

## Juneteenth 2020

### Our Department's Commitment to Anti-Racism and Social Justice

We, the Religious Studies department of the College of Charleston, share in the grief and outrage so many have experienced over the past few weeks in the face of the deaths of yet more Black people at the hands of police and vigilantes. Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks. We say their names. And we could add so many more, including those from our very own "Holy City" of Charleston. Walter Scott, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Rev. Sharonda Singleton, Myra Thompson, Tywanza Sanders, Ethel Lee Lance, Cynthia Hurd, Rev. Daniel L. Simmons Sr., Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Susie Jackson. We say their names. Their lives mattered.

We affirm what President Andrew Hsu [has written](#), that "until the College of Charleston becomes part of the solution to addressing the long-standing systemic issues that hold back many African Americans and perpetuate inequalities, we will remain part of the problem." We stand with our colleagues at the College who are taking this unprecedented moment to affirm their commitment to be part of the solution through a variety of avenues and initiatives. To that end, we support calls for, and plan to contribute courses to, the campus-wide effort to add a general education requirement on diversity, inclusion, and racial equity.

But white supremacy and anti-Black racism is not only a problem for the College, writ large. It is a problem with deep roots in religious studies as a discipline, and thus, in our department. As Laura McTighe recently wrote in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, "religious studies has a race problem." The category of "religion," along with the scientific and humanistic study thereof, was forged in white supremacy and European colonialism. The American Academy of Religion has released [its own statement on racism and the murder of George Floyd](#). We, as a department, affirm it. But further still, we recognize that to study and teach religion in the "Holy City" is to study and teach a history of violence as well as a history of resistance and resilience. We study and teach in a port city where almost half of all enslaved Africans brought to British North America first arrived. We study and teach in a city governed by apartheid until just half a century ago. We study and teach in a city where racial disparity and segregation continue to define education, transportation, housing, and policing for all who live here. Consequently, we as a department commit to:

- *We affirm our responsibility to continuously learn about and disrupt religion's role in reinforcing systems of white supremacy and oppression that dehumanize people of color, and Black people in particular.*
- *We dedicate ourselves to understanding how race has shaped and continues to shape the religious worlds of the people we study and, thus, to integrating the study of racialization into our scholarship, our curriculum, and our training of students.*
- *We pledge to continue to offer as well as develop new courses on African American and Native American religions that cultivate students' empathy and sensitivity to cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity.*

- *We pledge to offer with regularity a course on the religions of Charleston, which will expose students to the rich and complex history of the intersections of race, class, and power that were foundational to religious identities in the Lowcountry. Students will have to confront both the destructive and constructive impacts of religious and racial diversity and deepen their connections to the local community.*
- *We commit to lifting up the work of Black scholars of religion in our courses and, when possible to do so, we commit to inviting Black scholars of religion to campus as guest speakers.*
- *We commit to cultivating anti-racist and feminist classrooms where we invite our students and pledge ourselves to think critically about our own identities, power, and the ways both shape the production of knowledge within and outside the classroom.*
- *We commit to contributing to efforts on campus and in the Charleston community to illuminate and work to dismantle our College, and thus our department's, complicity in enslavement, segregation, and the persistence of white supremacy in the Lowcountry.*

We welcome comments and critiques from colleagues, staff, and students of color as we undertake this work.

To paraphrase the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we will not sleep through this great revolution. Black Lives Matter.

In solidarity,

Zeff Bjerken  
Veronica Butler-Byrd  
Matthew Cressler  
Louise Doire  
Jeremy Fisher  
Eugene V. Gallagher  
John Huddlestun  
Brennan Keegan  
Todd LeVasseur  
Lenny Lowe  
Elijah Siegler