

# Church, Politics, & Race in a Polarized Society

## ES-209 | Course Syllabus

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Thursdays, 7-9pm  
Wesley Downtown @ Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church  
MVC – Room B102  
Blackboard Link:  
Office Hours:

### I. Course Information

#### Description

Recent events have uncovered the deep racial, political, and religious divisions in America. Viewing these as isolated issues only perpetuates these divisions. This class will examine the way these three realities intersect to shape our public consciousness and impact public policies, as well as explore ways people of faith might bridge these divides and work for a common good in an increasingly polarized society. The class will proceed in three parts.

- First, we will closely analyze the current climate: Why at a time that many are signaling the end of white Christian America are we witnessing a country once again burning with racial violence?
- Second, to better understand our current context we'll look at the history of the civil rights movement—a political struggle for freedom fueled by the deep faith of preachers and protesters—and then the ways racism later became veiled in colorblindness and systemic inequalities.
- And finally, we will look at where we can go from here. We will turn to sociologists and political theorists, thinkers like Martin Luther King and James Baldwin, and theologians like Emilie Townes, Shawn Copeland, and James Cone. What resources are there for promoting liberation and reconciliation, practicing solidarity, and standing up for racial justice?

This course is an opportunity to face these difficult questions in light of a Gospel that calls us to be reconcilers; to think about our history, future, and responsibility; and to listen and learn from one another.

#### Goals

1. To develop the ability to think critically about the topics of race, politics, and theology, to reflect the ability to be open to others' perspectives and even to changing one's own, to and engage in meaningful and civil discourse about these sensitive and significant issues.
2. To read and engage with key texts on these issues, critically assess their perspectives, and clearly and thoroughly evaluate their positions and experiences in light of one's own.
3. To help participants deepen their understanding of the complexity of these issues in public, political, and religious life.
4. To help future leaders learn how to guide and conduct learned and civil discussions on contentious issues in multiple settings.

## Responsibilities & Assignments

**1. Active Participation** in seminar discussions: this includes doing all of the reading, listening to lectures and watching videos, and being prepared to discuss the texts.

**2. Personal Reflection Paper, due Oct 19:** Each student will write a 2-3 page paper reflecting on her or his own experience/history with the three topics of the course (race, politics, and church), with special attention to the ways they may have overlapped in her or his life. In these personal statements please reflect on the presumptions and formative experiences that you may bring to conversations about and evaluations of these topics. Also, please engage with the readings from Class 1 of the course, Oct 5, as they are helpful.

**3. Class Presentation:** Each student will be responsible for preparing one class discussion on one of the readings for that week. This will involve presenting a three-minute introduction to the reading, in which she or he will identify the principle argument(s) of the readings and highlight the most significant themes and/or points of interest. The discussion leader will then offer two key questions to begin our class conversation. Please turn in the written introductory remarks at the end of that class.

**4. Final Paper, due Dec 7** via email: Each student will submit a 10-12 page paper on a topic of the student's choice, approved by the professor. The paper may draw on readings not covered in class, though this is not a requirement, but must engage with a number of course texts. This is a thesis paper, meaning that this paper will identify a major theme, issue, or question and state a clear position on this issue or question. The paper will then make a clear argument for that position with reasons drawn from your analysis of the readings.

## Grading

Reflection Paper	10%
Participation	20%
Class Presentation	20%
Final Paper	50%

## Texts

Most course readings are available in PDF form online @ the course's **Blackboard** site or are listed with a **web link** in the syllabus (you may have to copy and paste the link to open the page). I would like you to purchase three books for the course, and recommend one other. Students will not be required to read the entirety of any of these, so please let me know if the cost is a burden and we can make other arrangements. The total cost of all three, however, is only \$35, and they are certainly books worth purchasing! Just think of this as me doing you a favor!

**1. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time***

**2. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation***

**3. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree***

**4. RECOMMENDED: Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*** (I will provide PDFs of the two chapters assigned because the book cost is \$30. Though it also is worth your own copy.)

## II. Course Schedule and Readings

### PART ONE | WHAT IS GOING ON?

#### Session One

#### **Oct 5 | Key Terms and Cultural Context**

Readings for Oct 5 class discussion (~ 60 total pages)

Setting the Terms

1. M. Shawn Copeland, “Race,” *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “What is Church?” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, excerpt from *Democracy in America*

Cultural and Religious Shifts

4. Ta-Nehisi Coates, excerpt from *Between the World and Me*
5. Joshua Rothman, “The Lives of Poor White People,” *The New Yorker*:  
[www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-lives-of-poor-white-people](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-lives-of-poor-white-people)
6. Russell Moore, “A White Church No More,” *New York Times*

Perception Gap in (Racial) Discrimination

7. Robert Jones, Daniel Cox, and Rachel Lienesch, “Who Sees Discrimination?” *PRRI* (pp. 1-7)
8. Jennifer Rubin, “Trump Supporters & the Empathy Gap,” *Washington Post*
9. Tara Isabella Burton, “When it Comes to Detecting Racial Inequality,” *Vox*:  
<https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/6/23/15855272/prri-study-white-christians-discrimination-blind-spot>

**In Class** | Course Introduction; Rev. William Barber interview on *The Daily Show*

The influential Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr insisted that any social, ethical, or theological analysis must begin with the question, “What is going on?” We cannot begin to understand or evaluate these complex topics before attending to our current situation. Thus, we will undertake two tasks this week. First, this means understanding our key terms and concepts. We will do this by reading M. Shawn Copeland’s (a contemporary black, female theologian) definition of race, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the church’s identity and mission—especially its relation to politics—(written during the early years of the German church’s opposition to the Third Reich), and French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville’s early 19<sup>th</sup> Century commentary on religion being America’s “first political institution.” Second, we must investigate the current interrelation of race, politics, and faith. We will begin by uncovering current cultural trends with conservative Southern Baptist Russell Moore’s evaluating of shifting racial demographics in the American church (and the church’s reluctance to face this reality) and Joshua Rothman’s review essay of the influential J.D. Vance book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, on the struggles and claims of political disenfranchisement of poor whites. Finally, we will look at analyses of these trends: survey data on the significant racial perception gap on what groups face the most discrimination and public oppression followed by a political and religious reflection on that data.

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## Session Two

### Oct 19 | The Intersections of Churches, Politics, and Race

Readings for Oct 19 class discussion (~ 130 total pages)

1. Putnam & Campbell, “Religion in American Politics” & “Echo Chambers: Politics Within Congregations,” *American Grace*
2. Robert Jones, “Desegregating White Christian America,” *The End of White Christian America*
3. Robert Jones, “Trump Can’t Reverse the Decline of White Christian America,” *The Atlantic*

**In Class** | Lecture—Racism at the End of White Christian America

**Due** | Reflection Paper

This week we take an even broader look at the trends and shifts we analyzed last week through the lens of sociology, political theory, and quantitative data research. First we read two chapters from the influential 2010 book, *American Grace*, by political theorists Robert Putnam and David Campbell, which investigates the data from a major research survey on the influence of religion on politics and vice versa. We will read two chapters, the first on the role religion has played and continues to play on American politics, and the second on how politics works within congregations—and how congregations reinforce political attitudes. Some of the information will be dated—much has happened in the past eight years—but many of the trends they identify and conclusions they project still stand. The chapters are long, but it’s like reading a comic book for religion and politics nerds. Then we will read two selections from Robert Jones, the director of research institute PRRI. While the *American Grace* readings explored the intersection of religion and politics, Jones adds the issue of race to this mixture in a chapter from his book, *The End of White Christian America*, published in the summer of 2016. Here he further explores the racial perception gap we addressed last week. Jones’ *Atlantic* article now serves as the “Afterword” to the 2nd edition of the book and examines the claims of the book in light of Trump’s electoral win: what does Trump’s win and evangelicals’ support for Trump signal for the end of white, Christian America?

## PART TWO | WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

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### Session Three

#### Oct 26 | Faith & Politics in the Black Freedom Struggle

Readings for Oct 26 class discussion (~ 90 total pages)

1. Martin Luther King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
2. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (pp. 1-47)
3. James Cone, "The Gospel of Jesus, Black People, and Black Power" (pp. 31-47), *Black Theology and Black Power*
4. James Cone, "Christian Faith and Political Praxis," *Encounter*

#### In Class | Lecture— The Trouble with Integration & Reconciliation

After coming to terms with our current circumstances, it is important to understand how we arrived here. This is a long history that we cannot explore adequately in such a brief course. Therefore, we will turn to the still-recent history of the civil rights movement and a few classic texts from that period. First, King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a classic text in public theology in which King employs deeply religious as well as practical reasons in arguing for a faith-based intervention in politics. James Baldwin's classic, *The Fire Next Time*, strikes an even stronger revolutionary (and tragic) tone as he reflects on the black experience in 1960s America, and as the son of a preacher, his own struggles with faith in light of black oppression. Finally, we read two selections from James Cone, the founder of the field of Black Liberation Theology. The first is a chapter from his seminal text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, written shortly after King's assassination in 1969, making a theological argument for the connection between the Black Power movement and the Christian Gospel's vision of liberation. The essay on Christian faith and political practice argues for the necessary political role of Christian theology.

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### Session Four

#### Nov 2 | From Racism to "Colorblindness"

Readings for Nov 2 class discussion (~ 60 total pages)

1. Randall Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right," *Politico*
2. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Required: Chapters 1 & 2)

#### In Class | Excerpt from documentary, "13<sup>th</sup>"

In the 50 years since the civil rights movement we have seen the problematic effects of the "success" of the movement. Once rights were won, whites could believe that racism had been defeated. Those who still clung tight to their racism had to engage in subtle strategies to effect racist policies, highlighted in historian Randall Balmer's account of the real rationale motivating the Religious Right's rise to power. It also allowed others who denounced racism to suggest that we now live in a post-racial society necessitating a colorblind approach to policy and social relations. Princeton African American studies professor Keeanga-Yanahtta Taylor offers a passionate account of the ways white supremacy still drives systemic forms of racism in police violence, inequality in the criminal justice system (especially the rise of mass incarceration), and the effects of decades of legal discrimination that have not been fully resolved. This "culture of racism" is aided and abetted, she argues, by white pretensions to colorblindness that continue to harm persons and communities of color.

## **PART THREE | WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

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### **Session Five**

#### **Nov 9 | Seeing Color**

Readings for Nov 9 class discussion (~ 70 total pages)

1. Emilie Townes, “Invisible Things Unspoken: Uninterrogated Coloredness,” *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*
2. Emilie Townes, “To Pick One’s Own Cotton: Religious Values, Public Policy, and Women’s Moral Autonomy,” *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*
3. Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*
4. Christina Sharpe, “Lose Your Kin,” *The New Inquiry*

**In Class** | Donna Claycomb-Sokol, pastor MVPUMC on church’s racial history

Having critically examined our current context and looked to our history to attempt to make sense of where we are, we conclude the course by thinking about the future; in King’s famous words, “Where do we go from here?” His two answers were either “community or chaos” and it certainly feels like we are sliding toward the latter. Having identified the contemporary problem with colorblindness, this week we turn to a selection of scholars who have analyzed the psychology, theology, and sociality of colorblindness. Womanist (or black feminist) theologian Emilie Townes offers two chapters dealing with this subject. The first helps us to see the harmful consequences of choosing to not see color, nor to interrogate the ways color still grants privileges and invites injury. The second explores the ways our religious values, and the racial attitudes enmeshed with them, impact public policy decisions. Robin DiAngelo, a scholar of education and “whiteness studies” has uncovered the fragile and defensive nature of white culture. She explores the multiple effects of “white fragility” and offers resources for overcoming the defensive posture many white people take in public when confronted with stories or accusations of racism. Finally, Christian Sharpe offers a brief reflection on finding kinship across racial divisions.

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### **Session Six**

#### **Nov 16 | Theologies and Practices of Liberation & Reconciliation**

Readings for Nov 16 class discussion (~ 90 total pages)

1. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Required: Introduction, Chapter 1, Conclusion)
2. M. Shawn Copeland, “Eucharist, Racism, and Black Bodies,” *Enfleshing Freedom*
3. William Barber, “A Moral Movement for the Nation” & “America’s Third Reconstruction” *The Third Reconstruction* (pp. 97-126)

**In Class** | Lecture—The Church as Alternative to White Supremacy

For our last class we turn to theology and to one of our initial questions about what people of faith can do in light of these racial, and racist, realities. This week we learn from James Cone, father of black theology, who helps us see the possibility of redemption in the tragic by identifying a connection between Jesus’ cross and the lynching tree. For Cone, true reconciliation is only possible when the oppressed are liberated from their oppressors. Shawn Copeland, a Catholic womanist theologian, locates her hope for reconciliation in the community of faith, the church, and its practice of Eucharist. The Eucharist is an act of solidarity and unites people of all races beyond the earthly differences that threaten to divide

us. We conclude the semester by turning to the practical implications of theology. Rev. William Barber, pastor and leader of the Moral Mondays movement, offers an account of the political practices that emanate from these theologies of liberation, highlighting a “fusion” politics that seeks partnerships with others committed to the common good.

**Final Paper Due** | December 7

### **III. Wesley Policy & Procedures**

## Students With Disabilities

If you have a physical, psychological, or learning disability and might require accommodations in this course, please contact the Associate Dean for Community Life, Asa Lee, early in the semester regarding Wesley's policies and procedures for documenting and accommodating disabilities, at x 8614, or [communitylife@wesleyseminary.edu](mailto:communitylife@wesleyseminary.edu). The seminary allows accommodations only through this policy.

## Technical Support

Students are responsible for meeting course deadlines. If you experience technical problems, please exercise one or all of the following options:

- Blackboard Support at [blackboardsupport@wesleyseminary.edu](mailto:blackboardsupport@wesleyseminary.edu)
- By phone at (202) 885-6091
- Blackboard/E Support Ticket at <http://blackboardsupport.wesleyseminary.edu> or <http://www.wesleyseminary.edu/MyWesley/eSupport.aspx>

## Technical Considerations

In order to access our course Blackboard site students need to go to MyWesley webpage and use student log on.

Blackboard site requires use of:

- An Internet connection. – A high speed Internet connection is highly recommended
- An Internet browser. (supported browsers include: Internet Explorer, Firefox, and Safari)
- An appropriate web browser configuration.

Any computer capable of running a recently updated web browser should be sufficient to access our Blackboard site. However, bear in mind that processor speed, amount of RAM and Internet connection speed can greatly affect performance. Those using dial-up connections will experience longer page load times and much slower performance.

For Blackboard Support: (202) 885-6091 or [blackboardsupport@wesleyseminary.edu](mailto:blackboardsupport@wesleyseminary.edu)

## Academic Misconduct

All students have signed the Covenant of Professional Ethics and Behavior. This must be adhered to, particularly in regards to academic honesty and plagiarism.

Plagiarism is regarded as a serious offense and will result in substantial penalties, including the possibility of academic dismissal. The Faculty regards the following as forms of plagiarism or dishonesty:

- copying from another student's paper
- giving or receiving unauthorized assistance to or from another student during an examination
- using unauthorized material during an examination
- borrowing and presenting as one's own (i.e., without proper attribution) the composition or ideas of another.

The mutilation, defacement, or stealing of library materials are examples of academic dishonesty and/or professional misconduct and are also subject to disciplinary action.

### **Weather Policy**

If the seminary is open we will have class. If the seminary is closed, class is cancelled. If the seminary is closed there will be a recorded message at the main switchboard number: 202-885-8600.

### **Inclusive Language Policy**

Bearing in mind that language reflects, reinforces, and creates social reality, the Seminary expects class conversation and written work to employ language that respects the equal dignity and worth of all human beings. In particular, linguistic sexism and racism are to be avoided.

**This syllabus is subject to revision by the professor.**