OPEN LETTER TO OUR STUDENTS

Dear Students,

The Department for the Study of Religions acknowledges the distressing racist history of this university. We are cognizant of the fact that like many institutions of higher learning in America, both in the North and South, Wake Forest University was historically supported by and benefited from the profits of slave labor, Jim Crow laws, and institutional segregation and exploitation in all its forms. Wake Forest University also supported extensive eugenic sterilizations of African Americans, American Indians, economically insecure European Americans, and many others.¹

The blackface caricature of African American men and women dates back to minstrel performances in the 1840s. It was intended to publicly mock and belittle African American aspirations and culture.² Disconcertingly, however, a form of blackface still occurs on our campus today. Parties in which white Wake Forest University students are advised to “dress like a Black person” made the news as recently as 2014. A study by sociologist Leslie Picca suggests that white college students are often unaware of how destructive their use of racial stereotypes is because they mistakenly assume that racism is a thing of the past.³

One of the hallmarks of religious studies is engagement “with the deepest motivations and values of individuals and institutions— in the past and in the present” (http://religion.wfu.edu/). As the troubling incidents of blackface as archived in Student Yearbook photographs have recently been brought to the Wake Forest University community’s attention, the Department for the Study of Religions stands with others in the university seeking to discover, make public, and address the links between the institution and slavery in all its forms past and present as well as the racism that continues to exist in our communities and on our campus.⁴

If you want to learn more about these issues, consider taking the following highly regarded courses that address critical approaches to race in the Department for the Study of Religions:

REL 246: Religion and Race
REL 348: Race, Memory, and Identity
REL 355: Jewish Identities: Religion, Race, and Rights
REL 369: Radical Christian Movements
REL 374: Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms
REL 375: Race, Myth, and the American Imagination
REL 376: Religion, Race, and Film
REL 385: Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in North America
REL 388: South Asian Women: Religion, Culture, and Politics

In addition, our offices are always open to you for conversation. We are committed to making the Department for the Study of Religions a space of support and safety so that together, we can ask difficult questions and fight racism in all its forms.

Signed: The Faculty of the Department for the Study of Religions

¹ https://cloud.lib.wfu.edu/blog/raceforest/racial-history-of-wfu/
⁴ https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.journalnow.com/z-no-digital/the-howler-yearbook-at-wake-forest-university-contained-blackface-and/article_b80aefae-76e5-5364-a9b5-3f0bda0b83da.amp.html