

## DISCUSSION GUIDE: FIVE SESSIONS

# 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 event can be found [here](#).

This guide is intended for groups who want to watch each lecture separately and the subsequent conversation between all four scholars, discussing one of those portions of the event per group session. Each section in this guide contains a series of nine questions, corresponding to the presentation of each of the four scholars and their discussion at the end of the program. This resource, written for discussion-oriented groups, anticipates that members will watch the portions together and then discuss the corresponding questions.

Questions appear *in italics*.

## PRESENTING SCHOLARS



**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



## PRESENTATION #1: DR. NICOLE MYERS TURNER

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University

Dr. Nicole Myers Turner's presentation centers on African Americans in the post-emancipation period and their understanding and application of religious liberty.

*1. What are your initial reactions, thoughts, and feelings toward Dr. Nicole Turner's presentation? What is something that stuck out to you?*

According to Dr. Turner, religious liberty was about fundamental soul liberty for post-emancipation freed people who were critiquing and undoing slavery. And, they saw that religious liberty needed to be protected and wrestled away from systems of inequality.

*2. How does Dr. Turner explain the phrase "fundamental soul liberty"? Why does she so thoroughly link "soul liberty" with "fundamental humanity"?*

*3. Why did religious liberty become so entwined with emancipation for enslaved Africans and freed Blacks?*

In Dr. 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 him from tending to his soul's salvation.

*4. 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?*

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

*6. If one of the earliest "civil rights movements" in America was the fight for enslaved Africans to worship freely and with dignity, why do you think this early movement is often overlooked or missing from the larger narratives of American history and religious liberty?*

Church historian James Washington wrote, "The founders of the Black Church movement were strong believers in religious freedom. They led Black folk in affirming what they believed to be the natural, God-given right to freedom. But this was not a notion of freedom without responsibility. Souls had to be saved, brothers and sisters in bondage had to be liberated, churches had to be organized and built."

*7. According to James Washington, how did religious liberty ultimately promote and strengthen a movement toward greater freedom? How did "a notion of (religious) freedom" stimulate the Black Church movement toward social responsibility?*

Part of Fields Cook's post-emancipation activism involved issuing grievances against the lack of free movement and the surveillance of Black people in Richmond, Virginia.

8. *How does Cook's activism illustrate how Black Churches, meeting separate from whites, could critique suppression of religious expression and worship and advance freedoms? In what ways has the Black Church in America been at the forefront of protecting and extending freedoms for all people?*

Dr. Turner suggests that the best way to see if rights work or do not work is through the eyes of the least advantaged.

9. *How does this suggestion change how our society evaluates the protection or extension of specific rights? How does this suggestion change your view on how to best evaluate or work for greater freedoms?*



**PRESENTATION #2:**  
**DR. TERESA L. SMALLWOOD**  
Associate Director of the  
Public Theology and Racial Justice Collaborative  
at Vanderbilt Divinity School

Dr. Teresa L Smallwood's presentation focuses on the New Testament metaphor of the tearing of the veil, and it's implication for African Americans and religious liberty.

1. *What are your initial reactions, thoughts, and feelings toward Dr. Smallwood's presentation? What is something that stuck out to you? Why is religious freedom important for Dr. Smallwood?*

Dr. 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."

2. *What does the symbol of 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 analyzed the metaphor of the "veil" and W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness. Du Bois articulated his idea this way: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

3. *What forces the veil for Du Bois to partition his self into two distinct factions? What do you think he means when he says, "One ever feels his two-ness?" How does Du Bois view the veil as a protective or freeing instrument?*

4. *Do you agree with Dr. Smallwood's critique of Du Bois' use of the metaphor of the veil? How does Dr. Smallwood accept Du Bois' characterization of the veil? How does she dismiss it or suggest a corrective?*

In her discussion of the collection of essays entitled “What the Negro Wants,” Dr. Smallwood recounts how African Americans saw the five freedoms of the First Amendment (religion, speech, press, peaceable assembly, and petition of government) as some of the vehicles to tear the veil and realize their full citizenship.

*5. Why do you think the 14 African American leaders and contributors to the book “What the Negro Wants,” pulling from their own experiences, cited these five freedoms in their quest for equality? Do you think that their hope to leverage the U.S. Constitution as a vehicle to tear the veil was justified?*

Dr. Smallwood asserts that the deep symbol of the veil is “at once a symbol of what is hidden and a symbol of what is revealed.”

*6. Do you agree with Dr. Smallwood when she suggests that the deep symbol of the tearing of the veil for Christians illustrates the removal of obstacles or barriers to connectivity, providing license for one to access God for themselves?*

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.

*7. 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?*

*8. How does Dr. Smallwood describe the spiritual power which allows African Americans to tear the veil? Do you agree or disagree when Dr. Smallwood centers the freeing of oppressed people (i.e., tearing of the veil) on a spiritual power?*

Toward the end of her presentation, Dr. Smallwood shifts her focus and emphasizes the repairing of the breach. See Isaiah 58:12: “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” (NRSV)

*9. In what ways do you see there being a breach between African Americans and the larger American society? What specific divides must be repaired? What can you do to heal these breaches?*



### PRESENTATION #3: DR. ANTHONY PINN

Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities  
and Professor of Religion at Rice University

Dr. Pinn critiques religious liberty in the context of a secular humanist perspective, extending the conversation on religious liberty to include discussions of the deep existential questions of life.

*1. What are your initial reactions, thoughts, and feelings toward Dr. Pinn’s presentation? What is something that stuck out to you?*

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

*2. How does Du Bois’ provocative question strike you? What are your thoughts and feelings as you reflect on it? How does this question point poignantly to the dehumanization and marginalization of Blacks in the United States? Does Du Bois’ question – and Dr. Pinn’s argument – still ring true for Black people in the United States today? What are the implications of this question 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’?”

*3. Discuss how the auction block bound enslaved Black people to consider themselves “other.” What does the term “otherness” mean to you?*

*4. 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. Pinn suggests that “religiosity becomes a fundamental way that Black folks have responded” to this “otherness.”

*5. Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Pinn? Why or why not? How does religiosity help Black people explore the deeper existential questions like “otherness” and freedom (e.g., who are we, what are we, when are we, why are we)?*

Dr. Pinn argues that “there are ways in which secular humanism is just as religious as the Black Church.” He defines religion as that which “puts in place modes of thought, processes and activities that are meant to wrestle with those fundamental questions: Who are we? When are we? Why are we? What are we?”

*6. What do you think Dr. Pinn is attempting to communicate through this statement? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? In what ways is secular humanism just as religious as the Black church? In what ways might the religion of the Black church be different than secular humanism?*

According to Dr. Pinn, there are other places in the Black community to wrestle with the fundamental existential questions of life that are outside of the Black Church.

*7. Name and describe some of the other places in the Black community where people can wrestle with those most fundamental questions of life.*

*8. How did you react to hearing religiosity expressed in non-traditional church music, such as through hip hop artist Tupac Shakur? What is the connection between Hip Hop and “religiosity”? How and why does Hip Hop music often celebrate the margins?*

*9. Describe how Dr. Pinn’s opinions, as a secular humanist, allow room for additional advocates for religious liberty. How or why does religiosity come into these non-religious spaces?*



## PRESENTATION #4: DR. DAVID GOATLEY

Research Professor of Theology and Black Church Studies  
at Duke Divinity School

Dr. Goatley directs his presentation as words of “caution and encouragement, particularly for our white siblings who are working for religious liberty.”

*1. What are your initial reactions, thoughts, and feelings toward Dr. Goatley’s presentation? What is something that stuck out to you?*

Dr. Goatley suggests that “religious liberty conversations in the United States are often engaged by white leaders who inhabit extremes.” Because of this, many Black leaders have only heard misconstrued narratives about religious liberty.

*2. What two extremes in religious liberty conversations does Dr. Goatley identify? Have you seen or experienced either or both of these two extremes? How does contemporary news media portray religious liberty?*

*3. What is the significance of an organization like BJC hosting this event? What was your reaction to hearing BJC’s approach to protecting and extending religious liberty for all? Why is it important for religious liberty proponents to advocate both for religion and from religion?*

Dr. 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.

*4. When dealing with religious liberty, why is it important to consider 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?*

*5. 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 are typically absent from religious liberty conversations? What is lost when these Black voices are not included in discussions of religious liberty?*

Dr. Goatley reminds us of the dire consequences when religion is imposed on others or when religion is banned. He encourages organizations like BJC to maintain their engagement on religious liberty issues that resonate with the Black community.

*6. In what ways can religious liberty advocates better engage with the Black community? What obstacles hinder the Black community from engaging with issues of religious freedom?*

Dr. Goatley says that Black people embrace a diversity in the practice of religion. He rejects this practice as being labeled as “syncretism” since there are no religions that are not informed or influenced by culture.

*7. Why is the labeling of Black religions as syncretistic (i.e., intertwining religious and cultural practices) harmful? How do white religions practice syncretism? Is it possible to have a religion that does not borrow cultural practices?*

Dr. Goatley suggests that the freedom of other Black religious voices (e.g., Nation of Islam) should not be denied as long as “that freedom is not exercise for the demonization, dehumanization, and destruction of people.”

8. *Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Goatley’s statement? Why or why not? How is this statement consistent with religious liberty that seeks the freedom of all?*

9. *Are Dr. Goatley’s hopeful sentiments about a positive engagement of white religious freedom advocates with the Black church justified? Are there additional obstacles to this engagement that should be considered?*



**SEGMENT #5:  
PANEL DISCUSSION**  
Moderated by CHARLES WATSON JR.  
Director of Education at BJC

Today, as Charles Watson Jr. notes, America is still racially segregated in many ways in American schools, churches, and neighborhoods.

1. *How can we work from separate places but still come together for common work? Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Goatley who suggested that people can remain distinct and separate in their culturally familiar places and still work together for freedoms?*

2. *How might the white church best acknowledge their own wrongs of the past?*

Dr. Smallwood notes that Frederick Douglass was an interrogator of religion. Douglass escaped bondage and often criticized American Christianity as enabling and being complacent toward his and others’ bondage. At the same time, Dr. Smallwood points out that Douglass was licensed to preach by an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Throughout his life, Douglass created his own understanding and appreciation for religion.

3. *What does Douglass’ life tell us about religious freedom in America? What role did religious liberty play in the spiritual life of Frederick Douglass? What role did “religious strivings” play in Black people’s work for freedom?*

4. *How do you interpret Dr. Smallwood’s words when she says that there are “many Christianities”? Why do many people in America only recognize one form of Christianity? How does this concept of “many Christianities” extend your understanding of religious liberty?*

Dr. Pinn reminds the audience of Fredrick Douglass’ quote saying he learned the value of prayer when he learned to pray with his legs.

5. *What does this quote mean? How do activism and spirituality connect?*

Dr. Pinn points to the hypocrisy of both theists and secular humanists as they advocate for freedom. He says that we must be mindful of the “range of rationales” for people being in churches.

6. *Other than doctrinal beliefs, name some of the rationales for African Americans being connected with churches today in America. Why is Dr. Pinn’s statement important?*

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.

*7. 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?*

Dr. Pinn notes that churches and other religious organizations have been given advantages in American society.

*8. How can churches use their advantage to feed the spiritual as well as physical needs of their communities? Of communities of marginalized individuals?*

*9. What other questions would you have asked the scholars about the intersections of equality, race, and religious liberty?*

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*If you are interested in additional resources on this topic, visit [BJCOnline.org/resources](https://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).*