

Sample Syllabus: Introduction to Theology and the Arts

Duke Divinity 2015

Course Description:

This course aims to provide an introduction to the ways in which theology can enrich and be enriched by the arts. Covering a wide range - including literature, painting, film, music and drama - it seeks to show how central theological doctrines can transform the way we perceive and make art, and how the arts in turn can enrich our understanding of some of the central tenets of the Christian faith. In the first half of the semester, we will engage some of the most pressing contemporary concerns related to the field, and then examine approaches to three, central and interrelated theological doctrines. In the latter half, we will explore the implications of both the contemporary challenges and theology for more specific aesthetic, ethical and ecclesial concerns.

Course Objectives:

- To discern the key theological issues at stake in theology's engagement with the arts today: especially with respect to the doctrines of *creation*, *Christology*, and the *Holy Spirit*.
- To explore how "Theology and the Arts" can be formed and be informed by the liturgy and practices of the body of Christ.
- To gain a working knowledge of some of the most influential writers and streams of writers in theology and the arts.
- To begin articulating what a theologically responsible and response-able *engagement with the arts* might look like, in a ministry setting and in the local community.

Required Texts:

- *Real Presences*, George Steiner (U of Chicago, 1991)
- *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy (Random House, 1998, 2008)
- *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*, William Dyrness (2001)
- *Love Alone is Credible*, Hans Urs von Balthasar (Ignatius Press 2005, or earlier)
- *Between the Image and the Word*, Trevor Hart (Ashgate, 2013)
- *The Idiot*, Fyodor Dostoevsky; trans. Pevear and Volokonsky (Vintage Classics 2003)
- *So Far From God*, Ana Castillo
- *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot (any edition)

Assignments:

- **A final project** which can either be 1) an article-length paper (@5000 words) that examines at least one of the texts from our syllabus (or otherwise approved by the instructor), or 2) a work of art which engages a particular theological question from this class.

Though there are many possible ways to do this well, a final paper should, generally speaking, make an argument that *contributes to a particular discussion* by integrating both a work of art and a specific work of theology. I especially encourage papers that either, employ a particular theological formulation to offer an illuminating interpretation of a work of art, or conversely show how the imaginative text might clarify/contribute to the formulation of a theological question.

An art project must first be approved by the instructor and will include in each case a two-page “artist’s statement” which makes explicit some of the formal and theological considerations that may be more implicit in the work. Ideally, students will have the opportunity to share this work with the class. For both final project options, success will largely be dependent on careful attention to the materials or the “evidence” in the work(s) at hand and a concrete, coherent, nuanced exploration or application of a theological doctrine. (55% of final grade)

- **A 5-10 page critical review** of a selected texts from the syllabus. Your review is to be circulated via Sakai or Email (25% of final grade). In general, your review should seek to *instruct the course participants* by both synthesizing and critically engaging the material.

Here are some questions to consider as you develop your review:

- what theological/doctrinal priorities or stresses do you discern in this text (e.g. the doctrine of God, creation, the person of Christ, etc) and how do they shape the argument of the text?
 - How does the writer’s argument compare to others we’ve engaged in the class?
 - What is the writer trying to argue against (if anything), and why?
 - To what extent does this argument cut against or challenge assumptions about Christian engagement with the arts that you have encountered? To what extent is the argument counter-cultural?
 - How satisfactory is the writer’s theological engagement with the process of artistic making, artistic reception, and the art-as-object)?
 - What is the most important thing you have learned from reading this text?
- **A weekly, informal reflection** (@200 words) on the assigned readings via email to the instructor by noon on the day of class. These responses should not seek to summarize or survey the readings – rather they are opportunities for you to begin raising and exploring the questions which most matter to you. Together with my assessment of your class participation and engagement with texts, these reflections will constitute 20% of your final grade. The first reading reflection is due Week 2.
 - **Please Note: Students wishing to fulfill either a CM or PTM Limited Elective** through this course should meet with the instructor early on in the semester to discuss how the weekly reflections and the final project can be directed towards meeting this requirement. Generally speaking, the work of students seeking a CM Limited Elective will reflect on the role the arts and conception of the imagination have played in discerning your vocation and a call to ministry. Students seeking to fulfill the PTM Limited Elective should draw on their other coursework, and Field-Ed or ecclesial experiences while at Duke Divinity to explore how a theologically-informed approach to the arts can inform and be informed by specific Christian practices.

Disability statement

Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the Disability Management System Student Access Office at 668-1267 as soon as possible to better ensure that such accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion. Please also contact Kori Robins, Divinity Registrar (krobins@div.duke.edu or 6603428), to assist with the process.

Academic Integrity and Inclusive Language

In accordance with the Honor Code, students are expected to do their own work for each of the assignments. Any violation of the Honor Code will result in a failing grade and, depending on the severity of the case, could result in additional consequences. In each assignment students are expected to follow the guidelines for inclusive language outlined in the Duke Divinity School Bulletin.

Course Schedule

Week 1 – Introduction to Course—What do we mean by “Theology”? What is “Art”?

Read: Begbie on “Christianity and the Arts” (Sakai)

Week 2 – Navigating the “High” and “Low” Art Divide: What is Art “good” for? Does Beauty *do*?

- *The God of Small Things* – Arundhati Roy
- Banksy’s “Dismaland”
- Auden’s “Musee de Beaux Arts” and “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (Sakai)
- Seamus Heaney: “Crediting Poetry” (Online)
- *Recommended*: Dorothy Sayers: “Problem Picture” (Sakai)

Week 3 – After Babel: Problems and Possibilities for Meaning

- George Steiner: *Real Presences* (focus especially on Book 3)
- Genesis 11:1-9
- David Foster Wallace: “Good Old Neon” and “All That” (Sakai)
- Dyrness: “Preface” and “Introduction”

Week 4 – A Trinitarian Theology of Creation and Creativity

- Genesis 1-2 and John 1:1-18
- Begbie: “A Christian Ecology” and “The Witness of J.S. Bach” (Sakai)
- Balthasar: *Love Alone* Ch. 1-4
- Dyrness: Ch. 1 & 2

Review:

- Ian McFarland: *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (esp. Ch. 4 & 5)

Week 5 – The Christological Imagination

- Edwin Muir: “The Incarnate One” (Sakai)
- Trevor Hart: “Between the Image and the Word”
- William Lynch: “Theology and the Imagination” (Sakai)
- Balthasar: *Love Alone* Ch. 5-7
- Dyrness: Ch. 3 & 4

Review:

- David Bentley Hart II: “Introduction” and “Salvation” from *Beauty of the Infinite*

Week 6 – After Babel, Pentecost: A Spirit-ual Imagination

- John Coltrane: *Love Supreme* (Youtube links in Sakai)
- Steve Nichols: “What hath Mississippi to do with Jerusalem? A Theologian Explores the World of the Blues” (from *Getting the Blues*)
- Steve Guthrie: “The Spirit’s Making and Ours” (Ch. 5- 7 of *Creator Spirit*) (Sakai)
- Begbie: “Singular Powers” (Sakai)
- Dyrness: Ch. 5 & 6

Review:

- Ben Quash: *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit* (esp. Ch. 1, Part II & 8)

Reading Week

Christ Figures

Week 7 – A (Christian) Portrait of the Artist?

- Flannery O'Connor: "The Partridge Festival" (Sakai)
- Wolterstorff: "Beyond Beauty and the Aesthetic" (Sakai)
- Tolkein: "Mythopoeia" (Sakai)
- Trevor Hart: "Cosmos, Kenosis and Creativity"
- Balthasar: "Love as Form" and "Love as the Light of the World"

Review:

- Nicholas Wolterstorff *Art in Action*

Week 8 – A Portrait of Christ?

- Dostoevsky: *The Idiot*
- Rouault "Prostitutes, Clowns and Christ" (Sakai)
- Balthasar: "Love as Justification and Faith" and "Love as Deed"
- JP II: "Letter to Artists" (Sakai)

Review:

- Rowan Williams: *Grace and Necessity*

Week 9 – A Sacramental Imagination?

- *Better Angels* (dir. by AJ Edwards, available for rent online)
- Roy Anker "Like Shining From Shook Foil: Art, Film and the Sacred" (Sakai)
- G.M. Hopkins "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"
- Trevor Hart: "The Promise and the Sign"

Review:

- Richard Villadesau: *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*

Week 10 – Nature, Grace and "Iconic" Vision

- Eavan Boland: readings from *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and Poet in Our Time* ("Preface," "Making the Difference," "A Woman Poet: Her Dilemma") and "Lava Cameo" on Sakai)
- Flannery O'Connor "Parker's Back" (Sakai)
- Dyrness: Ch. 7 and Conclusion
- Trevor Hart: "Unseemly Representations"

Week 11 – Theological Aesthetics, Hegemony and Social Transformation

- Ana Castillo: *So Far From God*
- Alejandro Garcia-Rivera: "A Different Beauty: Hispanic Theology and Aesthetics"
- John de Gruchy: *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (selections)
- He Qi: "The Lord's Prayer"
- Begbie: "Looking to The Future: A Hopeful Subversion" (Recommended)

Week 12 - The Church and the Gifts of Martyrs

- T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*
- Hauerwas: "Performing Faith" (Sakai)
- Trevor Hart: "Unfinished Performances"

Week 13 – Final Class: Wrap-up, Project Presentations, Etc...