

SINGLE SESSION DISCUSSION GUIDE

Religious Liberty Has Been White Too Long: Voices of Black Scholars



Faith. Freedom. For All.

This discussion guide is a companion piece for the 2021 event “Religious Liberty Has Been White Too Long: Voices of Black Scholars.” Featuring four scholars, the program explores the intersection of Black freedom and religious liberty. Each expert focused on deepening and expanding the work of decentering white voices and perspectives that have long-since dominated conversations about religious freedom.

The program was for the 2021 Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State, and hosted by BJC. A 90-minute recording of the lectures can be found [here](#).

This guide is intended for groups who want to watch the entire webinar and discuss all the lectures in a single session. This resource, written for discussion-oriented groups, anticipates that members will watch the presentations together and then openly discuss the corresponding questions. Questions appear *in italics*.

PARTICIPANTS



Dr. Nicole Myers Turner
Assistant Professor of
Religious Studies at
Yale University



Dr. Teresa L. Smallwood
Associate Director of the
Public Theology and Racial
Justice Collaborative at
Vanderbilt Divinity School



Dr. Anthony Pinn
Agnes Cullen Arnold
Professor of Humanities
and Professor of Religion at
Rice University



Dr. David Goatley
Research Professor of
Theology and Black Church
Studies at Duke Divinity
School



Charles Watson Jr.
Director of Education
at BJC

12 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In this lecture series, four scholars approach the intersection of race and religious liberty from four distinct and thought-provoking perspectives.

1. What are your initial reactions, thoughts, and feelings toward the lecture presentations? What is something that stuck out to you? What questions did you have as you watched the presentations?

In **Dr. Nicole Myers Turner's** research, the personal pilgrimage of Fields Cook highlights the oppression of enslaved persons. Contextualizing Cook's biography, Dr. Turner reminds viewers that after Nat Turner's rebellion (1831), many states legislated a range of prohibitions against enslaved Africans and freed Blacks that forbade them to meet in a worship service without a white man present and prohibited them from being ordained ministers. Because of these laws, Fields Cook was denied his soul's highest call – to be an ordained minister – and precluded from tending to his soul's salvation.

2. Which elements of the life of Fields Cook most stirred you? Which parts of his story made you the most indignant? How was the hypocrisy of white Christian slave owners shown in the life of Fields Cook's childhood companion? How was the hypocrisy of the slave owners' Christianity illustrated when Black slaves had to work harder and longer days on the Sabbath?

3. Why do you think slave owners worked so hard to prevent enslaved Africans from worshiping freely? In what ways does the denial of religious freedom for enslaved Africans have any implications for our contemporary society? What is the connection between religious freedom (i.e., the ability to pursue one's spiritual calling) and racial equality?

Dr. Teresa L. Smallwood grounds her presentation on the deep symbolism of the tearing of the veil in the temple, as found in the New Testament. She says, "The symbol of the veil has particular meaning for religionists, in general, and for Black religionists, in particular."

4. What does the veil in the temple symbolize, according to Dr. Smallwood? In her presentation, how are the metaphors of "veil" and "tearing of the veil" used to symbolize racism and freedom?

Dr. Smallwood suggests that the tearing of the veil requires a dogged strength within the veil. According to Dr. Smallwood, "dogged strength" is the same power working in us that raised Jesus from the dead.

5. Discuss the meaning and implications that "dogged strength" is the same power working in us that raised Jesus from the dead. How, according to Dr. Smallwood, have African Americans torn the veil from the top? How have they torn the veil from the bottom?

Dr. Anthony Pinn, drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois, asks the question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Dr. Pinn then argued that when it comes to America, Black people are a "problem."

6. How does Du Bois' provocative question strike you? What are your thoughts and feelings as you reflect on it? How does this question point to the dehumanization and marginalization of Black people in the United States? Does Du Bois' question — and Dr. Pinn's argument — still ring true for Black people in the United States today? How do the implications of Du Bois' question still manifest themselves in our contemporary society?

Dr. Pinn forcefully argues that it was at "the auction block, our enslaved ancestors most forcefully feel this otherness... the way they have been dehumanized, rendered things of no consequence." He continues by asking, "What do Black folks do to respond to the process of being 'othered'?"

7. Discuss how the auction block bound enslaved Black people to consider themselves "other." How did African Americans respond to being "othered"? What does "otherness" look like in contemporary American culture? Who are the "others" in contemporary America? How do we know who the "others" are? How do those in power impose this "otherness" on people?

Dr. David Goatley's first note of warning is that in some religious liberty conversations, white leaders have set agendas prior to seeking the input and advice of Black leaders and the Black community.

8. Why is it important to have diverse voices and viewpoints at the beginning of conversations rather than after the agenda has already been set? What are some ways that white religious liberty leaders can ensure that Black voices are heard in discussions of faith freedom?

9. How can white religious liberty leaders ensure they don't insist on a certain "kind" of Black voice in faith freedom discussions? Which religious Black voices would be typically absent from religious liberty conversations? What is lost when these Black voices are not included in discussions of religious liberty?

All the panelists agree that critical race theory – or the idea that race is a central factor in structural inequality – is an important lens through which to view religion in America. Others in American society push back on the study of critical race theory and say race has no bearing on Christianity and is not mentioned in the Bible.

10. How might you respond to these two different positions? How can you use the idea of critical race theory to understand the world through the eyes of someone else?

This event is titled "Religious Liberty Has Been White Too Long: Voices of Black Scholars." All the speakers agreed that there were opportunities for Black leaders, churches and individuals to be stronger advocates for religious liberty in America.

11. How did the four speakers agree that there were opportunities for Black leaders, churches and individuals to become stronger advocates for religious liberty? How were each of their perspectives on how to approach religious liberty unique or distinct?

12. What did you learn about religious liberty and race as you engaged in conversation about these presentations? How can you become an advocate for religious liberty in a way that allows many voices to protect faith freedom for all?

If you are interested in additional resources on this topic, visit [BJOnline.org/resources](https://www.bjconline.org/resources). There you will find webinars, podcasts, and a variety of other community and church resources.

This discussion guide is a resource from BJC (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty).