

INT500: Research Methods & Theological Methodologies

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Course Description: This is a semester-long unit of study that provides a basic introduction to the critical thinking and research skills, theological and historical methodologies, biblical hermeneutics and critical terms in theological studies, all of which support the research degree programs at VST. Early sessions will delineate and put into practice such skills as critical thinking, close reading of texts, thesis formulation for writing academic papers, the building of a research bibliography, and the practice of academic integrity. These will also include brief introductions to quantitative, historical and ethnographic research methodologies in and for theological studies. Several sessions will be devoted to considering the disposition of specifically theological thought within the postmodern, secular and postcolonial location. This will be followed by sessions that provide an overview of biblical hermeneutics (feminist, poststructural/deconstructive and postcolonial, reader-response, sociological analysis, etc.) and theological approaches-- notably, systematic, liberation, constructive, post-liberal or radical orthodoxy, and process. The VST dimensions--the lenses of gender analysis, cultural pluralism and inter-religious solidarity, engaged Jewish-Christian dialog and anti- or postcolonialism, as well as contextuality--will be addressed within a number of these units.

Competence Objectives:

- 1) This course encourages maturation of the basic skills needed by a critical thinker and effective writer in the theological disciplines;
- 2) Upon completion of this course, students should expect to evidence use of effective research techniques as well as be aware of various research methodologies;
- 3) Students will be aware of basic critical religious terms, hermeneutic practices, and theological methodologies in use today;
- 4) Students will have worked through the preparation of thesis statements or "arguments" (the basis of all effective research papers), learning to correlate those with a methodological approach suited to their research topic, and the preparation of a research bibliography.

Schedule & Format:

This is a 3 credit course which runs for the entire 11 weeks of Fall Semester, meeting 3 hours per week. A variety of classroom pedagogies will be employed, ranging from lecture to small group work to seminar style engagement. Various faculty members will serve as visiting lecturers at points so as to make available to students the widest variety and most honed of methodologies represented at VST.

During sessions 4 through 11, critical terms in religious studies, hermeneutic practices, critical theories and theological methods will be taught in the first 2/3rds of the classroom session. The remaining reserve of time together will be spent in small peer groups, critiquing and honing each student's research and writing skills--articulation of a thesis argument, developing a working bibliography, etc.--as well as with on-going concerns of

implementation of academic style and critical thinking skills.

Evaluation:

1. Consistent presence (no less than 80%) and participatory involvement in the classroom (mutually engaged peer review, obvious preparation for class and dialogical engagement of materials under discussion, etc.) is expected;

2. Students will develop a portfolio of materials for evaluation, all related to developing critical thinking and research skills for theological studies and public theological engagement:

a) Early exercise in close reading and critical engagement (identify thesis, supporting arguments, ferreting out author's assumptions, learning to take an authoritative stand in relation to the text read). This exercise will be approx 2.5 pages (12 point font, double-spaced, 1 inch margins);

b) Students will, by the end of term, complete an **academic thesis proposal or proposal for a research essay**, evidencing the setting of a thesis topic and argument, the mapping or outlining of a logical argument, the choice of an appropriate methodology [Notice that this is not a full research essay, but it's frame or hull](12-15 pages).

For some of you, the essay may be in the form of your thesis or research proposal. For all of you, this will be practice in the formulation of research papers in general. All good research papers must themselves evidence the elements of a "thesis project." That is, all research papers—just like an MA or ThM thesis in this regard--need 1) to "set the argument" or propose a thesis as well as 2) to map, methodologically or deductively, how one will argue that thesis, bringing the work to a conclusion. And, a bibliography accompanies each academic essay or "thesis." In other words, a research paper is a thesis in miniature.

Research topics for the essays will be chosen by the student early in the semester so as to make practicing the skills of proposing and delimiting a topic, mobilizing the thesis as an argument, developing a research bibliography (around which the book review and annotated bibliography will be set), etc., viable. If you have an issue/question that has brought you to your studies or if you already have a thesis in mind, here's the time to see if the topic fits you. For others still considering the broad field of possibilities, choose some question that's been sitting in the back of your mind, work on honing a critical theory that will be a part of your future work or explore a topic that has been roused within a course but into which you just didn't have the time to dig. As much as possible, let a degree of curiosity set the theme for your study.

c) **Annotated bibliography** of 10 texts (essays or books). An annotated bibliography assumes the skill to succinctly summarize the thesis argument of a text, understand its' "school" or location or hermeneutic angle, and to mark one's own analytic lens in relation to the text. Initially students develop a "working bibliography," then, having done an initial check for relevance of the articles to their particular research angle, refine that to a "research bibliography." Once a research bibliography has been achieved,

then students hone in on articles, essays, and/or texts which form the nexus within which the thesis emerges. An annotated bibliography encourages the skills of close reading of a text, identifying an article's thesis or argument as well as respectfully, if critically, summarizing the skills of another intellectual. This exercise will be approx. 3.5 pages;

- d) **Book Review** of 6 pages (1200 words). The Book Review gives practice in
 1. Close reading and synopsis of a text;
 2. Examining the stated and hidden assumptions of an author;
 3. Critical or analytic engagement of the methodology, thesis conclusion, following logic through to the practical outcropping of the author's thesis, etc., with an eye to academic argument (as distinct from "personal reflection," e.g.);
 4. Locating a text in terms of its contextual setting and a student's distinct locus in relation to that, translating an author's convictions into contemporary setting and our distinct socio-cultural and/or political questions, bringing a text into interface with other academic convictions, including that of the student's.

3. Because theological thought is also a rhetorical art, students will be encouraged to practice these critical thinking skills in seminar sessions and in peer review of the thesis/argument of each other's essays.

Required Texts:

1. David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (SUNY, 1989);
2. Nancy Vymeister, *Quality Research Papers* (Zondervan, 2008);
3. Kwok Pui-Lan, *Feminist and Postcolonial Imagination* (Westminster John Knox, 2005);
4. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Westminster John Knox, 1984);
5. Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit* (Westminster John Knox, 1994).
6. A Course Reading Pak is being prepared by and will be available at the UBC Bookstore.