THEO 650: Theology, Race, Culture
Fall 2026

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meeting times: Tuesdays, 6:30-9pm (central), online, via Teams
office hours: by appointment

Course Description

Since its inception what it means to be a follower of Christ had to be negotiated within cultural, political, and social contexts. Whether a small but strange sect that challenged the norms of the Roman Empire, to becoming an imperial religion, Christians have had to live out questions of identity. In our contemporary moment we are haunted by legacies of theologically sanctioned and violent differentiation. These lines are drawn by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality to name a few. The expansion of European colonial powers to "the world" grew out of and instantiated new and powerful ways of imagining one's place in the world with consequences for all peoples. "Race" became a logic, a way of seeing and organizing the world. Sadly, part of the legacy of this modern racial reality was the presence of the church in the midst of and as a catalyst for the re-imagining how lives are ordered and bound to one another.

Race is not a singular distortion of what it means to be made in the image of God. At the same time, we must ask how race comes into being and how it continues to shape our discourses, our communities, our world. While the logic of race may not be the primary frame of reference in your community, especially outside of the United Sates, to study the racial frames and how individuals and communities theorize, resist, and imagine new possibilities for themselves can serve as guides in a world where violent differentiation thrive in every corner of our world.

Drawing upon a variety of explicit and implicit theological sources we will attend to the creation of race and ethnicity as a theological moment in the modern world and how this reality has been negotiated. In the midst of this, we will reflect upon the challenges and possibilities of discipleship and ministry in a world so profoundly shaped by realities of race.

Learning Objectives

- Identify the distinction between race as a "natural" or as a socially constructed description of personhood
- Examine several significant theological rebuttals to dehumanizing theologies of race and identity
- Dialogue with literary and theological descriptions of race and ethnicity in the United States
- Workshop approaches to pastoral care and community engagement in scenarios where race is particularly evident.
- Reflect on how race has shaped or misshapen you. What does ministry or Christian leadership look like when it actively works for freedom and fullness of personhood of all people?

Course Readings

- Charles Chesnutt. The House Behind the Cedars. New York: Modern Library, 2003.(Available for free online, any edition is acceptable)
- Shawn Copeland. Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, Being. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. [isbn: 9781506463254; $23.92 at bookshop.org]

- Kelly Brown Douglas, Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God. Maryknoll, Orbis, 2015. [isbn: 9781626981096; $23.92 at bookshop.org]
- Willie James Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. [isbn: 9780300171365; $25.30 at bookshop.org]
- Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake. New York: Mariner Books, 2019. [isbn: 9780358062684; $15.63 at bookshop.org]
- Toni Morrison. The Bluest Eye. New York: Vintage International, 2007. [isbn: 9780307278449; $13.79 at bookshop.org]*

*additional readings to be posted online through Canvas

Meetings/class format

weekly reflections: As you work through the readings it is helpful to consider key passages or connections that you see. Each week you will post a quote that highlights a difficulty, something you hadn't thought of before, or perhaps something you were confused about. Write 250-300 words discussing why that quote stood out to you. Lastly, write 1 question you would like for us to address in our meeting (it does not have to be related to the quote you chose.) Reflections are due by 10am the day of class so that I can read through the questions and plan some responses during our class time.

weekly synchronous meetings via Teams: Each week we will meet virtually from 6-8:30 (central time). A zoom link will be posted on Canvas. You will already have listened to/read the lecture and read for the week. Our time together will be include a short lecture and addressing the questions that emerged and were posted to the forums, and then open up to questions that emerge from those responses and conversation.

Assignments/Grading

Master's Students

Weekly Reflection: (30%)
see description above.

Critical Pastoral Response: (30%, 40%)
Critical Pastoral Response: In a critical pastoral response students address a scenario that engages questions of race, theology, and identity. Responses are intended to encourage students to translate difficult concepts for the communities they serve as well as demonstrate nuanced and careful use of theological, theoretical, and historical resources to "read" situations and articulate a possible way forward. These responses are built primarily around a body of text that addresses the people in the situation and annotations that narrate the critical work you are bringing to bear in the situation. We will discuss the format and expectations of this assignment during our first in-class meeting.

Doctoral Students

Close reading papers: (25% each)

Choose 4 books and write a 5-7 page close reading paper for each book. Close readings examine a particular passage and develop an argument for reading the text and the quote in a particular way. Close readings focus on analysis of the author's argument and the significance of a particular quote in light of how you are reading the author's argument. Close readings are charitable, but critical in trying to examine how an author develops an idea within the larger text. These papers should not point to larger cultural realities or connect to other texts.

*****full schedule of readings will be available approximately 1 week prior to the first class session. As you anticipate the workload for this class, you can expect to read 100-200 pages per week, a written reflection each week, and 2 significant papers (9-10 pages each).***