

Religion & The Madhouse featuring Judith Weisenfeld

Teaching/Learning Resources

On this episode of Religion &, we have invited scholars to engage in a wide-ranging conversation with Judith Weisenfeld on facets of her newest publication *Black Religion in the Madhouse: Race and Psychiatry in Slavery's Wake* (NYU Press, 2025). Join us for a conversation with Dr. Judith Weisenfeld that unpacks Black religious beliefs, new religious movements, and “religious excitement” as a psychiatric concept in institutionalization.

Featured Panelist:

Judith Weisenfeld is Agate Brown and George L. Collord Professor of Religion and associated faculty in the Department of African American Studies and the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University. Her research focuses on early twentieth-century African American religious history, including the relation of religion to constructions of race, the impact on black religious life of migration, immigration, and urbanization, African American women's religious history, religion in film and popular culture, and religion and medicine. She is the author of *Black Religion in the Madhouse: Race and Psychiatry in Slavery's Wake* (NYU Press, 2025), *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity During the Great Migration* (NYU 2016), which won the 2017 Albert J. Raboteau Prize for the Best Book in Africana Religions, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (California 2007), and *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Harvard 1997), as well as many articles and book chapters on topics in African American and American religious history and culture. Her current research focuses on the psychiatry, race, and Black religions in the late nineteenth and early 20th century United States.

Co-Hosts:

Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Africana Studies at Indiana University Indianapolis and the Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies and Economics from Brown University, his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and his PhD in Religious Studies from Duke University. His research interests are Black religion and the Black body, alternative Christianities, and the role of scripture in African and African American religious traditions. His book, *The Other Black Church: Alternative Christian Movements and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Fortress, 2020), highlights the variety and vibrancy of the African American Christian sphere during the latter half of the twentieth century and it adds to the growing body of work that is addressing alternative Christian traditions in the Black public sphere.

Philippa Koch is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Missouri State University. Her research and teaching center on religion, health, and society in America and its global context. Her recent publications include “Records of Relinquishment: Caregiving and Emotion in the Philanthropy Archive,” an article which appeared in *The Public Historian* in May 2024, as well as her first book, *The Course of God's Providence: Religion, Health, and the Body in Early America*, which was published in 2021 by NYU Press. She is currently working on her next book, *Medicine and American Religion*, which is under contract with Routledge.

Forthcoming Text: [*Black Religion in the Madhouse: Race and Psychiatry in Slavery's Wake*](#)

Show Notes & Major Questions

Resources from Panelists

Assignment Prompts/Ideas

1. Think of the COVID-19 Pandemic, how did race or ethnicity play into the medical and vice versa, how were communities of color impacted by the pandemic differently than predominantly white communities?
2. How have these early ideas on race and medicine impacted the contemporary field of medicine?
3. Explore different forms of healing and healers, how does race come into play? What are some similarities between them or some differences? From medical professionals in the United States, reiki practitioners, midwives, Dulas, to medical professionals in eastern countries, folk healing, and so on.
4. How has religious thought or belief transferred into modern medicine? What are some of the problems with this happening?
5. How are doctors and those involved in the medical community still facing and dealing with race, ethnicity, and the impacts of slavery?
6. Think of other medical facilities or programs, how have things like slavery impacted them?

Sources Mentioned in Webinar

Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South by Albert J. Raboteau

- Twenty-five years after its original publication, *Slave Religion* remains a classic in the study of African American history and religion. In a new chapter in this anniversary edition, author Albert J. Raboteau reflects upon the origins of the book, the reactions to it over the past twenty-five years, and how he would write it differently today. Using a variety of first and second-hand sources - some objective, some personal, all riveting - Raboteau analyzes the transformation of the African religions into evangelical Christianity. He presents the narratives of the slaves themselves, as well as missionary reports, travel accounts, folklore, black autobiographies, and the journals of white observers to describe the day-to-day religious life in the slave communities. *Slave Religion* is a must-read for anyone wanting a full picture of this "invisible institution."

Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North by Arthur Huff Fauset

- Stemming from his anthropological field work among black religious groups in Philadelphia in the early 1940s, Arthur Huff Fauset believed it was possible to determine the likely direction that mainstream black religious leadership would take in the future, a direction that later indeed manifested itself in the civil rights movement. The American black church, according to Fauset and other contemporary researchers, provided the one place where blacks could experiment without hindrance in activities such as business, politics, social reform, and social expression. With detailed primary accounts of these early spiritual movements and their beliefs and practices, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* reveals the fascinating origins of such significant modern African American religious groups as the Nation of Islam as well as the role of lesser known and even forgotten churches in the history of the black community.

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination by Toni Morrison

- Author of *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and other vivid portrayals of black American experience, Morrison ponders the effect that living in a historically racialized society has had on American writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She argues that race has become a metaphor, a way of referring to forces, events, and forms of social decay, economic division, and human panic. Her compelling point is that the central characteristics of American literature individualism, masculinity, the insistence upon innocence coupled to an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are responses to a dark and abiding Africanist presence. Through her investigation of black characters, narrative strategies, and idiom in the fiction of white American writers, Morrison provides a daring perspective that is sure to alter conventional notions about American literature. She considers Willa Cather and the impact of race on concept and plot; turns to Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville to examine the black force that figures so significantly in the literature of early America; and discusses the implications of the Africanist presence at the heart of *Huckleberry Finn*. A final chapter on Ernest Hemingway is a brilliant exposition of the racial subtext that glimmers beneath the surface plots of his fiction.

ARDA Resources

[Race/Ethnicity and Religion Timeline](#)

Ahead of the Trend:

- [A Year Into the Pandemic, What Impact was Religion Having on Mental Distress?](#)

Books

[The Peculiar Institution and the Making of Modern Psychiatry 1840-1880](#) by Wendy Gonaver

- Though the origins of asylums can be traced to Europe, the systematic segregation of the mentally ill into specialized institutions occurred in the United States only after 1800, just as the struggle to end slavery took hold. In this book, Wendy Gonaver examines the relationship between these two historical developments, showing how slavery and ideas about race shaped early mental health treatment in the United States, especially in the South. She reveals these connections through the histories of two asylums in Virginia: the Eastern Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg, the first in the nation; and the Central Lunatic Asylum in Petersburg, the first created specifically for African Americans. Eastern Lunatic Asylum was the only institution to accept both slaves and free blacks as patients and to employ slaves as attendants. Drawing from these institutions' untapped archives, Gonaver reveals how slavery influenced ideas about patient liberty, about the proper relationship between caregiver and patient, about what constituted healthy religious belief and unhealthy fanaticism, and about gender. This early form of psychiatric care acted as a precursor to public health policy for generations, and Gonaver's book fills an important gap in the historiography of mental health and race in the nineteenth century.

[Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science](#) Terence Keel

- *Divine Variations* offers a new account of the development of scientific ideas about race. Focusing on the production of scientific knowledge over the last three centuries, Terence Keel uncovers the persistent links between pre-modern Christian thought and contemporary scientific perceptions of human difference. He argues that, instead of a rupture between religion and modern biology on the question of human origins, modern scientific theories of race are, in fact, an extension of Christian intellectual history.

- Keel's study draws on ancient and early modern theological texts and biblical commentaries, works in Christian natural philosophy, seminal studies in ethnology and early social science, debates within twentieth-century public health research, and recent genetic analysis of population differences and ancient human DNA. From these sources, Keel demonstrates that Christian ideas about creation, ancestry, and universalism helped form the basis of modern scientific accounts of human diversity—despite the ostensible shift in modern biology towards scientific naturalism, objectivity, and value neutrality. By showing the connections between Christian thought and scientific racial thinking, this book calls into question the notion that science and religion are mutually exclusive intellectual domains and proposes that the advance of modern science did not follow a linear process of secularization.

Administrations of Lunacy: Racism and the Haunting of American Psychiatry at the Milledgeville Asylum by Mab Segrest

- Through riveting accounts of historical characters, Segrest reveals how modern psychiatric practice was forged in the traumas of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. Deftly connecting this history to the modern era, Segrest then shows how a single asylum helped set the stage for the eugenics theories of the twentieth century and the persistent racial ideologies of our own times. She also traces the connections to today's dissident psychiatric practices that offer sanity and create justice.

Origins of Racism in American Medicine and Psychiatry chapter by Kimberly Gordon-Achebe et al. In *Racism and Psychiatry*

- Like most structures, American medicine has been susceptible to the effects of racism. In matters of racial oppression, the field of psychiatry has been both slowly responsive and complicit in its reaction to the cultural challenge of racism; all too often it avoids matters of social justice. Unwittingly, it contributes to the perpetuation of health disparities. This chapter reviews the history of racial oppression in medical education and organized medicine by examining its origins in American colonization and slavery, which have engendered mental health disparities for black Americans. It also explores racial stereotypes in psychological theory, clinical practice, and health policies that adversely affect blacks in America, and it highlights the medical community's role in creating historical trauma in the black community. Psychiatrists play a crucial role in the development of interventions that will help shape healthy racial identities for blacks, and they can also foster psychological well-being for all Americans by recognizing racism as a mental health disorder. Girded with an understanding of the historical context of how blacks view medicine and psychiatry, health care systems, policy makers, and providers can undo racism and racial mental health disparities by engaging in antiracism work and advocating for this work to be implemented and embedded in all aspects of organized psychiatry and medical education.

Black Church Leaders' Attitudes about Seeking Mental Health Services: Role of Religiosity and Spirituality by Okunroumu, Elizabeth; Allen-Wilson, Argie; Davey, Maureen; Davey, Adam

Racial Differences in Stigmatizing Attitudes Toward People With Mental Illness. By Deidre M. Anglin, Ph.D., Bruce G. Link, Ph.D., and Jo C. Phelan, Ph.D.

Peculiar Institutions: Representations of Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Madness and Confinement in Slavery and Asylum by Diana M. Louis

- This dissertation examines representations of black women's madness and confinement in slavery and asylums in the nineteenth-century. It begins with an examination of black women in slavery, then moves to a discussion of the connections between slavery and asylums and ends with an examination of black women in one postbellum asylum. It uses theories of intersectionality, madness and confinement to analyze Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (ILSG) alongside reconstructed narratives of Viney W.,

Jane G., Olivia W., Alice M. and Amanda C., black women who were sent to Georgia Lunatic Asylum (GLA) between 1881 and 1894. I argue that Harriet Jacobs' narrative reveals how slavery not only harmed the bodies of black women; it also created mental illness. Through her depictions of the predicament of black enslaved women, Jacobs uncovers how the institution psychologically wounded them. Harriet Jacobs' theorization that slavery was detrimental to black mental health reflects what I call anti-slavery psychiatry.

Religion/spirituality in African-American culture: an essential aspect of psychiatric care. By James H Carter

- There is an astonishing diversity of religious beliefs and practices in the history of African Americans that influences the presentation, diagnosis, and management of both physical and mental disorders. The majority of African Americans, however, are evangelical Christians with religious experiences originating in the regions of ancient Africa (Cush, Punt, and to a great extent, Egypt), as well as black adaptation of Hebraic, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic beliefs and rituals. Consequently, more than 60 of the nation's 125 medical schools offer classes in spirituality and health. Although there is a lack of empirical evidence that religion improves health outcomes, physicians should understand patients as a biopsychosocial-spiritual whole. Asking about religion/spirituality during a health assessment can help the physician determine whether religious/spiritual factors will influence the patient's medical decisions and compliance. Two psychiatric case histories of African Americans are presented in which religion/spirituality significantly influenced treatment decisions and results. Neither of these patients suffered major debilitating medical comorbidity.

Articles

In Our Own Voice: African-American Stories of Oppression, Survival and Recovery in Mental Health Systems by Vanessa Jackson

African Americans Underutilization of Mental Health Services: Religion as a Barrier by Huffman, Diamond

- The study highlights the reluctance of the African American community to seek traditional mental health services, primarily due to religious beliefs and associated stigmas. Additional topics discussed in the document are: Religious beliefs and mental health, Stigmas surrounding therapy, Barriers to professional help seeking

Racism and Mental Health: Historical Perspectives on the Limits of Good Intentions Article by Laura Hirshbein

- During the 1970–1971 academic year, scholars, researchers, and activists gathered at Syracuse University to discuss the problems of racism and mental health against a backdrop of police brutality and political protest. Black and White experts discussed the problems of individual and structural racism, the effects of racism on the mental health of children, the tension between assimilation and integration, the need to reform the American Psychiatric Association and the National Institute of Mental Health regarding race issues, and the complex issue of white supremacy. Many of the discussions from fifty years before remain highly relevant as the same problems remain. This paper examines the context and content of the Syracuse conference with some reflection on what changed—and what did not. While leaders within the mental health establishment expressed intentions to address racism, shifts in methods and priorities for mental health care left intact or exacerbated many of the issues addressed a half century ago.

[Keeping America Sane: Psychiatry and Eugenics in the United States and Canada 1880-1940](#) by Ian R. Dowbiggin and Janet Colaizzi

[“Race, Religion, and Documentary Film,”](#) in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, eds., Kathryn Gin Lum and Paul Harvey, eds. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 288-303.

[Symposium Addresses Mental Health Silences and Disparities](#) By Ahmad Greene-Hayes

[Alternative Mental Health Services: The Role of the Black Church in the South](#) by Michael B. Blank PhD, Marcus Mahmood PhD, Jeanne C. Fox PhD, RN, and Thomas Guterbock PhD. Published Online: October 10, 2011

[The impact of racism on Black American mental health](#) article in *Black Mental Health in the U.S.A: Nothing for Us without Us*. By Courtney D. Cogburn et al.

Videos & Podcasts

Black Religion and Mental Health Symposium from Harvard Divinity School

The symposium brought together experts from history, public health, psychiatry, African American studies, religious studies, and civic society, focusing on understanding the neurobiological and socio-behavioral dynamics contributing to mental health stigmatization within Black communities. The symposium aimed to illuminate how societal stressors, such as racism, influence brain function and behavior, thereby affecting mental health, while also exploring resilience mechanisms among Black religious communities. This project aligns with the Harvard Mind Brain Behavior Interfaculty Initiative’s mission of facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration to address complex issues, contributing to a broader understanding of the interplay between mind, brain, and behavior in the context of Black mental health. This event took place on March 1, 2024.

- [Opening keynote from Judith Weisenfeld](#)
- [Plenary I](#)
- [Plenary II](#)
- [Closing keynote](#)

Syllabi, Modules, and Other Resources

[Praying for a Cure? Religion, Health, and Healing in America Syllabus](#) by Wendy Cadge

- Does spirituality promote health as the cover of Time magazine asks? Should pharmacists be required to dispense birth control when they feel it conflicts with their religious beliefs? What have scientists learned about the influence of prayers on health? What is it like to be a hospital chaplain? Does religion or spirituality influence the work of doctors and nurses? What do Muslim community healthcare organizations do? How do leaders of local churches, synagogues, mosques and temples respond to the health needs of their congregants? This seminar investigates these questions and others by looking at the relationship between religion, health, and healing in the contemporary United States. We explore how a wide range of religious and medical organizations understand these relationships and focus specifically on contemporary

tensions between religious and medical beliefs. Course materials include academic and popular writings, films and guest speakers.

Religious Attitudes During the COVID-19 Pandemic - ARDA Teaching Module

- The COVID-19 pandemic changed the outlook of many on life and society, including attitudes toward vaccination and lockdowns. Even beliefs about civic participation were changed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This learning module explores religious attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic using survey data found on the ARDA.

The Garden Initiative for Black Women's Religious Activism

- The Garden Initiative for Black Women's Religious Activism is a three-year project to create a historical and contemporary repository of black women's religious leadership in America. To date, there is no archive that holistically documents black women religious leaders. There is also no clearinghouse with an analysis of black women's contributions to religious communities or religious activism in society. The Garden aims to broaden our historical knowledge and equip contemporary religious institutions, the academy, and social justice activists with resources to sustain social change.