

CL 8530: Gospel and Cultures
Mary Hess

Fall 2006
Thursdays
9:00 to 12:30 pm
NW 232

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This course explores the interwoven nature of the divine and human narratives. Specific topics of study include identity construction and maintenance, and the embodiment of faith in ritual practices. Students contextualize their own appropriation of gospel narratives in specific cultural locations, and consider diverse performances of the gospel across many cultural settings. Focused attention is given to the crucial role of story construction and propagation in practices of leadership with Christian community. Primary conversation partners are anthropology, cultural studies, and contemporary theological approaches to culture and tradition.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Develop a working vocabulary and set of exploratory tools from within organizational development, cultural studies, media studies, and theology for scholarly research that responds to the needs of contemporary religious communities.
- Problematize your own specific locations and narratives within “cultures” and “gospel.”
- Develop a familiarity with the ideas and concerns that cluster around the issue of “gospel and cultures,” particularly as related to congregational leadership. Use that familiarity to situate yourself within a particular scholarly discourse, and then investigate that discourse for its utility in supporting congregational mission.
- Collaborate with colleagues on learning how to teach new materials.
- What else would you add? (to be developed during our first class session)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

- Attend all of the class sessions. Please note: life often poses many challenges to participating fully in a class. This course has been structured to meet only once a week, so as to make it possible for commuting students to attend more easily. But this format also makes it difficult, if you miss a session, to engage the whole of the learning envisioned by the syllabus. I hope that you will make every effort possible to be with us. I also hope that you will feel invited to bring your children with you, particularly if otherwise you would have to miss the session (as I will, if I have days when my children are sick and I can't find a babysitter). Please notify me in advance if you will not be able to be present in class.

- Participate in the *Dismantling Racism* workshop offered by MCARI at Luther Seminary on Oct. 20-22. (If for some reason you cannot participate, please contact me individually so that we can make alternative arrangements for covering the necessary material.)
- During the week of October 26th, prepare a handout that helps your classmates to understand the additional text you've read, in light of the conversations of this course.
- Prepare a paper proposal for a research paper in this class, and include an annotated bibliography that addresses the specific research topic you will explore. One reason for preparing a proposal in advance of the paper (besides the reality that it's simply good practice!) is that we all come to this seminar from widely differing contexts and with widely varying interests. By preparing a proposal and bibliography in advance of the paper's deadline, you give us the opportunity to contribute ideas and resource to each other's final work. Your bibliography should have at least fifteen citations on it, and each citation should have a brief note attached to it that describes its connection to your research topic. (These citations can include required texts from this class, but should definitely include *additional* texts as well.) This proposal is due on November 9th in class.
- Write a research essay suitable for presentation at a regional AAR/SBL meeting based on some theme that catches your attention within the course. These papers are due on December 14th and will be shared with each other on that date in paper form, as well as via short 10 minute presentations. Your formulation of the research question should be based, in part, on having a specific audience in mind. That is, consider what possible unit of the regional AAR/SBL meeting would be most interested in your topic, and plan accordingly.
- Please contact me early in the term if you have any specific learning challenges or other needs that should be supported in some way other than what is envisioned in this syllabus.

COURSE CALENDAR

Sept. 14 – Course orientation and introductions

Read:

Douglas John Hall, "What is theology?" in *Cross Currents* (Summer 2003) 171-184

Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the turn to cultural analysis," in *Converging on Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 3-16

Mary Hess, "Rich treasures in jars of clay" and "Understanding by design" in *Engaging Technology in Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman&Littlefield, 2005), 1- 20 and 39 - 62

In class today we'll introduce ourselves to each other, and begin to focus on the central questions of the course. By way of preparation, think about what your own current theological lens is, and what you believe you're doing/thinking/feeling when you are "theologizing." Why do you want to be a theologian? And what impact do you want to have on which communities?

Sept. 21 – Cultural studies and theology

Read:

Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002)

Katheryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997)

During the first half of our time together, we'll talk about Bevans' book and think about it in relation to Niebuhr's typology. During the second half of our time together we'll engage Tanner as an example of a theologian attempting to take cultural studies' insights into cultural production seriously. In both halves, our primary question should be: what does "culture" have to do with any of this? what do we mean by "culture"?

Background reading:

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951)

Sept. 28 – Theology, organizational theory, culture

Read:

Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004)

Scott Cormode, "Multi-layered leadership: The Christian leader as builder, shepherd, and gardener" in the *Journal of Religious Leadership*
(<http://www.christianleaders.org/JRL/Fall2002/cormode.htm>)

How does Schein's description of "culture" in organizational theory add to our beginning understandings of what we mean by "culture"? What are some potential implications of his work for engagement with communities of faith, particularly those engaged in transformative change?

Oct. 5 -- More work with ritual

Read:

Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998)

Recommended reading:

Herbert Anderson and Ed Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Catherine Bell, "Chapter 3: Ritual symbols, syntax and praxis" in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 61-89

Ronald Grimes, "Preface and Part One: Emergent ritual and liturgical authority," in *Reading, Writing, and Ritualizing* (Washington, D.C: The Pastoral Press, 1993) v – 58

To what extent does Driver's work intersect with Schein's? What can theologians contribute by way of "thinking through" ritual?

Oct. 12 – A case in point: Race in the US

Read:

James Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2004)

Mary Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman&Littlefield, 2005), Chapter six ("Embodied pedagogies: Engaging racism in theological education and digital cultures" – 95 - 112)

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and conversion," in *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 105-120

Race is a prime example of something which is a "cultural construction" in the United States. What are the consequences of this kind of construction for communities of faith? In what ways do these authors draw on biblical claims to lend their arguments authority? How does this case help us to further refine our arguments to date in this class? What are the implications of this work for theologians engaged in "congregational mission and leadership"?

Oct. 19 – A case in point: Pop culture and theology

Read:

Christian Scharen, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006)

Mary Hess, "All that we can't leave behind" in *Engaging Technology in Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman&Littlefield) 79-94

Watch:

The DVD of U2's "ZooTV live from Sydney" concert, which will be on reserve in the library.

This week we are fortunate to be able to have Christian Scharen join us for this discussion. We may well have further ideas for ways to prepare, closer to this date.

Oct. 20-22 -- Weekend workshop – Dismantling Racism (Friday, Saturday, Sunday)

We have the opportunity this term to participate in the *Dismantling Racism* workshop that will be held at Luther, and facilitated by MCARI (<http://mcari.org/>). I am making this workshop an assignment of our seminar for three reasons. First, I think it provides an excellent opportunity to explore some of the issues we've been engaged in in a more directly congregationally-oriented way. Second, it provides a vivid example of a different kind of pedagogy than that usually embedded in graduate school contexts. Third, the workshop gives us the opportunity to "try out" some of what we've been doing in a context that includes leaders from area communities of faith.

The workshop runs from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm on Friday, October 20th, and 8:30 am to 5:30 pm on both Saturday, October 21st and Sunday, October 22. It is important to be present for the entire workshop, as its pedagogy is a carefully constructed, sequential process. Along with typical 'stretch breaks,' there will be major lunch breaks on both Saturday and Sunday and we ask that you provide your own lunch. All registration fees will be provided by Luther Seminary.

Given the extensive number of "contact hours" involved in this workshop, I have cut out two class meetings (and their attendant assignments) from the latter third of our time together. (That amounts to 6 hours of class meeting, and an additional 18 hours of outside prep time – more than compensating for the 20 hours of the workshop.)

If for some reason you will not be able to participate in the workshop, please contact me individually and we will work out alternative assignments to cover the necessary materials.

Oct. 26 – Further theological analysis

Read:

Brown, Daveney and Tanner, eds. *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

and choose one book from the following list (or some other similar book I approve in advance), but each person in class must choose a different book:

Jung Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multi-cultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995)

Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995)

Dwight Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005)

Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (New York: Crossroad, 1992)

Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996)

David Clark, *Urban World/Global City* (Routledge, 1996)

The contributors to *Converging on Culture* all share a similar discursive terrain with respect to culture and theology. What is it? We'll discuss this book in the first half of our time together. In the second half, we turn to your choice books. How would the author whose book you chose engage the authors of *Converging on Culture* in conversation? Where are some of the disagreements and agreements?

Additionally, please bring to class a short (no more than 3 pages) handout that you develop to share the primary argument of your chosen author's book.

Nov. 2 – Interfaith issues

Read:

Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000)

Watch:

The Passion of the Christ (a film by Mel Gibson) and *The Passion of the Jew* (an episode of *South Park*) (these will be available through reserve in the library, and are also available at local area video rental stores)

How would you evaluate the proposal Boys makes for an alternative “read” of the primary Christian narrative? To what extent are the issues she raises present – or not – in the mediated pop culture pieces we've watched for this week? To what extent does your definition of “culture” affect how you engage these media pieces?

Nov. 9 – Evangelism and mission

Read/skim:

James Scherer and Stephen Bevans, editors, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 1: Basic Statements, 1974-1991* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992). This is a collection of basic statements from a variety of ecumenical organizations, as well as individual denominations.

James Scherer and Stephen Bevans, editors, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994)

James Scherer and Stephen Bevans, editors, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 3: Faith and Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999)

These three books are all core books that you should own and have in your reference collection. My assumption is that you've read them in other classes, but if you have not, this is an enormous amount of reading for one week. It will be important for you to figure out – preferably with your classmates – how you're going to be responsible for the materials in these books.

The primary questions I think we'll engage (although by this time in the term our questions may change) include: To what extent do these documents respond to the issues in terms of "culture" that make sense to us? What kinds of definitions of "culture" reside in these documents? How does the contemporary "read" in missiology grow out of, and challenge, these ideas?

Assignment due:

Please bring your paper proposal, with its annotated bibliography, to class on this day, with enough copies for your classmates.

Nov. 16 – Convergence culture

Read:

Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006)

<http://www.smallpieces.com/>

Also, read an assortment of blogs for this week, TBA.

Given our previous discussions, does Jenkins' book challenge any of your emerging conclusions about culture? In what sense does "ritual" become a factor in his analysis? How does he define "religion" and where does "religion" fit in this analysis? What role, if any, do theologians have in a "convergence culture"?

[[break for study and paper research and writing]]

During this long break – a break occasioned in part by our earlier participation in the *Dismantling Racism* workshop – I assume that you will be hard at work on your research paper.

Dec. 14th — Paper presentations

This week we'll reconvene one last time to share the research you've been engaged in. Each of you will have ten minutes to present your paper, and 20 minutes for discussion following. Treat this assignment as an opportunity to practice for eventually presenting a paper at an academic conference. What kind of handout will you provide? What points do you want to make in your oral presentation? Will you offer a powerpoint presentation or some other kind of media illustration?