

T-631: Theology for the Welcoming Church

Spring Semester 2012

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Description and Purpose of the Course:

The purpose of this course is to foster critical conversation exploring theological issues involved in the practice of fully welcoming into the church's life and mission gay, lesbian and other Christians whose commitments and relationships differ from traditionally prevailing models.

We do not pretend that this conversation takes place from a neutral standpoint. After all, as the course title indicates, this is theology *for* the welcoming church (“welcoming church” being a “generic” code word for “open and affirming,” “more light,” “reconciling” and other such congregations), and that presumes that the welcoming church has some claim to legitimacy. But standing somewhere is not only consistent with critical conversation but a necessary prerequisite. And standing anywhere responsibly requires critical conversation with people who stand elsewhere (especially since none of us ever stands consistently in one place either—if you think you do, we’ll prove you don’t).



We need a *theology* for the welcoming church, not another how-to curriculum for moving in that direction (well, maybe we could use that too), because the differences and divisions the welcoming movement provokes can’t all be reduced to “homophobia” or some other form of prejudice. The welcoming movement challenges the very terms in which most of us have understood the Gospel, and those of us who have joined in that movement ought to be glad when people care enough about the Gospel to want to make sure that we don’t unintentionally undermine it for the sake of looking nice. The same people ought also to be glad, or at least intrigued, when we claim to have discovered ways to live and present the Gospel with renewed vitality. But they might never hear that claim if their own convictions are not welcomed in theological conversation.

We believe the welcoming movement *and* many of the controversies it sparks can be a positive enrichment of the communion all of us are called to embody. But enrichment will happen only if we are prepared to engage the Gospel far more frequently and more radically than most of us currently do. And for that degree and quality of engagement we will definitely have to cultivate theological practices in closer-than-usual concert with our spiritualities, our politics and any other practices we deem crucial to embodying the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ. Our perhaps utopian dream is that this course will give new vitality and health to all of these practices—theology, spirituality, politics, etc.—at once.

What do we mean by “theology”? Here’s one working definition: *Christian theology is making sense of the Gospel and all other truths that claim us most radically*. Since that touches on just about every subject, theology often gives rise to exceedingly abstract formulations. That needs no apology. But at its heart theology is the most vital engagement imaginable. At its heart theology is not arguments, not static formulas, but a constant, lively interaction among all the most radical claims on our lives. It is a kind of conversation that never ends. Even in solitude the conversation goes on internally. And even when our attention focuses elsewhere, it goes on in the background. It is how we try to face the variety of claims on our lives with integrity.

We’ve designed this course more or less as a graduate seminar. This obviously requires a high level of participation on your part, along with the preparation necessary to make your participation worthwhile for everybody else. It also requires a great deal of courage and sensitivity. This is an emotionally charged subject, and people can easily hurt or anger one another unintentionally. So we need to weigh not just what we say but how we say it, and we

need to be careful not to smuggle in value judgments that need more examination (note: value judgments are fine, in fact, inescapable; it's the "smuggling-in" that concerns me).

Inclusive Language:

Students are expected to use inclusive, nonsexist language in both written and oral communication in this course. In other words, if you mean to refer to humanity in general, use "humankind," "she/he," or similar expressions. Use "he," "him," "man," only when you are referring to male persons. If you have questions concerning how to express yourself in nonsexist ways, please consult your instructors.

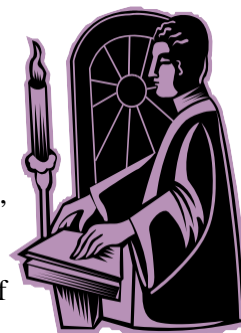
Welcoming behavior:

Students are expected to treat each other and the professor with attention and respect. This is especially important when disagreements and misunderstandings occur. At times this course will address topics that are both near and dear to our hearts as well as some that are quite contested amongst Christians. Students are encouraged to be open to listen to each other's perspectives and to speak about one's own beliefs and experiences with care and awareness of how such claims may be heard. All participants in the conversation and course are responsible for maintaining this inclusive and safe environment. In particular students will refrain from racist, sexist and homophobic language.

While everyone harbors unconscious embedded assumptions, students who are open to uncovering these claims and others, and examining them in an open and welcoming environment are welcome to the conversation. However, be it known that bigoted language and behavior will not be tolerated. This includes issues concerning ethnic-racial, class, gender, religious affiliation, disability and sexual orientation.

Course Requirements:

1. **Completion of assigned reading:** Informed and instructive conversation requires a sufficient number of you to have completed and reflected on the assigned reading every time we convene. Ideally of course, everybody would stay caught up with the reading. On days when you can't get all the reading done, you should at least try to look it over enough to allow you to sound informed when we start conversing. In addition, classmates will have provided us with summaries and comments on the assigned reading. In any case, consider yourself honor-bound to have completed all assigned readings by the end of the course.



2. **Informed and regular participation in classroom discussions:** Regular participation obviously requires regular attendance. Unavoidable absences will be treated on a case-by-case basis. In accordance with CTS policy students missing more than 3 classes for any reason will not receive credit. Besides showing up, you are expected to speak up and to pay respectful attention when others do the same. You should be ready and willing to explain why you're inclined to say whatever you do and should hold others (including your professor) to the same standard. This will count for 20% of your course grade.

3. **Three "discussion starters":** These are typed, single-spaced, 1-2 pp. papers responding to the reading assigned during the three sessions where you will take partial responsibility for getting our discussion underway. They should include 1) a summation of the major ideas discussed in the reading along with 2) your critical response to those ideas. (On part 2, try asking yourself something like, "What role do Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience play in this work?" See what you come up with.) Each discussion starter is due at the beginning of class for which it is scheduled. Sufficient copies should be made for distribution to the rest of the class.

We'll try to honor the dates you prefer, but these assignments need to be as evenly distributed as we can make them. Each discussion starter will count for 10% of your course grade (30% total).

4. **A final paper:** This is a typed, double-spaced, 15 pp. paper that attempts instructively to address some of the crucial issues covered in this course from the perspective of your own major field. We're open to a wide range of possibilities here, as long as the paper shows careful interaction with the texts we've read (along with whatever other resources you want to use). The final draft is due by 1 May. This will count 50% of your course grade.

Grading:

Your grade will be based directly on requirements 2-4 (and indirectly on the first requirement, but we're not going to cross-examine anybody). Written assignments will be graded according to the **clarity** and **accuracy** with which you present your own or others' positions, and the **cogency** with which you support your own position and your assessments of others' (in light of which your own should be appropriately qualified). **Clarity and accuracy also presuppose correct grammar.** (Beware especially of sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and disagreement between the subject and main verb of a sentence. These seem to be among the most glaring and frequent errors committed at CTS.) We certainly will not be grading people according to how close they come to sharing any of our cherished viewpoints. The best papers may be the ones that disagree with one or the other of us most. In order to be **cogent**, however, any position stated should be explicitly and adequately supported by **reasons**, and it should be nuanced so as to reflect the degree and manner of support you are able to provide.

Required Textbooks:

- James Alison, *On Being Liked*
- Walter Brueggemann, et al., *Struggling with Scripture*
- Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love*
- Horace Griffin, *And Their Own Receive them Not*
- Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian*
- Marion L. Soards, *Scripture & Homosexuality: Biblical Authority in the Church Today*
- Other Selections on reserve, Inside CTS, or on the web.
- *Out in Scripture* selections from HRC website (<http://www.hrc.org/scripture/>). Read the article for the current lectionary reading for each week in Lent. And feel free to explore others.

Weekly Schedule of Assignments:

Week 1: What is theology? What is the Welcoming Church?

T 1/17 Introduction to the course and to each other.

Week 2

T 1/24 Movie, *For The Bible Tells Me So*.

Week 3: What does the Bible say about Gays and lesbians in the Christian Church?

T 1/31 **Read:** Soards. Attend to the crux of his argument.

Review: Power point presentation:

<http://www.therevdrcharleswallen.com/WhatDoesTheBibleSayaboutItself.ppt>

Week 4: Biblical Authority.

T 2/7 **Read:** Brueggemann, et al.

Research: one or two Biblical passages that address homosexuality. Read what one or two biblical scholars have written about the passages and reflect upon your response

as it pertains to the issue at hand.

Sample a few commentaries from “Out in Scripture:” <http://www.hrc.org/scripture/>
(remember for the following weeks)

Week 5: Theological Revisioning

T 2/14 **Read:** Alison.

Week 6:

T 2/21: **Read:** Cheng, *Radical Love*

Week 7

T 2/28 No Class—Reading Week

Week 8

T 3/6 Christian Inclusivity.

Read: Carter Heyward, pp. xi-114.

Week 9

T 3/13 Christology and Feminist Theology.

Read: Heyward, pp. 115-215.

Week 10 Sexuality and Racism.

T 3/20 **Read:** Griffin, first half (intro through chapter 3).

Week 11

W 3/27 **Read:** Griffin, second half (chapters 4 forward)

Week 12 Holy Week--No Class

Week 13 Case Studies in African American Welcoming Churches.

T 4/10 **Read:** selections from *A Whosoever Church*, pp. 189-201, 218-231, 232-241, 242-254. (on Reserve)

Week 14

T 4/17 Conversion Therapies

Read: Selections from Erzen, *Straight to Jesus*, pp. 1-21, 52-84, 216-230 (recommended: 126-182). (on Reserve)

Read: www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/3528

www.npr.org/tablet/#story/?storyId=6225399

Week 15 Love, Sexuality, Desire and Charles.

T 4/24 Allen’s reserve materials (TBA)

Read: The Body’s Grace: http://www.igreens.org.uk/bodyys_grace.htm

Week 16 Sum Up.

T 5/1 View Film: *Sordid Lives* Bring Popcorn!

Due: Final Paper