

The Department of Religion at Emory University Presents:  
Africana Approaches to African American Religious History  
Lecture Series

Feb 14 – Ras Michael Brown | Mar 19 – Danielle Boaz | Mar 26 – Jason Young | Apr 4 – Tracey Hucks



Dr. **Jason Young**  
Associate Professor  
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**MAR**  
**26, 2019**

**4:30 PM**  
Rita Anne  
Rollins  
Bldg. 252

## What Was African American Religion?: New Approaches to Black Religiosity

Writing in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois described the Black Church as the social center of African American life in the United States. More than a mere house of worship, the Black Church was home to “the Sunday-school, two or three insurance societies, women’s societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds.” In this way, the Black Church was a universe unto itself, reproducing, in microcosm, all the worlds of political and social life from which African Americans were cut off by racism and discrimination. Standing at the center of this insular world, the Black Preacher was not only a leader in matters religious and moral, but also “the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, and the supernatural avenger of wrong.” Over the course of the 20th century--and even into the 21st--Du Bois’ view of the Black Church has prevailed. For more than 100 years, prominent thinkers and writers--both scholarly and popular; religious and lay alike--have taken Black Christianity as the *sine qua non* of Black religiosity in the United States. When followed to its furthest extent, this view has located, in African American Christianity, a compelling origin story for Black identity in the United States.

Writing in “*What Was African American Religion?*” Jason Young argues that recent scholarship on Black religious practice not only challenges Du Bois’ insistence on the centrality of the Black Church, but also calls into question some of the foundational tenets that lay at the heart of African American Religion. Revisionist views of the past along with speculative imaginings of the future are calling into question long-established periodizations of black life and religiosity. At the same time, novel cartographies of slavery and its aftermath are causing once stable notions of place and space to shuffle and shudder under our feet. Finally, new and insurgent calls from various marginalized communities are forcing a moral reckoning with old, outmoded forms of authority and power. At the turn of the 20th century, *The Souls of Black Folk* responded to the need for a vision of Black religiosity that might exceed the bounds of slavery. Writing in “*What Was African American Religion?*” Jason Young imagines what new frontiers lay ahead.