

Scott C. Williamson  
Spring 2010  
TH274C

## **Frederick Douglass**

### **Course Description**

This seminar is designed to introduce students to the moral, political, and religious thought of Frederick Douglass and to the cultural milieu within which he lived. Douglass was one of the most fascinating and influential figures of the nineteenth century. Remembered primarily as a dynamic abolitionist lecturer and candid editor, Douglass was also an important thinker. He was among the nineteenth century's foremost advocates for social, racial and gender equality. Douglass is also among the first generation of black thinkers to combine the disparate elements of Protestantism, Black Nationalism, moral and political abolitionism, and cultural assimilation into an effective program of social progress for African Americans. His ideas influenced generations of black scholars, most notably, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

The goal of this seminar is twofold: (1) to discern Douglass's thought; and (2) to understand the times in which he lived. Students will accomplish this goal by engaging in collaborative research. While examining Douglass's autobiographies, students will be assigned to small working groups, three to four persons each, around selected themes in the field of Douglass scholarship. These small groups will present their research and findings to the class.

### **Requirements**

1. Regular class attendance, reading and thoughtful participation
2. Group presentation on one of the research topics at the end of the syllabus.  
Students will present their research questions and findings to the class (approximately 20 minutes per group)
3. 3 short essays (three pages each, double-spaced). These short essays are intended to help you prepare for your final essay. While you are free to choose the specific topic of these essays, each one should contain the following three elements: (1) description; (2) analysis; and (3) theological/moral reflection. In the first of these essays, students will evaluate Douglass's vision of self-realization in the midst of social injustice. In the second essay, students will locate Douglass within the intellectual and social currents of his day and assess how his public voice is indebted to those currents. Finally, in the third essay, students will interpret the theological traditions that helped Douglass to give meaning to the Civil War, and that grounded his mature religious and moral thought.

As an alternative to the third requirement, students may write a one-page reflection on the 12 reflection questions at the end of the syllabus. The first and second reflections, question #1 and #2, are due February 22nd and an additional reflection is due each week thereafter for the remainder of the semester.

4. A 12-page final essay (9 pages if you choose to answer the 12 reflection questions) on your research topic. Citations in all of your written work should follow the Seminary standard, which is based on these guides:
  - Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
  - *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

### **Grading**

1. Attendance, reading, and participation: 20%
2. Oral presentation: 20%
3. 3 short essays (or 12 one-page reflection papers): 30%
4. Final research paper: 30%

### **Required Books** (in order of use)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., editor, *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, 1994

Waldo Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984)

David Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989)

### **Schedule of Topics**

February 15                      Introduction to the peculiar institution and to Douglass

February 22                      *Narrative of the Life*

March 1                              *My Bondage and My Freedom*  
especially chapters 18, 22-25

March 8                              *Life and Times*  
especially chapters 6, 7, 10, 15, 18-19

#### **Essay #1 due**

March 15                              *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*  
chapters 1-4

March 29                              *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*  
chapters 5-7

April 5                                 *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*  
chapters 8-10

#### **Essay #2 due**

April 12	<i>Frederick Douglass' Civil War</i> chapters 1-5
April 19	<i>Frederick Douglass' Civil War</i> chapters 6-10
April 26	group presentations (groups 1 & 2)
	<b>Essay #3 due</b>
May 3	group presentations (groups 3 & 4)
May 10	group presentations (groups 5 & 6)
May 21	<b>Final paper due</b>

### **Research Topics**

1. Douglass and Christianity.
2. The influence of Black Nationalism and Racial Assimilationism on Douglass's thought.
3. Douglass's public voice and his indebtedness to abolitionist philosophy.
4. Douglass's political agenda compared to other 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists.
5. Resistance and reconciliation in Douglass's moral thought.
6. The relevance of Douglass's thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Can slavery be justified on moral or theological grounds?
2. Can violent resistance to slavery be justified on moral or theological grounds?
3. Where is God in the abolitionist struggle for emancipation?
4. What view of the Christian life emerges from Douglass's autobiographies?
5. Was Douglass's abolitionism derivative?
6. Describe the philosophy behind Douglass's social reform agenda.
7. Was Douglass a Christian? Did he push God offstage?
8. What is "liberal" religion and does it accurately describe Douglass's religion?
9. Explain two of the following intellectual and theological traditions: millennialism, apocalypticism, civil religion, and/or the jeremiad.
10. How did John Winthrop's vision of a "city upon a hill" function in prewar rhetoric?
11. Evaluate the power of political memory in the postwar years.
12. Did blacks have a political home in the postwar years?