



McMaster Divinity
College

SPIRITUAL WISDOM AND DISCERNMENT

Fall 2023

PhD MS 6XD6 / DPT MS 5XD5 / MDiv, MTS MS 3XD3 (specializations CS/CW/PS)

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This course is online and asynchronous. There is no in-person class.
There may be some optional synchronous class gatherings on Zoom, TBA.
Course duration: week of September 11 to week of December 4, 2023.

Course Description

Many of us want to be able to see where God is at work in our lives, or in the people, church, community, or culture around us. How can we recognize God at work or discern where he is leading? Every person, whether in professional or lay ministry, the academy, or in life in general, needs spiritual wisdom and discernment, and the capacity for skillful and insightful theological reflection.

This course develops awareness of theory, methodology, practice, and the viability of spiritual wisdom and discernment in ministry, in professional and academic work, and in personal life. Wisdom and discernment are especially critical to gaining perspectives on vocation as we experience life-changes, cultural shifts, or aging that seems to change everything. (E.g. does God's calling in our lives come to an end when we reach the age of retirement, or when a parent puts other things on hold to stay at home and raise children, or when a health challenge or other commitment requires a change of job?) In this course, we will explore various means for developing understanding of spiritual wisdom and discernment, whether through weekly content, reading selected authors, or engaging weekly with the class on our theme as encountered through literature, Christian biography, biblical characters, or events, current or historical events or institutions, and through personal experience. Through pursuing spiritual wisdom and discernment in these various areas, students also develop skills in theological reflection that are crucial to personal spiritual wholeness, professional effectiveness, academic integrity, and successful leadership. Final papers and projects in this course are shaped to the student's personal, ministerial, or professional needs and interests, and can be done at any MDC degree course level.

Knowing, Being, Doing

Through required reading and assessments, online content, weekly postings with classmates, and completion of assignments, students should fulfill the following course objectives:

Knowing

- explore contemporary and historical perspectives on spiritual wisdom and discernment.
- discover ways of engaging in spiritual wisdom and discernment that are relevant for life, ministry, and vocation.

Being

- be shaped by the practice of developing skills in theological reflection.
- become increasingly attuned to God's leading in the past and present.
- be transformed in small ways through attentive interaction with our topics and each other.

Doing

- practice engaging in theological reflection on wisdom and discernment through weekly postings.
- increase your capacity for wisdom and discernment through thoughtful reflection on content, weekly reading, and research for assignments.
- develop your approach to spiritual wisdom and discernment through papers or projects that are shaped towards your own area of professional, ministerial, or academic concern.

Required Course Textbooks

1. Ford, David F. *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. This book lays out an approach to understanding what Scripture has to say about Christian wisdom, and its application in a complex world.
2. Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. Liebert is a leading author on the practice of spiritual discernment, and this, her foundational book on the subject, explores seven practical ways of engaging in discernment.

Alternative book to Liebert, Book 1:

Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015. This second of Liebert's books moves from personal application to communal and institutional application. Ideally you would explore her previous work first, then this one, but if you are particularly interested in discernment in the context of communities and institutions, then you may choose this Liebert book instead of *The Way of Discernment*. Alternative readings are included in the weekly schedule.

Suggested Supplemental Reading

- Bass, Dorothy C., Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. This co-authored book brings practical theologians together to discuss an ancient topic that is relatively recent in pastoral theology.
- Nouwen, Henri, with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Nouwen's thoughts on spiritual discernment have been collected together in this book.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Originally published in 1954 and 1955. Revised edn. London: Harper Collins USA, 2002. *The Hobbit*, London: HarperCollins, 2001. Tolkien's stories are rich with examples of characters who do or do not pursue wisdom and discernment. Consider the possibilities for reflection on wisdom and discernment through Tolkien's characters and scenarios.

PhD/DPT students should choose an additional authored book/monograph:

Choose an additional substantive book that pertains to spiritual wisdom and/or discernment and relates to your profession or academic field, or to your own spiritual life. Select this in consultation with the professor. During the course, show evidence of engaging with this work by drawing on it in some weekly assignments or in a major assignment, or provide a brief review of the book in terms of its relevance and impact on your learning.

Tentative Class Schedule

Note: Course content for the week is normally posted on Mondays on Avenue to Learn.

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| Pre-Course Padlet Post – Personal Intro Videos on Padlet (1-2 minutes) |
| <p>1 – Monday, Sept 11 Overview of Course, Technology, Assignments, Goals and Expectations Introduction to Spiritual Wisdom and Discernment Class Presentation sign-ups.</p> |
| <p>2 – Monday, Sept 18 “Theological Reflection: The Key to Wisdom and Discernment” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, Intro and ch. 1, Wisdom Cries Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, chs. 1–2, What Is It? and Foundations (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 1, Age of Complexity) Due: Padlet Post 1 – Literature and the Arts 1</p> |
| <p>3 – Monday, Sept 25 “Doorways into Discernment” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 2, Wisdom Interpretation of Scripture Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, chs. 3–4, Focusing the Matter, Memory’s Guidance (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 2, Discerners) Due: Padlet Post 2 – Literature and the Arts 2</p> |
| <p>4 – Monday, Oct 2 “Where Is God in This?” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, chs. 3 and 4, Job Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 5, Intuition’s Knowing (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 3, Systems and Structures) Due: Padlet Post 3 – Christian Biography 1</p> |
| <p>Monday, Oct 9 (Thanksgiving Monday) and READING WEEK No class materials or posts.</p> |
| <p>5 – Monday, Oct 16 “Spiritual Autobiography: Encounters with Wisdom and Discernment” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 5, Wisdom Christology Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 6, Body’s Awareness (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 4, Situation and System) Due: Padlet Post 4 – Christian Biography 2</p> |
| <p>6 – Monday, Oct 23 “The Wisdom of Historical Memory” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 6, Tradition and Worship Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 7, Imagination’s Insight (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 5, Social Analysis) Due: Padlet Post 5 – Biblical Character or Event 1</p> |
| <p>7 – Monday, Oct 30 “Wisdom and Discernment in the Small Things”</p> |

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| <p>Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 7, Loving the God of Wisdom Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 8, Reason's Considerations (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 6, Theological Reflection) Due: Padlet Post 6 – Biblical Character or Event 2</p> |
| <p>8 – Monday, Nov 6 “Spiritual Freedom and the Essence of the Question: Unexpected Answers in Gadamer” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 8, Inter-Faith Wisdom Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 9, Power of Religious Affections (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 7, Decision and Confirmation) Due: Padlet Post 7 – Historical or Current Event or Institution 1</p> |
| <p>9 – Monday, Nov 13 “Practices of Faith that Lead to Wisdom and Discernment” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 9, Interdisciplinary Wisdom Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 10, Nature's Perspective (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. 11, Implementation and Evaluation) Due: Padlet Post 8 – Historical or Current Event or Institution 2</p> |
| <p>10 – Monday, Nov 20 “To Do or to Be?” Ford, <i>Christian Wisdom</i>, ch. 10 and conclusion, Interpersonal Wisdom Liebert, <i>Way of Discernment</i>, ch. 11, Confirming Tentative Decisions (alternative Liebert book, <i>Soul of Discernment</i>, ch. Due: Padlet Post 9 – Personal Experience (successful or unsuccessful)</p> |
| <p>11 – Monday, Nov 27 “Spiritual Wisdom and Discernment on Vocation and Calling: Early and Later in Life” Due: Padlet Post 10 – Personal Experience (successful or unsuccessful)</p> |
| <p>12 – Monday, Dec 4 “Bringing Wisdom and Discernment into the Future” Due: Final Padlet VIDEO Post – Final Paper or Project Video on Personal Learning Due: Online course evaluations</p> |

A Learning Community

My hope for this class is that we would be a mutual learning community, where each member of our community can grow through positive encouragement, constructive input, and active engagement with each another, with Scripture, with intellectual ideas, and with practice-based insights. I encourage you to take risks in what you explore, share, and submit, and I will try to foster an environment where we can trust each other with those outcomes. We are all people in process. Come with an openness to be challenged, reshaped, or re-formed, and to grow through our mutual learning experience. As professor, I hope to empower each of you to develop as much as you are willing to, and I aim to treat each of you with respect and dignity. I ask for this in return. I am a fellow learner in the community, and I will attempt to offer information, reflection, experience, and questions for each of us to reflect on together, and to be hospitable in shaping an environment for each of your contributions. I welcome the responsibility and opportunity to give thoughtful evaluation and feedback to your thinking, both as you offer it to the class and through written work or projects, so that your growth through this class can be maximized as a result of our collaboration. As a responsible member of our learning community, I expect you to commit yourself to the class throughout the semester that we are together. This means not only that in our class interactions you will endeavor to treat each person with respect and dignity, but that you

will come prepared to be fully engaged in and with the class. Your weekly participation is required and critical for our learning community to function at an optimal level.

I try to keep class correspondence to weekdays where possible, but I can be reached outside these times and certainly in a crisis. I welcome the opportunity to communicate with you by email or by appointment in an online meeting (Zoom).

ASSIGNMENTS

PhD Students: Contact me about shaping the assignments in this course to specifically align with your program and research interests.

DPT Students: Contact me about designing your assignments towards specific ministry and professional needs that relate to your practice and focus in the program.

MTS and MDiv Students: If you would like this course to count towards your specialization, then focus at least one major assignment around your specialization (CS/CW/PS), then describe in a paragraph how the assignment supports that specialization.

1. Weekly Padlet Posts. 25%

Reflection posts are due Tuesdays by 5:00 p.m.

Responses to other posts are due Thursdays by 5:00 p.m.

a. **Reflection Posts.** Post a weekly Padlet Reflection on wisdom and discernment following the schedule below. Length: 250 words. Late posts get missed, so don't be late.

The focus areas for these 10 Reflections are as follows (note that Padlet #11 is part of your final paper or project):

1. Week of Monday, Sept 18: Literature and the Arts 1.
2. Week of Monday, Sept 25: Literature and the Arts 2.
3. Week of Monday, Oct. 2: Christian Biography 1.
4. Week of Monday, Oct. 16: Christian Biography 2.
5. Week of Monday, Oct 23: Biblical Characters or Events 1.
6. Week of Monday, Oct 30: Biblical Characters or Events 2.
7. Week of Monday, Nov 6: Historical or Current Event or Institution 1 (e.g. church, ministry, professional institution, academic institution, NGO, family institution, etc.).
8. Week of Monday, Nov 13: Historical or Current Event or Institution 2. (e.g. church, ministry, professional institution, academic institution, NGO, family institution, etc.).
9. Week of Monday, Nov 20: Personal Experience 1 (successful or unsuccessful).
10. Week of Monday, Nov 27: Personal Experience 2 (successful or unsuccessful).

Note that there is also a Padlet video post on the final week connected to your final assignment.

b. **Responses.** Respond to at least 2 other student Padlet posts each week. Responses should be thoughtful and considerate. 75–100 words.

Separate links to weekly Padlets will be provided.

The success of these communal interactions depends on each person posting on time and on your concern and care for one another. Weekly contributions to each segment of this assignment are required for optimal grades. Late posts get missed, and don't count for marks, so don't be late.

2. Video Class Presentation — 30%.

Due: Thursday by noon, the week *prior* to Monday's class.

Duration: 5 to 7 minutes long.

Choose a week (according to class sign-up) to prepare a video presentation/reflection on one of the approaches to discernment as outlined in Liebert's book 1, *The Way of Discernment*, chs. 4 to 10 (according to the class schedule). Include opportunity for student engagement and/or thoughtful questions to consider. Be sure to rehearse this prior to final recording, and edit the final recording, if needed. At least part of your recording must include you visually and audibly speaking or presenting in some other way where you are easily identifiable, but other components can be used, as well, including voice-overs.

Note: Depending on class size, presentations may be collaborative, or the topic split between persons in terms of their focus.

3. Final Paper or Project. 40%. Choose either a paper or project for this assignment. Select a topic that matters to you and is relevant for your program requirements and goals.

Risk Factor: Try to take a meaningful risk in your assignments. This does not guarantee the highest mark, but it is through some aspect of risk that you will learn the most. Provide evidence of any meaningful risk that you have taken.

Due: Friday, November 24, by midnight, via Avenue to Learn "Assignments" or by email. Projects with media may need to be embedded and links provided.

Paper: Research and write a paper that explores spiritual wisdom or discernment from an exegetical, historical, psychological, cultural, or other perspective that is of value to you personally, or to your professional practice, ministry, or academic field. Choose something that stretches you. Consult with the professor by email about your topic and approach.

DPT or PhD students: shape this towards your profession / practice / academic area.

MDiv or MTS students: develop your specialization. Include a paragraph on how it does this.

Quality of Writing and Style: Follow the MDC Style Guide

<https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>. Use a minimum of 10–15 substantive sources, and document these accurately. Your research and writing must reflect at least the level of your program.

Word Count for Papers:

PhD: 7000 words

DPT: 5500 words

MDiv / MTS students: 4000 words

Project: Choose a project in which you explore some aspect of spiritual wisdom or discernment, and that stretches you in meaningful ways. Show evidence of thoughtful reflection. Your project may be a work of art, or teaching materials for a seminar, or any number of other possibilities.

You may choose a medium that is familiar or one that you have never attempted before. You **must** consult with the professor (by email) before finalizing your subject and mode of delivery. Critical to this project is that you provide a thoughtful written reflection (see description and

word count below) on what you learned. Projects submitted without this reflection will not be graded.

Project Length and Complexity: This is determined only in consultation with the professor.
Reflection on Learning: Include a thoughtful reflection on what you learned through this project. Use “I” language. Include this with your project submission. Projects that do not include this personal reflection will not be graded until the reflection is received.

Reflection: PhD/DPT: 1000 words. MDiv/MTS: 750 words.

Final Paper or Project Video Padlet Post – 5%

Post a video in the final Padlet where you very briefly describe your paper/project and *at least one thing that you learned through it*, whether you chose a creative project or a research paper. Use “I” language to describe what you learned. Without this personal learning component, the assignment will be considered incomplete. Max 3 minutes video.

Successful Completion of this Course for Credit requires that each of the assignments be attempted. Failure to make a valid attempt to complete each of these requirements may constitute grounds for failure of the course. Late assignments may result in incrementally reduced grades, up to 2% per day. Please be pro-active and contact me well in advance if there is some legitimate and urgent reason that you cannot get an assignment done on time.

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one’s own (regardless of the means of its production) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student’s dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

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 inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSV (2021), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Bookstore

All required textbooks 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, you 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.

Writing Style: All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses <http://mcmasterdivinity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/mdcstyleguide.pdf>. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

Deadlines and Late Submission Penalty: Assignments should be submitted on time and in good order. Late assignments may be docked incrementally up to 2% per calendar day. Submit assignments electronically either to Avenue to Learn or by email. If there are issues that could prevent your timely or successful completion of an assignment, be in touch with the instructor immediately to discuss possible alternatives. Be proactive—do not leave this to the last minute.

Disclaimer: 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.

Selected Bibliography

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