Culture, Context and Christian Mission: Challenges and Opportunities in Contemporary Mission
MS 3P1190/MS 5P1180
CC/PS
Fall 2026

***DPT (or PhD) students who want to take this course as an advanced elective should consult with the student records office for direction as to how to proceed with registration and the development of a supplemental syllabus in consultation with the course instructor.**

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The mission of McMaster Divinity College is to develop effective evangelical Christian leaders for the Church, academy, and society through graduate-level education, spiritual development, and vocational formation.

Class Begins Wednesday, September 16, 11:00-12:50 EST. The course is hybrid, available in person or on-line, meeting weekly *except* on Oct. 14 (reading week). The last day of class will be Dec. 16. Class meeting room TBA.

Course Description

The mission of the church is always done in a context. The context is inevitably entwined with a culture. Thus, as the church engages in its mission it must understand its relationship with culture. This course is designed to help students consider the relationship between the church and culture and how to think effectively about how to do ministry in a contextualized way that aids its effectiveness. The course will consider topics like the nature of culture, how culture is formed, a theology and philosophy of contextualization and some of the cultural issues that the church is and will face as it seeks to do mission in a Canadian, North American and globalized context.

Learning Goals:

Knowing:

1. As a result of this course students will be able to articulate what culture, as a concept, is.

2. Upon completion of this course students will be able to articulate a coherent philosophy of contextualization based on biblical, historical, and theoretical practices.

3. As a result of this course students will be able to identify several major cultural issues facing the church as it moves into the mid-late 21st century.

Being

1. Upon completion of this course students will have had the opportunity to reflect on the impact of culture on their own lives and ministries.

Doing

1. Upon completion of this course students will have a foundational philosophy for contextualizing their ministry in a mid-late 21st century cultural context.

2. As a result of this course students will have a foundational ability to anticipate the future of Western culture and its implications for ministry in the next 50 years.

Working together as a learning community

A core value of our class is that it is a "learning community," designed to be a place where each member of the community can grow through positive affirmation and constructive input. We should all come to the community as people in process, open to be deconstructed and formed through our mutual learning experience.

As a responsible member of our learning community, you will be expected to commit yourself to the class throughout the semester that we are together. This means that in our class interactions you will endeavor to treat all members of our class with respect and dignity. Your presence is necessary for our community (that is our class) to function at an optimal level, therefor it is expected that each student will faithfully attend class weekly. **Assignments should be handed in on time and in good order as an email attachment to the instructor in a word or pdf format (more detail on this will be offered at the first class meeting).** Assignments should be sent in on or before the due date specified in this syllabus. All assignments handed in after the due date may be subject to a penalty of 3% for each day that they are late (including weekends).

Instructor's role and availability

As professor it is my responsibility to empower each class member as a learner by treating each student with respect and dignity. I come to position myself as a fellow learner in the community and to offer information, reflection, experience, and questions for us to reflect on together. Further, it is my responsibility to give good evaluation and feedback to your thinking, both as you offer it to the class in our discussions and through written work so that your growth through this class can be maximized as a result of our collaboration.

I will do my best to answer any email enquiries within 24 hours during weekdays (Mon.-Fri). I do not generally answer emails Saturdays or Sunday during the day. If an email is sent later in

the afternoon on a Friday it will probably not be answered until Sunday evening or Monday morning. I will do my very best to grade assignments within three weeks of submission.

I am not only available but also welcome and enjoy connections with each of you outside class time. If you would like to meet together in person or via zoom, please feel free to make an appointment with me for a time that works for both of us.

Required Reading

Edgar, William. *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture.* Downers Grave: Intervarsity, 2017.

Bevans, Stephan B. *Models of Contextual Theology* (Revised and Expanded Edition). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.

Bowen, John P. (editor). *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan, 1957-1973.* Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011.

Assignments

1. Paper: A Theology of Culture

This paper should offer a clear understanding of what culture is, how it is formed and what it means for a Christian and/or the church to engage responsibly and effectively in the creation of and tending to the culture in which they find themselves. The paper should provide a reflection on and definition of culture itself, some thoughts on how culture is formed and primarily what a Christian theology and practice of culture making, and stewardship looks like. The paper should demonstrate conversance with course material and the textbook *Created and Creating* as well as at least eight other sources. These sources should be peer reviewed (books published by well established publishers and/or articles found in academic journals). Other sources can be used but only as an augment to the primary research.
This assignment is designed to help meet learning goals Knowing #1 and Being #1.

This paper should be 12-13 pages in length (double spaced) and will constitute 40% of the course grade. It is due Oct. 21, 2026.

2. Class Presentation: Contextual Analysis

Students will choose a cultural artefact that provides insight into the place of Christianity and/or the church in contemporary North American culture and present it to the class for discussion. Examples of an artefact could be a specific issue that is highly relevant to the church today, a news story on a pressing contemporary issue, an opinion article, a scene from a movie or t.v. show, lyrics from a popular song, or even a personal encounter of some sort. The presentation should offer an analysis of how the artefact represents the place of Christian faith in contemporary culture, that is, how does this artefact demonstrate the place of Christianity and/or

the church in current culture. It could be an artefact that positively or negatively demonstrates how the church is trying to engage contemporary culture, or it could be an example of how the wider culture perceives the church, or how the place of Christianity is changing within culture, etc. The presentation should clearly articulate how the artefact is particular to the contemporary setting (not something that is applicable universally or that would have been equally as applicable in a different time period). The presentation should include a question for the class that will help to provide a springboard for class discussion.

This assignment is designed to help meet learning goal Knowing #3 and Being #1.

Depending on the size of the class, presentations will take place on Nov. 18, 25 and Dec. 2 (a schedule of exact times, and order of presentations will be provided before the second class meeting). Presentations should be no more than 12 minutes in length (going over time will have an adverse effect on the final grade), followed by 5-7 minutes of discussion and further Q+A. The presentation will constitute 20% of the course grade.

3. Paper: A Theology and Practice of Contextualization

This paper should seek to offer a clear theology and philosophy of contextualization. That is, an answer to the question how does the church proclaim its message effectively in various cultural contexts? The paper should answer questions like; how does scripture help us reflect on the work of contextualization? How does the history of the church help us think about contextualization? What other resources are necessary for doing contextualization well? What are some of the challenges in doing contextualization faithfully? What are some current issues that demand close reflection on contextualization and why? What is your current approach to and/or philosophy of how the local church should approach the work of contextualizing the Christian gospel today? The paper should draw from Biblical and secondary resources including the course textbook *Models of Contextual Theology* and *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan, 1957-1973* as well as at least eight other credible sources (books published by well established publishers and/or articles found in academic journals).

This assignment is designed to help meet learning goals Knowing #3 and Doing #1 and 2.

The paper should be 12-13 pages (Double spaced) in length and will constitute 40% of the course grade. It is due Dec. 9, 2026.

Course Outline

Section One: A Theology of Culture **(Sept. 16, 23, 30, Oct. 7)**

Topics Include:

- What is culture?
- How is culture formed?
- The ethics and issues inherent in culture and its formation
- A Christian Theology of Culture

Student Responsibilities: Join us for class each week and participate in the lectures and discussions. Read the book *Created and Creating.* Work on your paper; *A Theology of Culture* and prepare to submit it to the professor on Oct. 21.

Section Two: Contextualization: Challenges, Theology and Approaches (Oct. 21, 28, Nov. 4, 11) *Note there is no class Oct. 14th (reading week)

Topics Include:

- What is contextualization'
- Biblical models of contextualization
- Historic models of contextualization
- Best practices of contextualization
- Discussion on Bevans' book, *Models of Contextual Theology*

Student Responsibilities: Join us for class each week and participate in the lectures and discussions. Read the book *Models of Contextual Theology.* Work on your upcoming class presentation.

Section Three: Mission in Contemporary Culture (Nov. 18, 25, Dec. 2, 9, 16)

Topics Include:

- A consideration of current Western cultural realities and their challenges
- Student Presentations
- Integrating class material and praxis
- Lecture/discussion of the Bowen book, *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan, 1957-1973.*

Student Responsibilities: Join us for class each week and participate in the lectures, presentations and discussions. Read the book *The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan, 1957-1973.* Prepare and deliver your class presentation on the date your assigned during the first or second week of class. Prepare your final paper "A Theology and practice of Contextualization" and submit it to the instructor on or before Dec. 9.

Some Suggested Further Resources

Crouch, Andy. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling.* Downers Grove, IN: Intervarsity, 2008.

Dyrness, William A. *The Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture.* Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022.

Fleming, Dean. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission.* Downers Grove, IN: Intervarsity, 2005.

Moreau, Scott. *Contextualization in World Mission: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models.* Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012.

_____. *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018.

Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

Koyama, Kosuke. *Water Buffalo Theology* (25th Anniversary Edition). New York, NY: Orbis, 1999.

Niebuhr, Richard H. *Christ and Culture.* New York, N.Y.: Harper Colophon, 1951.

Schreiter, Robert J. *Constructing Local Theologies* (30th Anniversary Edition). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015.

Sedmak, Clemons. *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015.

Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture.* New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press. 1959.

Additional notes:

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresenting the authorship or ownership of written work through deception or other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include copying or using unauthorized aids during tests or examinations; plagiarism, that is, presenting another person's (or generative AI's) words, ideas, data, or creative work as one's own without appropriate acknowledgement and citation; or submitting work for credit in more than one course without instructor permission.

A special note about Generative AI: Students are expected to do their own thinking and write their own papers and assignments. Generative AI is not to be used to do this work. The use of AI to produce content that is then submitted as though it were the student's own work constitutes

plagiarism and is a violation of the Academic Honesty Policy. While AI tools may be used to correct errors in English grammar, usage, and mechanics, Generative AI must not be used to translate assignments from a student's native language into English. All degree programs at MDC are taught in the English language. Students are expected to be sufficiently proficient in English to engage fully in academic discourse in these programs.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), McMaster Divinity College (MDC) is committed to supporting a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. Students who require academic accommodations to participate fully in this course must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) (https://sas.mcmaster.ca/) of McMaster University. SAS will work directly with the MDC Registrar to ensure reasonably appropriate accommodations are in place. Students with accommodations must use the SAS portal to activate the accommodations relevant to each course at the start of each term in which they are enrolled. Please note that accommodations must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation. Accommodations are not retroactive and will not be applied to coursework or activities that have already concluded.

Contact Information:

- **Student Accessibility Services General Inquiries:** sas@mcmaster.ca
- **Roksana Sobota (SAS Representative for MDC)**: sobotar@mcmaster.ca
- **MDC Registrar:** mdcreg@mcmaster.ca

Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that student will use inclusive language in all MDC assignments. When referencing biblical texts, students should preserve the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God while using gender-inclusive language when referring to human beings. Biblical quotations should be taken from a gender-inclusive translation such as: NRSVue (2022), NIV (2011), CEB (2011), NLT (1996), or CEV (1995).

Hurlburt Family Bookstore

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, students may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

College Style for Submission of Written Work

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the **McMaster Divinity College Press Style Guide** https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

Academic Integrity & AI Usage

- All work submitted must be your own. Use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.) is prohibited for all assignments, discussions, and assessments unless explicitly authorized by the instructor.
- Violations of this policy will be treated as academic misconduct under institutional guidelines.

Online Synchronous Course Policy

Technology Requirements

- A reliable internet connection (tested before class time),
- A device with audio and video capability
- The correct video conferencing platform installed (e.g., Zoom, Teams).

Webcam & Environment

- Students must keep their microphones muted except when speaking to minimize background noise.
- Students must keep their webcams on throughout the class session.
- Students must dress appropriately.
- Students must ensure their surroundings are free from unnecessary distractions. Professional virtual backgrounds are permitted.