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AUTUMN 2020

# Criterion



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## FROM THE DEAN

**R**ace and religion: past scholars and believers have often attempted to keep those two words far apart, preferring to see only the more universalist facets of their traditions. Today few conjunctions seem more urgent to religious studies in the United States. Everywhere we are seeing an efflorescence of inquiry into the ongoing effects of slavery, segregation, and racism on the possibilities not only for religion, but for life itself.

The Divinity School has attended to these questions in the past. The late Charles Long, who taught here in the 1960s, is just one of an earlier generation of scholars who sowed the disciplinary field. Others are attending to them today (see, for example, reflections in these pages by Professor Hopkins, or in the Fall 2019 issue, by Professor Curtis Evans). But neither this Divinity School nor any other has attended enough.

What would sufficient attention look like? At the very least, it would involve effort on all of our parts. We are not all scholarly experts in the distinctive racial history of violence and political oppression of African Americans that has so deeply shaped the society in which we live. But as we seek to confront the ways in which race and religion are intertwined in our own society, we can make this confrontation a task for all of us who study religion in other times and places.

The racial ideologies of modern colonialism and of the United States are in many ways distinctive, but they are also watered from a venerable reservoir of ideas in our religious traditions. Exploring those ideas can help us perceive the ongoing nourishment they provide to the intertwining of race and religion today.

One way to notice the size of the reservoir is to include an idea found among many peoples in the family of concepts we call “race”: the idea that attributes of human culture are reproduced as the organism reproduces itself, through seed, lineage, and genealogy. Equally widespread is the belief that among those attributes reproduced through seed are human relations with gods and divinities, along with



all the forms of power and subordination, patronage and deprivation, blessing and curse, that stem from those relations: a family of ideas we could loosely call “religion.” Thus defined, race and religion are widespread indeed.

Perhaps the ideas are so widespread because agriculture and culture are so closely related. Humans have dedicated millennial attention to the breeding and selection of plants and animals (including often themselves). In the Middle East strains of wheat and other “founder crops” were developed by 9500 BCE. In South Asia and across the Indo-Pacific it was rice instead of wheat; in the Andes potatoes; maize and squash in Mesoamerica. Animals too, were bred for select traits. Dogs, pigs, turkeys, sheep, llamas, cows, horses, camels: humans noticed the power of seed selection for many different needs and in many different places. Small wonder that mastery over seed is among the powers granted Adam at creation (1.29). That power struck later Greek and Latin translators as particularly important, judging by the alliteration they devoted to it: “*sporimon speiron sperma*,” says the Greek Septuagint, rendered by Augustine into equally sibilant Latin as “*seminale seminans semen*.”

An ancient Greek quipped that if horses had gods, those gods would look like horses. Many societies have imagined their gods as selectors of seed because that is what they themselves were. “Good semen, good seed, King chosen by Enlil,” begins one Sumerian poem to the fertility god Ninurta, son of the high god Enlil, circa 2500 BCE. Across the history of many ancient Near Eastern peoples we will see gods selecting from their own seed (compare Psalm 82.6), and from that of humanity as well. “Truly God chose Adam, Noah, the House of Abraham and the House of Imrān above the worlds, as seed [*dhurrīyah*], one from another. And God is Hearing, Knowing.” (Qur’an 3:33–34)

These examples should not imply that imbrications of race and religion are particularly Near Eastern or “Abrahamic.” The Hawaiian Islands are far from any continent, yet when Captain James Cook reached them

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# Criterion

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**Dean**

David Nirenberg

---

**Director of Communications**

Terren Ilana Wein

---

**Design**

Amy Charlson Design

---

**Photography**

Yuliya Grushik  
Irema Halilovic  
Kanika Singh Sisodia  
Joe Sterbenc  
Carol Tan

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The University of Chicago  
Divinity School  
1025 E. 58th Street  
Chicago, IL 60637  
773.702.8200  
[divinity.uchicago.edu](https://divinity.uchicago.edu)



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# What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Religion?

**“WE ARE TALKING ABOUT ALL SORTS OF PHENOMENA THAT MAKE SENSE AS OBJECTS OF HUMANISTIC AND SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY (TEXTS, INSTITUTIONS, RITUALS, CLAIMS, MATERIAL OBJECTS). But we are also talking with real people, past and present, whose lives are subjectively oriented by such phenomena. To the extent that religiously oriented persons typically interpret these phenomena differently than do scholars of religious studies, this field’s ‘data’ include alternative hermeneutical and other theoretical perspectives; the most sophisticated work in religious studies is informed by the recognition that such perspectives may themselves represent powerful challenges to scholarly understanding.”**

**DANIEL ARNOLD, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGIONS**

## ESSAY CONTEST ON RACE AND RELIGION

As the historical legacies of racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination persist in our contemporary world, questions about how religious practices and traditions interact with structures of power and categorizations of race demand increasing attention from scholars in the study of religion. To this end, the University of Chicago Divinity School invites submissions for an international essay contest.

We welcome contributions from graduate students at the master’s and doctoral levels in any field in the humanities, social sciences, or divinity, and graduates and early career scholars.

The winning essay will be awarded \$2,000 and an opportunity to deliver a lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Essays in second and third-place will be awarded \$500 each. Up to six finalists will be invited to participate in a publishing workshop alongside senior colleagues to revise their entries for publication.

Full details can be found online: <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/essay-contest>

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The Lord’s Business: Evangelical Christianity and Corporate Capitalism in Modern America

The Political Theologies of Zionism

The Radiant Pearl: Introduction to Syriac Literature and its Historical Contexts

Theological Criticism: Creation and Gender

Whom am I to Judge? Relativism and Religious Difference



## IN THE CLASSROOM



This academic year saw a proliferation of new course offerings, including **Environmental Justice in Chicago with Professor Sarah Fredericks**. Professor Fredericks' work draws upon pragmatic and comparative religious ethics to look at topics such as the interaction of religion, science, and philosophy.

**CLASS:**  
**ENVIRONMENTAL  
JUSTICE IN CHICAGO**

**INSTRUCTOR:**  
**Sarah Fredericks,**  
**Director of Doctoral  
Studies and  
Associate Professor of  
Environmental Ethics**

### **What's the class about?**

**SF:** Environmental Justice in Chicago will examine the development of environmental justice theory and practice through social scientific and ethical literature about the subject as well as primary source accounts of environmental injustices. We will focus on environmental justice issues in Chicago including, but not limited to waste

disposal, air pollution, the Chicago heat wave, and climate change. Particular attention will be paid to environmental racism and the often understudied role of religion in environmental justice theory and practice. The course will end by examining the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the environmental justice to explore whether and to what degree it is an issue of environmental justice.

Environmental justice scholarship and activism relies upon and develops multiple theories of justice. Distributive injustice involves the disproportionate environmental burdens some people, particularly people of color and the poor face. For instance, they are more likely to live near a toxic waste dump or coal-fired power plant, experience urban heat island effects, have less access to parks and green



space, or experience the effects of climate change. Participatory justice involves people's ability to participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making. Restorative and transformative justice may guide decision-making after injustices as communities try to respond to degraded ecosystems, health disparities, economic stress, and cultural erosion. While aspects of these theories of justice trace back to Aristotle, environmental justice scholars have developed many new ideas including theories of environmental identity and heritage and restorative justice to begin to address the thorny conceptual and practical issues of environmental injustice.

The emphasis on participatory justice in this field shapes the reading list for the class which will involve texts from scholars from many fields as well as activists and community members. I am hoping to have few local community leaders visit our virtual classroom. Throughout the course we will explore how normative commitments are expressed in different types of literature. We will investigate the types

of authorities authors use to ground their commitments, whether religious, political, scientific, economic, experiential etc. or some combination thereof.

#### **What was your inspiration for this class?**

**SF:** As a teacher, I aim to help students learn about and develop their own positions regarding complex ethical issues. Environmental justice is one of the most complex issues as it involves race, class, gender, environmental location, culture, and religion to name a few and insofar as many academic disciplines as well as lived experience facilitate our understanding of it. Issues of environmental justice are incredibly influential in our world, yet are often overlooked. Studying environmental justice allows both deep investigation of ethical theory and practice as they mutually inform each other. Additionally, as a scholar of religion, I recognize that a course on environmental justice enables us to study religion in many ways. Religious groups have commissioned groundbreaking studies on toxic wastes and race,



religious beliefs provide many with a foundational ethics of justice, networks of religious communities have often facilitated justice activism. Thus, I see environmental justice as a pressing issue in our world that also provides a clear way to introduce undergraduates to ethical theory and the academic study of religion.

Programmatically, this course is also part of Divinity School's increased attention to undergraduate education. The Ethics Area in particular has developed a set of three courses on justice in history, theory, and practice. By developing this course, I am also contributing to the Environmental and Urban Studies undergraduate major and establishing a connection with the Chicago Studies program. In doing so,

I hope to expand the number of students across the university who are exposed to the academic study of religion.

I'm also interested in exploring the history and contemporary circumstances of Chicago, and, ideally, making more connections in the community.



**"I see environmental justice as a pressing issue in our world that also provides a clear way to introduce undergraduates to ethical theory and the academic study of religion." SARAH FREDERICKS**



*Sightings*, the online publication of the **Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion**, recently came under the editorship of Daniel Owings, a PhD candidate in Theology whose research focuses on discourses surrounding idolatry in sixteenth-century European Christianity. We asked Daniel and previous editor Joel Brown, a PhD candidate in Religions in the Americas who studies race and religion, to ask each other a few questions from their side of the desk.



Joel Brown

**D:** What would you consider the most important contribution of *Sightings* to the public discourse about religion in your two years as editor?

**J:** Religion is a powerful force, one with the potential to be incredibly constructive and life-giving but also devastatingly destructive and life-crushing, and the last two years has seen plenty of both and perhaps more of the latter than we are accustomed to. When I arrived at the Divinity School a number of years ago, then dean Margaret M. Mitchell told those of us matriculating that studying religion is like “playing with fire,”

recognizing on the one hand its inherent and sometimes unavoidable capacity for destruction—the wildfires burning out west are on my mind—and yet also its necessity for sustaining human life on the other. The combustible and sometimes deadly force of religion means that we have to use care when analyzing and discussing it, attending to its complex relationships with other spheres of our individual and social lives, both where religion is obviously at play but also and maybe especially where it is hidden from plain sight. Religion has received a lot of attention and coverage over the last several years,

and I’m glad that news outlets and commentators are paying attention to religion’s role in shaping public life, but my worry is that it’s often being mishandled so that the complex and diverse forces of religion in a pluralistic society are only understood by what can be observed on the surface level, even by outlets that have editors and journalists dedicated to reporting on religion. So what I hope *Sightings* has contributed is a deeper and longer analysis—even if necessarily slower than most reporting on religion—of the innumerable public faces of religion in, around, and behind current events. Attending to the complexities and nuances of religion in public life is not always sexy, and it’s rarely easy, but it is crucial in helping individuals and communities not only prevent fires from burning people but also in helping them marshal fire’s life-giving properties, to provide light and warmth during our darkest and coldest nights. On our best days I think we were able to do just that.

**J:** What attracted you to the work of editing *Sightings*?

**D:** I really appreciate the genre and form of *Sightings* articles; there’s something thrilling about a small word-count limit, both because it forces writers to get to the point as quickly as possible, but also because it frees them from a lot of the normal perfectionistic reflexes that can inhibit academic writing. I like the insistence on rigorous methodology that one finds in the academy, and especially at UChicago, but it can bog down writers and readers both. *Sightings* presents the reading public with opportunities to encounter how academics are parsing what they see in the world in real time, and offer an entrée into the big meaty questions that really should be asked. I like soliciting those big questions from writers, and I really love helping them to refine and highlight that question as an editor.

The most important aspect of *Sightings* is the fact that it is housed within



a university; it presents a liminal space between the journalistic think piece and the academic article. The Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion, which is the specific home for *Sightings* within the Divinity School, has done a lot of work to encourage dialogue between the academy and the public regarding the study of religion, and *Sightings* is a crucial part of that.

**D:** What did you find the most difficult thing about editing the column?

**J:** I think there are number of shared challenges that editors of *Sightings* have faced throughout the years: having to reject so many great column pitches because we can only publish two per week; balancing the commentary and tone so that it is meaningful and readable for multiple audiences (e.g., scholarly and non-scholarly, interpreters of religion and religious practitioners); and trying to keep up with rapidly changing news cycles when the nature of our commentary and analysis necessarily takes more time and reflection, just to name a few difficulties. However, I think one challenge that was unique to my tenure, and that of my predecessor, Brett Colasacco, was editing *Sightings* during what we might call the “Trump Era.” The challenge didn’t really have much to do with President Trump himself

or even partisan politics per se, but rather Trump’s effect on the media and the nation’s attention. Over the last four years, Trump, both as President and personality, has dominated our attention and the headlines in a way that no one else before has, and this “Trump effect” has also impacted religion reporting. I subscribed to a number of daily newsletters that collected reports on religion around the globe, and I was time and again amazed (even if not entirely surprised) by how many stories about religion involved Trump. It seems that everything Trump does or tweets has a connection to religion and a potential religion story; it was a constant struggle to strike the right balance between covering religion in relation to Trump, which I don’t think we could have responsibly avoided, and paying attention to a world full of stories about religion in public life.

**J:** What are some of your criteria for deciding what topics *Sightings* will cover and which ones it won’t, recognizing that you only can run two articles a week?

**D:** The news cycle is such a constant blur right now, and religion is more relevant than ever to so many of the issues bombarding us. I’m still



Daniel Owings

figuring it out. One of the most important things so far has been allowing the columns to take time with a question. Time for reflection is important for the academic study of anything, and so a

run a special multi-author issue on the George Floyd protests was the only correct approach, and no one with a public platform can afford to stand idly by as so many fundamental injustices

**“Some stories demand comment.”** DANIEL OWINGS

series of hot-takes would inevitably stray from our foundations in the academy that make us unique. But more crucially, we’ll just miss so much if we restrict our understanding of “the public sphere” to the news cycle—there is so much happening in our world that is worth thinking about, and I want to bring the unknown and unfamiliar to our readers. Of course, some stories demand comment: for instance, your choice to

continue come to light—there is no room for neutrality in some areas. But at the same time it is necessary to bear in mind the immense complexity of the network of things commonly called “religion,” and to bring facets of that complexity to our readers; and that often requires turning our eyes away from the crisis du jour. Or at the very least, letting it sit for a few weeks.



**A scholar of modern Jewish thought and continental philosophy,** Sarah Hammerschlag says her interest in religion did not take root until she began exploring her family's Jewish background and reading French poet Edmond Jabès's work on exile.

**HAMMERSCHLAG MADE HER WAY TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO DIVINITY SCHOOL VIA A WINDING ROUTE,** with interludes working as a newspaper reporter on the *Roanoke Times* while studying for her MA in English and Creative Writing, as a bibliographer's assistant at Columbia University, and a brief graduate stint at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Hammerschlag (Associate Professor of Religion and Literature, Philosophy of Religions, History of Judaism, and Director of MA Studies) had just graduated with a BA from Wesleyan University in 1996 and was working as a feature reporter for the *Roanoke Times* in Virginia, where she spent time covering evangelical Christian and other faith communities, further fueling her interest in religion.

After she moved to New York City, Hammerschlag had a chance meeting with Wayne Proudfoot, a renowned scholar at Columbia University in the philosophy of religion field, that sparked in her the idea of pursuing graduate work in religious thought.

She applied to several programs, including the University of Chicago Divinity School, and ultimately chose UCSB. But the program wasn't a good fit, Hammerschlag says, and she decided to reactivate her Chicago application after revisiting the Divinity School.

"What made all the difference was meeting the students [at the Divinity School]," Hammerschlag says. "Even the most playful conversations were peppered with references to the history of religion and the history of philosophy, and I was so excited to meet people who shared that sense of quirkiness and that intellectual hunger."

At the Divinity School, Hammerschlag earned a master of arts degree in Religious Studies in 2001 and her PhD, in the Philosophy of Religions, in

2006. Her dissertation became her first book, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (The University of Chicago Press, 2010), which received an honorable mention for the 2012 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award from the Association of Jewish Scholars and was a finalist for the American Academy of Religion's Best First Book in the History of Religions in 2011.

*The Figural Jew* discuss how the representation of Jews in post-World War II French literature and philosophy moved away from the anti-Semitic tropes and images long embraced in France, especially in the decades

before World War II. After the war, "the idea of the uprooted Jew being on the margins developed a kind of positive philosophical and political cachet" among influential French intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida, according to Hammerschlag.

During her last year in graduate school, Hammerschlag was halfway into her dissertation when she accepted an assistant professorship for

the following school year at Williams College teaching continental philosophy and Jewish thought.

Hammerschlag says that although she loved teaching undergraduates at Williams, she and her husband, Ryan Coyne—who met as fellow Divinity School students—were teaching or researching at different schools at the time and needed to settle down in the same place.

Eventually, they returned to Chicago after Coyne, now Associate Professor of the Philosophy of Religions and Theology at the Divinity School, accepted a position there while Hammerschlag was on maternity leave with their daughter. Hammerschlag became an assistant professor at the Divinity School in 2013, an associate professor in 2016, and the director of the MA program in 2015, a position she is currently serving in for a second term.







“I was so excited to meet people who shared that sense of quirkiness and that intellectual hunger.”

SARAH HAMMERSCHLAG

Having just completed “Faith: Three Inquires on Religion, Literature, and Politics,” co-written with Amy Hollywood and Constance Furey, Hammerschlag is now working on the book *Sowers and Sages: The Renaissance of Judaism in Postwar Paris*, about the renewal of Jewish life after the war, which had its beginnings under the Vichy regime in the Jewish scouting movement. She previously published *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion* (2016) and edited the anthology *Modern French Jewish Thought: Writings on Religion and Politics* (2018) as part of the Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought.

“I’ve found that [the Divinity School] values very highly the research of its faculty,” Hammerschlag says, citing the school’s flexibility and the ability of faculty to arrange their schedules so that they can teach two out of the three teaching quarters and use the remaining time for research and writing.

Still, Hammerschlag says, teaching remains a priority: “The most exciting thing about the University of Chicago is my students. I remind myself that there’s just no other way I could have worked with the kind of students I get to work with. It’s incredibly exciting to learn from them.”



# Introducing the Academic Study of Womanist Theology

## Dwight N. Hopkins

THIS TALK WAS DELIVERED ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2020, AT THE DIVINITY SCHOOL'S WELCOMING DAY CEREMONY FOR INCOMING STUDENTS.

**W**omanist theology is the term chosen by many black female religious scholars who wish to name and claim two things: (1) the positive theoretical perspectives and experiences of African American women as a basis for doing theology; and (2) the enlivening of academic conversations to be more inclusive.

Womanist theology, moreover, takes its theological guidelines from the definition of womanist given by Alice Walker in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.<sup>1</sup> And I quote this four-part definition:

Womanist 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to

the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

Walker's four-part definition embodies aspects of tradition, community, self, and similarities and differences with white feminist theology.

### WOMANIST HISTORY

The first article published from a womanist theological perspective was actually pointing toward black feminist theology. The young author, Jacqueline Grant, was a PhD student in systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary (New York City). In 1979 Grant published her article titled "Black Theology and the Black Woman." Though the specific phrase *womanist theology* was created several years after this 1979 essay, historically this is the first article that began womanist theology.

Grant's essay called into question the most fundamental belief of black theology as a theology of liberation. It challenged African American men's





apparent overconfidence in liberation by illustrating how black male theology contradicted its own criteria. Specifically, Grant argued that if black theology described itself as a theology of liberation—meaning that Jesus Christ was with the most oppressed and God was working for the liberation of the least in society—then why was it that black theology, at best, was silent about African American women and, at worst, oppressed black women? The point was clear: Black theology cannot claim to be for justice and simultaneously treat black women as second-class citizens. Thus Grant deployed an internal critique of black male liberation theology.

Grant concluded that black women are invisible in black theology. She observed two derogatory justifications pervading the classroom: (1) African American women have no place in the study of God-talk and God-walk because we don't see them on the faculty or in the student body; and (2) black men are capable of speaking for black women.

Similar conclusions can be drawn about black women in the African American church and the larger society. Grant wrote the following criticism of black religious institutions:

If the liberation of women is not proclaimed, the church's proclamation cannot be about divine liberation. If the church does not share in the liberation struggle of black women, its liberation struggle is not authentic. If women are oppressed, the church cannot be "a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality."<sup>2</sup>

The very first written work to use the term *womanist* was Katie G. Cannon's 1985 article "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness." Championing Alice Walker's concept of "black *womanist* consciousness," Cannon observed that black feminist consciousness may, in fact, be more accurately defined as black womanist consciousness. Cannon writes how the black womanist tradition



provides the incentive to chip away at oppressive structures, bit by bit. It identifies those texts that help Black womanists to celebrate and to rename the innumerable incidents of unpredictability in empowering ways. The Black womanist identifies with those biblical characters who hold on to life in the face of formidable oppression. Often compelled to act or to refrain from acting in accordance with the powers and principalities of the external world, Black womanists search the Scriptures to learn how to dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life.<sup>3</sup>

Cannon's scholarship introduced *womanism* as the pioneering and new description for all black women's religious work; however, the first written text using the specific phrase *womanist theology* was by Delores S. Williams. In her article, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," which appeared in the March 2, 1987 edition of *Christianity & Crisis*, Williams used Alice Walker's definition of womanism as a theoretical framework for black women's theology.<sup>4</sup>

#### METHOD IN WOMANIST THEOLOGY

The arrival and advancement of womanist theological method provides an important contribution to the academy, the church, and the larger society. In the development of theology and ethics, womanists' method explores critically an inclusive or total relation to the divine. For them, this means that African American women cannot be focused on one issue. So they argue for positive sacred - human connections around issues such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and, to a certain degree, ecology. In fact, an inclusive method and an inclusive worldview define what it means to do womanist theology, which embraces and employs (1) the many theological examples of oppression and liberation, (2) many disciplines and analyses; and (3) the diverse dimensions of what constitutes a human being—that is, the spiritual, cultural, political, economic, linguistic, and other realms.

Furthermore, in the words of Delores S. Williams, womanist theological method is "informed by at least four elements: (1) a multidialogical intent, (2) a liturgical intent, (3) a didactic intent, and (4) a





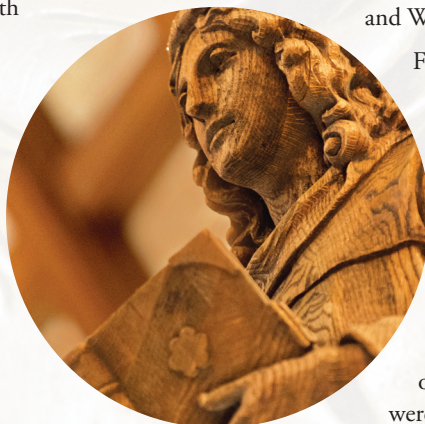
commitment both to reason and to the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements.”<sup>5</sup>

*Multidialogical intent* allows Christian womanists to participate in many conversations with partners from various religious, political, and social communities. In these discussions, womanists focus on the “slow genocide” of poor African American women, children, and men caused by systems of exploitation. *Liturgical intent* enables black female religious scholars to fashion a theology relevant to black churches, especially in worship, action, and thought. At the same time, womanist theology confronts black churches with prophetic and challenging messages coming out of womanist conceptual frameworks and critical practices. Black church liturgy has to be defined by justice. *Didactic intent* points to the teaching moment in theology as it relates to a moral life grounded in justice, survival and quality-of-life considerations. All of these concerns can yield a language that is both rich in imagination and reason and filled with female story, metaphor, and imagery.

The method of womanist theology includes both epistemology and practice, that is, how we obtain knowledge and how we practice our ethics. How do womanists get their knowledge and how does knowledge relate to their practice? In the analysis of Kelly Brown Douglas, womanist theology is accountable to ordinary women—poor and working-class black women. Accordingly womanists must reach beyond the seminaries and divinity schools and go into churches and community-based organizations in order for womanist theologians to make theology more accessible. Moreover, womanist theology must work with church women to help empower them generally and to assist them in creating change vis-à-vis the church leadership. African American women comprise up to 70 percent of black churches and are the financial supporters and workers of the church.<sup>6</sup>

**“Black theology cannot claim to be for justice and simultaneously treat black women as second-class citizens.”** DWIGHT HOPKINS

Summing up the holistic or inclusive dimension of the various sources in womanist theology, Emilie M. Townes states that the cornerstone of womanist analysis and practice is the black church and larger community. From this environment, womanists learn from sacred and secular black writers and singers, conversations in higher education, black folktales, and even vodun and West African indigenous religions.<sup>7</sup>



For instance, one of the most creative models for practicing womanist theological method was initiated by Professor Teresa L. Fry.<sup>8</sup> From 1988 to 1994, in Denver, Colorado, Professor Fry worked with African American women in churches, individual interest groups, and various other organizations. In this model, there were 500 to 600 participants. Fry states that the women created S.W.E.E.T. (Sisters Working Encouraging Empowering Together), which was an intentional womanist effort to support black women's spiritual and social liberation. The project was truly inclusive: ages 7 through 78; educational levels from grade school to graduate school; women who were married, widowed, single, and divorced; heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual members; faith perspectives from ecumenical to interfaith to unchurched to personalized spiritual feelings; some who “had been incarcerated, on the way to jail or knew someone there.”

S.W.E.E.T. organized annual seminars, inclusive seminars, intensive women centered Bible studies, monthly workshops, relationship building exercises, small group discussions, potluck dinners, informal and formal luncheons,



community action projects, intergenerational mentoring groups, individual and group counseling sessions, guest speakers, and in group speakers, panel discussions, role playing, ethnographies, health support groups, and African American women's literature study and discussion groups. Alice Walker's definition of womanist was used as the point of departure of each discussion.<sup>9</sup>

The following was added to Walker's definition: a S.W.E.E.T. womanist also "believes in Somebody bigger than you and me" or "possesses a radical faith in a higher power."

Throughout the sessions, women were encouraged to think for themselves and form their own opinions and models of life by taking seriously their own experiences. In addition, each person had a chance to lead meetings. One rule governed all of S.W.E.E.T.'s activities: "We will respect our sister's space, speech, issues, voice, pain and sensitivities." Women used titles such as Sister, Girlfriend, or first names. And elders were respected with the designation of Mother (for the spiritual anchors of the group) or Miss.

Women were not pressured to be a member of a church and there was an understanding that the group was spiritually based. Each sister determined and articulated her own sense of spirituality. African American spirituality is the conscious awareness of God, self, and others in the total response to Black life and culture. It is the expressive style, mode of contemplating God, prayer life, and that which nourishes, strengthens and sustains the whole person. We coupled prayer, testimony, tears, laughter, or silence with embracing each other.<sup>10</sup>

Further S.W.E.E.T. activities included interviews with members' mothers, grandmothers, and other mothers; investigations of black women leaders in different fields and in history; discussions on how to change and save the black family based on African family values; black clergywomen in the pulpit, revisioning inclusive liturgies, and seeing women's roles in the Bible; "Back to the Kitchen Table" programs held on Saturday mornings in different homes; an intergenerational group, "It Takes an Entire Village to Raise a Child"; and "Loving and Care for Yourself" gatherings concerning

hysterectomy, breast cancer, divorce, new Christians, single mothers, exercising, and self-affirmation.

For academics, the S.W.E.E.T. model encourages a multidisciplinary approach to discerning meaning in conversations in higher education, especially conversations situated in the vibrant culture and context of a university setting.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, womanist theology informs and perhaps challenges us on several levels. Womanist academics weave a web of holism, an integrated vision of non-dualism encompassing, among other things, gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ecology, religious studies and theology together, faith and rigorous "objective" scholarship together, academy, church and community together, individual healing and radical transformation of U.S. structures and the aesthetic together.

Furthermore, *holism* in methodology and cosmology coupled with *faith* in a justice and liberation power beyond the human realm connect to their intentional *self-naming* as intergenerational African American women. We observe a sense of intellectual history and critical continuity among the womanists. That is why, for me, they self-consciously use the terms first, second, and third generation womanist scholars. They might teach us that structural and individual conversions in the United States will more likely result when black female, religious scholars work toward relating to previous scholars who put up the scaffolding for the house of their theology and theories. Contrary to this long genealogy of their parents and ancestors, it appears as if today's North American culture thrives on historical amnesia and instantaneous micro-wave individualism. But the womanists know where they come from and to whom they are linked.

I think rigorous critical and self-critical interrogation, theoretical innovation, and constructive theology will further enhance the academy, the more our doors are open to welcome many who pursue the academic study of womanist theology.

*Dwight N. Hopkins is the Alexander Campbell Professor of Theology.*





1 New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. xi-xii.

2 In Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, ed. *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 423.

3 Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 1985), 40.

4 Williams' article "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," can be found in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume Two, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

5 Williams, "Womanist Theology," 269.

6 Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 114.

7 Emilie M. Townes, introduction to *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 2.

8 Teresa L. Fry, "Avoiding Asphyxiation: A Womanist Perspective on Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Transformation," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), chap. 6. All references to Fry's work are from this article.

9 *Ibid.*, 80.

10 *Ibid.*, 81.







# Ancient Muses and Student Poets: Storytelling in Verse

I HAVE ASKED SOME OF MY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO TO QUOTE THEIR WORK FOR THIS ARTICLE. I AM GRATEFUL FOR THEIR ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE AND HAVE HONORED THEIR WISHES TO BE CREDITED BY NAME OR ANONYMOUSLY.

BY ERIN GALGAY WALSH IN *ANCIENT JEW REVIEW* | PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 20, 2020

In a world reverberating with poetic speech, Christianity blossomed. Poets retold biblical stories, conveyed their doctrinal convictions, and reflected on their faith in the midst of personal struggle. Drawing from my own research on Greek and Syriac poetry, I decided to design a survey course that would both introduce students to late antique authors and consider how later poets diverged from and sustained earlier traditions. How did Christians respond to and transform received poetic traditions? What habits of biblical interpretation and narration does one encounter in Christian poetry? How does poetry function as a medium for theological inquiry, debate, and ethical reflection? Over ten weeks, thirty-five students from various undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs became my interlocutors for this inquiry. Together we traversed linguistic and doctrinal boundaries, reading across twenty centuries from



Syria Palaestina to the Iberian Peninsula, Edessa to medieval England, Renaissance Italy to the contemporary United States.

For the first few weeks we focused on late antique poetry composed in Latin, Greek, and Syriac.

We discussed authors such as Prudentius, Proba, Gregory of Nazianzus, Romanos Melodos, Ephrem the Syrian, and Jacob of Serugh with a focus on storytelling, attribution of imagined speech, and their use of the Bible. Students discovered the ways poets expanded biblical stories and foregrounded minor characters to shift an audience's perspective. Romanos's dramatic and swiftly paced kontakia opened avenues for examining the role of liturgy and performance for nurturing beliefs and practices.

We discussed foundational works in poetic aesthetics such as Michael Roberts's *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* and Aaron Pelttari's *The Space that Remains: Reading Latin*



*Poetry in Late Antiquity*. I introduced students to the field of Syriac literature through essays from Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Sebastian Brock on the creation and amplification of female voices. [1] The writings of Derek Krueger illuminated the ways that Romanos modeled religious subjectivity through poetic narrators. I assigned Karl Olav Sandnes's *The Gospel According to Homer and Virgil* to explain the intricacies of Proba's *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*. The cento, a poem formed from verses and sections of previous works, opened up textually grounded conversations on how some learned Christians engaged classical culture to express their faith in an elevated style. In addition to participating in translation groups, advanced students surveyed the larger landscape of late antique poetry through the work of Laura Lieber and Tzvi Novick on *piyyutim* (Jewish and Samaritan liturgical poetry).

No one could have foreseen the challenges that arose from teaching in the spring of 2020. With our library limiting access to students and faculty, I had to rethink research assignments and assessment. Ultimately, I chose to supplement close readings and traditional analysis with a more creative assignment: learning through imitation. This project was placed at the midpoint of the course to allow students to pause and apply their newfound insights into the poetic rhetoric of early Christians. Late antique poets—with their penchant for storytelling and dramatization—offered students plenty of examples to emulate. The assignment had two parts:

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**PART ONE:** Retell a biblical story, a cultural memory, or a story from any religious or philosophical tradition using the techniques we encountered in the poets discussed over the last few weeks. You should imitate artistic styles, interpretative approaches, and modes of presentation. When selecting a topic, narrow your focus on a single scene or narrative moment to explore deeply.

**PART TWO:** Through a short preface and footnotes, reflect on your artistic process in conversation with course readings. What are your primary rhetorical and pedagogical aims? How does form enhance your message? What aspects of familiar stories and characters did you open up for readers? Can you envision a performative context for your piece?

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**“The students engaged the assignment in surprising and profound ways. Most composed inspired poetry, but a few applied the narrative techniques of late antique poets to other genres, scripting original plays, writing short stories, and creating visual art.”**

**ERIN GALGAY WALSH**

I underscored the openness of the prompt as an invitation for students to customize their work to suit their individual interests and artistic tastes, even while Part Two encouraged students to apply what they had learned from historians and literary theorists. Reading and commenting on their annotations allowed me to have a one-on-one conversation with students, a welcome benefit when the class size had made it difficult to form connections over Zoom discussions and asynchronous platforms. Attention to literary devices like rhyme, alliteration, and rhythm, equips students to consider the particularity of poetry as a medium for religious expression.

The students engaged the assignment in surprising and profound ways. Most composed inspired poetry, but a few applied the narrative techniques of late antique poets to other genres, scripting original plays, writing short stories, and creating visual art.

The most successful submissions reimagined stories from fresh angles. Taking Boethius and Prudentius as models, one student staged *The Acts of Thecla* as a three-character play featuring the cities of Antioch, Seleucia, and Iconium imagined as women. These figures bore witness to the exploits and miracles of Thecla drawing out the importance of location to the saint's life. Inhabiting the point of view of relatively minor or intentionally silenced characters, a practice students observed in Greek and Syriac authors, proved a powerful rhetorical strategy. Stories of sexual violence also drew attention as



students sought to redress injustice within the biblical texts and give voice to female pain. One student composed and recorded a song from the point of view of Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) to the tune of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." In the composition, Bathsheba relates her own story of heartbreak at David's hands:

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**Ashamed I was to be used so,  
violated by one so powerful and known.  
King anointed, exalted, respected.  
A destructive end you have pursued  
and cursed now are all within your brood.[2]**

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Reflecting the power of refrains, she punctuated her song with a reminder of the multiple dimensions of Bathsheba's identity: "Bathsheba, wife taken, mother heartbroken, woman scorned." The emotions here on display are a good example of the empathetic reading practices students brought to the biblical text. One poem recounted the mental anguish of the concubine in Judges 19 by imagining a young woman's final interaction with her parents: "But her mother knew, she could always tell/that she did not want to go/home again to her living hell." [3] Echoing the ways Ephrem and Jacob vivified figures through monologues and narrative embellishment, students pressed beyond sparsely recounted biblical stories to create engaging, emotional portrayals.

By considering the moral deliberations and struggles of biblical characters from a first-person perspective, students understood texts more intimately. One piece, recorded as a rap, captured the eagerness (and subsequent disappointment) of the rich young man who asks Jesus to point out the way to eternal life (Mt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-31; Lk 18:18-30). Opening with playful ebullience, "All the jewels, all the mules, everything I've flaunted, / but when I'm alone man I'm still haunted," the writer emphasized the conspicuous self-assurance of the youth: "I was so rich that I never had to murder/ I was so rich that I never had to steal/ or tell a lie



just to get another meal." [4] Another student-poet reconstructed the community behind the Epistle to Philemon by assuming the voice of Apphia, "our sister" (1:2). Listening to Paul's plea on behalf of Onesimus through the lens of Col 3:11, Apphia questions the apostle's claims, "A servant is not a servant. Might then, a woman be not a woman? Could it be? Or am I only a witness to a discourse that does not embrace [me]?" [5]

Students also displayed a keen eye for poetic form and rhetoric. Imitating the elaborate invitational prayers found in Jacob of Serugh, students crafted their poetic narrator and gave structure to their short compositions. Some took up the formal challenges of composing a cento. Drawing lines and phrases from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (cited in brackets), one student recounted God's directive to Hosea to marry Gomer:

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**"My word, O prophet, and effectual might,"**  
[III.170, XII.375]

**So spake the almighty maker that one,**  
[VII.174, VI.23]

**A servant of God, in hope heard his voice.**  
[VI.29, III.630, 710]

**"Elect to wed her, Daughter of Sin, so**  
[III.184, V.216, X.708]

**is my will, with that bad woman to bring**  
[III.184, X.837, 983]

**A woeful race, own begotten,  
and of**  
[X.984, 983]

**Ere conception, race  
unblessed to being."**  
[X.987, 988] [6]

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In their annotations students observed how the base texts shaped their new compositions. The lyrics from the Broadway musical, "Hamilton," led one student to intensify the political dimensions of Jesus's ministry and death. The words of Aaron Burr slide easily from Judas's lips: "Now I'm the villain in your history." [7] More than a simple pastiche of familiar lyrics and verses, the *cento* fosters evocative parallels and reveals a thoughtful negotiation between source and rhetorical goals.



As critical readers, students not only observed how ancient authors connected distinct biblical passages through the use of imagery and types, but they actively forged intertexts. Responding to the potent maternal imagery of Ode XIX from the *Odes of Solomon*, one student wove together biblical figures through familiar imagery:

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**And the Spirit pierced the womb of the Mother,  
and she received the holy and made it blood  
because from the blood would come the wine for the Beloved.  
And the spear pierced the soul of the Mother,  
and the holy wine began to flow for the Beloved.[8]**

---

The style of poetic rhetoric even led students to consider the role of chronology in storytelling. They fractured the sequence of narrative action as allusions and foreshadowing troubled linear timelines. Such examples show attentiveness to how Ephrem and others rearranged biblical language and imagery as mosaic tesserae to create distinct expressions.

The present pandemic has, without question, changed the way we teach, learn, think, and relate to one another. In developing this course, I reflected openly with students: what difference does the study of the ancient world and its literature make in times such as these? Throughout the course we discussed how syllabi and historiography reflect conscious decisions. Whose voices are centralized (and marginalized)? What questions must we ask? How does our own experience inform our readings? And finally, where do we go from here? How can we evolve as thinkers and interlocutors?

For those of us teaching and writing about late antiquity, I would suggest that the often-marginalized genre of poetry brings a polyphony of voices to the table. Poetic literature compels us to *listen* for multiple perspectives: from the imagined voices of female biblical figures to late antique and medieval women such as Proba and Kassia—not to mention modern and contemporary poets. A survey course of such breadth reveals shifts over time and distance, while also unearthing surprising affinities.

Students read late antique Syriac poems featuring pearl imagery alongside the medieval English *Pearl Poet* to query how Christians in distinct historical and geographical contexts returned to a single biblical image to express their visions for faithful living. A class dedicated to the character of Eve featured readings from Narsai of Nisibis in tandem with premodern poets Aemilia Lanyer and John Milton to glimpse the ways biblical storytelling around Genesis participated in the construction of gender. We read the recent edition of Jupiter Hammon's poetry in conjunction with William Langland's *Piers Plowman* to consider how two Christians reflected on social injustices and structural violence through a biblical idiom. For the final class, students compiled their own reading list highlighting the religious aspects of artists including George Herbert and Kendrick Lamar around the themes of death, faith, and suffering.

But most importantly, this assignment encouraged students to develop their own voices. Their fearlessness and imagination—in the midst of crises personal, local, national, and global—affirmed that in both the ancient world and our own today, poetic speech is power.

*Erin Galgay Walsh is Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Executive Editor for Christianity at Ancient Jew Review, a non-profit web journal devoted to the interdisciplinary study of ancient Judaism. This essay is reprinted by permission.*

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[1] There are several essays from both authors one could assign, for example: Sebastian P. Brock, "Creating Women's Voices: Sarah and Tamar in Some Syriac Narrative Poems," in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 125-42 and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2001): 105-131.

[2] Kristen Joseph, English and Literature major and graduate with the class of 2020.

[3] Paige Spencer, MA student in the Divinity School.

[4] David Kim, MA student in the Divinity School.

[5] Ian Caveny, MA student in the Divinity School.

[6] Emily Barnum, MA student in the Divinity School.

[7] Alexis Wolf, a Comparative Literature major and graduate with the class of 2020.

[8] Viviana Rojas Madrid, a Psychology major and rising senior.



# News & Notes

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Our Teaching Fellows program, which offers recent graduates the opportunity to continue to develop their research and teaching at the School for up to two years, doubled this year. Fellows work under the mentorship of a faculty colleague, and within a pedagogical community of practice. This year's new fellows are [Bevin Blaber](#), [Greg Chatterley](#), [Francesca Chubb-Confer](#), [Marshall Cunningham](#), and [Matthew Vanderpoel](#). They join the second-year cohort in developing and offering a range of new courses aimed at the UChicago College population.

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[Charles Preston](#) has joined us as our inaugural Higher Education Program Administrator.

Like our Teaching Fellow program, this is a two-year postdoctoral position, in this case for alumni of our PhD program who are interested in pursuing careers in higher education administration. Charles will work

closely with staff in the Dean's office and Dean of Students office, as well as with our directors of undergraduate and doctoral studies, providing support for programs including career counseling, admissions, the development of the religious studies core, and the Craft of Teaching pedagogy program.

Charles earned his MA ('06) and PhD ('16, History of Religions) from the Divinity School. He has served as a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at Millsaps College and has held Visiting Assistant Professor appointments at Northwestern University and Albion College. Of his appointment, Charles says that, while much has changed, "the Divinity School is my intellectual home, and I'm happy to be a part of the family again."

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A new initiative of the Dean of Students office pairs peer mentors with incoming students. [The BONDS \(Building Opportunities and Networks for Divinity Students\) Peer Mentorship Program](#) aids our incoming students with the transition to graduate school, and also builds community both within the new cohorts and across the Divinity School.

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## 57

### **Graduates for Spring 2020:**

32 MA  
5 AMRS  
14 MDiv  
6 PhD

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## 21

### **Graduates for Summer 2020:**

8 MA  
4 AMRS  
1 MDiv  
8 PhD

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## 63

### **New Students in Autumn 2020**

29 MA  
7 AMRS  
15 MDiv  
12 PHD

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## 8

### **Teaching Fellows in the 2020-2021 academic year**



## Faculty News



David Barak-Gorodetsky has joined us in Swift Hall for a three-year appointment as our Israel Institute Visiting Fellow. A historian and a scholar of Jewish thought, Prof. Barak-Gorodetsky's interests include pre-state and early-state Israeli history, Jewish-American history and religious thought, political theology, post-secularism and Israel and World Jewry relations.

### Marion Awarded Top Theology Prize

Jean-Luc Marion—widely regarded as one of the world's leading Catholic thinkers—has been awarded the Ratzinger Prize for his lifetime achievements in theology.

Awarded annually by Pope Francis and considered one of the world's most prestigious awards for theological study, the Ratzinger Prize recognizes lifetime achievements in scriptural exegesis, patristics or systematic theology. Previous winners include French scholar Rémi Brague and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.

The Andrew Thomas Greeley and Grace McNichols Greeley Professor of Catholic Studies and Professor of the Philosophy of Religions and Theology at the Divinity School, Marion works at the intersection of

Christian theology, the history of philosophy and contemporary phenomenology—the philosophical study of structures of consciousness.

“Jean-Luc Marion has done more than any other thinker in our generation to explore the kinship between philosophy and theology in Catholic thought and culture,” said Prof. David Nirenberg, dean of the Divinity School. “His writings have deepened these disciplines and modes of thought, and enriched the very language (French) in which he writes. I am delighted that his contributions to theology are being honored, and

by a community that has benefitted so much from his teaching.”

A member of the Académie française, Marion was received as one of the literary society's *immortels* in 2010. He is also a member of the Accademia dei Lincei—a science academy based in Rome—and the Pontifical Council on Culture, which fosters relationships between the Catholic Church and other cultures.

Among Marion's many awards are the Grand Prix du Philosophie de l'Académie Française,

the Karl-Jaspers Prize of the city and University of Heidelberg, and the Humboldt-Stiftung Prize. He is also a professor emeritus of philosophy at Université Paris-Sorbonne.

The award was launched in 2011 to recognize scholars whose work demonstrates a meaningful contribution to theology in the spirit of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Bavarian theologian who became Benedict XVI.



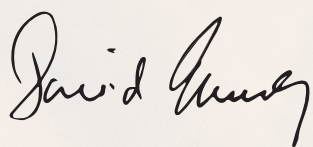


FROM THE DEAN, *CONTINUED*

in 1778 he found a flourishing civilization whose agricultural practices, cosmologies, and marriage strategies were as intimately intertwined as those of the Sumerians or any other peoples. The same is true of the Incas and the Aztecs, or of the Shang dynasty of China circa 1600 BCE. Much of humanity has contributed, each in its own particular way, to the creation of structures of domination and discrimination that have often shared the common tendency to imagine that seed transmits human potential, that the potential for godliness and all the goods that flow from it is among those transmitted by biological reproduction, and that the gods themselves authorize this view.

It is true that some reproductive theologies and bio-cultural discourses have conquered and converted more of the world than others. The ones we are confronting in the present urgently require specialized attention. But it is also true, as Marshall Hodgson—pioneer of world history and collaborator with Charles Long—once wrote, that everything in history may be interconnected. When those of us who are not specialists in the racial history of the United States reflect critically on questions of race and religion in some other place and time, we can offer points of engagement for critical reflection on race and religion in our own.

Discovering one's potential offering: that is a matter of attention, not of specialty. As we tread the steps of Swift Hall, let each of us be alert for what it is our own distinct learning, no matter how obscure or archaic our object of study, can contribute to criticizing the embrace of race and religion today.



**DAVID NIRENBERG**  
DEAN OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL  
AND DEBORAH R. AND EDGAR D. JANNOTTA  
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR



