected and may take any or all of the following forms: selective verbal contributions, active listening, and helping or encouraging others to participate. I expect that your comments will be grounded in the readings, use appropriate evidence to support positions and when appropriate/applicable connect to the comments made by other discussants.

#### *Discussion Questions*

You must prepare in advance of each class session 1-2 questions for discussion. These questions should directly engage the readings and offer a critical launching point for discussion.

Good discussion questions are open-ended and invite a variety of responses, rather than a yes/no or factual response. They may address aspects of the texts' arguments, interpretations, methods/sources and more.

Characteristics of good questions:

- a. Relevant –directly addresses the issues, themes and topics of the reading.
- b. Important –addresses significant or prominent issues in the readings
- c. Thought-provoking –open-ended and not be able to be answered with a yes/no or factual response.
- d. Original – reflect independent thought, are distinct from textbook questions, and ought not repeat another student's question.
- e. Timely - are posted by on time

(Adapted from: "Good Questions" [http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/SS770/Outline-GOOD\\_QUESTIONS.html](http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/SS770/Outline-GOOD_QUESTIONS.html))

## **Grading and Assessment**

### ***Grading Policy***

Grades are intended to be a reflection of an individual's ability to demonstrate a meaningful and understandable engagement with the material covered in the course. They are not reflections of the quality of one's intelligence, effort or character. Please do not obsess over grades. Do be concerned with what you learn and how that knowledge transforms you and the world around you.

I take great care in establishing expectations and guidelines for assignments and in assessing assignments. In order to have a grade reconsidered, you must wait 24 hours before submitting a written a statement explaining the grievance. Keep in mind that your grade could go up or down as a result.

### ***Assessment Standards***

All work is assessed on a scale of A to F where the following values are associated with the work product (not the person):

A level work (90-100) is work of exceptional quality, demonstrating a great degree of engagement, sophistication and professionalism. It is timely, original, and meticulous in its presentation.

B level work (80-89) is work of solid quality, demonstrating good engagement. It is thoughtful, relevant and well-reasoned. It is timely, original and generally clean and organized.

C level work (70-79) is work of average quality and may reflect lack of thorough engagement, may present as "run of the mill," with a lack of insight or care.

D level work (60-69) is work of below average quality and is marred severely by lack of engagement, disconnection, disorganization, and irrelevance, lack of timeliness.

F level work (<60) is work that is not submitted or is plagiarized.

### ***Assessment Criteria***

Discussion questions are assessed based on the following criteria: relevance to the reading; centrality of the issues raised; open-endedness; originality; presence/absence of citation; and timeliness.

Discussion participation is assessed based on the following criteria: ability to reference the readings knowledgeably; attentive listening; thoughtfulness of questions; use of the text in discussion; engagement of classmates, which includes inviting others to participate by asking questions or bridging comments.

Written assignments are assessed based on the following criteria: clarity and originality of thesis, central point or aim; careful and thoughtful engagement with the primary and secondary sources; logical organization and coherent development of ideas; grammar and citation mechanics

## **CLASS POLICIES**

### ***Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Cheating Policy***

I expect that all members of this class will abide by the spirit and letter of Virginia Commonwealth University's policies on plagiarism and cheating in every aspect of participation in this course.

<http://policy.vcu.edu/sites/default/files/Student%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf>

### ***Classroom Etiquette***

We are a community of learners and learning is difficult to promote unless there is a sense of respect and a willingness to take risks. To that end, let respectful language and tones as well as a desire to understand as much as to be understood guide your contributions and participation in class. Feel free to express your opinions and ideas and to back them up with credible evidence, just as historians do.

Please silence your cell-phone during class.

If you choose to use a laptop for taking notes you must sit in the front of the class.

### ***Communication & Office Hours***

I make every effort to respond to emails within 48 hours. However, email works best for brief factual questions not more in-depth discussion. Please visit me during office hours to discuss your work or clarify content.

I also use email and Blackboard announcements to convey information regarding changes in readings or class meeting plans. Be sure to check your email daily to ensure that you don't miss updates.

In the age of email and text messages, sometime a good old face-to-face conversation is the best way to address the matters at hand. I encourage you to make it a point to see me at least once this semester. I am happy to discuss any aspects of the course content, assignments, or experience. I am available during office hours (and by appointment when necessary).

### ***Absences***

Since attendance is necessary to participate, excessive absence (i.e. more than 2 absences) will lower your grade for the course. Absences may be excused for religious reasons with appropriate notice per university guidelines and in the case of illness, a letter from a doctor or advisor.

If you are absent, it is your responsibility to get the lecture notes and announcements from one of your fellow students.

### ***Lateness***

Be on time to class. Two late arrivals count as an unexcused absence (and will cause your grade to be lowered.)