

## **Religions of the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora**

**IST 3127**

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“The suffering of our ancestors, the great suffering we share only in glimpses, only in traces, the suffering we have difficulty even imagining, has gifted us an understanding, a creativity, a joy, a transformational capacity, a solidarity with those in pain and struggle, that is much needed in the world today.”

- Makota Valdina Pinto, Candomblé elder

### **Religions of the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora**

This course examines the histories and meanings of religions created by Africans and their descendants in the Americas from the 17th century through the end of the 19th century, in the context of enslavement and resistance to slavery. The course takes an interdisciplinary approach, with a focus on historical, anthropological, philosophical and womanist perspectives. We examine Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería/Lucumí, Haitian Vodou, and African American Christianity through the lens of shared diasporic experience and Afro-Indigenous orientations to Black freedom.

Our course understands the African American Christian tradition as part of the larger, Black diasporic community of religions and asserts that the Black church shares much in common with the African-based ritual traditions of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Through a combination of lectures, readings, videos, audio recordings and guest presentations, we will explore the historical development and contemporary manifestations of these traditions; their connections and dissimilarities; their impact on visual artists and writers; their relationship to Christianity, and their meaning in the context of the ongoing struggle of Black people to imagine and embody sane, inclusive, healthy alternatives to a pervasive global model of white supremacy.

### **Learning Outcomes**

This course provides analytical tools, creative models and opportunities for personal and collective reflection, enabling students to:

- Examine the origins and histories of major religious traditions of the Black Atlantic world.
- Explore the writings of established and emerging scholars of Afro-Atlantic religions

- Analyze similarities and distinctions among Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American religions.
- Understand roots and traditions of the Black church in the USA in diasporic context
- Recognize the impact of diasporic Black religious consciousness in the work of selected African American visual artists and writers.
- Construct healthy, respectful engagement between US Christians and practitioners of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin religions
- Evaluate a diversity of human experiences as key to the wellbeing of the church.

### **How Our Online Class Works**

We will be working collaboratively as a class with an emphasis on student-centered learning. In addition to weekly Canvas discussions based on my lectures and required texts, requirements for this course also include serving as a Discussion Starter once in the quarter, attending our in-person class meetings on October 10 and 11 at Iliff in Bartlett (L-205), and a final exam in essay format or optional creative final project.

Each week of our course begins on Monday and ends on Sunday.

Every Monday, before 2pm, I will post a weekly assignment reminder; as well as a lecture or short commentary on the week's readings; and one or more supplementary study materials. I will also open ("publish") new discussion boards. With the exception of the three books by Harding, Hucks and Wilson, all of the texts for the course will be supplied as files or hyperlinks on Canvas.

Students have one week to complete all assignments listed for a particular week of the course. This means you can work when you want and you are not required to be online at any assigned time. *However*, there are weekly, internal deadlines for Canvas postings. (See below for details.) Please keep these in mind. Of course, you are free to complete work before the deadlines and, in fact, I strongly encourage you do so – especially the discussions in Canvas.

Most of my communication with you will happen on Canvas and via Inbox. Please REMEMBER to check your Iliff email and Canvas messages several times a week. You will run the risk of missing important notices if you forget.

Each week, we will rotate 2 or 3 students to initiate our Canvas discussions based on their reflections on the readings/videos and my commentaries. During the first week, I'll post a sign-up sheet so that students can decide which week of the semester they would like to be responsible for as a "**discussion starter**."

### *Discussion Starters*

Starters will begin class discussions on assigned course material. The responsibility of starters is threefold:

1. *Briefly* summarize major arguments in the week's materials. Point out significant social issues and historical events referenced in the texts. Point out any part of the readings or videos that you find confusing or unclear. This part of the task should not take more than a single long paragraph or two short ones.
2. Choose an excerpt from the week's material for the class to analyze together. Develop a few questions or discussion points in relation to the text. Provide a quote and the page number where the quote is found (or the time stamp of a video or film) that is significant both to the author's argument and to your thinking about the topic. Critically reflect on the passage and discuss how it challenged, expanded or nuanced your thinking.
  - a) If the passage *challenged* you, this means it pushed you to come to a different conclusion than you previously had about something, or at least, it is pushing you to reconsider your prior thinking.
  - b) If the passage *expanded* your thinking, this means you agree with the author's writing and it caused you to see new things, to broaden your thinking on a particular point, or caused you to make connections you did not previously make between ideas.
  - c) If the passage *nuanced* your thinking, this mean you agree with the author's writing and it caused you to see things in a new light in terms of some important detail.

Or, you might have another kind of response to the material – questions, uncertainties or just something that caught your attention in a particular way that you want to contemplate.

Develop one or two questions or discussion points related to the material you have chosen to reflect on.

*THE POINT IS...YOU WANT TO OPEN UP THE CLASS FOR A CONVERSATION*

3. Finally, you should also find and share a cultural artifact that relates to the text or film. This can be anything that strikes you as connected in some way to the ideas or issues examined in the week's materials. A "cultural artifact" can be a news article, television show, movie, music video, song, YouTube video, a piece of artwork (a painting, sculpture, mural art, animation, etc.), a poem, or even a

conversation you had with another person – ANYTHING you come across in your daily life, or in your research, that is related to the themes we are discussing for that week. Say something about the cultural artifact and what connection you see to our text or film.

#### Canvas Discussions – Important Points!

- A. For the first two weeks of our class, students will post their responses to questions and prompts that I have prepared.

Beginning in the third week of our course (the week of September 23), our **Discussion Starters** will post questions and prompts for our class related to the material we're reading/viewing for each week of the course.

- B. Each person who has agreed to be a discussion starter for a particular week will submit their discussion assignment by 11:59 pm on the **Monday** of their Starter Week. Submissions should be made on Canvas in the ASSIGNMENTS section. As mentioned above, the assignment consists of three parts:

- a. a *brief* summary of major points and significant social issues/events referenced in the text(s).
- b. a question, commentary or discussion point posed to the class.
- c. a cultural artifact (video, song, poem, artwork, reading, conversation, etc.) that relates in some way to our readings or film/video for the week.

- C. After I receive the Starters' assignments, I will post them to the class on **Tuesday morning by 10am.**

- D. Students will each post a reply to the questions/commentary of ONE of the Starters and then, before the deadline of Sunday at 11:59pm, each student will return to the discussion board to respond to the posts of TWO other classmates.

So, just to clarify – each week, the Starters will submit their reactions/questions/artifacts. Then other students will post responses to the starters' questions. And by Sunday night each student will return to the discussion board to post additional responses to what two of their classmates have written.

**Important:** You can respond to ANYBODY'S POST – they do not have to be answering the same question you answered. Any post is fair game. Every

student (who is not a starter) should have a minimum of **THREE** postings each week. **ONE** as an initial response to a Starter prompt. And **TWO** in response to postings by other non-Starter classmates.

You will receive up to 10 points for your original post in response to a Starter. You will receive up to 20 points (10 points per post) for your response to the postings of other classmates.

- E. I will make a sign-up sheet for starters on Wednesday of our first week. If you have not signed up to be a starter by the end of the first week of class, I will randomly assign you a week. I will post the schedule of Discussion Starters in the Announcements section of our Canvas site. It is your responsibility to check the Discussion Starters schedule so that you will know when it's your turn to lead our class conversation.
- F. I'll make sure that texts are available to starters at least one week in advance so that they can read and prepare ahead of the rest of the class.
- G. Please contact me by Canvas Inbox or Email me if you have any questions!

I will check the discussion board several times each week and respond to questions, clarify doubts, suggest additional examples related to the readings, and give you encouragement as you discuss and analyze the material you are studying.

**PLEASE NOTE:** After you put your postings on the discussion board, you should check back – before the end of the week – to see if I have asked you a follow-up question or given you some specific feedback. If I have written a question for you in the discussion thread, please do your best to answer it. My questions are not rhetorical.

### **Evaluation Criteria for Canvas Posts**

Here is a list of criteria I use in evaluating discussion posts:

- The answers you post should demonstrate that you have read (or watched/listened to) the required material. Your comments may seek clarification about things you didn't understand fully or they may offer reflections on the material based on your own insights, other readings you've done, my lectures, or the supplementary materials I post from time to time like videos and websites.

- You should cite *specific examples* from the readings in your comments. **This is important.** It shows me that you are reading the material and comprehending it.
- Your responses to the postings of classmates should not be simply “I agree with this idea” or “This is interesting to me.” If you choose to respond to a classmate’s commentary, do it with specifics and gusto! If you agree, explain why you agree in as much detail as possible. If you disagree, explain clearly why you see things differently. Use examples and not just generalizations.
- Don’t use offensive language. We will be discussing some challenging subjects in this course, but it’s important to maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect as we converse with each other. Having strong opinions is a good thing – but we have to be careful about how we express them online. The internet doesn’t always modulate well...
- I don’t mind if you use slang in your posts (as long as it is not offensive). We may ask you to define words that are not clear to everyone, though. Otherwise, pay attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation. We cannot “hear” each other’s actual voices, so we have to take extra care to make sure that we understand and can be understood by one another.
- You can submit as many postings in response to other people as you would like. (This is our primary space for engaging the material and each other, so feel free to use it in that way. *The three weekly postings are a minimum requirement.* Additional posts will not be graded individually, but the more you participate in discussions, the more I will notice, and I will remember your participation when final grades are calculated.)

## Required Texts:

### Books

- August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
- Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, Indiana University Press, 2000
- Tracey Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, University of New Mexico Press, 2012

### Essays and book chapters

(These will be available on Canvas)

- Crystal Andrea Felima, “The Economics of Vodou: Haitian Women, Entrepreneurship and Agency” in Celucien Joseph and Nixon Cleophas, *Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination*, Lexington Books, 2016

- Rachel E. Harding, "You Got a Right to the Tree of Life: African American Spirituals and Religions of the Diaspora," in *Crosscurrents*, vol 57, no 2, Summer 2007
- Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel E. Harding, "Hospitality Haints and Healing: A Southern African American Meaning of Religion," in Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, NYU Press 2006
- Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion in the United States," in Fulop and Raboteau, *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, Routledge, 1997
- Charles H. Long, "Passage and Prayer: The Origin of Religion in the Atlantic World," in Quinton Dixie and Cornel West, *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, Beacon Press, 1999
- Claudine Michel, "Vodou in Haiti: Way of Life and Mode of Survival," in Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, ed. *Invisible Powers: Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture*, Palgrave, 2006
- Joseph Murphy, "Cuban and Cuban American Santeria," in *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*, Beacon Press, 1995
- Elizabeth Perez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*, New York University, 2016 (chapter 5)
- Valdina Pinto, "Candomblé Cosmology and Environmental Education," lecture given at the Iliff School of Theology in 2002

**Videos and Films** (note: You should arrange to access the first two films via an online streaming service such as Netflix or Amazon. We will watch *Cidade das Mulheres* together in class in October.)

- *Daughters of the Dust*
- *Sacred Journeys: Osun-Osogbo*
- *Cidade das Mulheres (City of Women)*

#### **Recommended additional readings (not required)**

- George Brandon, *The Dead Sell Memories: Santeria from Africa to the New World*
- Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Vodou Gods of Haiti*
- Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel E. Harding, *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering*
- Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*
- John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*
- Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*
- Jacob Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*
- Arisika Razak, "Her Blue Body: A Pagan Reading of Alice Walker's Womanism," *Feminist Theology*, vol 18(1):92-116
- Dianne Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*

## Course Schedule

### **Week One. Week of September 9**

#### ***Class Introductions***

- Assignments:
  - Read Syllabus, Dr. Harding's Introductory Note and "What Is the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora"
  - Familiarize yourself with the Canvas site
  - Introduce yourself on the DISCUSSION board for this week

### **Week Two. Week of September 16**

#### ***What are Afro-Atlantic Religions?***

- Assignments:
  - View "Afro-Atlantic Religions: An Introduction" powerpoint presentation
  - Read Dr. Harding's lecture, "What Are Afro-Atlantic Religions?"
  - Respond to discussion questions

### **Week Three. Week of September 23**

#### ***Our Theoretical Approach***

- Assignments:
  - Read Dr. Harding's commentary
  - Read C. Long, "Passage and Prayer: The Origin of Religion in the Atlantic World"
  - Read C. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion in the United States"
  - Respond to discussion questions
  - DISCUSSION STARTERS begin this week

### **Week Four. Week of September 30**

#### ***African American Indigeneity and Southern Black Religion***

- Assignments:
  - Read Dr. Harding's commentary
  - Read, Freeney Harding and Harding, "Hospitality Haints and Healing: A Southern African American Meaning of Religion"
  - Watch, *Daughters of the Dust* (film)
  - Respond to discussion questions

### **Week Five. Week of October 7**



### *Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*

This week we have two in-class sessions at Iliff.

October 10 from 1 to 5pm

October 11 from 8am to 12pm

- Assignments:
  - Read, Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*
  - Read, Pinto, “Candomblé Cosmology and Environmental Education”
  - In class: Watch, *Cidade das Mulheres* (film)
  - In class: Skype session with Artist Daniel Minter
  - Respond to discussion questions

### **Week Six. Week of October 14**

#### *Afro-Cuban Lucumi/Santeria/Regla Ocha*

- Assignments:
  - Read, Perez, “Tasting Affliction,” from *Religion in the Kitchen*,
  - Read, Murphy, “Cuban and Cuban American Santeria” from *Working the Spirit*
  - Additional reading or video TBA
  - Respond to discussion questions

### **Week Seven. Week of October 21**

#### *Ifá/Yoruba Religion in the USA*

- Assignments:
  - Read, Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*
  - Watch, *Sacred Journeys: Osun Osogbo* (film)
  - Respond to discussion questions

### **Week Eight. Week of October 28**

#### *Haitian Vodou*

- Assignments:
  - Read, Michel, “Vodou in Haiti: Way of Life and Mode of Survival”
  - Read, Cleophas, “Haitian Vodou: The Ethic of Sin and the Praxis of Liberation”

- Read, Felima, “The Economics of Vodou: Haitian Women, Entrepreneurship and Agency”
- Watch, *Believer* segment w Reza Azlan (link provided in Canvas)
- Watch, interview w houngan Max Beauvoir (link provided in Canvas)
- Respond to discussion questions

#### **Week Nine. Week of November 4**

##### ***African American Christianity as Diasporic Religion***

- Assignments:
  - Read, Harding, *You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*
  - Read, Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
  - Respond to discussion questions

#### **Week Ten. Week of November 11**

##### ***Finals Week***

- Assignments:
  - Final exam (or, alternatively, submit a creative final project)

This syllabus may be modified at any time at the discretion of the professor.

*In the spirit of remembering, healing and peace, I pay respect to the original Ute, Arapaho and Cheyenne owners – both past and present – of the land on which the Iliff School of Theology stands. And to the African Indigenous people, and their descendants, whose forced labor created the foundations of wealth of this country. May these ancestors bless our work in this class.*