

TH 3XC3
Theology for the Contemporary Church and Christian Life

McMaster Divinity College
Winter 2015
Hybrid (Feb 12–13)
Office: 216

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12:30-1:30 and 3:30-4:30 and by appointment

I. Description:

This course discusses significant issues related to the contemporary Church and Christian life from a theological perspective. It explores the theological issues and implications of the current *context* and *approaches* to Christian ministry and discipleship and considers 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 society impacting the contemporary church.

B. 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.

- C. 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.

III. Required Text(s):

- A. Text on God and Western Culture:

Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).

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

- 1) The following are examples of books that treat issues in contemporary Christian life, feel free to select an alternative:

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

David Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism? Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011)

or (with Geoff Holsclaw), *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2013).

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, free to select an alternative:

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:

Assignment	Percent	Due
A. Christianity's Cultural Context	20%	Feb 2 (week 5)
B. Op-Ed on a Emerging Churches	15%	Feb 23 (week 7)
C. Constructive Essay (or project)	35%	
1) Presentation	10%	March 9 (week 9)
2) Paper	25%	
D. Participation:	<u>30%</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 papers and assignment should conform to the [MDC Writing Style Guide](#)

A. Christianity's Cultural Context:

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: 5–7 double-spaced pages in 12 point Times New Roman font.
3. Document sources with footnotes and follows the MDC Writing Style Guide.

B. Op-Ed on a Current Ministry or Christian Life Issue:

1. 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. Write an opinion piece on the topic/figure like you find in a major news outlet.
3. Length: 700–800 words.
4. Post your op-ed on the Avenue to Learn website.
5. Comment on at least one of the op-eds posted by your class colleagues.

C. Constructive Essay or Project:

1. Description:
 - a. The purpose of this assignment is to provide you with an opportunity to
 - 1) describe a significant issue facing contemporary Christian thought, life, and/or ministry and . . .
 - 2) evaluate it theologically. 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 address an issue that is important to Christian life and ministry and to your personal life and 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 Christian churches be engaged in inter-religious coalitions that address social problems/concerns? What are the theological categories that informs 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) The paper should address an issue related to 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 campus sessions provide an opportunity to present your paper or project to the class. Class presentations are valuable for introducing the fruit of your theological reflection on the topic to the other members of the class and for receiving interaction from your class colleagues. Class presentations are approximately 25–30 minutes (approximately 20 minutes for presenting your paper/project and 10 minutes for class discussion). Although not required, I encourage multi-media, audio, and audio-visual methods when appropriate.
- Note: the final version of the paper/project is due March 9 (Monday of week 9)
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 MDC Writing Style Guide found on the website.
- 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. Participation:

Developing a community of learners through online posts and discussion is central to the class experience. Each student contributes weekly to the online community of the class. See syllabus outline for discussion topics and assignments for posts.

The online venue is McMaster University's Avenue to Learn

VI. Course Outline (*tentative*):

Part One: Weeks 1–5	
Week	Topic
1 Jan 5	Introduction to the Course I. The Context of Contemporary Christian Life and Ministry A. Modernism
2 Jan 12	B. Postmodernism • Post on Avenue to Learn: What are the challenges and insights presented by postmodernism for Christian life and ministry in the Canadian context?
3 Jan 19	C. Post-Christendom & Disenchantment with the Church/Christianity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post on Avenue to Learn: Describe your experience with the reality of post-Christendom
<p>4 Jan 26</p>	<p>II. Current Issues in Christian Life & Ministry (Part One):</p> <p>A. Emerging Adults & Spirituality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post on Avenue to Learn: describe your experience with emerging adult spirituality in the church and the culture. Discuss ways that it is conducive and a challenge to the pursuit of the Christian life
<p>5 Feb 2</p>	<p>B. Singleness and Sexuality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lauren Winner, <i>Real Sex</i> • Post on Avenue to Learn: Marriage is the assumed ideal for adult life in the evangelical church. Given that, what is the place of single identity in the evangelical church?

Part Two: Campus Sessions February 12–13 (week 6)		
Day	Session	
1		
9:00–noon	1	<p>III. Cultural Issues and Contemporary Christian Life and Ministry</p> <p>A. The Decline of the West—should Christians care?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussion: What challenge/s does the legacy of Western imperialism present for evangelism with immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa? <p>B. Christian Mission in the Context of Religious Pluralism and “Tolerance”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussion: share your experience with religious pluralism and Christian witness in a secular culture. • Read my “Fort Hood and the Myths of Secularism” on Christianity.ca
12:00–1:00		Lunch

<p>1:00– 4:00</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Class Presentations and Discussion Groups</p> <p>1. Presentation _____</p> <p>2. Presentation _____</p> <p>3. Presentation _____</p> <p>4. Presentation _____</p> <p>5. Presentation _____</p>
<p>2</p>		
<p>9:00– noon</p>	<p>1</p>	<p>C. New Expressions of the Church in Canada—From Monks to Punks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class discussion: share your experience with new and emerging forms of the church in Canada.
<p>12:00– 1:00</p>		<p>Lunch</p>
<p>1:00– 4:00</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Class Presentations and Discussion Groups</p> <p>6. Presentation _____</p> <p>7. Presentation _____</p> <p>8. Presentation _____</p> <p>9. Presentation _____</p> <p>10. Presentation _____</p>

Reading Week: February 16–20

Part Three: Weeks 7–12	
Week	Topic
7 Feb 23	<p>IV. Current Issues in Christian Life and Ministry (Part Two):</p> <p>A. New Directions in Ministry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frost & Hirsch, <i>Shaping of Things to Come</i> • Bolger & Gibbs, <i>Emergent Churches</i> • Post Op-Ed on emerging Church (see assignment description)
8 Mar 2	<p>B. Key Shapers of Contemporary Christian Life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Fitch, <i>The End of Evangelicalism & Prodigal Christianity</i> (Reclaiming the Mission blog) • Scott McKnight, <i>Jesus Creed</i> (Jesus Creed blog) • Francis Chan, <i>Crazy Love</i> • David Platt, <i>Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream</i> (website: www.Radical.net) • Tim Keller (website: http://www.timothykeller.com) • Post on Avenue to Learn (see assignment description): describe the influence of one or two contemporary Christian figures/leaders on your understanding of the Christian life/ministry.
9 Mar 9	<p>C. Social Justice & Creation Care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read my EerdWord Blog • Post on Avenue to Learn: Are creation care initiatives an appropriate form of church ministry; that is, is creation care fine for the individual, but really a part of the church's mission?
10 Mar 16	<p>D. The Simple Way or the Suburbs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shane Claiborne & Albert Hsu • Post on Avenue to Learn: Discuss the challenges and benefits of the Simple Way—can it work as a long-term lifestyle for most Christians in North America?
11	

Mar 23	<p>E. Religion and Science</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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> • Post on Avenue to Learn: Post your reflections on Ramachandra's discussion of the myths of science (chapter 5, <i>Subverting Global Myths</i>)
12 Mar 30	<p>F. Class Selected Topic (the class will propose topics during weeks 1–5 with selection of the topic during the campus segment of the class)</p>

VII. Policies:

A. Textbook Purchase:

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, 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 ~

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.