THEO 322 Black Theology

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PURPOSE & STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

This aim of this course is to explore the major issues and topics that define Black Theology. By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1) Define black theology and why black theologians insist “liberation” is the content of Christian theology.
2) Compare and contrast the ways black theologians have proclaimed and interpreted the Black Christ.
3) Describe and be moderately familiar with at least two (non-Christian) faith traditions in black communities.
4) Give examples of new strategies for interpreting sacred texts.
5) Analyze and access the distinctive ways gender and sexuality function within black communities.
6) Identify the theological significance of new intellectual currents, trends and movements in black communities.

CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION: The success of this course will depend on the quality of dialogue between its participants. It is imperative to critically read and reflect on the assigned readings, complete assignments on time, as well as be prepared for each class. In order to facilitate productive discussion and engagement of course materials, students will be asked to relate their questions and comments to the assigned readings.

You are allowed 2 unexcused absences without penalty for the entire semester (one week). Each absence after 2 will result a reduction of your final grade. For example, a final letter grade of B would be reduced to a B-. Four or more absences may result in failure. Absences are excused only with provision of doctor’s or a Xavier administrator’s note. I occasionally accept emailed excuses but no more than 2.

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of class. Late arrivals should see the professor after class. Three late arrivals will count as an absence.

Questions I will ask myself in evaluating your class preparation and participation:

1. Does your participation in discussion consistently reflect a careful and critical reading of all the assigned readings for the session?
2. Do you show an ability to actively listen, compare differing perspectives accurately, fairly, respectfully? A willingness to integrate multiple perspectives into a (more or less) coherent whole?
3. Are you having any fun?
Class Environment: A “hermeneutic of generosity”

At its best, theological conversation opens up questions of a personal, political, and sometimes sensitive or controversial nature. The dialogue model itself is designed to facilitate open-ended discussion and critical questioning of assumed positions or complacent beliefs. This kind of personal engagement necessitates that we do our best to create ample space for diverse and conflicting points of view, even struggle and growth within ourselves. In short, at its best the seminar should cultivate an atmosphere of intellectual openness, trust, and mutual respect, especially where we may disagree with another’s point of view.

A good Ignatian rule of thumb, when feeling challenged or uncomfortable with another’s position, is to listen carefully, ask follow-up questions for clarity and understanding, and try to consider the idea (above all the person advancing it) through the best possible lens, or what we might call a “hermeneutic of generosity.” At the end of the day, surely we will all depend on the same wellspring of mercy and understanding for our painfully limited, obscure, and imperfect view of things.

Finally, a climate of openness and trust implies a rule of confidentiality to the degree experiences of a personal or sensitive nature may be shared during seminar discussions.

No cell phones during class. Laptops are to be used only for class purposes.

Students must check their XAVIER email regularly
Important notifications in cases of emergency and updates about course material, assignments, etc. will be sent via Xavier, not private, email. Make sure you direct all Canvas notifications to your Xavier email address.

**GROUP PRESENTATIONS:** Each student will be asked to sign up for an in-class presentation. These presentations are to be 30 minutes long and should be informative and creative. The informative requirement of the presentation is satisfied by providing a cogent exposition of the assigned readings and highlighting the author(s) main arguments and concerns. The creative element is accomplished by selecting a contemporary social issue and placing it in dialogue with the major theme of the week. This should be done with the intent of making the academic issues “come alive” for your classmates. In addition, each group must provide discussion questions for the class based on the readings.

**WEEKLY ACADEMIC REFLECTION:** You will be required to type a 1 page single-spaced response to the readings on designated weeks. Your response should restate the author’s main idea in your own words and answer the weekly reflection question. It is recommended that you purchase a separate notebook for note taking when you do homework assignments. Write down your responses to the readings and formulate questions to bring to class. You will not receive a letter grade on these responses. Instead you will receive a credit (CR=B), (CR+=B+), (CR- =B-), no credit (NC=F) or a credit with distinction (CD=A, CD- =A-).

**MIDTERM PAPER:** OCTOBER 6

**FINAL PAPER:** YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO SUBMIT A 10-12 PAGE PAPER AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER.

**EVALUATION:**

10% = Group Presentations and class preparation and participation (one grade)  
30% = Weekly Reflections  
20% = Midterm Paper, Oct 6  
40% = Final Paper
LATE POLICY ON PAPERS: Please submit papers on time. Late papers are penalized ½ grade per day. I rarely accept electronic copies of papers. Hard copies only!

THE GRADING POLICY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY:
Grades indicate a professor’s assessment of a student’s academic performance and not a student’s effort. In accordance with University policy, letter grades in undergraduate theology courses mean the following:
A= Exceptional academic performance (that is, uncommonly high academic achievement, which demonstrates mastery of subject matter, uncommon skills in critical analysis, effective communication, and imagination).
B= Good academic performance (that is, high quality academic achievement, which demonstrates competency in the discipline above the average or standard).
C= Satisfactory academic performance (that is, academic achievement that meets an average or standard level of competency in the discipline).
D= Minimal academic performance, sufficient to pass.
F= Failure

If a course uses number grades, an 8 point scale determines the final letter grade for the course:
A= 92-100; B= 84-91; C= 76-83; D= 68-75; F= 67 or below.

The grading of objective and essay tests: Grades reflect the accuracy, coherence, clarity, and completeness of answers and essays.

The grading of class participation:
A= The student is consistently well prepared for class, actively listens, and contributes thought-provoking insights to class discussions.
B= The student is prepared for class and demonstrates thoughtful engagement with the material.
C= The student is inconsistently prepared for class and is infrequently engaged with the material.
D= The student is minimally prepared for class and shows a lack of interest in the course material.
F= The student shows lack of interest in the course, is frequently late or absent, and regularly demonstrates a lack of commitment to the class.

For all assignments with a letter grade, the final grade will be determined by converting all letter grades to grade point numbers [A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1], assigning the proper weight to each component of the final grade (e.g. an A for class participation and group presentation counts as 4 points; an A on the final exam counts as 8 points), and figuring a grade point number for the course. GP scores of 3.6-4.0 yield an A for the course; 2.6-3.4 yield a B; 1.6-2.4 yield a C; 1.0-1.4 yield a D; 0-0.9 yield an F. Borderline cases (3.5, 2.5, 1.5) will be decided by the instructor.

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a documented disability, or if you have emergency medical information to share, please ask to meet with me, if possible during office hours.

REQUIRED TEXTS:
James H. Cone, For My People, (1984). Check online if not in bookstore

COURSE SCHEDULE (Tentative)

I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Tuesday, August 25 Introduction and Overview

Thursday, August 27 #BlackLivesMatters (readings on canvas)
II. **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND ORIGINS OF BLACK THEOLOGY**

**Tuesday, September 1**
Documentary “This Far By Faith”

**Thursday, September 3**
Gayraud Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism “African Beginning” (canvas)
Harvey Sindima, Drums of Redemption, “Early African Church” (canvas)

III. **WHAT IS BLACK THEOLOGY?**

**Tuesday, September 8**
James Cone, *For My People*, Introduction and Chapter 1 on “The Origins of Black Theology”
Anthony Pinn “Introduction” from *The Ties that Bind* (canvas)

**Thursday, September 10**
“Christian Theology, Scripture and God’s Liberating Activity,” James Cone pp.1-16 (canvas)
“Christian Faith and Political Praxis,” James Cone pp. 35-49 (canvas)
James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Preface, Introduction (canvas)

IV. **CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER**

**Tuesday, September 15**
“Christianity and Black Power,” James Cone, pp. 3-12 (canvas) “Black Theology and Black Liberation” James Cone pp. 106-113 (canvas)

**Thursday, September 17**
James Cone, *For My People*, Chapter 2 “Black Theology as an Attack on White Religion” pp.31-52; Chapter 3 “Black Theology as Liberation Theology” pp.53-77

*Class Presentation*

**Reflection Question:** While white theologians regarded Black Power as the antithesis of Christianity, Black theologians claimed that Black Power was the gospel of Jesus Christ to twentieth-century America. Explain why. How is Black Theology conceived as a theology of liberation?

V. **BLACK THEOLOGY AND WHITE THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES**

**Tuesday, September 22**
“Theology’s great sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy”, James Cone (canvas)
“The Crisis of Race in the New Millennium” Jim Perkinson(canvas)

**Thursday, September 24**
“White Posture” Jim Perkinson (canvas)
“Black Theology and the White Church in the Third Millennium” Jim Perkinson (canvas)

*Class Presentation*

**Reflection Question:** What are the consequences of white theologians ignoring black suffering according to James Cone? How does Perkinson define the crisis of race and white posturing in the new millennium?
VII. The Black Christ

Historical Perspective

Tuesday, September 29
Edward Blum and Paul Harvey, The Coloring of Christ: The Son of God and the Sage of Race in America, Chapter 8 and Chapter 9

Thursday, October 1
We will examine 3 different theological perspectives on the Black Christ.
1. James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation chapter 1, “The Content of Theology” pp.1-20; Chapter 6, “Jesus Christ in Black Theology” pp.110-128
*Class Presentation

Tuesday, October 6
3. Albert Cleage (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman), Black Theology: A Documentary History, v1 “Introduction”, pp.3-9; (canvas articles by Cleage)

Midterm Paper Due: Highlight significant aspects of the debate over Christ’s race according to Blum and Harvey. From the standpoint of Black theologians, why is it important to state that Jesus Christ is Black? How do James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts and Albert Cleage differ in their understanding of the meaning of Blackness in reference to Jesus Christ? (4-5 pages)

Thursday, October 8
NO CLASS—Fall Break

VII. Black Theology and The Black Church

Tuesday, October 13
For My People, Chapter 5, “Black Theology and The Black Church,” pp. 99-121

Thursday, October 15
Raphael Warnock, The Divided Mind of the Black Church, Chapter 1 and Chapter 3
*Class Presentation

Reflection Question: 1) Why do Black theologians regard Black theology as the prophetic voice of the Black church? Or, 2) Discuss how “being saved” (sanctification) is united with being “liberated” (liberation) in the Black religious tradition.

VIII. Black Theology and its Critics

Tuesday, October 20
Victor Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness, Intro and Chapter 3

Thursday, October 22
Victor Anderson, Beyond Ontological Blackness, Chapter 4
Class Presentation

**Reflection question**: How does Anderson critique the category of “blackness” in black theology? What alternative does he propose?

**IX. Contemporary Social Movement: Black Lives Matter**

**Tuesday, October 27** TBA

**Thursday, October 29** TBA

**Reflection Question**

**Class Presentation**

**X. Gendering Blackness: Womanist Theology**

**Tuesday, November 3** Delores Williams, “Black Theology and Womanist Theology” in The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology edited by Dwight Hopkins, pp. 58-72 (overview)

Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Preface, Intro

**Thursday, November 5** Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, chapter 1 and chapters 6. (e-reserve)

**Reflection Question**: Discuss the significance of Hagar to black women’s experience according to Williams? What is Williams’ critique of the Cross and why does she advocate the ministerial vision of Jesus?

**Class Presentation**

**XI. Sexuality and Black Theology**

**Tuesday, November 10** Patrick Cheng, *An Introduction to Queer Theology: Radical Love*, Chapter 1 and 2

**Thursday, November 12** Kelly Brown-Douglas, *Sexuality and The Black Church*, Chapters 2 and 4 (e-reserve)

*Class Presentation*

**Tuesday, November 17** Kelly Brown-Douglas, *Sexuality and The Black Church*, Chapter 5

**Reflection Question**: Discuss Queer Theology and its genealogy. Or describe the emergence of homophobia in the Black community. What strategies does Kelly Brown-Douglas suggest to resist homophobia?

**XII. Is Black Theology exclusively Christian? An Inquiry into Religious Pluralism**

**Thursday, November 19** Anthony Pinn, *Ashe! Santeria, Orisha-Voodoo, and Oyotunji African Village*” *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 56-103 (e-reserve)
XII. HIP HOP CULTURE AND BLACK THEOLOGY

The Origins of Hip Hop

Tuesday, December 1  
Michael Eric Dyson, “The Culture of Hip Hop” (401-410) in *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*

Matt Miller, *Rap’s Dirty South: From Subculture to Popular Culture* (270-293) in *That’s The Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*

Thursday, December 3  
Errol Henderson, Black Nationalism and Rap Music

Davarian Baldwin, *Black Empires and White Desires the Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop* (229-246) in *That’s The Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*

Reflection Question: Give an account of the origins of Hip Hop in the North and South?

Class Presentation

Invoking God in Hip Hop Culture

Tuesday, December 8  
Ebony Utley: Introduction: Understanding the Gangsta’s God (1-9)
Ebony Utley, Chapter 3: The Jesus Piece (49-67)

Thursday, December 10  
Ebony Utley, Chapter 5: Godly Power (93-109)
Ebony Utley, Chapter 6: The Rap on Rap and Religion (111-136)

Class Presentation

Tuesday, December 17  
FINAL EXAM 10:30-12:20pm