Soulful jazz singer Billie Holiday is remembered today for her unique sound, troubled personal history, and a catalogue that includes such resonant songs as “Strange Fruit” and “God Bless the Child.” In this lecture, Tracy Fessenden will discuss the surprising ways in which Holiday and her music were also strongly shaped by religion. Mixing elements of biography with the history of race and American music, she will explore the multiple religious influences on Holiday’s life and sound, including her time spent as a child in a Baltimore convent, the echoes of black Southern churches in the blues she heard in brothels, the secular riffs on ancestral faith in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, and the Jewish songwriting culture of Tin Pan Alley. Growing out of Fessenden’s most recent publication, *Religion Around Billie Holiday* (Penn State UP, 2018), the lecture aims to illuminate the power and durability of religion in the making of an American musical icon.

Tracy Fessenden holds the Steve and Margaret Forster Professorship in Comparative Mythology at Arizona State University, where she is a member of the faculty of Religious Studies. She is a scholar of American religion and the secular who focuses on literature and the arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to *Religion Around Billie Holiday*, Fessenden is the author of *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton UP, 2007) and co-editor of *The Puritan Origins of American Sex: Religion, Sexuality, and American Literature* (Routledge, 2001), and *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (Columbia UP, 2013). She is Editor of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* and General Editor of the North American Religions series at New York University Press.

This lecture is free and open to the public. For more information, please contact the Department of Religion at 937-775-2274 or religion@wright.edu