

## Theo 500: Introduction to Theology

Modality:	Synchronous Online
Term:	Spring 2024
Instructor:	Dr. Brian Bantum
Office Hours:	by appointment

---

### Course Structure

February 5-May 14, Tuesdays 6:30–8:30pm. Synchronous online meetings.

Course Rhythms: On Monday of each week we will gather to discuss questions, topics of interest, or engage in some exercises. In addition to the assigned readings I will also provide a lecture (in audio and text formats). The weekly meetings will center on the weeks' lecture and readings. We will not meet on Monday September 6th (Labor Day). I will provide a brief introductory lecture as well as time for conversation your questions/observations from the readings.

A typical week would be: Tuesday through Friday, listen (or read) the lecture for the week, read the assigned texts. Saturday or Sunday reflect on concepts that were confusing, write down a few key quotes you found provocative or challenging or confusing and write a paragraph or two on why you chose those quotes (see assignments below). On Monday we will gather and I will share a few thoughts to begin and we will then begin to work through some of the questions/comments. This timing is not strict, but it should give you a sense of the progression I would like you to work through during the week. Our gatherings will not be about disseminating information, but asking questions, thinking together and learning through the collective questions of the class. This assumes you have engaged the lecture and the readings and come to Mondays prepared to think through connections, differences, and underlying concerns.

You may have noticed the course is formally listed as meeting from 6:30pm-9:30pm. But part of our instruction will be given through pre-recorded lectures and that accounts for the time we will not meet in person. The class will meet each week from 6:30-8:30pm.

I will be available for "office hours" by appointment throughout the semester. You can email me or use the Calendly link to schedule an appointment.

---

### Course Description

Christian theology is the purposeful reflection upon God and God's world. Our beliefs about who God is (or is not) are bound to the way we live and who we live among. Theology shapes

us as we struggle to discern the meaning of our lives in relationship to God, to one another, and to creation itself. This course serves as a starting point in exploring the questions, approaches and themes of systematic and constructive theologies.

By *systematic* I mean there is an interrelationship between the beliefs and doctrines that shape Christian faith. Sometimes these doctrines are explicit and sometimes they are implicit. But our faith and lives as disciples are animated by how we describe who God is, what we believe creation to be, what are human beings, what has gone wrong in our world and what does God do to “save” or “heal” or “restore” or “judge.” Depending on the phrase we associate with salvation we already see implicit assumptions about who God is and what’s gone wrong. Systematic theology is the process of thinking about these interrelationships with respect to who we believe God to be, and who we believe our ourselves to be.

By *constructive* I mean that theology is not simply a process of describing what others have said, the systems that some traditions or denominations or believers have articulated over time. While there are many ways of describing constructive theology, my invocation of the term implies that theology is a creative and co-creative process. Theology is a way of being and a way of describing that draws from the descriptions, problems, formulas, and performances of theology that precede, but also speaks from its moment. In this speaking, we draw from the artists, theories, sciences, and histories that help us to describe our moment more faithfully and then discern what it might mean to say that God is acting and present in our moment.

And by *theologies* I mean that descriptions of God working in this world are always multiple. Sometimes they intersect, sometimes they are in conversation, and sometimes they are in opposition. If we confess that our God is transcendent, that God is one who cannot be known or captured within our language or knowledge or experience, then we might begin to open ourselves to all of these descriptions as offering us an insight into who God is. And yet we are also confronted by a God who brings a people into being, who is called by a name, who has a particularity, a personhood. How do we begin to discern who God is in the midst of this transcendence and personhood?

Throughout this course we will examine theology through many of the central doctrines of Christian confession (God, creation, humanity, the fall, Christology, etc.), attending to various treatments (or lack of treatment) of these doctrines, and the historical development of early creeds and confessions.

In addition to comparing theological claims and descriptions we will also endeavor to construct or speak of God and God’s world in light of these descriptions, asking how our theological work might contribute to drawing people into a deeper sense of God in their midst.

---

## Learning Objectives

In this class students will:

- Examine differences and similarities in various theological systems/descriptions.
- Identify interrelationships between doctrinal claims within theological systems.

- Understand theological ideas as having a history and examining several examples, particularly regarding Christology.
- Draw upon theological descriptions to articulate an emerging constructive/systematic theology.

---

## Readings/Texts

- Brian Bantum. *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*. Grand Rapids: Fortress Press, 2016 [isbn: 978-1506408880 , Amazon, \$16.99]
- Dorothy Soelle. *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015 [isbn: 978-1498295765, Amazon, \$18.59]
- Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2018 [isbn: 978-0881416299, Amazon, \$18.00]
  
- Additional readings will be available on Moodle

---

## Grading/Assignments

- Weekly Quotes and Questions (20%): Each week you will be responsible for identifying at least two quotes that speak to the central question of the week. These passages might be particularly difficult, or enlightening. Post these quotes along with a brief description of why you chose those passages (100-150 words) and a question that you have about the passage, or that arises from those passages. Q/Q's are due Monday night of each week by 5pm. On Tuesday our discussion session will be centered primarily on the questions/issues you raise in your forum posts. Posts are graded on a credit/no credit basis. 12 posts=95; 11 =85; 10 =75; 9 = 65; 8=55.
  
- Comparative Theological Exercise (30%): The midterm assignment will provide an opportunity to examine two theologians and their understand of a single theological doctrine. The aim here is to consider how their "system" hangs together, what problems it tries to address, and what it begins to point to in terms of who God is and what the Christian life ought to look like. You will consider the doctrine of God and creation for Mercy Oduyoye and Kallistos Ware. Drawing on the readings for each theologian so far in the class, how do the two doctrines relate to each other? How do you see the methods or approaches or problems shaping their thought about who God is and what creation is. You can present these differences and your analysis of what influences these differences as a 3-4 page paper (750-1000 words) or a chart or other visualization (memes, videos, etc.) If you choose a visualization be sure to clearly identify specific quotes as well as offer some clear indication of your analysis of the two theologians' similarities or differences. In other words, enough explanatory text to convey your analysis of the theologians. (Grade is based on understanding of each theologian's ideas, attention to detail in interpretation and comparison, analysis of the relationships between the doctrines and the differences between the theologian)
  
- Visual Theology Project: (50%) The visual theology project will guide you through a series of exercises that ask you to connect critical reflection on theological concepts with reflective practices of creation

and meditation. These exercises will not be graded on “artistic” ability, but rather the quality of reflection and connections demonstrated, and how those reflect an understanding of critical concepts.