

**SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY**  
**SEATTLE UNIVERSITY**

**STMA 504. GOD, CREATION, AND TRINITY**

SPRING QUARTER 2011  
THURSDAY, 9:00 – 11:50 A.M.  
HUNTHAUSEN 100

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HUNTHAUSEN 126  
OFFICE HOURS BY APPOINTMENT

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**SYLLABUS**

**I. COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Examines Christian understandings of God and God's relationship to the world, including the doctrine of the Trinity. Specific topics of discussion may include: the nature of God, God as mystery, God's love and God's power, divine transcendence and immanence; God as creator, liberator, and sustainer of all, models of God's relationship to the world, God and evil; sources, opportunities, and limits of Trinitarian language. Culturally and theologically diverse materials will be considered.

**II. S.T.M. LEARNING OUTCOMES ADDRESSED IN THIS COURSE**

This course primarily addresses the following learning outcome put forward for the M.Div. degree:

Ability to reflect theologically on the central themes of the Christian tradition.

Secondarily, these learning outcomes will be addressed:

- Knowledge of the interaction of religious/spiritual experience and culture in their ecumenical and multicultural dimensions.
- Ability to read scriptural texts critically.
- Awareness of the student's own social location/assumptions/hermeneutics as they engage the text in their own lives, their communities, and the larger world.
- Ability to articulate one's relationship with God, as it is informed by theological reflection in one's social context.

### III. COURSE OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this course are for each student:

- 1) to listen deeply and attentively to the wisdom of the Western religious and philosophical traditions concerning God (the gods/the divine), thereby gaining a solid and use-full understanding of the following concepts/themes – the nature, existence, and goodness of God; God and history; human belief in God; God as personal;
- 2) to engage actively and openly the approach of a representative contemporary theologian and her/his revisionary way of imaging and thinking God, thereby arriving at a solid and use-full understanding of problematic aspects of traditional Western views of God, as well as alternatives to these views;
- 3) to wrestle critically and empathetically with the co-presence within Christianity of experience/talk/thought of God as both one and three, thereby developing a solid and use-full understanding of the sources, functions, and limits of both monotheistic and Trinitarian concepts and images;
- 4) to recognize and embrace the historically and culturally conditioned character of all human perceptions, images, and concepts of God;
- 5) to develop greater facility in oral and written communication, in theological reflection, and in the integration of theology, spirituality, and ministerial practice;
- 6) to develop a heightened sensitivity to the difference gender makes (and does not make) in human experience and to the ways race, class, and culture deepen and complicate accounts of human experience;
- 7) to develop an appreciation for the rich vitality of human experiences of God, as well as for the ways in which God remains always beyond the powers of human imagination and conception.

#### IV. TEXTS

##### Books:

Collins, Paul M. *The Trinity: A Guide for the Perplexed*.  
London and New York: T&T Clark, 2008.

McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*.  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*.  
New York: Washington Square Press, 1982.

Ward, Keith. *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*.  
Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002.

##### Film:

Bergman, Ingmar (writer and director). "Winter Light [Nattvardsgästerna]."  
Svensk Filmindustri, 1961.

##### Articles and Chapters from Books (in the order in which they are assigned):

1. Taylor, Mark Lloyd. "Ishmael's (m)Other: Gender, Jesus, and God in Melville's *Moby-Dick*." *The Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 325-350.
2. Mafico, Temba L.J. "The Divine Name *Yahweh Elohim* from an African Perspective," in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, pp. 21-32.
3. Soares-Prabhu, George. "Laughing at Idols: The Dark Side of Biblical Monotheism," in *Reading from this Place*, pp. 109-131.
4. Taylor, Mark Lloyd. "The Boundless Love of God and the Bounds of Critical Reflection: Schubert Ogden's Contribution to a Theology of Liberation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989): 103-147.

These four articles will be available in a course reader for sale at Super Copy.

## V. SCHEDULE OF CLASS SESSIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS

### A. Getting Acquainted and Getting Oriented

March 31

Introductions and "Theology of Origin" Exercise

Course Organization

What is Theology?

God: One and Three? A First Look

### B. Imaging and Thinking God Today

April 7 – Theology, Metaphor, and Models of God

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Sallie McFague, *Models of God*, pp. ix-xv, 1-87

April 14 – No Class Session! Seattle University Mission Day!

Please use this week off wisely to work on your future reading/viewing assignments and to begin thinking about Paper #1.

April 21 – New Models of God: Mother, Lover, Friend

Read and be prepared to discuss:

McFague, *Models of God*, pp. 89-187

April 28 – God in Human Experience

Watch and be prepared to discuss the film:

"Winter Light," written and directed by Ingmar Bergman

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Mark Lloyd Taylor, "Ishmael's (m)Other" (Course Reader)

### C. God: *One* and *Three*?

May 5 – Naming the One God

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Temba Mafico, "The Divine Name *Yahweh Elohim*..."

(Course Reader)

George Soares-Prabhu, "Laughing at Idols" (Course Reader)

Re-read and be prepared to discuss:

Sallie McFague, *Models of God*, pp. 181-187

**Paper #1 Due**

### D. God in the Western Religious and Philosophical Traditions

May 12 – The Nature, Existence, and Goodness of God

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Keith Ward, *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, pp. 1-139

May 19 – God and History; the Rationality/Irrationality of Belief in God;

God as Person/Personal?

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Ward, *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, pp. 101-254

## V. SCHEDULE OF CLASS SESSIONS AND ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

### D. God in the Western Religious and Philosophical Traditions (continued)

May 26 – God in Human Experience

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Mark Lloyd Taylor, “The Boundless Love of God...”

(Course Reader)

### E. God: *One and Three?*

June 2 – Understanding the Trinity

Read and be prepared to discuss:

Paul Collins, *The Trinity: A Guide for the Perplexed*, pp. 1-94

Re-read and be prepared to discuss:

Keith Ward, *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, pp. 234-237

Course Evaluation

Closure

June 8 – no later than 12:00 noon

**Paper #2 Due**

## VI. PROCEDURES AND ASSIGNMENTS

**A. Attendance.** Class sessions are the primary means by which the instructor and students can share the material introduced in the assigned texts and other activities. Therefore, punctual attendance at all sessions of the course is essential.

**B. Reading, Preparation for Class Sessions, and In-Class Participation.** Each student is responsible for having read the material assigned for each session of the course and should be prepared to discuss their reading in class. Each student is also responsible for being an active participant in class sessions. Activities will include lectures, large group discussions, and small group work.

**C. Gathering Prayer.** Since our class meets at 9:00 a.m. on a day of the week S.T.M. sponsors Morning Prayer, I invite you to join me, as you are inclined and able, at 8:30 on Thursdays in the Chapel of St. Ignatius for our class sessions' gathering prayer. You might also consider volunteering to help lead Morning Prayer one of those Thursdays in Spring Quarter; please contact Jan Cherry, Ecumenical Liturgical Coordinator, at [cherryj2@seattleu.edu](mailto:cherryj2@seattleu.edu) if you are interested.

## VI. PROCEDURES AND ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

**D. Small Group Discussion Leadership.** Each student will lead a small group (3 or 4 students) in a discussion of issues emerging from the reading assignment for one of the sessions of the course.

- Group discussions will last 30 minutes (maximum).
- Think of yourself, and prepare yourself to serve, as the resident expert within your group on that day's assigned reading and the themes/issues that emerge from them.
- Basic topic of group discussions: What difference does today's assigned reading make to your imaging and thinking of God (and/or that of your ministry or leadership setting, your local community of faith, your ecclesial community, etc.) – new insights? new solutions to old problems or questions? new problems or questions raised? challenges to your previous imaging/thinking?
- Facilitate as rich a discussion as possible, employing your best skills in group process.
- By the beginning of the next class session, hand in a one page (300 word) written reflection on your experience of leadership and what your group discussion accomplished/failed to accomplish.

### **E. Paper #1 – Theological Analysis**

In 1989, the British poet-theologian Brian Wren published a hymn entitled “Bring Many Names” (this hymn can be found as #11 in the United Church of Christ's *New Century Hymnal* – and the instructor will provide printed copies of the hymn at the first class session). Based on your reading of *Models of God*, discuss what you think would be Sallie McFague's assessment of this hymn as a piece of Christian theologizing, that is, an attempt to express the meaning of the Christian tradition in the contemporary situation. I am not asking you to evaluate McFague's views. I am asking you to demonstrate a thorough understanding of McFague's views and the ability to make use of some of her basic ideas.

Be sure to give good evidence both from *Models of God* and from “Bring Many Names” to support your interpretive conclusions. Please engage, at least briefly, all six stanzas of the hymn with some attention to what Wren is trying to accomplish in the hymn concerning “God.”

I would encourage you to work toward a paper that is very tightly focused on the theological issues/themes/methodologies that arise from the intersection of McFague's book and Wren's hymn. In particular, try to avoid writing in your paper about the process you went through to get to and through the writing of the paper. Leave the process behind in your study/office; let that process, as important as it is, be the ladder or the path that delivered you to the conclusions about McFague and Wren that do appear in the paper.

Your paper should be 7 typed, double-spaced pages in length (around 2000 words) and **is due at 1:30 p.m. on Thursday, May 5.**

## VI. PROCEDURES AND ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

### F. Paper #2 – Constructive Theologizing

Your assignment in this final paper is to articulate something of your own constructive theological understanding of God by wrestling with (at least) one of the following questions:

**What do you believe most deeply about God?  
What do you experience of God most vitally?  
What do you assume concerning God most fundamentally  
in your life and ministry?**

As you develop and defend this theology of God, your work should show the impact of the course and thereby integrate some of its resources.

While this assignment is intentionally quite open-ended, please be sure to find a clear focus for your reflections. The following are four starting points that occur to me; don't feel bound by them – let them spark your own creativity.

- Work out your own understanding of God in dialogue with some aspect of Bergman's *Winter Light* and/or Walker's *The Color Purple*.
- Pick two of the seven ways of thinking about God identified by Keith Ward in his book *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (or a major theme or a major figure within two of the ways of thinking about God) and use them as dialogue partners in your constructive theologizing. Consider picking the one of the seven ways that resonated most naturally with you and the one that was (at least initially) the most dissonant.
- Work toward your own theology of God in dialogue with some significant liturgical or creedal or component of your own denominational tradition (such as the United Christ Statement of Faith we looked at on the first day of class), or some central element in your own spiritual discipline/practice.
- Revisit the theology of origin exercise we engaged in on the first day of class – in other words, articulate your current understanding of God by looking back at an earlier view of God you held, or a key turning point in your sense of who/what God is.

A few cautions: 1) Please avoid making McFague's *Models of God* your primary dialogue partner in this paper (since you already wrote on her book in Paper #1). 2) While the third and fourth "options" above invite papers arising out of your own experience/autobiography, try to make the primary focus the theological sifting and clarification of that experience and not just a narration of your experience. 3) While I firmly believe that any specific theological "topic" or "theme" (anthropology, christology, ecclesiology, etc.) will always be intertwined with others and can only artificially be separated out, keep in mind that this is a course on "God, Creation, and Trinity" and not Christian anthropology, christology, or the church. For the sake of developing theological competence on the particular issues laid out in this course's syllabus, avoid writing a paper,

## VI. PROCEDURES AND ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

### E. Paper #2 – Constructive Theologizing (continued)

for instance, on Jesus Christ. You could, however, write on “what” it is of God that you find made flesh or revealed in Jesus, or “who” the God is you experience as present here and now in the Holy Spirit. Make sense?

I would love to chat with you about ideas for this paper or give you feedback on an outline or a rough draft. Let me know if I can help.

This paper should be 10 typed, double-spaced pages in length (somewhere around 2500 words in length) and **is due no later than 12:00 noon on Wednesday, June 8 (note, this is the week after our last class session).**

### G. General Guidelines for All Written Work

First of all, please read and follow the required S.T.M. writing guide: Lynn Quitman Troyka and Douglas Hesse, *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle Brook, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009). Beyond that, be aware that I always look for a seemingly paradoxical combination of two factors in papers written for my S.T.M. courses.

On the one hand, I am hoping for you to put your own individual gifts and insights into words as creatively and winsomely as possible; I simply do not know how to create a checklist or set of guidelines to encourage you to be yourself. So, I will simply say: be yourself, let your papers express who you are.

On the other hand, I am hoping that any reasonably intelligent reader could pick up your paper at random – in the park or on the bus – and make sense of it. So, your written work does need to follow basic rules of good writing. A successful paper must:

- 1) advance a thesis – a basic point – that is easily identifiable, plausible, novel, compelling, insightful, and crystal clear
- 2) display a structure or organization of materials that is solid, evident, understandable, and appropriate to your thesis – in particular, transitions from point to point must be smooth, each paragraph must have its own topic sentence, and all paragraphs must somehow advance your thesis
- 3) make use of appropriate evidence to support your points – do not just make assertions, but offer your reader reasons why s/he should accept your assertions and, thereby, embrace your thesis (such evidence may come from other texts and artifacts, judiciously selected, as well as your own experience, carefully articulated)
- 4) reflect sound argumentation – all ideas should flow together smoothly, you might anticipate and answer counterarguments to your thesis, as well as making novel connections to other experiences and ideas
- 5) demonstrate good mechanics – sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, style of citation of sources, and spelling.

## VI. PROCEDURES AND ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

### G. General Guidelines for All Written Work (continued)

Papers should be “typed,” double-spaced, on standard 8 ½ x 11” paper. Use 1” margins all around (do not justify right margins); 12 pt. type. Staple the paper in the top left-hand corner. Please do not use plastic covers or binders. **Keep a hard copy of your work – other than the one you hand in!**

## VII. COMPUTATION OF FINAL GRADE

Class Preparation and Participation, including Small Group Leadership	50 points
Paper #1	100
Paper #2	150
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TOTAL	300 points

Final letter grades for the course will be close to the following scale:

A	=	280-300 points
A-	=	270-279
B+	=	260-269
B	=	245-259
B-	=	240-244
C+	=	234-239

and so on.