

GETCOS 522-E, Theology in the Contemporary Church

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Course Texts

The following texts are required for the course:

Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) ISBN 978-0-8028-7185-5

James C. Livingston, et al, *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) ISBN 0-8006-3796-8

In addition to work in the course texts, there will be five hours worth of preliminary material available for your use. These will be audio podcasts, roughly an hour apiece, that feature contemporary scholars and authors, who will help to bring an enhanced perspective to the topics covered in the reading materials.

What to expect from this course

As this is a "capstone"-style course, the intention is to bring your learning throughout the Course of Study into conversation with a major period in the Church, as well as a core set of issues central to the work of the Church.

In this case, the major time period is the contemporary period - roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. This period includes "modernism," the global mindset that arose in part in reaction to the mechanization of production and the advent of "total war" in 1917 Europe, as well as the "higher criticism" of the Bible. The period also incorporates the numerous "reactions to modernism" - fundamentalism, anti-modernism, post-structuralism and post-modernism, to name but a few.

Furthermore, in the course, the core set of issues is both theological and political in nature. The end of the imperial monarchies and the rise of the modern nation-state run in parallel with the revolutionary upheavals of both global capitalism and global anti-capitalism. Against this geo-political backdrop, Christian theology underwent a structural shift on par with the Protestant

Reformation: both science and politics brought new possibilities for the theologian, while Auschwitz and the atom bomb brought increased challenges to theology, if we understand it simply as an aloof practice removed from the realities of life.

The call to political engagement within theology, as well as the call to contextualism, awareness of identity, and the empowerment of new voices within the theological project (non-males, non-whites, the differently-abled, the global south, and the LGBTQ communities) have led to profound opportunities and deep challenges to the study of traditional doctrines within the Church.

Overall goals of this course

Above all, the goal of this course is to encourage and instill theological confidence - with regard both to your personal theological reflection and your work in ministry.

We will accomplish this goal together, working in conversation with each other, as well as with the course texts and the recorded interviews of some of today's most interesting religious thinkers.

By the end of the course, you will have demonstrated

- Familiarity and facility with a core set of doctrines that have been the focus of contemporary theological discourse
- Increased comfort with using terms like "discourse" without twitching involuntarily
- The ability to connect contemporary theological issues to concrete issues in ministry
- The ability to engage in constructive and synthetic theological conversations
- What should you do from here?

Get the textbooks and start reading. There are ten preparation units. Each unit has between 80 to 100 pages to read. Once the reading is completed, there will be a short (500 word) paper to write in response to the reading. There are also five audio assignments (roughly an hour each, featuring interviews with contemporary theologians). After you listen to each audio assignment, you will be prompted to write an additional short (500 word) response to each audio piece.

Thus you will write approximately 30 pages (10 two-page reading responses, 5 two-page interview responses) in preparation for your arrival at the Course of Study.

Once on campus, we will spend approximately three hours a day (8am to 11:30am, with breaks), for five days. Class time will consist of approximately one hour of lecture, and two hours of interactive discussion and guided reflection on the lecture and reading materials.

Preparing for the July Course

Before we meet in July, there are ten units of information you need to study and master.

Each unit mixes reading assignments from the two course texts, *Modern Christian Thought* and *Faith Seeking Understanding*. I have tried to arrange it so that each mix clocks in at around 80 - 100 total pages.

Also, in some units, there will be one or more audio podcasts. Each of these will last about 20 minutes, and will feature my interviews with contemporary scholars of religion, speaking about topics related to the themes of each unit.

There are also writing assignments you will need to complete.

Each assignment will give you opportunities to draw together and utilize the information from the units.

Assignment 1 - Reading, Listening, and Response

Read

Modern Christian Theology, Chapter 1: "The Legacy of Modernity and the New Challenge of Historical Theology," pp. 1-32

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapters 1-3: "The Task of Theology," "The Meaning of Revelation," and "The Authority of Scripture," pp. 1-65

Respond

On page 2 of *Modern Christian Thought*, the authors state that "the question of authority is not a modern problem in Christianity." Nevertheless, modern Christianity has set forth some unique responses to the question of authority. Drawing from both assigned readings, write an overview of the key ways in which contemporary theology approaches the question of authority (500 words / two pages maximum)

Listen

Phyllis Tickle, speaking on the transitions of religious ages and "The Great Emergence"

Respond

In the interview, Phyllis Tickle makes the claim that seminarians in the 21st century should be required to study cosmology and quantum physics. Using her interview and the readings assigned above as a starting point, put forth your own argument for what contemporary seminarians should be required to study, and why. You can suggest anything, so long as your reasoning can be demonstrated as to how the subject(s) will equip students for ministry in the 21st century (500 words / two pages maximum)

Assignment 2 - Reading and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapters 2-4: "American Empirical and Naturalistic Theology," "The Dialectical Theology: Barth, Brunner, and Gogarten," and "The Theologies of Barth and Bonhoeffer," pp. 33-132.

Respond

Karl Barth insisted that we encounter a "strange new world" in the Bible. What are the major characteristics of this world? What is so wrong (according to Barth) in assuming that the Bible describes our world? (500 words / two pages maximum)

No audio for this assignment. No readings from Faith Seeking Understanding for this assignment.

Assignment 3 - Reading and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 5: "Christian Existentialism," pp. 133-164

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapters 7 and 8: "Humanity as Creature, Sinner, and New Being in Christ," and "The Person and Work of Jesus Christ," pp. 143-204

Response

On page 153 of Faith Seeking Understanding, Migliore states that "to say that God is triune is to say also that human life is fulfilled only in relationship with God and others." Based upon your reading, how would Tillich agree or disagree with this claim? How would Bultmann? (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Assignment 4 - Reading, Listening, and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 6: "Christian Realism: A Post-Liberal America Theology," and Chapter 7, "The New Theology and Transcendental Thomism," pp. 165-232

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 4: "The Triune God," pp. 66-95

Responding

Migliore begins Chapter 4 with the claim that "talk of God has become a problem for many people today," in part because "belief in God and affirmation of human freedom [seem] incompatible." How does Reinhold Niebuhr address this problem - particularly with regard to the tension between love and justice in his theology? (500 words / two pages maximum)

Listening

John Thataminil on Interfaith Dialogue, (approximately one hour)

Responding

John Thataminil describes a contemporary church setting where you might find "a worship service on the first floor and a yoga class in the basement." Examine this phenomenon in light of your own church commitments - would this be an example of a healthy or dangerous church practice? State your reasoning for the position you hold. (500 words 2 pages maximum)

Assignment 5 - Reading, Listening, and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 8: "Vatican II and the Aggiornamento of Roman Catholic Theology," pp. 233 - 272

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapters 11 and 12: "The New Community" and "Proclamation, Sacraments, and Ministry," pp. 259 - 313

Responding

Briefly compare Migliore's description of the "current models" of the Christian church with "Vatican II's Understanding of the Church," found on pages 238 - 240 of Modern Christian Thought. In the wake of Vatican II, are these understanding of the Church and its function more similar or different? (500 words / 2 pages)

Listening

Father Bruce Cinquegrani, speaking about his formation as a priest during Vatican II (approx. one hour)

Responding

As Fr. Cinquegrani describes his calling to ministry, compare his description to Migliore's section on "The Meaning of an Ordained Ministry" on pages 308-313. Does Fr. Cinquegrani's experience match the markers of ministry that Migliore outlines? Where do they diverge? (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Assignment 6 - Reading and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 9: "Political Theology and Liberation Theologies," pp. 273 - 308, and Chapter 13, "Feminist Theology," pp. 417 - 442

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 9: "Confessing Christ in Context,"

Responding

Migliore notes that "contextual theologies and their particular views of Christ and the salvation he brings may seem both bewildering and threatening" (p. 228). In these chapters, there has been mention of a number of different contextual theologies - feminist, Latin American, Asian, and others. Which of these particular theologies do you find the most challenging? Imagine a

situation in which you need to explain this particular theology to a congregation. Write a brief essay in which you provide the congregation as charitable an explanation of the theology as you can. (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Listening

No audio for this session.

Assignment 7 - Reading and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 12: "Evangelical Theology," pp. 387 - 416, and Chapter 14, "Black Theology in America," pp. 443 - 468

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 10: "The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life," pp. 232 - 258

Response

Migliore makes the claim that "the Holy Spirit is the power of new life [and] ... new freedom in Christ" (p. 237). Drawing upon the resources of the three chapters assigned for this unit, demonstrate how this statement might be heard and understood specifically within the context of Black theology. (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Listening

No audio this session

Assignment 8 - Reading, Listening, and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 10: "Process Theology," pp. 309 - 340, and Chapter 15, "Theology of Religions: Christian Responses to Other Faiths," pp. 469 - 492

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 13: "The Finality of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism," pp. 314 - 343

Respond

Is it possible to understand Origen's concept of apokatastasis panton (the "restoration of all things") as an ancient form of process theology? Draw on the resources in the three chapters assigned for this unit to argue for or against such a comparison. (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Listening

Todd Green on Islamophobia (approximately one hour)

Respond

Migliore outlines seven positions by which we can situate and understand different manifestations of religious pluralism. In your analysis, which of these seven approaches best describes Todd Green's position with regard to Christian engagement with Islam? (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Assignment 9 - Reading, Listening, and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 16: "Christian Thought at the End of the Twentieth Century," pp. 493

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 6: "The Providence of God and the Mystery of Evil," pp. 121

Response

What is your answer to Migliore's question, "If we honestly acknowledge the persistence and power of evil in the world, can we still speak responsibly of divine providence?" (page 135). (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Listening

Aaron Simmons on postmodern thought , approximately one hour

Response

In Modern Christian Thought, it is claimed that the term, "postmodernism," is "burdened by a lack of precision" (page 494). Is Simmons able to overcome this burden in his characterization of postmodernity? (500 words / 2 pages maximum)

Assignment 10 - Reading and Response

Reading

Modern Christian Thought, Chapter 11: "History and Hermeneutics," pp. 341 - 386

Faith Seeking Understanding, Chapter 5: "The Good Creation," pp. 96 - 120, and Appendices C and D: "Political Theology: A Dialogue," and "Atheism: A Dialogue," pp. 400 -

Response

Migliore notes that "science and faith not only need not be at war with each other but each can and should influence and enrich each other" (page 118). In a sense, this brings us full circle, back to the insights of Phyllis Tickle in Unit 1. But if science allows us an adequate and full explanation of the world (and indeed, can help us productively address the world "in crisis"), then why - as the atheist might ask - do we need religion at all? In a world of both suffering and science, what is the possible justification for remaining a person of faith? (500 words / 2 pages maximum - although this actually will take you a lifetime to wrestle and figure out)