REL 300 - BETWEEN DESPAIR AND HOPE

Spring 2012

Wednesdays
6:45 P.M. to 9:30 P.M.

Dr. Marcia C. Robinson
Professor

Office: 511 HL
Office Hours: 4:00PM to 5:00PM, Wednesdays, and by appointment
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Course Description

In this course, we will examine the way in which faith—in a religious and a broad sense—might be said to help individuals to navigate between sorrow, disillusionment, and death, on the one hand, and possibility, expectation, and life, on the other. This means that we will have to ask constantly what faith is. We will use African-American experience to focus our inquiry, but our readings will not focus exclusively on African Americans. Some of the thinkers, writers, and artists whom we will use include Søren Kierkegaard, Cornel West, Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, W. E. B. DuBois, Charles H. Long, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Zora Neale Hurston, Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden, Henrik Ibsen, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Howard Thurman.

Course Goals

The purpose or goal of this course is to help students to think broadly, specifically, and critically about the significance and the meaning of religion for human flourishing. In order to do this, students will be encouraged to view religion and its many facets in existential terms. And as African-American existence and religious experience are the primary, though not exclusive, means by which we are focusing this exercise, students will also be encouraged to see African-American religious experience in existential rather than simply Afro-Protestantism terms (or even the terms of other traditions of faith).

Required readings

I. Please purchase the following texts at the SU Bookstore. Note that in regard to new books, the Bookstore may very well have later editions of these texts than the versions listed here.
They, however, should be issued by the same publishers, or should be reprints of these books.


Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperPerennial/Modern Classics, 2006);


Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986);

Gordon Marino, ed., *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004);

Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Plume, New American Library 1987);

Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975);

______________, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981); and

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2008). (I will be using Richard Wright, *Early Works: Lawd Today!, Uncle Tom’s Children, Native Son* (New York: Library of America, 1991). So if you have this version already, or decide to get it, this is fine.)

II. We will read selections from the following materials, which will be available as electronic documents on Blackboard (under “Content”):


Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Chs. 1 (pp. 4-5), 4-5.


**Sound Recordings on Library Reserve**

Where possible, selected sound recordings of Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Billie Holiday may be placed on two-hour reserve in Bird and/or MLK Libraries or on Blackboard.

**Useful Histories for Context**

If you want a helpful historical narrative in order to orient the readings of this course in the American context, you might check out the following text:


I have asked the SU Bookstore to order one or two copies so that you can review it. If your funds are tight, but you would like to own it, you can find limited copies at amazon.com’s marketplace for considerably less. For descriptive information and a table of contents, go to Oxford University Press’ webpage, and type the book title into the search engine.

The other work that is useful for historical context for much of the reading in this course is DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folks*. You might take a look particularly at Chapters II-IX, as well as the ones that we will focus on, namely, Chapters I, X-XIV.
Course Requirements and Grading

This is an upper-level, undergraduate reading seminar. There are no exams or term papers. Reading, class discussion, and short writing assignments are the core of our work together. Therefore, it is essential that students come to class prepared. Since we will be meeting only once a week, weekly reading assignments are planned to cover roughly two ordinary 80-minute class sessions. Students are required to do the weekly reading and to bring their books or readings to every class. Students are also required to participate in class discussion. Class discussion will be facilitated both by readings and by short writing assignments aimed at helping students to focus their thoughts. Participation in class discussion will account for one half of a student’s grade. The short writing assignments will account for the other half of a student’s grade. The final grade will be an average of the two.

Class participation is comprised of reading assignments and participation in informal class discussion. A student’s preparedness for class and regular participation in class discussion will be noted over the course of the semester. Being prepared not only means reading all course materials assigned for the day and formulating some clear, thoughtful ideas about the readings. It also means bringing one’s books or copies of online materials to class so that these materials might be referenced. If students wish to use electronic documents in class, they are required to bring their own computer. A letter grade will be assessed for class participation at mid-term and at the end of the term based upon the quality of a student’s verbal participation—insightfulness, preparedness, and clarity.

Please note that failure to attend the course regularly and timely can hurt a student’s class participation grade. Therefore, MAKE SURE THAT YOU ATTEND REGULARLY AND TIMELY. Irregular attendance, including regular tardiness, will diminish your overall class participation grade in the following manner:

- One absence = No deductions.
- Two to Three absences = 5 points each.
- Each absence thereafter = 10 points per instance.
- Regular tardiness = 10 points per instance.

These penalties will be enforced. However, if you are having problems or have special issues, do not hesitate to inform me immediately.

As this is a seminar, students are also required to prepare short, weekly papers in order to facilitate focused class discussion. In preparing these papers, students should pick a passage or small group of passages that they find interesting in the required readings. This includes music. Students should quote this passage or these passages at the top of the first page of their papers. They should then type no more than two pages of double-spaced commentary on their chosen passage(s). In doing so, students should identify and briefly analyze an issue regarding despair, faith, and/or hope that their chosen passage(s) raise(s), and be ready to discuss it in class. Students should keep copies of their papers for themselves, and be ready to turn in their papers at the end of each class session.
This includes any request of typed notes, since students will sometimes be asked to make notes rather than write a short commentary.

These short writing assignments will not be graded individually. Rather, they will be graded collectively at mid-term (before or just after Spring Break) and at the end of the course. Typically I will provide feedback on the first papers so that students will know if they are doing what is expected. Both the mid-term and final set of short papers will be worth up to 100 points per set. The final short papers grade will be an average of the grades for the two sets of short papers.

Grade Scale

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Fractions of points will be rounded to the nearest whole point only at my discretion, and only in regard to the final grade.

Expectations and Course Policies

Attendance: Students are expected to attend each class session regularly and timely. Students are not fully present unless they bring all required reading material for the day to class, along with any assigned writing.

Preparation: Students are expected to be prepared for each class and to submit all assignments when due. Tardy work will not be accepted. Students should also bring all required reading material for the day to class as well. One is not fully prepared without these materials.

Respect: Students are expected to be attentive and courteous to me and each other. This means no talking while others are talking; no entering and exiting while class is in session (unless there is an emergency or this is part of the structure of a presentation); no cell-phone calls; no text messaging, sending or writing e-mails,
or surfing the web; no reading newspapers during class; no chewing gum or eating; no putting on makeup or combing one’s hair; and so forth.

Problems: If you have problems with the assignments or anything else that might affect your performance, please contact me immediately. Email is best, but also call the main office of the Dept. of Religion at (315) 443-3861, and leave a message with one of the secretaries.

University Policies

Academic Integrity:

The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. For more information and the complete policy, see: http://academicintegrity.syr.edu

Disability-Related Accommodations:

Syracuse University and I are committed to your success and to supporting Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This means that in general no individual who is otherwise qualified shall be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity, solely by reason of having a disability. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services(ODS), http://disabilityservices.syr.edu, located in Room 309 of 804 University Avenue, or call (315) 443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue students with documented disabilities Accommodation Authorization Letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.

Religious Observances:

Syracuse University’s religious observances policy—found at http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp ben/religious_observance.htm—recognizes the diversity of faiths represented among the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their tradition. Under the policy, students are provided an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance provided they notify their instructors before the end of the second week of classes. For fall and
Please note that all readings and assignments are contingent upon how fast we move together as a group. Therefore, readings and assignments may be adjusted as needed. Any adjustments will typically be made in consultation with the class and announced in class. Major adjustments will be posted on Blackboard and/or distributed.

### Tentative Schedule of Discussions & Assignments

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<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>Wed., 1/18</td>
<td>Introductions. We will begin with basic introductions and with an introduction to the course. Students will then be allowed to spend the rest of the class session reading several short selections for the next session, namely, a selection from Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo’s “Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr,” in Gordon Marino’s <em>Basic Writings of Existentialism</em>, and three very short selections from Howard Thurman’s <em>The Inward Journey</em> on Blackboard, entitled, “The Night View of the World,” “Meaning is Inherent in Life,” and “Belief and Faith” (in this order). On completing the readings, jot down some notes that capture what you think each writer is saying about belief and unbelief, faith and doubt, despair and hope. Be sure to mark specific places in the texts.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Wed., 1/25</td>
<td>We will begin today’s class session discussing the short readings from Unamuno and Thurman. Please be prepared to discuss what you think both writers are saying about belief and unbelief, faith and doubt, despair and hope. To this end, review and type your notes for discussion so that you will be prepared to hand them in at the end of our discussion. We will spend about 30-45 minutes discussing these texts. Our second and central task of today is to begin establishing a framework for the course broadly and for this section of the course in particular by discussing the relationship between Cornel West and Søren Kierkegaard.</td>
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(SK). Later we will expand our developing framework to include W. E. B. DuBois, James Baldwin, and Charles Long. And even later, we will expand it to include Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins.

For today, please read “On My Intellectual Vocation,” George Yancy’s interview with Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” and “A Philosophical View of Easter” from the Cornel West Reader on Blackboard. Please also read the first 16pp. of my article, “Cornel West: Kierkegaard and the Construction of a Blues Philosophy,” from Jon Stewart’s Kierkegaard Research, on Blackboard.

3. Wed., 2/1

In today’s class, we will continue to set the framework for the course by reading the rest of my article on West and Kierkegaard (pp. 16-32) and by reading the selection from Kierkegaard’s Sickness Unto Death in the Marino anthology. Pick a passage of interest to you from the Kierkegaard selection on which to write your first short paper. Be sure your passage raises an issue about despair, faith, and/or hope that will allow you to reflect on and analyze SK’s treatment of it in some detail. In other words, pick a passage that you think is worthy of class time. Be sure to type your passage at the top of your paper. Include a brief citation. Then let the rest of the paper be your commentary on the passage. Review the basic instructions above for the form of this paper.

4. Wed., 2/8

Today’s class will focus entirely on Richard Wright’s Native Son. Please read the novel. Then pick a passage or set of passages of interest to you, and write a short paper that analyzes the novel’s treatment of despair, faith, and hope (if you think hope is a theme). In writing your paper, consider the framework that we have established thus far in reading West and my work on West and Kierkegaard.


Over the next two class sessions, our discussion of despair, faith, and hope will continue as we look at selected works by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, W. E. B. DuBois, and Charles H. Long. For 2/15, read James Baldwin’s “Many Thousands Gone” and “Notes of a Native Son” from Price of the Ticket on Blackboard, and write a short paper that takes into consideration Baldwin’s critique of Wright and insights on race in America in light of his own experiences. In preparing your paper on Baldwin and Wright, please also read the short selection in the Marino anthology from Ellison’s Invisible Man, and consider how it raises a question about the absurdity of racism, especially as Ellison folds it into a
multi-faceted awareness of racism’s destructiveness. During class, we will set this discussion in the context of our West-Kierkegaard work. We may also listen to some jazz selections from the time and view some of the work of Romare Bearden to set the cultural context and to establish the mood, since despair and hope can be said to have their own moods.

For 2/22, read DuBois, Souls of Black Folks, Chaps. I, X-XIV. In preparing a paper, consider how DuBois anticipates and departs from Wright’s treatment of despair and faith in Native Son, and how he both anticipates and expands upon Baldwin.

In light of the discussions about despair and faith that we have had over the last few weeks, and in reference to DuBois’ particular call for a different kind of religion for modern black people, for 2/29, we will move to a more concentrated discussion of black religion and despair by focusing on Charles Long’s Significations. We will begin with DuBois’ take on black religion in Chapters X and XIV in The Souls of Black Folk; therefore, review these chapters. We will then focus on Long’s Significations. To this end, read the Introduction and Chapts. 8-12, and come to class with thoughts and questions about Long’s take on religion and black experience. We may divide into five groups, with each group taking one chapter. Everyone, however, should cover the Introduction.

7-8. Wed., 3/7 Today we will focus our ongoing discussion of despair, faith, and hope on Toni Morrison’s Beloved by considering it in light of our ever developing framework. Please read the novel. Then pick at least three passages of interest to you, and write a short paper that discusses the way that Morrison attends to despair, faith, and hope. In doing so, use the framework that we have developed thus far with Kierkegaard, West, Wright, Baldwin, Long, and others. As this will be our first foray into women and despair, be attentive to the distinctiveness of Morrison’s perspective as a woman. Please also read my article, “Søren Kierkegaard,” in Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins, ed. Miguel De La Torre and Stacey Floyd-Thomas, on Blackboard, and bring it and your Marino anthology to class, along with Beloved, as we may reference SK’s Fear and Trembling during class discussion.


10. Wed., 3/21 We will extend the framework that we have been developing to include the work of Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins. Please read the Introduction and Chapters 1, 4-5, 7 in Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (the chapters are not numbered; they start: “I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama,” “Blame it on the Blues,” “Preaching the Blues,” “When a Woman Loves a Man”). Please also read Collins, Chs. 1(pp. 6-7) and 5. Type some notes that consider how these women theorists extend our framework, and be ready to discuss this in class today. We will listen to the songs of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday during class; therefore, please be sure to bring your texts to class. The Davis text has the lyrics for many of these women’s songs. We may also view some of the work of Elizabeth Catlett as a way of discussing the dignity of black working women.

11. Wed., 3/28 Please read Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Select one or two passages from Hurston’s novel and from the blues women that Davis discusses, and write a short paper, identifying the issues of despair, faith, and hope raised by Hurston and addressed by Rainey, Smith, and/or Holiday as Davis sets them out. Use as needed or desired Davis’ anthology of the lyrics of Rainey’s, Smith’s, and Holiday’s music (as well as any sound recordings that might be placed on reserve). Keep in mind our broader framework. You might also find it helpful to consider Hurston’s treatment of black women’s blues in light of Toni Morrison’s treatment of black women’s pain and suffering in *Beloved*.

12. Wed., 4/4 In this class session, we will compare black women’s blues to white women’s blues by considering despair as a loss of personhood and hope as regaining it through self determination and self definition. Our focal text will be Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. We will read it with the idea of comparing it to Hurston’s *Their Eyes*. That is, we will read it with idea of comparing Ibsen’s Nora to Hurston’s Janie. As you prepare for this session, read the entire play. You might also find Chapter 4 of Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* on Blackboard helpful. Type out some notes for discussion.
13.-15 Wed., 4/11

-4/25 “We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest”: Despair, Faith, and Hope in the Civil-Rights Era.

13. Wed., 4/11 Over the final three class sessions, we will discuss despair, faith, and hope in the Civil Rights Era. We may start by listening to music from Bernice Johnson Reagon’s group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, and by screening portions of the documentary, *Eye on the Prize*, in order to set the stage. Afterwards, we will use the framework that we have already established to examine the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Thurman.

For today, read King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and West’s essay on King as an “organic intellectual” on Blackboard. Please also read Chs. I-III in Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Taking our framework into account, including the additional reading from West for today, write a short paper analyzing the way in which King might be said to address despair, faith, and hope as an “organic public intellectual.” Please also begin to think about how Thurman may be addressing the same issues in his reflection on Jesus. Make some preliminary notes on Thurman to facilitate discussion.

14. Wed., 4/18 In today’s class, we will focus on Thurman. During the first two hours of our class, we will complete our discussion of *Jesus and the Disinherited* in light of Martin King’s work. To this end, finish the book by reading Chs. IV-V and the Epilogue. Please also read the selection “Mysticism and the Experience of Love” on Blackboard. Select one or two passages from each work, and write a short commentary that discusses Thurman’s position in comparison to King’s. Consider what King may have found compelling in Thurman’s *Jesus*.

During the last 45 minutes of class, we will begin discussing Thurman’s *Deep River*. To this end, please read the Introduction through Ch. II. Please also review DuBois’ essay on the sorrow songs in Ch. XIV of *Souls* and read West’s essay on the spirituals, “The Spirituals as Lyrical Poetry,” from the *Cornel West Reader* on Blackboard. We may listen to some spirituals in this session or the next.

15. Wed., 4/25 In our final class session, we will focus on Thurman’s *Deep River*. Please finish reading the text (i.e., Chs. III-VII). Select one or more passages, and write a short commentary on the way in which Thurman discusses the spirituals as songs of despair and hope. Keep the theoretical work (i.e., the theological and philosophical framework) of our seminar in mind in
doing so. Today’s session will close with some summary remarks and with course evaluations. If desired, we may make this a dinner session.