

TH550: Christian Theologies from the Modern to the Postmodern

Fall Semester 2009

Meets Thursdays, 9:00-12:00

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Purpose: We, here in the West, live within a region that has assumed Christian narratives as cultural maps. On the one hand, then, given Christian narrative as cultural map, science and capitalist global economics have been enthused with Christian spiritual aspirations; on the other hand, a growing intellectual suspicion of a life of devotion and religious commitment inflects the intellectual ethos of modernity. Spiritual wisdom has been, quite simply, inadmissible knowledge. But, and how inopportune!, publically marginalized by the demands of modern rationalism, western Christianity had--by the later half of the 20th century--come to suffer further public humiliation.

We thus enter the work of Christian theology in North America at a time when Christianity has been indicted by colonialism, by the ecological crisis, as anti-intellectual, and by its sacrally legitimized corporeal repressions, e.g., non-euro-western cultures, women, gays, lesbians and queers. As we now try to break our modernist habits, owing to the accumulated ecosystemic, economic and cultural crises following in modernity=s wake (e.g., its ravaging of world resources via “modern development” projects, the deracination ensuing in the wake of its hegemonic claim to truth, and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor), North American Christians face thinking “the end of the world [of Christianity] as we have known it”. And yet, at the very same time, the effects of globalization, its carving of economic and ecological divides around the planet, its enervation of purpose, meaning and belonging here in North AmericaBoccasion cries for the wisdom of the religions, including that of Christianity.

As constructive Christian theologians, we must sit to the question of how we think the sacred, its relation to justice and sacred vitality, within the ethos and powers of this time. Given its modernist, intellectual marginalization and coupled with this humiliation, how shall we, ...how can we speak of the sacred in the 21st century? If the 20th century, the self-proclaimed “Christian Century”, were replete with the most horrendous genocides of human history, can we still speak of the redemptive or gracious transformative dimension of the sacred? What is salvific, if, as postcolonial theorists charge, our benevolent outreach might but hide imperialist resolve? How do we enter with God into the work of preventing world waste?

We approach such questions by taking a theological history of late modernity. We read theologies of the 19th-20th century from this location. Our primary work for the semester is then the “analytic history” behind our most pressing questions: How do we unravel our complicities?

What wisdom resources do we carry forward so as to "postmodernize" Christianity in and for the West? What do we make of the liberalizing (progressive) versus conserving (evangelical) split

that has opened up within the Christian body...and what might it hide from view?

While theology has too often been cloistered from the life of laity and parish, many of the challenges of modernity have not been theologically unthought. Theology has always also had its own on-going critique of formations of modern knowledge and culture, if also of itself and the Christian church. Given theology's growing appreciation for context and yet the planetary encompassment of global capitalism, this survey of modern to postmodern Christian theologies ends by asking what shape North American Christian theologies might take as we end or edge our way out of modernity and assume the work of loving the world in the 21st century.

This course will survey theological proposals that responded to the philosophical queries and scientific rigor as well as the utopian dreams of the modern era. Modernity--an historical epoch committed to bringing the light of Reason to bear on the redemption of Nature, committed to the universal sameness and equality of humanity, and to the progressive unfolding of the History (of the "truth")--can be said to be interested in wholly secularizing and yet simultaneously, precisely in its embrace of Natural Reason/Logos, in sacralizing the world. We begin by considering how these seemingly desperate impulses (the ambivalence of which is just now being revisited) may have been spawned by the utopian vision known as the Enlightenment--a religious vision for the New Earth, a second chance at paradise on earth.

The course stretches from the early liberal proposals of Schleiermacher through the late twentieth century liberation theologies, with concluding sessions picking up postmodern intuitions which face us into the ecological and economic dimensions of life in the 21st century. If, as liberation theologian Eduardo Mendieta has suggested, the Judeo-Christian tradition is "the most integral factor" in western modernity, then to edge our way into postmodernity must have something to do with reconsidering and reinhabiting our own Christian commitments.

Course Profile: Required for United Church MDiv. Strongly recommended for students in MA/Theology Concentration. This elective would be recommend preparation for TH600.

Course Competencies:

1. The ability to articulate a critical perspective on modernity and the role of Enlightenment utopian thought, especially as related to western Christianity;
2. The ability to articulate a significant understanding of several major theologians and several theological schools of thought that developed in response to the religious skepticism of modernity (e.g., Schleiermacher, Hegel, and later Barth), the philosophical "masters of suspicion" of 19th century (Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, Feuerbach), 20th century suspicions of "masters" (feminism, black theology) as well as theologies among those corporeally excluded (liberation, minjung, ecological; disability);
3. Among the core theological curriculum, this course supports the development of students' critical theological abilities. This includes not only encouraging students to seriously and critically wrestle with the conclusions of these theological and philosophical figures with focused attention to our contemporary context/location, but also coming to an overall understanding of the

shape of theology at the end of modernity (e.g., praxistic more than systematic; globally concerned, but resistant to “universals”; more prone to “spirit” and humility than “kin-dom building”) with some beginning ability to discern what theological resources we carry with us and which modernist intellectual and theological habits we put to an “end” as we “edge” our way out of modernity.

Format: This course provides a general introductory background to the study of modern and postmodern, postcolonial theologies. Owing to the goal of providing a theological overview, the course is generally lecture in format. In one session, students will, after researching and preparing a study of one venue of liberation theology (Latin American, Black, feminist, minjung, queer, etc), instruct each other. And the last several sessions, during which we will be critically engaging a postmodern, postcolonial theological proposition, will be seminar in format.

Required Texts:

1. A Course Pak will be available from UBC Bookstore;
2. Students will be required to read extensive selections from the following texts and so these books have been ordered and will be available for purchase in the UBC bookstore (Readings from these texts are NOT included in the Course Pak):
 - a) Caputo, John. *Philosophy and Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006;
 - b) Moltmann, Jurgen. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1967;
 - c) Rieger, Joerg. *God and the Excluded*. Augsburg, 2000;
 - d) Rivera, Mayra. *The Touch of Transcendence: a Postcolonial Theology of God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Course Expectations & Evaluations:

1. Consistent, weekly and “on time” class attendance is expected; students must attend 80% of classroom hours to be credited with course attendance.
2. Students will be assigned weekly readings and will be expected to have sufficiently prepared--on a week by week basis--for class discussion. I encourage, but do NOT require a reading journal in which you “dialog” with assigned readings:

While preparing for each class, consider--

- a) How does this theologian depict God’s relation to the world? How and where does this theology/theologian encounter the sacred?
- b) Who thinks theology? In what form and how does “theology” get done? What work does theology do?
- c) What are the resources for theological thought/analysis, bible, science and/or social sciences, literatures, context, other religions, etc? What/Who sets the theological agenda?
- d) What is theology’s relation to biblical hermeneutics, if you can surmise such?
- e) What is the “justification FOR faith” in the divine/sacred at this juncture, if it needs any justification?
- f) How does ecclesiology look at this juncture? What’s the work of “the church”?

After each class, reflect upon the following:

- a) What occasioned the “humiliation of Christianity?” Where in your own “body” [of thought] do you find the genomes/patterns of such practice?
- b) What resources, what wisdom do we carry forward?
- c) What insights have you had about how we might now do theology and practice ecclesiology into this postmodern situation and within our context?

3. In addition to the preparation of readings and classroom participation, students will engage three evaluative exercises:

a. A 2500 word paper on a modern theologian: Each student will choose from among the following list of theologians or schools of theology, read 300 (additional) pages of his/her work and engage a particular theme or thesis of the theologian=s work in a 10-12 page (double-spaced, 12 point font or 2500 word) paper. While students may want to spend 3-5 paragraphs setting the biography of the theologian and his/her location, the PRIMARY work of the paper will be to engage a particular theme or thesis of this person’s theological contribution in relation to that theologian’s world of concern. In conclusion, the student will ask how this theologian’s work might translate over and so influence our world of concerns. [Students may consult the instructor for possible substitutions, which may be granted upon the student offering sufficient rationale for this substitution, e.g., relevance to the student’s denominational tradition.]

Karl Barth	Dorothee Soelle	Wolfhart Pannenberg
Friedrich Schleiermacher	Dietrich Bonhoeffer	Teilhard de Chardin
Gustavo Gutierrez	Rosemary Radford Ruether	Paul Tillich
Jürgen Moltmann	Karl Rahner	Rudolf Bultmann
C.S. Song	Mary Daly	

b. During session 8, each student will present a book review of one “liberation theologian/theology” (Queer, minjung, black, feminist, indigenous, disability, ecological). This review will be presented orally as well as submitted in written form. The review is to be 6 pages or 1200-1500 words in length. Students will consult with the instructor on the final choice of the text. Examples of possible text/theologians include:

- 1) James Cone or Dolores Williams in the area of black and/or womanist theologies;
- 2) Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength* (one of the first queer theologies);
- 3) Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (disability theology);
- 4) Rosemary Ruether, *Gaia and God* (ecological).

c. Students will write a final exam.