

Theo 500: Introduction to Theology

Term:	Spring 2025
Modality:	asynchronous online
Dates:	January 27-May 5
Instructor:	Dr. Brian Bantum
Office Hours:	by appointment

Course Structure

Course Rhythms: As an online *asynchronous* course, we will not have collective gatherings. The course is organized into modules that include lectures, readings, and responsive exercises. The complete schedule and flow of the course will be available through Moodle 1 week before the first day of class. Each week you can expect to 1-1.5 hours of lecture material (offered via video or written), 60-90 pages of reading, and an exercise that should take you 30-60 minutes to complete. At the end of the week you will be asked to any questions that emerged for you to a class forum where I will respond to as many questions as I can via video recording to be posted by the end of the day the following Monday.

The rhythm of your week should look something like this:

- Tuesday/Wednesday - listen to the lecture and complete readings
- Thursday - exercise
- Friday - post question to forum
weekend
- Monday - watch question response recording
- Tuesday/Wednesday - listen to the lecture and complete readings
- Etc....

**Given this is an asynchronous course, this is just a suggested flow for your week, but you will want to be sure you are keeping up with weekly work and working towards the larger assignments.*

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 (10 points): Post one or two questions you have about either the lecture material or readings to class forum. Posts are due by 8am (central time) Friday morning. Questions are graded on a credit/no credit basis, 1 point for each post. Questions are not required every week, but you should post questions 10/12 weeks for the full 10 points.
- Weekly Exercises (50 points): Each week there will be an exercise, to be completed by 12am (central time) each Thursday of the week. Exercises may ask you to compare to readings for the week, engage in a visual exercise, have a brief conversation, record a video, for example. Be sure to check the exercise the previous week to plan accordingly. Each exercise is worth 3 points, you must complete 10 exercises for full credit.
- Visual Theology Project: (30 points) 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. More information will be given as the beginning of the semester.

Connecting

While the class is asynchronous, I hope we will have opportunities to connect in some way throughout the semester. We will arrange occasional "drop-in" hours to ask questions as well as create some opportunities to meet each other either face-to-face or online synchronously as schedules permit. These will not be required, but I hope they help us to get a sense of who else is "in the room" during our semester together.

Syllabus/Schedule

**The full schedule and syllabus will be available approximately one week prior to the first day of class.*