Institutional Context and Teaching Approach

Mississippi State University is a land-grant university with just over 20,000 students. Those of us in the humanities and social sciences work to broaden and build on the university’s science-oriented focus and strengths.

Mississippi State’s undergraduates arrive with widely varied levels of preparation. Our students come primarily from Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Louisiana. Overall, the student population is about 70% white, over 20% African American, and nearly 10% international. Forty percent of our students arrive as transfers from the state’s community colleges. We also have a large proportion of ROTC students and veterans. The diversity of age, experience, and ethnicity makes for lively conversation and surprisingly varied perspectives, once students feel encouraged to speak up in class.

African American Religious History is a new upper-level course in the History Department, where I also teach American religious history, twentieth century United States history, and historical methods. The course is cross-listed with African American Studies. Upper-level courses have a maximum enrollment of thirty students and meet twice weekly in blocks of one hour and fifteen minutes. There are no prerequisites.

This course follows the same format as my existing American Religious History course. I lecture briefly as necessary to clarify themes and historical moments, but I stress conversation more than coverage. Students work frequently in groups or pairs to think through material they have read or to work their way through primary source readings in class. Most weeks, class includes an audio or video component, brief enough to view or hear and then discuss together alongside assigned readings.

The course revolves around the assigned readings: scholarly books and articles, primary documents, a memoir, some fiction, and short online essays that provide historical perspective on contemporary issues. I have found memoir and fiction to be particularly effective at grabbing students’ attention and exercising their empathetic abilities. We talk at some length about different types of texts and media—how historians build on primary sources, and how they follow different rules from writers of memoir and fiction as they craft narratives about the same events. On occasion, we read or examine several textual or material primary sources, a secondary source, a work of fiction, and then view a documentary or hear a song, all based on the same moment or event. We then talk about the points of contact and divergence among those sources. I find this intense engagement with widely varied materials to be an effective way to teach both the distinctions among types of sources and the methods of historical interpretation.

The course assignments build on the skills students develop in weekly conversations. Rather than exams, I assign weekly in-class reading responses, which also serve as
conversation openers. Students complete three short papers, which I scaffold to prepare students for the final research paper assignment, on a topic of their choice.

**HISTORY 4990**

**African American Religious History**

Dr. Alison Collis Greene

**Required Books**


**Articles, Essays, and Short Stories**

Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, "From Light to White: The Place and Race of Jesus in Antebellum America," *Historically Speaking* 13, no. 4 (September 2012).
Heather Ann Thompson, "Shame of the Nation: The Fight to Keep Children Locked Up for Life," *Huffington Post* (online), October 6, 2014
Lerone A. Martin, "For Michael Brown, Justice is Not a Gift. It's a Right. *Religion and Politics* (online), September 9, 2014.
Course Goals

This course provides an introduction to African American religious history from the colonial period to the present. The course textbook provides a broad overview of African American religious history, which provides a common base of knowledge for our discussions. The additional course readings, lectures, documentary viewings, and class discussion provide an opportunity to examine particular moments or movements in more depth. By the end of the course, students should have both a general knowledge of African American religious history and a more comprehensive knowledge of a few particularly rich moments and themes in that history.

Good historians are good analytical thinkers and good writers. This course emphasizes these two interrelated skills, which are essential not only for historians but also for college graduates and professionals in any field. Writing is the best way to develop and demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of a particular topic and to hone analytical skills. Thus, this course will focus on building those skills through brief in-class writing activities, three short analytical essays, and a longer research essay.

Course Expectations

Success in this course requires regular attendance, active participation, and timely completion of readings and written assignments.

*Attendance and participation:* This course meets twice weekly, with meetings devoted to a combination of interactive discussion, group work with texts, mini-lectures, and analysis of film and audio clips. Students who complete the weekly course readings will be prepared to engage in class activities and earn high marks in participation. Because students’ regular attendance and active participation is essential to the success of the course, participation and in-class reading responses together comprise 30% of the course grade. Periodically, class discussions will draw from or conclude with brief in-class written assignments, which are included in the course participation grade. Students who miss more than two class meetings or who come to class unprepared to discuss the week’s readings do so at the expense of the final grade.

*In-class reading responses:* To encourage full participation, completion of course readings, and punctual arrival, Monday meetings begin with a short, open-ended question drawn from the assigned readings. Tardy or absent students forfeit the opportunity to complete the day’s reading response. Students will complete all reading responses in a blue book.

*A note on laptops and other devices:* This class requires minimal note-taking, and laptops are unnecessary. Please respect our brief time together each week and keep your phones and other electronic devices on vibrate and out of reach.

Graded Assignments
In addition to regular participation and reading responses, students will complete three 500-750-word papers (2-3 pages) and one 2000-2500 word research paper (8-10 pages). The first paper invites students to recount their own intellectual history, with an emphasis on influential mentors and books. The next two papers engage questions drawn from assigned course readings and primary sources. Essay 2, a primary source essay, asks students to use the Fett monograph to analyze one of three primary sources on the history of slave religion and traditions. Essay 3, a cultural analysis, requires that students draw on a relevant course reading of their choice to analyze a film, work of fiction, or work of art from the period between the Civil War and World War II.

I will post more detailed instructions and guidelines on Blackboard two weeks before each paper’s due date, and we will also discuss each assignment in class. The final paper is a longer research paper that requires students to integrate primary and secondary materials into a study of a particular event, moment, or movement in African American religious history. Students will submit all papers online through turnitin.com and in hard copy at the start of class on the due date. Timely completion of assignments is mandatory. Each day an assignment is late results in an automatic deduction of half a letter grade.

Grading Scale
Participation and in-class assignments twice weekly 15%
Weekly reading responses weekly 15%
Intellectual autobiography Week 2 10%
Primary source essay Week 6 15%
Cultural analysis essay Week 10 15%
Research essay proposal & bibliography Week 13 10%
Research essay Week 15 20%
A: 90-100 B: 80-89.9 C: 70-79.9 D: 60-69.9 F: 59.9 & below

Honor Code
Mississippi State University has an approved Honor Code that applies to all students. It reads: "As a Mississippi State University student I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do."

Upon accepting admission to Mississippi State University, a student immediately assumes a commitment to uphold the Honor Code, to accept responsibility for learning, and to follow the philosophy and rules of the Honor Code. Students will be required to state their commitment on examinations, research papers, and other academic work. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the MSU community from the requirements or the processes of the Honor Code. For additional information please visit: www.honorcode.msstate.edu

Special Needs and Accommodations
Any student with a learning challenge or other special needs should provide appropriate verification from Student Support Services detailing any special accommodations required.

Course Schedule
Complete each week’s required reading in time for that Monday’s class meeting.

**WEEK 1:** Why Talk about the Past (and Who Gets to Tell the Stories)?: African American Religious History from Jamestown to Ferguson  
Readings: Trouillot, “The Power in the Story”  
Laurie Maffly-Kipp, “The Hope of Ferguson”

**WEEK 2:** Africans Arrive in the Americas  
Readings:  
Curtis, *Muslims in America*, Preface and Chapter 1  
Harvey, *Through the Storm*, Introduction and Chapters 1-2  
AARH I.1. Olaudah Equiano, Traditional Ibo Religion and Culture  
AARH I.2. Bryan Edwards, African Religions in Colonial Jamaica  
Due: Essay 1: Intellectual Autobiography

**WEEK 3:** Religious Adaptation in the Early Republic and Antebellum America  
Readings:  
AARH II.7 Peter Randolph, Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible  
AARH II.9. Henry Bibb, Conjuration and Witchcraft

**WEEK 4:** The Varieties of African Religions in Antebellum America  
Readings:  
Fett, *Working Cures*, Part II (Chapters 5-7) and Conclusion  
AARH II.8 Sister Kelly, “Proud of that ‘Ole Time’ Religion”  
AARH III.16 Jarena Lee, “A Female Preacher among the African Methodists”

**WEEK 5:** Protestant Images of Jesus from Slavery to Emancipation  
Readings:  
Blum and Harvey, “From Light to White”  
Harvey, *Through the Storm*, Chapter 3  
AARH II.12. Frederick Douglass, “Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ”  
AARH II.18, David Walker, “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Preachers of Religion”

**WEEK 6:** Gender and Christianity in the Nadir and Beyond  
**FILM SCREENING: Daughters of the Dust**  
Readings:  
Weisenfeld, “My Story Begins Before I Was Born”  
Higginbotham, “The Feminist Theology of the Black Baptist Church”  
AARH IV.29, Amanda Smith, “The Travail of a Female Colored Evangelist”  
Due: Essay 2: Primary Source Analysis [Fett and your selected source]

**WEEK 7:** “The Black Church” and Black Churches from WWI to WWII  
Readings:  
Wright, “Fire and Cloud”  
Harvey, *Through the Storm*, Chapter 5  
Curtis, *Muslims in America*, Chapter 2  
AARH VI.47 Marcus Garvey, Garvey Tells His Own Story
WEEK 8: Memoir and Childhood in the Great Depression
Readings: James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

WEEK 9: Midcentury Transformations in Black Religion and Culture
Readings: Cressler, “Black Catholic Conversion and the Burden of Black Religion”
Wald, “From Spiritual to Swing”
Curtis, *Muslims in America*, Chapter 3
AARH VI.50 Father Divine, “The Realness of God to you-wards”

WEEK 10: Christianity, Sex, and the Early Civil Rights Movement
Readings: Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown”
Retzloff, “Seer or Queer”
Due: Essay 3: Cultural Analysis Essay

WEEK 11: Religion, Irreligion, and Civil Rights
DOCUMENTARY SCREENING: Excerpts from *Eyes on the Prize*
Harvey, *Through the Storm*, Chapter 6
AARH VII.54, Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”

WEEK 12: From Black Liberals to Black Power
Readings: Cone, “Martin and Malcolm”
Curtis, *Muslims in America*, Chapter 4
AARH VI.52, Wallace D. Muhammad, “Self-Government in the New World”
AARH VII.57, National Conference of Black Churchmen: Black Power and Black Theology

WEEK 13: Christianity, Capitalism, and Post-Blackness
Harvey, *Through the Storm*, Epilogue
Due: Final Essay Proposal and Bibliography

WEEK 14: Old Fears, the New Jim Crow, and Black Freedom in the 21st Century
Thompson, “How Prisons Change the Balance of Power in America”
Thompson, “Shame of the Nation”
Martin, “For Michael Brown, Justice is Not a Gift. It’s a Right”

WEEK 15: Course Conclusion: Why Talk about the Past—and How Will You Tell the Stories?
Due: Final essay