

GTHE 539—Black Church History and Theology

3 Credit hours

Spring 2008

GENERAL THEMES

Below are several general themes that will guide our course throughout the term. Under each, I have listed leading questions, which will be raised in the readings or during discussions. This sheet is not meant to be exhaustive, but to introduce some of the classical debates and theories relative to understanding the black church and black religion. In writing your papers, you will need to consider if (or where) the author situates his/her argument in one of these larger debates.

1. Was the cosmology i.e., (worldview, ethnology, acculturation, and culture) of Africans lost when they were brought to these shores?
2. Can we really talk about an African cosmology being transformed when slaves came from so many different parts of the continent?
3. How persuasively do the two proponents (Frazier and Herskovitz) make their arguments on retention? Who else falls on either side of the debate?
4. Discuss the broader issue of retention; the state of the African retention in African American experience. What are some of the examples of this retention?
5. What aspects of African religions were retained by the slaves? How did they retain them? What is the evidence?
6. How does the constant import of slavery (Larger Caribbean phenomenon) versus breeding of slaves (United States context) affect the argument for/ against African retention?
7. How did the evangelization and conversion of African slaves to Christianity take place.
8. What is syncretism considering the infusion from the ATR, Judaism, Christianity and Islam?
9. What were the origins of Black Religion in America? What was the nature of religion to which the slave was converted? What was distinctive about religion in the slave quarters.
10. Is black religion simply a carbon copy of white evangelical religion particularly as it develops institutionally in the 19th and 20th centuries? How does one account for its attractiveness?
11. Discuss Issues of radicalism of the gospels, Slave and freedman hermeneutic tools, Slave songs and freedom messages, Identification with the exodus narrative in the Bible
12. What are the distinctive features of black religion compared to its original form during slavery and today?
13. Discuss Social activism, treatment of women; autonomy, social critique in Black preaching.
14. What makes the black church unique?
15. Is there a distinction between the black church and black congregations in predominantly white denominations? On what basis does one make an argument for these being unique or similar worship contexts?
16. How does one interpret black missionaries going to Africa to spread the gospel, i.e., Lott Carey?
17. Is the black church in some sense “a universal church” representing all blacks in both the sacred and secular sphere of human existence?
18. What should be the response to the historically inadequate idea (circulated today by some Africans/Americans as well) that Christianity is “a white man’s religion.” Why it is important to point out that biblical Christianity is a black religion as much as a white one?
19. How can the black church be a vehicle for accommodation or resistance in the area of racial reconciliation?
20. Discuss the appropriate agenda for the black church in the 21st century, noting its problems and possible solutions. “Womanist Theology” and “Black Theology” as they relate individually to the development of the black church.