

Race and Political Theology
Spring 2011 // Emory University

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Overview:

There has recently been a groundswell of interest in political theology in the humanities. Scholars in literature, political theory, religious studies, and anthropology have considered, and contested, Carl Schmitt's claim that "all significant political concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." From a different direction, some theologians have asked what the political implications might be when a secular *logos* is replaced by a Christian *logos* – not just a transfer or substitution of concepts, but an all encompassing shift from one lived and embodied narrative to another. The interest in theology from both the secular and the theological academy challenges us to reconsider how we approach history, literature, and culture.

This course explores these issues by focusing on the topic of race. Are recent discussions of political theology, which largely ignore race, superfluous because writings about race have always blended the political and the theological? When we set aside secular assumptions, how do we read historical and literary texts that deal with race differently? Do racial texts become performances of Christian *logos*, or are there alternative ways of understanding their theopolitical significance?

After introducing key concepts and themes in the first three weeks, we will turn to an investigation of debates arising from historical texts. In the final half of the class we will perform our own political theological readings of literary texts, making use of the concepts, themes, and debates earlier discussed. While many of the texts we will read focus on black experience, the questions they address concern race more generally. In a sense, black experience here functions as a case study in race and political theology.

Objectives:

- To become familiar with key conversations about race and political theology
- To become familiar with political theological readings, and to become able to perform political theological readings
- To become familiar with criticism of secularism – of secular assumptions embedded in historical and literary texts

Assignments and Grading:

- 15%: Weekly reading responses, approximately 2pp, to be distributed to classmates via e-mail before class
- 10%: Beginning the discussion of one week's readings
- 75%: Final 20pp paper

Required Texts:

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Norton, 1996)
- Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford, 2004)
- Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard, 1994)
- Eddie Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago, 2000)
- Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale, 2010)
- Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (Harper Perennial, 2008)
- James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Dial, 2000)
- Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name – A Biomythography* (The Crossing Press, 1982)
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (Anchor, 2004)
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Vintage, 1995)

Schedule:

Week 1. Introduction

Week 2. Introductory Text and Readings

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
- Lewis Gordon, “Douglass as an Existentialist” in Gordon, *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (Routledge, 2000)
- J. Kameron Carter, “Race, Religion, and the Contradictions of Identity: A Theological Engagement with Douglass’s 1845 Narrative,” *Modern Theology* 21:1 (January 2005)

Week 3. Introductory Theories and Concepts

- Carl Schmitt, “Political Theology” in Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, 2006)
- Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33:1 (Fall 2006)
- Jared Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of ‘Race’,” *Early American Literature* 45:1 (2010)
- J. Kameron Carter, “Dramatizing Race: A Theological Account of Modernity” in Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, 2008)

Week 4. Historical Readings: Slavery

- Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South*, Chapters 1, 3, 5, 6
- Eddie Glaude, “Agency, Slavery, and African American Christianity” in Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue* (Chicago, 2007)
- J. Kameron Carter, “Historicizing Race: Albert J. Raboteau, Religious History, and the Ambiguities of Blackness” in Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, 2008)

Week 5. Historical Readings: Gender

- Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (chapters 1, 2, 5, 7)
- Saba Mahmood, “The Subject of Freedom” in Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2004)

Week 6. Historical Readings: Prophecy

- Eddie Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*
- George Shulman, “Prophecy as Vernacular Political Theology” in Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minnesota, 2008)

Week 7. Colonial Encounters between History and Literature

- Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (selections)

Week 8. Literary Readings: Wright

- Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, Part I

Week 9. Literary Readings: Baldwin

- James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Week 10. Literary Readings: Lorde

- Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name – A Biomythography*

Week 11. Literary Readings: Adichie

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*

Weeks 12 and 13. Literary Readings: Ellison

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*