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- **RELI 330: Race and Political Theology**  
**Vassar College / Spring 2016**  
**Blodgett 201**  
**Tues, 3:10-5:10**

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Jonathon Kahn

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Office Hours: Mon, 3-4; Tues, 10-12, or by appt.

In recent years, “political theology” has emerged as a crucial notion in the humanities. Most narrowly, political theology refers to Carl Schmitt’s claim that all “significant political concepts” of the modern nation-state have theological and religious roots. Until very recently, theorists of political theology have ignored the ways in which race functions as a significant political concept of the state. This seminar will explore the intersection between race and political theology. We will examine multiple conceptions of political theology. And we will ask most centrally: In what ways are constructions of race rooted in theological concepts and histories? We will ask this question both from the perspective of the state as well as from accounts of African American experience in historical and literary texts.

**REQUIRED TEXTS (ORDERED FROM THE VASSAR COLLEGE BOOK STORE)**

- **Ted A. Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford U Press) 978-0804793308**
  - Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Dover) 978-0486284996
  - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage) (978-0679744726)
    - Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (The Text Pub Company) 978-1925240702
    - Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (Orbis) 978-1626980389
    - Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage) 978-1400033416
    - Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Vintage) 978-0679732761
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**REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING**

- Papers: 60%
  - Oral Presentation: 10%
  - Class Participation: 30%
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Requirements include careful reading of weekly assignments, avid class participation, class presentation of reading, mid-term paper (5 pages), final paper on a topic of your choosing (10-12).

- *Presentation Expectations:* Your task, when making a presentation, is to identify two or three passages that would be good for the class to discuss and to frame those passages with appropriate introductory remarks and questions. You should also have a few additional passages in mind. The ideal presentation is one that is likely, because of its selection and framing of passages, to initiate an excellent discussion. Feel free to discuss your plan ahead of time, either by email or in person.
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- **Late papers without extensions are subject to a penalty at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade per day**
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- **Failure to complete/receive credit for any of the assignment will result in failure of the class.**
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#### **TECHNOLOGY POLICY**

- I'm not a big fan of electronic devices in class. The internet is a very tempting siren and I'm convinced that it distracts us from each other and the matters at hand. However, I realize that we live in a world of screens: that is how we access much of our information. So here's the skinny. You may use devices to refer to course related content. You may not use electronics to email, text, tweet, or, in the immortal words of Bill Belichick, . I may ask you at some point if you are playing around on the Wide World Web.
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#### **STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS REQUIREMENTS**

“Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please schedule an appointment with the instructor early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course which have been approved by the Director of Disability and Support Services as indicated in your accommodation letter.”

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## **August 29 - September 4**

8/30--Introduction

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- Schmitt, *Political Theology* , pgs 5-6, 9-10, 15, 36-38, 49-50
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## **September 5 - September 11**

What is Political Theology?

9/6

- Paul Kahn, excerpts from *Political Theology*, 1-30, 137-147
  - George Shulman, “White Supremacy and Black Insurgency as Political Theology”
  - Saidiya Hartman, excerpt from *Scenes of Subjection*
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## **September 12 - September 18**

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Religion of the Enslaved

9/13

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- Albert Raboteau, excerpts from *Slave Religion*
  - Eddie Glaude, "Agency, Slavery, and African American Christianity" in Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue* (Chicago, 2007)
  - Hortense Spillers, "Variations on the African-American Sermon"
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## September 19 - September 25

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Contesting Narratives of Freedom and Liberation

9/20

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- Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
  - J. Kameron Carter, "Race, Religion, and the Contradictions of Identity: A Theological Engagement with Douglass's 1845 Narrative"
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## September 26 - October 2

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9/27

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- Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, preface, intro, ch 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 Afterword
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## October 3 - October 9

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10/4

Josef Sorett Guest Lecture

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- Sorett, excerpt from "Spirit in the Dark," "Secular Compared to What?," "A Fantastic Church: Literature, Politics, and the Afterlife of Afro-Protestantism"
  - "Religion, secularism, and Black Lives Matter," <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2016/09/22/religion-secularism-and-black-lives-matter/>
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## October 10 - October 16

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10/10 MONDAY EVENING: Film Viewing--"Birth of a Nation" -- Time and place, TBA

10/11

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- "The Confessions of Nat Turner"
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## **October 17 - October 23**

**FALL BREAK**

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## **October 24 - October 30**

10/25

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- Ted Smith, *Weird John Brown*
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## **October 31 - November 6**

11/1

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- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
  - Vincent Lloyd, "The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin"
  - Jonathon Kahn, "James Baldwin and a Theology of Justice in a Secular Age"
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## **November 7 - November 13**

11/8

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- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*
  - Vincent Lloyd, "The Political Theology of Mass Incarceration"
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## **November 14 - November 20**

11/15

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- Morrison, *Beloved*, 3-241
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## November 21 - November 27

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11/22

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- Morrison, *Beloved*, 242-324
  - Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3-108
  - Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, chs 4, 8
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## November 28 - December 4

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11/29

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- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, finish text
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## December 5 - December 11

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12/4

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- Jonathon Kahn, "The Virtue of Democratic Faith: A Recovery for Difficult Times"
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