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- **FWS/RELI/AFRS 189:**
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Religion, Community Organizing, and Movements for Civil Rights

A First-Year Writing Seminar and part of the

Social Justice in Question initiative

TR 1:30-2:45pm

Blodgett Hall 201

Jonathon Kahn, Professor of Religion, programs in Africana and American Studies

Office: Blodgett Hall 203

Office Hours: Weds 9-11, or by appointment

Course Description:

...the Utopian dreams of social justice in which many contemporary socialists and anarchists indulge are, in spite of their impracticability and non-adaptation to present environmental conditions, analogous to the saint's belief in an existent kingdom of heaven. They help to break the edge of the general reign of hardness and are slow leavens of a better order. – William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)

In American life, religion is often portrayed as a divisive force. Yet historically, religious actors, communities, spaces, and motivations have contributed to broad-based collective movements for civil and human rights. This course explores the ways in which religions have supplied resources that help communities organize and develop visions of collective life. Our focus will be on 20th and 21st century America, with special attention paid to Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker's Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement from 1945 to the present.

Social Justice in Question

Our course is part of the inaugural year of the Social Justice in Question initiative. Social Justice in Question (SJQ) names a consortium of First-Year Writing seminars that value and understand social justice as a crucial site of inquiry. These courses engage social justice as an on-going and reflective project, one that critically questions structures of power in an effort to construct a more humane world. Collectively, SJQ courses seek ways to engage the Vassar community and beyond through interrelated coursework and a public lecture series.

Part of the initiative is a year-long set of lectures, designed and sponsored by faculty teaching SJQ classes. As a whole, the lecture series presents Vassar students—not just SJQ students, but the entire campus—with multiple accounts and perspectives on social justice. The hope is that the diversity of approaches—from race, to disability studies, to math, to immigration—offers a variety of entry points for students to wrestle with the intersection of justice and society.

Please see the [SJQ website](#) for more information, including a full list of the SJQ course offerings and schedule of lectures.

Writing Seminar Goals

This course is a First-Year Writing Seminar. The course's goals include the following:

- 1) **Formulating an Argument:** By participating in a scholarly conversation with the readings, your classmates, and me, you will learn to craft clear claims about a text or an issue at hand.
- 2) **Marshalling evidence:** All arguments require evidence. Over the course of the semester, you'll work on ways to choose and present your evidence in persuasive ways.
- 3) **Writing-as-Process:** Writing is hard. It takes time. It requires revisions. We will do various strategies that address the difficulty of writing and the time it takes.

Course Texts (ordered from Vassar College Bookstore)

- Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist* (St. Martin's Press)
- William Barber, *The Third Reconstruction* (Beacon Press)
- Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (Orbis Books)

Other Readings

- Additional readings for the course, as marked on the syllabus, will be found on Moodle or on the web through links on the course syllabus on Moodle.

 - You must bring the essays to class. I recommend downloading them and printing them out. Less ideal is bringing your laptop to class and reading from it.

• [September 3 - September 9](#)

9/4: Introduction to the course

9/6:

- Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted," *New Yorker* (October 4, 2010).
- Reporting Civil Rights

9/7: Response 1, Due by midnight. Prompt: What is the question the author is asking in their piece of writing and how does the author answer that question?

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-  [Gladwell_Small Change](#)
 -  [Reporting Civil Rights](#)
 -  [Handout Questions](#)
 -  [Handout WritingGuidelines2](#)

• [September 10 - September 16](#)

9/11

- George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"
- Ernesto Cortés Jr., "Toward a Democratic Culture," *Kettering Review* (Spring 2006): 46-57.
- Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, [on her transition from law to seminary](#)
- Video: Michelle Alexander on The New Jim Crow at Union Theological Seminary

9/13

- [Religion, secularism, and Black Lives Matter](#), from the *Immanent Frame*. Please read entries by Wes Alcenat, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, Melynda Price,



9/13 Lecture, Villard Room @ 5:30

Race, Activism, and Social Justice

Barbara Ransby, Distinguished Professor of African American Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, and History, University of Illinois at Chicago

9/14 Response 2 Due by Midnight.

Prompt: Respond to one moment in any of our readings that moved you. Explain what it is about that moment that moved you in terms of the issues it raises. In other words, I want to hear about your feelings--but framed in terms of a broader set of issues you think your feelings are speaking to.

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-  [Orwell Politics and the English LanguageFile](#)
 -  [Cortes Democratic CultureFile](#)

- [September 17 - September 23](#)
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9/18

- Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, Preface and Part I

9/20

- Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, Part II

9/21 Response 3 Due by Midnight

September 24 - September 30

9/25

- Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, Part III

9/27

- Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, Part V

9/28 Draft of Mid-semester assignment due by Midnight

October 1 - October 7

10/2

- Luke Bretherton, "The Origins of Organizing"

10/4



- Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, "A Theology of Organizing"

10/4 Lecture

Mathematics and Social Justice

Karen Saxe, Associate Director of American Mathematical Society and the Dewitt Wallace Professor of Mathematics, Macalester College

10/5 Response 4 Due by Midnight

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-  Warren Theology Organizing
 -  Bretherton Origins Organizing

- [October 8 - October 14](#)
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10/9

- Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* excerpt

10/9 Lecture

Professor Christina Sharpe

Department of Humanities, York University

6pm Taylor 203

10/11

- Mid-Semester Paper Due by Midnight

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-  [Sharpe In The Wake](#)

- [October 15 - October 21](#)

Fall Break

- [October 22 - October 28](#)

10/23

- Aldon Morris, from the *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*

10/25

- Charles Payne, from *I've Got the Light of Freedom*

[October 29 - November 4](#)

10/30

- William Barber, *The Third Reconstruction*

11/1

- William Barber, *The Third Reconstruction*
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November 5 - November 11

11/6

- William Barber, *The Third Reconstruction*

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

William Star Distinguished Lecture

Roxane Gay

November 7, 2018

11/8

- Roxane Gay, TBA

November 12 - November 18

11/13

- Jeffrey Stout, from *Blessed Are the Organized*, “The Contested Sacred”

11/15

- Stout, “Across Great Scars of Wrong”

November 19 - November 25

11/20 – In Class Writing Day

Thanksgiving

November 26 - December 2

11/27

- Khan-Cullors and Bandele, *When They Call You A Terrorist*

11/29

- Khan-Cullors and Bandele, *When They Call You A Terrorist*


December 3 - December 9

12/4

- Khan-Cullors and Bandele, *When They Call You A Terrorist*

12/6

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

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-  [Kahn The Virtue of Democratic Faith A Recovery for Difficult Times](#)
 - [December 10 - December 16](#)
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12/11

- [Wrap-up](#)
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