HARTFORD INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION AND PEACE

SPRING SEMESTER, 2023

That Blessed Book: The Interfaith Roots of an African American Biblical Imagination

THURSDAYS: 4-7 PM.

INSTRUCTOR: Cheryl Townsend Gilkes ctgilkes@colby.edu Phone: 617-876-1595

OFFICE AND OFFICE HOURS: To Be Announced and Scheduled

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Africans and their descendants in North America developed a distinctive tradition of Bible reading that evinces a prophetic-apocalyptic imagination with an ethic of perseverance. That evidence is found in biblical texts embedded in a wide variety of prayers, songs, stories, and sermons. This course examines selected African American orature (e.g., spirituals and folklore) and literature in order to explore the formation of the Black Church’s biblical “canon within a canon.” That canon is the result of an extensive “interfaith” and multi-cultural conversation and negotiation among diverse African ethnicities (Gomez/Midlo Hall) in the slave communities of the United States (Raboteau/Sobel/Weber). While “interfaith” refers to the full spectrum of religious world views (Smart) that Africans carried to North America, special attention will be paid to the importance of African Muslims as a source of epistemological resistance to enslavers’ Christianity and as agents of “local assimilation” (Sanneh) of the Bible in the formation of the Christian religion of the enslaved and the formation of the Black Church.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

To develop an appreciation of the culture and agency of Africans and their descendants in North America as they used the Bible in their production of knowledge, ritual, and traditions while creating the elementary forms (Durkheim) of their religious life—the Black Church (Du Bois/Williams/Lincoln and Mamiya).

To develop a detailed understanding of the African ethnic diversity in British North America and the United States and the religious implications of that diversity (Gomez/Price) with special attention to the presence of enslaved African Muslims (Diouf/Austin/Callahan).

To explore the choices of scripture evident in spirituals, gospel music, folklore, sermons, and imaginative literature (e.g., poems and novels) and to interrogate the social, cultural, and theological implications of those choices.

To inquire about the ways that African/African American uses of scripture connect with various dimensions of biblical criticism and canonical criticism and, in turn, to explore the ways that biblical and canonical criticism help to illuminate the agency of Africans and their descendants. This will include a special focus on African American biblical scholarship and the struggles of African American biblical scholars with a tradition of academic exclusion.

To appreciate the full range of African American sacred music and the biblical linkages in those musics.

To explore the impact of the biblically informed African American cultural imagination on African American religious history and the formation of distinctive denominations, movements, and doctrines.

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES:

This

LIST OF REQUIRED TEXTS:

 Holy Bible (King James Version)

 Zorah Neale Hurston, Moses, Man of the Mountain

Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited

 Howard Thurman, Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death

 James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues

 Albert Raboteau, Slave Religion:

Albert Raboteau, Canaanland: A Religious History of African Americans

 Bernice Johnson Reagon, If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me: The African American
 Sacred Song Tradition

 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Sorrow Songs” in The Souls of Black Folk (PDF to be distributed)

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes—Assorted Readings to Be Distributed as PDFs

LIST OF RECOMMENDED TEXTS:

 James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, The Books of American Negro
 Spirituals.

 John Lovell, Jr., Black Song: The Forge and Flame—The Story of How the Afro-American
 Spiritual Was Hammered Out

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND MEANS OF ASSESSMENT/ ASSIGNMENTS:

Attendance and discussion accompanied by a weekly written response with questions and/or comments—1-2 pages.

An oral and written book report from recommended texts/resource bibliography lists.

An exploration of a biblical text associated with a spiritual and an imagined application of African and American experience, culture, and faith resources for understanding the choosing of text.

A reflective essay exploring the way the African and African American biblical engagement expands an understanding of African (religious) world views, the African American religious experience, and their impact on culture and society, especially in the Unitede States with its prominent attachment to the Bible.

MODALITY: Hybrid Synchronous

COURSE CALENDAR: IN PROGRESS

January 19, 2023—Welcome and introductions

January 26, 2023—Why “King Jimmy” Matters.

 Gilkes, “Forum: American Scriptures”. (PDF to be distributed electronically)

 Du Bois, “The Sorrow Songs” (PDF to be distributed)

 King James Bible—Any favorite Bible story and Psalm 68.

February 2, 2023—The Spirituals as Epistemic Agency

 Howard Thurman, “Deep River”

 Gilkes, “From Sorrow Songs to Freedom Songs” (PDF to be distributed electronically)

 Discussion: What is a spiritual and what spirituals do you know?

 We will listen to music.

 Available for Office Hours