

## The Problem of God

Theo 001-21  
Summer 2017  
MTRF 1-3  
Maquire 104

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**Course Description:** Drawing on theology, philosophy, literature, visual art and film, this course explores the ethical and political implications of the question W.E.B. Du Bois raised in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “How does it feel to be a problem?” The question underscores what Lewis R. Gordon calls the “hermeneutical turn” in Du Bois’s effort to explore and explain the meaning blackness in a society divided by the “color-line.” The course will explore the varying degrees to which Du Bois’s question shapes the epistemic terrain of twentieth-century African American religion and sheds light on contemporary existential concerns facing human flourishing. We will explore two fundamental questions throughout the course: *first, if the monotheistic God is just, merciful and loving, according to Afro-Christian teachings, how do we explain race and gender-based injustice, violence and social evil in 20<sup>th</sup> century America? Second, to what extent, if at all, do narratives and traditions shape and inform our imagination of the divine and, subsequently, those we define as the “problem” within our cultural milieu?* As we examine these questions in historical and theological contexts, we will extend our investigation into the human interiority and explore whether or not “interiority” serves as a site from which we might uncover new “truths” or resources for understanding how social evil can exist alongside a beneficent God. In Genesis 6:5, the writer reminds us of how God grappled with evil: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Although most postmodern philosophers reject this category called interiority, primarily because it assumes the self is unique and emerges from a single origin that can explain human behavior, I want to reclaim interiority as a possible resource for exploring how evil emerges in the world and how it informs what I call the “moral problem of blackness.”

**Course Requirements and Guidelines:** (1) Students are required to facilitate at least one classroom discussion, which will involve an oral presentation that offers a discussion (not a summary) of the assigned readings. This discussion will shed light on the major arguments at hand as well as offer critical insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the readings. (2) Classroom attendance and participation are mandatory. Three absences will result in a zero for the classroom participation grade. (3) Students will be given two in-class writing assignments (July 17<sup>th</sup> and July 31<sup>th</sup>). The exercises will provide an opportunity for students to offer an in-depth analysis of an assigned reading or readings and explore conceptual problems within the texts under examination. (4) Every Thursday at the beginning of class, students will submit a one-page reflection paper. This assignment will reflect on a major theme or argument that emerged in the assigned readings for the week. (5) Students will submit a “reflective essay” that will explore the major themes of the class in conversation with their primary epistemic resources. This assignment is due August 11<sup>th</sup>. (6) Students are expected in each class to participate in classroom debates and discussions. Indeed, this course is designed to stimulate rigorous reflection and debate, and at times classroom discussions may become contentious. In fact, students may be offended by so-called liberal, conservative, religious and/or secular opinions, values and ideas that emerge during our discussions. It is the goal of the instructor that students will bracket familiar epistemic terrain, if only momentarily, in order to weigh what is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. (7) Plagiarism will not be tolerated. If students borrow ideas and lift sentences without proper citation, they will receive an automatic F in the course. (8) The use of laptops, cellular/smart phones and electronic devices are prohibited during class unless approved by the instructor. (9)The instructor may modify the standards and requirements set forth in this syllabus at any given time in the semester.

**Grading Distribution:**

Classroom Participation: 20 percent

Essay Exercises: 40 percent

Final Reflection Exercise: 40 percent

## **Books for Purchase**

Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*

W. E. B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*

September

3 Introduction

## **I. The Moral Problem of Blackness and the Burden of Black Religion**

July

8 President Barack Obama's Charleston Nine Eulogy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RK7tYOvd0Hs>

11 W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Forethought," and "Of the Faith of the Fathers"

<http://www.bartleby.com/114/>

12 Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of the Coming of John"

## **II. Slave Religion**

13 Al Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pgs. 4-16, 44-74

17 In-class writing exercise

18 Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pgs. 96-104; 128-133; 143-150

19 Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pgs. 212-219; 290-318

20 Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic*, pgs. 1-9; chapter 1

24 Chireau, *Black Magic*, Chapters 2-3

25 Chireau, *Black Magic*, Chapters 4-5

26 Pinn, Anthony, "The Great Mahdi Has Come! Islam, Nation of Islam, and the Minneapolis Study Group" (handout)

27 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, Chapters 1-3

31 In-class writing exercise

August

1 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, Chapters 4-6

2 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

### **III. Repairing the Soul, Remembering the Ancestors**

3 Morrison, *Beloved*

7 Morrison, *Beloved*

8 Morrison, *Beloved*

9 Submit Draft of Final Reflection Paper

10 Student Presentations

11 Final paper is due at or before 11 pm.