

## **Theology for the Contemporary Church TH 3XC3/5XC5 (CC/CW/PS)**

**McMaster Divinity College**

**Fall 2023**

**Online Asynchronous**

**Michael Brain, Ph.D.**

**Email:** [brainmr@mcmaster.ca](mailto:brainmr@mcmaster.ca)

**Office Hours: By Appointment**

### **Course Description**

This course discusses significant issues related to the contemporary Church and the Christian life from a theological perspective. It explores theological issues and implications of the current context, approaches to Christian ministry and discipleship, and the ways that theological reflection can contribute to these approaches. The course endeavours to discern the work and direction of the Spirit through contemporary approaches to the Christian life and ministry.

**DPT Students:** Doctor of Practical Theology students who wish to apply for this course as an Advanced Elective for their degree program must consult with the Program Director of the DPT and the course instructor in order to develop an Advanced Elective approach to the course that fulfills the specific elements required by the DPT program. Once the elements of the Advanced Elective have been agreed upon by the student, the Program Director, and the instructor, a formal application can be made for an Advanced Elective in connection with this course. Once the application is accepted, DPT students can proceed with the course as part of their degree program.

### **Course Objectives**

#### *Knowing*

- Identify key movements in contemporary Christian life and ministry
- Understand key trends impacting the life of the contemporary Church

#### *Doing*

- Analyze significant movements and people shaping the contemporary Church
- Develop research skills in the area of theology and Christian ministry

#### *Being*

- Embrace a deeper understanding of the nature of Christian life and ministry

- Integrate theological reflection into your life and practice of ministry

**Course Texts**

Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*.

Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*.

Other readings will be posted on the course site as required.

**Grade Breakdown**

## MDiv/MTS

1. Online Discussion Participation (10%)
2. Book Review (25%)
3. Position Paper (25%)
4. Research Paper (40%)

## DPT

5. Online Discussion Participation (10%)
6. Book Review (25%)
7. Literature Review (25%)
8. Research Paper (40%)

**Assignment Descriptions**

**Online Discussion Participation** - as an online asynchronous course, participation and attendance is demonstrated by regular logins and up-to-date participation in course forums. Throughout the term, you will be required to participate in online group discussions, for the purpose of engaging with your classmates and the theological content of the course. You will be expected to post questions or comments related to the course readings and/or lectures for the week by Tuesday evenings at 11:59p.m. (ET), as well as responses to the posts of three classmates by Thursday evenings at 11:59p.m. (ET).

**MDiv/MTS: Book Review** - MDiv and MTS students will write a 6-page position paper based on one of the topics discussed through the course. The topic for this paper should be different from your research topic for the final paper. Position papers will explore the various approaches to the topic, and should take a position that critically analyzes how the church can faithfully respond to these movements. No outside research is required for this assignment.

**DPT: Literature Review** - DPT students will compile a literature review, consisting of an annotated bibliography, related to one of the course topics. Bibliography should consist of 15-20 resources, related to one of the topics addressed in the course, and write a 100-word annotation for each one. Students are encouraged to select a topic that aligns with their research interests. If there is a topic not covered in the course that aligns more with your research project, speak with the professor well in advance for approval.

**Book Review** - you will write a 6-page book review on one of the two core course texts - Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith*, or Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*. The purpose of the book review is to briefly describe the main thesis of the book, to analyze theologically significant elements of the text, and to describe how the author's ideas are/are not applicable to the ministry/church context in which you are currently engaged. Papers will be due at the end of week 5 of the course.

**Research Paper** - the culminating project of the course will be a capstone research paper that addresses one of the topics discussed throughout the term. Papers are expected to exhibit sound research and academic practices, and will include a clear, well-developed thesis statement, critical analysis, and will be supported by at least 10 high quality academic sources beyond the course materials. Grading rubric will be provided on the course page. MDiv/MTS students will write a paper of 3,000-3,500 words, DPT paper length is 7,000 words. If there is a topic outside of the course materials, relevant to your own research interests and in-line with the overall topic of the course, please speak to the instructor well in advance.

## Course Outline

### I. The Context of Contemporary Christian Life and Ministry

#### **Week 1 (Sept. 11-15) - Introduction to Course: The Modern Period**

Volf, *A Public Faith*, Introduction-Ch. 1

Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, Introduction-Ch. 1

DPT: Green, "Modernity," *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*

#### **Week 2 (Sept. 18-22) - Postmodernism: The World Without a Story**

Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, Ch. 2

Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, Ch. 1

DPT: Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story"; "What is a Post-Christian?"

**Week 3 (Sept. 25-29) - Post-Christendom I: Disillusionment and Disenchantment**

Volf, *A Public Faith*, 2-3

Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, Ch. 2

DPT: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Ch. 15

**Week 4 (Oct. 2-6) - Post-Christendom II: The Church in a Post-Christian Age**

Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, Ch. 3

Volf, *A Public Faith*, Chs. 4

DPT: Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, p.1-34

**II. Current Issues in Christian Life & Ministry**

**October 9-13 - Reading Week (No Class)**

**Week 5 (Oct. 16-20) - Secularism & Pluralism**

**Book Review Due - Friday, October 20th**

Volf, *A Public Faith*, Chs. 5-6

Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, Ch. 5

DPT: Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, Chs. 2, 4

**Week 6 (Oct. 23-27) - The Church and Politics**

Discussion of Ward, Volf

Hinlicky, *Before Auschwitz*, pp. 1-13, 141-171

DPT: Cavanaugh, "Church," *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*

**Week 7 (Oct. 30-Nov. 3) - Theology & Social Justice**

McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, Ch. 4

Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Chs. 7-8

DPT: Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, "Zurura's Tears"

**Week 8 (Nov. 6-10) - Reconciliation and the Canadian Church**

**Literature Review Due - Friday, November 10th**

Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview*, Ch. 2-3

DPT: *Coming Full Circle: Constructing Native Christian Theology*, Chs. 1-2

**Week 9 (Nov. 13-17) - Climate Change & Creation**

Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, Chs. 4-5

DPT: Wirzba, *The Agrarian Spirit*, Chs. 1-3

**Week 10 (Nov. 20-24) - Theology & Science**

Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology*, pp. 1-24

McGrath, *Enriching Our Vision of Reality*, Ch. 1

DPT: Vainio, *Cosmology in Theological Perspective*, Chs. 6, 9

**Week 11 (Nov. 27-Dec. 1) - Technology and Christian Community**

Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*, Chs. 1-2

DPT: Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, Ch. 5

**Week 12 (Dec. 4-8) - Conclusion**

Course wrap-up

**Academic Policies**

**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](mailto:books@readon.ca). The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

**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, <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

**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 up to and including the first day of class. Students will be kept apprised of any changes.

