

Theology for the Contemporary Church and Christian Life TH 2BO3

McMaster Divinity College

Fall 2010

Saturday: Sept 18, Oct 2, Nov 6, Dec 4 – 9 am - 4 pm

Office: 216

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Hours: Wed 12:30-1:30 and 5:00-6:00

Tues 12:30-2:30 and by appointment

I. Description:

This course surveys and interacts with significant issues in the contemporary Church and Christian life from a theological perspective. The aim of the course is to explore the theological issues and implications of current *context* and *approaches* to Christian ministry and discipleship and to consider ways that theological reflection can contribute to these current approaches. The book of Revelation encourages Christians to “hear what the Spirit” is saying to the churches. This course endeavors to discern the work and direction of the Spirit through contemporary approaches to the Christian life and ministry (e.g., Intentional Communities/New Monasticism, New Atheism, Post-Christendom and the decline of the West, Religious Pluralism, and Emergent Church).

II. Course Objectives:

A. Knowing:

1. Know key movements in contemporary Christian ministry and life.
2. Know key books that are shaping contemporary Christian ministry and life.
3. Know key trends within contemporary impacting the contemporary church.

B. Doing:

1. Become familiar with significant movements and people shaping contemporary Christian life and ministry.
2. Research and discuss a contemporary movement or figure shaping Christian life and ministry.
3. Engage in the process of constructive theological reflection on a significant issue facing the contemporary church and Christian life.

C. Being:

1. Appreciate the role of theological reflection for Christian life and ministry.
2. Embrace a deeper understanding of the nature of Christian ministry and living.
3. Develop a sense of the Holy Spirit’s work in the world.

III. Required Text(s):

A. Texts on the New Atheism and God in Western Culture

The class will read together the following:

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006)

John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

See his website for more current essays and articles:

<http://web.mac.com/haughtj1/Site/Welcome.html>

B. Select ONE text that treats a significant issue related to the contemporary Christian life and/or Ministry:

1) The following are examples of books that treat issues in contemporary Christian life:

Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that could change Everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*, The Church and Postmodern Culture series, ser. ed. James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

2) The following are examples of books that treat issues in contemporary Christian ministry:

Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).

David Kinnaman & Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation really thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emergent Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005)

IV. Course Performance Criteria:

<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Due</u>
A. Christianity's Cultural Context	30%	Second session
B. Assessment of a Current Ministry/Christian Life Issue	20%	Third session
C. Constructive Essay (or project)	45%	
1) Presentation	15%	Fourth session
2) Paper	30%	Dec 11
D. Reading:	5%	Dec 11
E. Participation:	<u> X</u>	
	Total: 100%	

V. Assignment Descriptions:

General Guidelines:

- Please submit papers in electronic format (MS Word preferred)
- Papers and assignments may be submitted early for feedback from the professor and resubmitted on the due date for grading.
- All assignments marked according to the Grading Criteria Form attached to the syllabus
- All papers and assignment should conform to (and will be marked against) the MacDiv Style Guide

A. Christianity's Cultural Context (**DUE second session**):

1. Description:

This assignment provides the opportunity to explore an important aspect of the cultural context of Christianity. Students may select from the topics discussed in lectures or an alternative issue. The goal of this assignment is for students to develop a working expertise with a significant factor of North American culture that shapes the context for contemporary Christian life and ministry—e.g., consumerism, narcissism, and globalization. The essay should include concrete (your personal observations of the specific issue) and theoretical/academic discussions of the issue (e.g., demographic, sociological, media, and theological analyses). For example, if you choose consumerism, personal observations could include your experience with consumer culture (how have you been led to accept the cultural myth that you are what you consume, how do you see consumerism influencing ministry approaches, life style practices among Christians and

the broader culture?) and academic discussions might include reading and drawing on Juliet Schor's *Born to Buy* and Paul Stiles, *Is the American Dream Killing You?*

2. Length: approx. 5-7 double-spaced pages in 12 point Times New Roman font.
3. Document sources with footnotes and follow the MacDiv Style Guide.

B. Assessment of a Current Ministry or Christian Life Issue (Due third session):

1. You will select a contemporary book or ministry approach that sets forth a contemporary vision of the Christian life and/or ministry and describe and assess its theology.
2. Length: approx. 5-7 double-spaced pages in 12 point Times New Roman font.
3. Document sources with footnotes and follow the MacDiv Style Guide.
4. Length and style expectations:
 - a. Write a detailed and coherent essay that details the process of reflecting on contemporary issue related to contemporary Christian life/ministry.
 - b. Write a stylistically clean essay.
 - c. Length: approx. 5-7 double-spaced pages in 12 point Times New Roman font.
 - d. Document additional sources with footnotes and follow the MacDiv Style Guide.

C. Constructive Essay or Project (DUE December 11):

1. Description:
 - a. The purpose of this assignment is to provide you with an opportunity 1) to discuss a significant issue facing contemporary Christian thought, life, and/or ministry and 2) to analyze and evaluate its theology, whether its theology is implicit or explicit. Your theological analysis and evaluation can be based on biblical, historical, and/or contemporary theology. The goal of this assignment is to give you an opportunity to treat an issue important for the Christian life and ministry and of personal relevance to your ministry and/or academic interests.
 - b. Topics are flexible. The paper or project can focus on a contemporary ministry practice/opportunity/challenge or influential ministry leader. Examples include:
 - 1) Should a Christian church be engaged in inter-religious coalitions that address

social problems/concerns? What are the theological categories that would inform an answer to that question?

- 2) Should a Christian church be involved with creation care and what would a ministry of creation care look like?
- 3) Is the Emergent Church movement or intentional communities credible ways to be the church in the twenty first century? Alternatively, you could focus on one of the major figures in the Emergent Churches and discuss and analyze his/her theology and its implications for Christian life and ministry.
- 4) The essay or project could research and assess the theology and practice of the influential ministry leaders such as Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, and Rob Bell.

c. This assignment is flexible so that you can craft it in a way that matches you current or future ministry and/or academic pursuits. Two basic approaches are available. Students can elect to write a paper or develop a project.

- 1) A paper should address an issue related to the contemporary Christian life or ministry. This option is a traditional academic essay.
- 2) A project can address an issue in contemporary Christian life and/or ministry in a more applied way. For example, what would it look like for you to apply insights from the emergent church literature and theology in your ministry setting? How would you introduce your church to the issues of religious pluralism and interfaith interactions and ways to respond them? If you have an idea not mentioned above, talk to me about so that we can work out the details of your idea. The goal of the project is to give you an opportunity to address a contemporary issue related to your ministry and Christian life.

2. Class Presentation:

The last class session will provide you with an opportunity to present your paper or project to the class. Class presentations are valuable for introducing the other members of the class to the fruit of your theological reflection and for receiving interaction from your class colleagues. Class presentations are approximately 30 minutes–20 minutes for presenting your paper/project and 10 minutes for class discussion. Although not required, encourage multi-media, audio, audio-visual methods when appropriate.

3. Length and style expectations:

a. Length: 11-13 double-spaced pages, 12 point Times New Roman font.

b. Research resources:

1) Use and document at least 10 scholarly resources (e.g., scholarly monographs, journal articles, and essays).

2) Document sources with footnotes and follow the MacDiv Style Guide.

c. Structure: the paper should reflect a clear and thoughtful structure that introduces the topic and thesis and then convincingly demonstrates and/or supports the thesis of the paper. Projects are more flexible in structure and medium of presentation.

D. Reading (**DUE December 11**):

- Please complete assigned readings before the class session, as we will likely discuss them
- Please submit a reading report (statement of the percentage of reading completed) by due date
- The professor may at times assign supplementary readings.

VI. Lecture Outline (*tentative*):

Day	Session	Topic
1	Sept 18	
	1	Introduction to the Course I. The Context of Contemporary Christian Life and Ministry A. Postmodernism B. Post-Christendom and Disenchantment with the Church/Christianity C. Decline of the West • Group discussion: living and ministering in the contemporary world
	2	II. Cultural Issues and Contemporary Christian Life and Ministry A. The New Atheism • E.g., Dawkins, <i>The God Delusion</i> , Christopher Hitchens, <i>God is Not Great</i> , & John F. Haught, <i>God and the New Atheism</i> B. Christian Mission in the Context of Religious Pluralism and “Tolerance”
2	Oct 2	
	1	III. Current Issues in Christian Living A. Singleness, Sexuality, & Homosexuality • E.g., Lauren Winner, <i>Real Sex</i>

	2	<p>B. Key Shapers of Contemporary Christian Life</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rob Bell, <i>Jesus Wants to save Christians</i> • Brian McLaren, <i>Generous Orthodoxy & A New Kind of Christian</i> • Dan Kimball, <i>They Like Jesus but not the Church</i>
3	Nov 6	
	1	<p>IV. Current Issues in Christian Ministry</p> <p>A. Emergent Churches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frost & Hirsch, <i>Shaping of Things to Come</i> • Bolger and Gibbs, <i>Emergent Churches</i>
	2	<p>B. Intentional Communities</p> <p>C. Social Justice & Creation Care</p>
4	Dec 4	
	1	<p>1. Presentation _____</p> <p>2. Presentation _____</p> <p>3. Presentation _____</p> <p>4. Presentation _____</p> <p>5. Presentation _____</p>
	2	<p>6. Presentation _____</p> <p>7. Presentation _____</p> <p>8. Presentation _____</p> <p>9. Presentation _____</p> <p>10. Presentation _____</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclusion • Course Evaluations

VII. Policies:**A. Textbook Purchase:**

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 218, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstores, 304 The East Mall, Suite 100, Etobicoke, ON M9C 5K1: phone 416-620-2934; fax 416-622-2308; e-mail books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

B. Academic Honesty:

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College.

Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty ~ www.madciv.ca/regs/honesty.php.

C. Gender Inclusive Language:

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all of its publications. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected. The NRSV and TNIV are examples of the use of inclusive language for human beings. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments.

VIII. Late-Assignment and Exam Policy:

A. Assignments are due at the beginning of class on the date specified in the syllabus.

B. Students take exams on the date and at the time scheduled in the syllabus.

C. Late assignments are reduced five percentage points for each day late (e.g., if the grade is 90 and it is one day late, the grade will be reduced to 85).

D. Assignments and exams will be accepted without penalty after the specified date in the syllabus **only** in the case of an excused absence. If a student misses an exam or assignment submission due to a reason that he/she believes is excusable, then he/she must notify the instructor and schedule an exam date and/or late-assignment submission date within twenty-four hours of the beginning of the missed class session.

E. Assignments and exams will not be accepted late on the basis of the student's involvement with school-approved activities. If you are not able to be in class for an exam or assignment submission,

then you must pre-arrange with the instructor to take the exam and/or submit the assignment before the scheduled date in the syllabus.

Please Note: This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.