Religion Department Statement of Solidarity and Accountability

Our study of religious communities and peoples of faith regularly impresses upon us the wonder, mystery, and fragility of each human person, and reminds us how imperative it is to treat all individuals with a spirit of reverence, awe, and care. We grieve at the horrors inflicted upon Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and countless others. We lament the suffering these killings have added to the lives of people of color across the country, and specifically to Black students and alumni in our Wofford community, as well as our faculty and staff colleagues of color who face an array of their own challenges every day as they also help guide our students. We write now, above all else, to express our love and support for these members of the Wofford community.

Our study of religious history shows us that religion can be and has been used as a tool of oppression, violence, and the maintenance of exclusionary privilege. As scholars of religion, we acknowledge the frequency throughout history of people of faith turning to their sacred symbols, texts, and theologies to justify and perpetuate systems of injustice. In America, the Christian faith has routinely been invoked to propagate racist social structures and institutions, including the transatlantic slave trade and America’s slave-based economy; segregation and Jim Crow laws; KKK terror; anti-Civil Rights activism; and anti-Black public policies, statutory and case law, and social norms that maintain the status quo of white supremacy. As a United Methodist-affiliated institution in the South, Wofford’s own story is our nation’s story writ small. Wofford’s founder was a Methodist minister and, like several of the College’s early presidents and faculty members, an owner of enslaved people. Wofford’s Main Building, the building that houses both the Religion Department and the Chaplain’s office, was built by enslaved people. As the faculty members of Wofford’s Religion Department, all of whom are white, we acknowledge that we, too, have benefited personally and professionally from the same structures of white supremacy that have devastated and continue to devastate communities of color.

As scholars of religion at a United Methodist-affiliated institution, we are committed to the struggle against structures that undermine the ability of all people in our society to flourish and live without fear. This means standing against white supremacy, which includes the racist, imperialist, and patriarchal bases of the academic discipline of Religious Studies in the West. As educators at a liberal arts institution training students for global citizenship, we are committed to cultivating anti-racist classrooms. Our pedagogies should examine society’s racial failures and advocate for reform where institutions are broken. We are moved to re-examine our discipline, our curriculum, and our own hearts.

To that end, we commit ourselves to the following:

**Short Term** (for 2020-21 school year)

1. With assistance from the Chaplain’s Office, we will host a departmental book discussion with majors and minors of *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi;
2. We will use departmental funds to invite to campus recent Black alumni of the department to talk about their areas of expertise (e.g., law and politics, interfaith work, community organizing);
3. We will work on self-assessment of our curriculum to determine ways we can enhance:
   a. the presence of authors of color;
   b. the study of racial/ethnic issues in our courses.

Long term

We commit to:
1. Petitioning the administration to expand our department to include a specialist devoted to race/ethnicity and religion. This could include a specialist on African religions, African-American religions, religions of the African diaspora, Latinx religions or Indigenous religions;
2. Exploring the creation of a fund for Black, Indigenous and other students of color in the Religion Department that will be used to support travel and registration fees for academic conferences and/or professional membership fees;
3. Researching the Back of the College houses of worship, in collaboration with other research projects related to that neighborhood;
4. Following our short-term self-assessment in 2020-21, petitioning the administration to invite an external review to help us strengthen the diversity and inclusiveness of our department. Specific items that we will discuss with the reviewer include:
   a. The possible appointment of a departmental anti-racism advocate and campus liaison, who will, among other things, help us research ongoing trainings with organizations such as the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI);
   b. Ways to improve diversity and inclusion in the curriculum;
   c. Analysis of current teaching practices and possible training in inclusive and anti-racist pedagogies;
   d. Discerning biases that may impact grading.

Ongoing

1. We will support the ongoing work of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (Campus Life and Student Affairs) and the Dean of Diversity and Inclusion (Academic Affairs);
2. We will develop, review, and enhance a departmental diversity statement;
3. We will advocate for curricular reforms across the College that enhance our students' exposure to and understanding of issues regarding race;
4. We will actively support and uplift scholars and colleagues of color across campus.

Signed

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Trina Janiec Jones
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Dan Mathewson
Ron Robinson

While the views expressed in this statement are solely those of the Religion Department signatories, we express our gratitude to the following people with whom we consulted:

Taifha Alexander
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