

The African-American Experience in Social Ethics

Professor: Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course is an introduction to the rich texture of the African American Christian experience from the perspective of social ethics. This broad experience will be explored through the themes of Christian faith and witness, Black spirituality, the struggle for liberation, and the meaning and nature of moral agency. Particular contestable ethical issues facing Black Americans in their question for freedom and from the perspective of “double consciousness” as an ongoing process will be studied in depth, namely, sexuality, violence, rage, racism, sexism, poverty, and justice. **Note:** This course is taught with a commitment to a mission of justice through attention to anti-racism, diversity, and multiculturalism.

CLASS PROCEDURE: The format of the class is seminar style, inclusive of lectures, student-led group discussion, film and music. The class will meet twice a week for 75 minutes. For the first class session of the week, the professor will provide a lecture on the topic of the week that will explore a contemporary theoretical perspective as well as supply the connecting analysis between the various religious and ethical principles that such theories pose. The second class session of any given week will be a seminar style in which student facilitators will be asked to lead the class discussion by placing the readings in their theoretical context for the week. Within this seminar framework, we will raise to visibility the social consequences of particular spiritual beliefs, ethical principles, norms, values and taboos that African American Christians seeking justice must keep in the forefront of our consciousness.

Each student will volunteer to become part of a group that will facilitate a discussion of the weekly-required reading by sharing a copy of a collaborative Diaspora Literacy Notebook entry. After the facilitating group has walked through the notebook entry, the entire class will enter into the discussion. The professor will then debrief the presentation and its connections to the topic of focus for that week.

COURSE OBJECTIVES: By the end of the course, students should be able to: (1) express an understanding of the importance of the ethical dimension of human life in an intellectually responsible manner; (2) demonstrate a coherent, metaethical understanding of some of the most pressing perennial concerns facing our society today; and (3) demonstrate the ways in which ethical theory and vocabulary have profound implications for life, ministry, and social change.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

1. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk (New Edition)*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).
2. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1988).
3. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation 20th Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll, NY: 1990).
4. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleeland, OH: Pilgrim, 2006)
5. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
6. Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994).
7. Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room*, (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003).
8. Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2006).
9. Selected articles (electronic reserve): Cornel West “Subversive Joy and Revolutionary Patience in Black Christianity”; bell hooks “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” and “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance”

REQUIREMENTS: Class attendance and participation, thorough reading of required texts, and the timely completion of all written/oral requirements, namely: oral presentation, weekly response paper (2 pages typed), three focus papers (5-7 pages typed), and research prospectus.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

- **An open and willing mind** is a fundamental requirement. You must be willing to entertain thoughtfully and carefully ideas and questions that may be different than your own. You must be willing to work on your own, to wrestle with ideas or questions – suspending rash judgment until you have filled in overlooked or missing components in your own framework.
- **Preparation of required reading** is expected to be complete before each class meeting. Students who have not adequately prepared for class are considered absent. As important as physical presence in the classroom is each student’s ability to be present *mindfully*, i.e., engaged consciously and intentionally with material treated in reading assignments and the class lectures, exercises, and discussions that evolve from the reading. Reading is critical to developing a knowledge that will facilitate understanding and following lectures. The lectures and handouts will reinforce your reading but they will not repeat the readings verbatim.
- **Class participation** is critical since lively, substantive, and serious class discussion is the result of careful and thoughtful preparation. It goes without saying that engaged, active classroom conversation, as well as attentive and respectful listening, is necessary. Class participation entails: attendance, punctuality, preparedness, class etiquette, and engagement. Each student is expected to come to class having thoroughly prepared for discussion. This means either to contribute to an explanation of key arguments or be able to raise appropriate questions of the material. At the professors' discretion, brief quizzes may be given in order insure comprehension and retention of assigned material and lectures. *Students may be called upon by name and will be expected to reply to the best of their ability.* **Please note:** No more than two absences from class are allowed in this course. Any other absence will result in the lowering of your final grade by 10% (That is one full letter grade!) Absences harm your ability to keep up

with course material and detract from your participation in discussions – both of which are crucial for our learning *and* your grade. Therefore, excessive absences, i.e., more than six, will not be given course credit. *Active participation in responsible, reflective and respectful discussion is critical for educational growth and success in this course. Your registration in class is a contract with yourself and with me to learn all you can.*

Three Critical Reflection Papers are to be submitted on the due dates indicated. The reflection guidelines will be distributed prior to each due date but all papers must be 5-7 pages long, relate to the readings, as well as to Black congregational life. No late papers will be accepted. All papers must be typed, double-spaced, 12pt Times Roman font with 1” margins, conform to the writing style sheet provided, and must include a full bibliography.

- **Group Presentations** will be given by a self-selected group of students. Each group will be responsible for leading the discussion of the weekly ethical themes, required readings, and issues explored. Groups are free to determine how they will present material, but presentations must engage both the argument and issues of reading assigned for the week of the presentation and a joint case study analysis with commentary must be distributed to every class member.
- **Maintain an e-mail account and check the E-college website regularly.**

A NOTE ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students are expected to familiarize themselves with and adhere to the honor code regarding all assignments and examinations for this course. This is essential for the success of student learning and our work together. As a general rule of thumb, any work you submit should represent your own time, thoughts, and efforts as to avoid plagiarism.

DISABILITIES AND HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS

There is a commitment to make every reasonable effort to facilitate the learning of students capable of graduate seminary level work. Any student who has a diagnosed and documented condition that may prevent full demonstration of her or his abilities (e.g. difficulty seeing or hearing, dyslexia, or other learning disabilities) should contact the professor to discuss learning needs and alternatives that have worked for the student in the past and mutually acceptable accommodations to ensure the student's full participation and evaluation in the course. Arrangements for such conditions must be discussed with the professor at the start of the semester.

ETHICAL GROUND RULES REGARDING CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

This course aims to create and maintain an atmosphere conducive to rigorous intellectual dialogue, analysis, critique, and a politics of professionalism and respectability. Think of these as ground rules or guidelines for our time together. They are adapted from feminist/womanist pedagogy as models and guidelines for higher education discourse:

1. We shall listen to one another – patiently, carefully – assuming that each one of us is always doing the best that she or he can. (*And because we assume this about each other, each of us shall do the best that she or he can*).
2. We will speak thoughtfully by: speaking in the first person; not engaging in foul language; refraining from remarks showing a lack of respect for the feelings, beliefs, and thoughts of others; refusing to make comments that disparage any person or group on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, religion, social class, or sexual orientation; and remembering that the social locations of persons, whether present in the class or not, are to be respected at all times.
3. We will be faithful in using gender inclusive and anti-racist language in our writing and speaking.
4. We will address our colleagues in our classroom by name in recognition of their humanity and individuality. We will refer to our professor by her appropriate title in recognition of her training and position.
5. We will claim ownership of our own assumptions, our conclusions, and their implications for moral development and social change.
6. We will be open to each other's intellectual growth and change.
7. We cannot be blamed for the misinformation we have been taught and have absorbed from U. S. society and culture, but we shall be held responsible for repeating and acting out on misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
8. We each have a moral obligation to actively combat stereotypes so that we can begin to eradicate the biases that prevent us from envisioning and realizing the well being of us all.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION:

Attendance and Class Participation	10%
Diaspora literacy notebook	30%
Focus Papers (3)	30%
Constructive Metaethical Essay	20%
Course facilitation	10%

A note on grading— The grade(s) given in this course represent an evaluation of actual work – not good intentions, inherent ability, intelligence, personal, moral, nor spiritual qualities. Thus, the evaluation criteria for grading include:

- ability to comprehend and articulate the controlling ideas of class lectures and texts
- demonstration of independent critical analysis of ideas, theories, and issues
- logic and accuracy in grammar and structure of writing
- accuracy and precision in grammar usage and spelling
- completion of assignments on the due dates
- contribution to the class discussion of inquiry

GRADING STANDARDS:

I interpret the letter grades (A through F) in the following manner:

- A very clear, insightful, perhaps, original thinking; excellent grasp of subject matter; clear evidence of personal engagement in course material and critical thinking; thorough, timely preparation of reading assignments; excellent preparation, timely completion of written work; active and thoughtful participation in class discussion, frequent contributions to classroom learning are made through responses, comments, open-mindedness, demonstrated willingness to be changed by new insights and discoveries.
- A- clear thinking; accurate and thorough grasp of subject matter; evidence of personal engagement in course work and critical thinking; thorough and timely preparation of reading assignments; very well-prepared written work; active and thoughtful participation in class discussion, often contributions are made to classroom learning; open-mindedness, demonstrated willingness to be changed by new insights and discoveries.
- B+ clear thinking; marked improvement in understanding of subject matter; evidence of personal engagement in course work and critical thinking; well-prepared written work; active and thoughtful participation in class discussion, often contributions are made to classroom learning; open-mindedness, demonstrated willingness to consider new insights, to risk change.
- B clear thinking; improvement in understanding of subject matter; some evidence of personal engagement in course work, effort at critical thinking; timely, careful preparation of reading assignments; adequately prepared written work; active participation in discussion; open-mindedness, a willingness to consider and wrestle seriously with new insights and ideas.
- B- reflective thinking; increasing understanding of subject matter; some evidence of personal engagement in course work, effort at critical thinking; preparation of reading assignments; adequately prepared written work; participation in discussion; open-mindedness
- C+ some evidence of reflective thinking; satisfactory understanding of subject matter; some evidence of personal engagement in course work; reading assignments adequately prepared; written work adequately prepared; some participation in class discussion.

- C satisfactory understanding of subject matter; reading assignments adequately prepared; written work somewhat adequately prepared; occasional participation in class discussion.
- C- some understanding of subject matter; less than adequate preparation of written work; less than adequate preparation of reading assignments; occasional class participation.
- D little understanding of subject; written work inadequately prepared; infrequent preparation of reading assignments; infrequent participation in class discussion.
- F little or no understanding of subject; poorly prepared written work and reading assignments; infrequent participation in class discussion.

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES, READINGS, & ASSIGNMENTS

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE OF STUDY	
WEEK 1	The Ethical Principles for Understanding the African American Moral Dilemma
Session 1	Introduction to Course of Study
Required Reading and Required Viewing	
Session 2	Cornel West “Subversive Joy and Revolutionary Patience in Black Christianity”
	<i>This Far by Faith</i> (Documentary)
PART I: EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM	
WEEK 2	Double Consciousness and “The Strange Nature of Being Black” in America
Required Reading	
Session 3	W. E. B. DuBois, <i>Souls of Black Folk</i> (Chapters 1-7)
Session 4	W. E. B. DuBois, <i>Souls of Black Folk</i> (Chapters 8-14)
WEEK 3	African American Moral Thought as an African Worldview
Required Reading	
Session 5	Anatomy of the Idea and Metaethical Essay Workshop I
Session 6	<i>Eyes on the Prize: Awakenings</i> (Documentary) Due: Racial Strata Inventory
WEEK 4	Moral Character and Virtue Ethics
Required Reading	
Session 7	Peter Paris, <i>Spirituality of African Peoples</i> (Chapters 1-3)

Session 8	Peter Paris, <i>Spirituality of African Peoples</i> (Chapters 4-6)
PART II: SOCIAL FREEDOM	
WEEK 5	The Moral Situation of Tripartite Oppression
Required Reading and Viewing	
Session 9	<i>The Color Purple</i> (Movie) Katie Cannon, <i>Black Womanist Ethics</i> (Chapters 1-3)
Session 10	<i>The Color Purple</i> (Movie) Katie Cannon, <i>Black Womanist Ethics</i> (Chapters 4-6)
WEEK 6	Sex, Gender and Congregational Ethics
Required Reading	
Session 11	Marcia Riggs <i>Plenty Good Room</i> (Chapters 1-3)
Session 12	Marcia Riggs <i>Plenty Good Room</i> (Chapters 4-6)
WEEK 7	Survival, Disruptive, and Resistance Ethics
Required Reading	
Session 13	Traci West, <i>Disruptive Christian Ethics</i> (Chapters 1 & 2)
Session 14	Traci West, <i>Disruptive Christian Ethics</i> (Chapters 3-5)
WEEK 8	Womanist Ethics: From Radical Subjectivity to Critical Engagement
Required Reading	
Session 15	Stacey Floyd-Thomas, <i>Deeper Shades of Purple</i> (Intro., Chapters 1,5,9,14, & 20) Stacey Floyd-Thomas, <i>Mining the Motherlode</i>
Session 16	Due: Case Study Analysis
Session 17	The State of the Black Church Summit and Consultation
Session 18	The State of the Black Church Summit and Consultation
PART III: ESCHATOLOGICAL FREEDOM	
WEEK 8	Metaethics Workshop
Session 19	Anatomy of the Idea and Metaethical Essay Workshop II
Required Reading	

bell hooks “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” and “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance”	
Session 20	Anatomy of the Idea and Metaethical Essay Workshop III
WEEK 9	Racial Justice and Liberationist Ethics
Required Reading	
Session 21	James Cone, <i>A Black Theology of Liberation</i> , (Chapters 1-4)
Session 22	James Cone, <i>A Black Theology of Liberation</i> , (Chapters 5-8)
WEEK 10	Realizing Eschatology
Required Assignment and Viewing	
Session 23	Due: Racial Media Watch Presentations
Session 24	The Hudlin Brothers <i>Cosmic Slop</i> (Movie)
WEEK 11	Racial Realism as Moral Reasoning and Ethical Judgment
Required Reading	
Session 25	Derrick Bell <i>Faces at the Bottom of the Well</i> , (Chapters 1-4)
Session 26	Derrick Bell <i>Faces at the Bottom of the Well</i> , (Chapters 5-8) Reporting Out and Course Evaluations
Session 27	Due: Metaethical Essay & Presentations