

5 Church and Culture: Transcending Secularism

McMaster Divinity College
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Hybrid
Office: 216

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I. Description

Western culture declares the world secular. God and spirituality are the realm of the private inner life. Churches can embrace this wider cultural perspective by separating the sacred and the secular, church and culture, and creation and redemption, but Christians are then left with a fractured life. Most of their lives—from professions, arts, education, and entertainment—take place in the secular world. They struggle to relate these areas of life to God, spirituality, and church. This course explores ways to regain creation as the space for encountering God. Together we will consider ways to transcend the secular world, not by escaping it, but by finding God in the diverse contexts of life. To achieve this goal, this course engages leading voices and approaches to the problem of secularism and transcendence. It investigates theological and practical strategies for transcending the secular and retrieving creation as the horizon for experiencing God.

Format

This course is a hybrid class. It includes online and in-person learning experiences. The first part consists of two online weeks, April 10–21. The second part is in-person, April 25–27. The in-person days include two days of classroom experience, one of those featuring Christina Gschwandtner (conference keynote), and the third day attending the “Secularism and the Pursuit of Transcendence” conference at McMaster Divinity College (April 27, 2023). The third part of the course is three online weeks (May 1–19).

II. Course Objectives

A. Knowing

1. Identify challenges facing the church from secularism (blogs/podcasts on church and secularism, small group discussions on major seminar/project/paper, lectures).
2. Describe and assess instances of secularism in contemporary culture (blog on secularism and religion).
3. Explore a variety of contemporary approaches to secularism and Christian responses to it (conference attendance).

B. Being

1. Develop a theology of creation as a place for encountering God (lectures, constructive element of seminar/project/paper).

2. Acquire a deeper theological vision for Christian life and ministry in secular society (seminar/project/paper, lectures).
 3. Improve skills for creating thoughtful and creative digital content (blogs, podcasts, video presentations).
- C. Doing
1. Differentiate and compare distinct Christian responses to secularism (blogs and/or podcast, video presentations).
 2. Communicate the complex theological knowledge and cultural analysis of secularism for a non-academic audience (blogs/podcasts, paper presentation).
 3. Generate and write a constructive Christian engagement with secular culture (major paper).

III. Required Texts

* This course does not have a required text. Course readings and research activities fulfill reading requirements.

IV. Course Assignments Outline

Assignments		Percent	Due
A.	Blog on secularism and religion	15%	
	1) Post blog on Padlet	10%	April 13
	2) Padlet interaction	5%	April 15
B.	Blog on church and secularism	15%	
	1) Post blog on Padlet	10%	April 20
	2) Padlet interaction	5%	April 22
C.	Post-conference reflection & assessment	25%	
	1) Post podcast/blog on Padlet	10%	May 4
	2) Padlet interaction	15%	May 6
D.	Seminar/paper/project	45%	
	1) Post video	10%	May 15
	2) Post interaction	5%	May 17
	3) Written seminar/project/paper	30%	May 19
E.	Participation:	X	
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		Total: 100%	

V. Course Outline

Schedule and course outline	
Part 1: Online	
April 10-14	<p>Introduction to the Course</p> <p>I. Advent of Secularism: Transcending the transcendent</p> <p>A. Video lectures on modernism on the topic of transcending God and creation and postmodernism as transcending nature.</p> <p>B. Blog on secularism and religion (link)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Post blog on Padlet 2) Interact with colleagues on Padlet <p>C. Read Watts, “Religion, Science, and Disenchantment” and Milbank, “Comments on <i>A Secular Age</i>” (posted on A2L)</p>
April 17-21	<p>II. Secularism, Religious Pluralism, Post-Christendom, & Disenchantment with the Church/Christianity</p> <p>A. Video lectures on the complex cultural factors shaping the context of contemporary Christianity.</p> <p>B. Blog on church and secularism</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Post blog on Padlet 2) Interact with colleagues on Padlet <p>C. Read Thiessen, “Becoming a Religious None,” Stackhouse, “Post-Christian Canada” (posted on A2L)</p> <p>D. Read statistical analysis on religious affiliation in Canada and the US</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) US religious affiliation (pewresearch/religion/2021/unaffiliated) 2) Religiosity in Canada (statcan/religiosity) 3) Post-COVID church attendance (barna/church-attendance-2022)
Part 2: Conference, in-person, and livestream week	
April 25 Tuesday 10:00am-noon	<p>III. Transcending the Secular</p> <p>In-person/livestream session that includes lectures, discussion, and small group conversations on major paper/project.</p>
April 26 Wednesday	<p>IV. Guest Lecture and Discussion with Christina Gschwandtner</p>

10:00am-noon	<p>The conference keynote speaker will join our class to present a lecture and facilitate a conversation on Ecological Theology: Challenges and Opportunities for Creation Care.</p> <p>* In-person, no livestream option for this session.</p>
April 27 Thursday 9:00am-5:15pm	<p>V. Attend Secularism and the Pursuit of Transcendence, A Church and Culture Conference https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/transcendence/</p>
Part 3: Online	
May 1-5	<p>VI. Post-Conference Reflection and Assessment</p> <p><i>You have two options for this week:</i></p> <p>A. Option 1: Podcast or blog on Charles Taylor, Merold Westphal, and Robert Wuthnow interviews.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Read the bio briefs on Taylor, Westphal, and Wuthnow in the Avenue folder before listening to the interviews. 2) After listening to the interviews, record a podcast or write a blog that <i>compares</i> their thought (e.g., identify where they agree and take different approaches to the problem of and solution for secularism) and <i>identifies and assesses</i> their contribution for Christian thought, life, and/or ministry. 3) <i>Post</i> podcast/blog on Padlet and <i>interact</i> with colleagues' posts. <p>B. Option 2: Podcast or blog on three sessions from the conference.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Describe, compare, contrast</i> (where appropriate) three conference presentations and <i>identify and assess</i> their contribution for Christian thought, life, and/or ministry. 2) <i>Post</i> podcast/blog on Padlet and <i>interact</i> with colleagues' posts.
May 8-12	<p>VII. Embracing life in Creation</p> <p>A. Video lecture on ways to embrace embodied life in creation.</p> <p>B. Prepare paper/project presentation and written submission.</p>
May 15-19	<p>VIII. Paper and Project Presentations</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May 15 – Post paper/project video presentation on Padlet • May 17 – Post interaction with paper/project presentation on Padlet • May 19 – Submit final written paper/project • May 19 – Course evaluations
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VI. Assignment Descriptions

General Guidelines

- Submit your assignments in the relevant folder on Avenue to Learn.
- All papers and assignments should conform to the MDC’s Style Guide: <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>

A. Blog on secularism and religion

1. Purpose

This assignment introduces you to the topic of secularism and its implication for religion. It also provides the opportunity to apply this knowledge to contemporary culture by identifying and describing an example of secularism and its impact on religion and the quest for transcendence.

2. Guidelines

- a. *Read* Steven Kettell’s “Secularism and Religion,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.898>
- b. *Watch* video lecture content on modernism.
- c. Based on the Kettell reading and video lecture content . . .
 - 1) *identify* and *describe* a secular phenomenon/artifact in contemporary culture and . . .
 - 2) *assess* consequences for transcendence/the experience of God.
- d. *Post* your description and assessment of the secular artifact on Padlet (if your artifact is not material, post a concrete example—e.g., for example Starbucks’

cultivation of third spaces is an effort to create community and transcend the individualism promoted by secularism). Your description and assessment can be text, audio, or video using the post function within Padlet.

- e. *Interact* with at least three of the artifacts posted by your class colleagues. You can contribute with the text or audio/audio-video within Padlet.
2. Style: Blogs target a popular audience. But they do not need to be simpleminded. They should condense, synthesize, apply, and highlight the importance and implications of part of a field of study.
 3. Length: approximately 2,000 words.
- B. Blog on church and secularism: What is your church's relationship to secular culture?

1. Purpose

This assignment provides the opportunity to analyze the church's response and relationship to its secular cultural environment. Assessing the church's *implicit* and *explicit* posture toward secular culture is essential.

For example, does the church intentionally attempt to engage people through contemporary cultural forms, does it perceive itself as an isolated bastion for the faithful, and do its ministries and church "values" reflect accommodation to culture? This requires careful discernment. For example, a Christian organization on the surface may appear opposed to secularism but adopt a worldview and spirituality that regards the world as secular space.

2. Guidelines

- a. Select a church or Christian ministry organization and interpret its response to secular culture. Ideally, the church/organization is one you attend and/or in which you are involved.
- b. Use your observations of the church (website, ministries, sermons, etc.).
- c. Length: approximately 2,000 words.

C. Post-conference reflection and assessment

Choose option 1 OR option 2

1. Option 1: Podcast or blog on Charles Taylor, Merold Westphal, and Robert Wuthnow interviews

- a. Read the bio briefs on Taylor, Westphal, and Wuthnow in the Avenue folder before listening to the interviews.
 - b. After listening to the interviews, write a blog that compares the thought of at least two of the scholars interviewed.
 - c. *Post* podcast/blog on Padlet and *interact* with colleagues' posts.
 - d. Length: approximately 5-7 minutes/1,500 words.
2. Option 2: Mini-Seminar on Conference Take-Aways
- a. Prepare a report on the secularism and transcendence conference. The report should do the following:
 - ⇒ *Describe, compare, and contrast* (where appropriate) the key contributions.
 - ⇒ *Identify and assess* their contribution for Christian thought, life, and/or ministry.
 - ⇒ Be sure to craft this mini seminar for a particular audience: e.g., church leadership group.
 - b. *Post* podcast/blog on Padlet and *interact* with colleagues' posts.
 - c. Length: approximately 10-12 minutes/2,000 words.
 *Note: this assignment is longer than option 1 because option 2 is based on your experience at the conference whereas option 1 requires extra reading and content.

D. Major paper, presentation, and interaction

- ◆ This assignment gives you experience writing and presenting article, essay, and chapter length papers. It also affords the opportunity to contribute to and receive feedback from your course colleagues.
- ◆ You are encouraged to use this assignment as an opportunity to work on a paper to . . .
 - Present at academic and/or professional society meetings and/or submit to journals for publication
 - Develop material for presentation to and/or application in your professional world
 - Pursue dissertation research.

1. Paper (final written submission due **May 19**)
You will *write* and *present* a thesis paper on a topic related to course content and your area of DPT practice led research. I encourage you to investigate the issue from the perspective of your discipline and area(s) of research interest.
 - a. Guidelines for the Paper:
The paper should include (description categories below correspond to those of the grading rubric) . . .
 - 1) Content and argument
 - a) Detail a clear thesis (the view that your paper supports).
 - Example of a thesis statement: The missional church movement, especially its emphasis on incarnational ministry, provides valuable insight for Christian leadership in a postmodern and post-Christian culture.
 - Note: The DPT PLR topic in this thesis statement is “Christian leadership in a postmodern and post-Christian culture.”
 - b) Describe your topic.
 - c) Write an essay that coherently demonstrates your view.
 - d) Detail major alternatives and/or criticisms and interact with them vis-à-vis your view, where and when appropriate.
 - 2) Form and Style:
 - a) Write a stylistically clean and academic paper—e.g., avoid excessive first-person discourse, colloquialisms (academic differs from conversational voice), and passive voice (use active).
 - b) Use and document a *minimum* of fifteen scholarly resources. Given the limitations on accessing libraries, you may need to rely more on journal articles than other normal circumstances.
 - c) Accurately document sources according to the [MDC Style Guide](https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/):
<https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>
 - d) Paper length: 20–25 pages. Not to exceed 8,000 words.
 - e) Provide a bibliography (list only the books cited in the footnotes of the paper).

- f) Use footnotes.

2. Video Presentation

a. Purpose

The presentation provides skill development in synthesizing and summarizing complex information for public presentation. The presentation, therefore, is an overview of your paper. The time frame for the presentation will not allow you to read the entire paper. This time constraint gives you experience working in the time parameters of a paper presentation at a conference.

b. Guidelines

- Post a video presentation of your paper on Padlet **May 15**.
- Length of video presentation is approx. 15–20 minutes.

3. Interaction

a. Purpose

Provides experience in responding to and contributing to your class colleagues' projects. It provides the opportunity to develop professional skills in academic interaction that takes place at professional and academic conferences.

b. Guidelines

Each student prepares a critical evaluation of the papers/projects presented by their class colleagues. Evaluations can be written, audio, or audio-visual.

1) The interaction should be . . .

a) Charitable

b) Critical (includes highlighting and discussing problems *and* strengths):

The interaction should explore the following sorts of issues:

- Does the paper have a thesis?
- Does the content develop and support the thesis?
- Does it use appropriate sources?
- Does it address a significant topic and develop it?
- For projects, does it seem like an effective approach to a particular issue, topic, and does it seem effective given its target audience?

- 2) Post your critical evaluation by **May 17** for each student in the paper/project Padlet.
 - Interactions can text, audio, video.
 - Length: the equivalent of a substantive paragraph of written interaction.

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 ~ <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/rules-regulations/>
- 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).

- Please note, late papers may not be graded and returned at the same time as the other papers; they will not receive comments from the professor on the grade rubric.
- 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.
- Assignments and exams will not be accepted late based on 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.

IX. Bibliography

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