PURPOSE:

The application of theology to situations of crisis and suffering requires great care and discernment. Theology, to be sure, has great power to bring hope and healing and consolation to those in our care. At the same time, theology can do great harm, if it is not applied critically and reflectively. As we examine various pastoral theologies of sin, grace, suffering, anxiety, depression, addiction, aggression and violence, we will be asking ourselves, how do we know when theology brings comfort and healing? How do we know when it does not, when it makes the situation worse? The purpose of this course is to provide students with a method for reflecting, theologically, on the work of pastoral care and counseling, mental health counseling, and spiritual care. We will learn to think critically about our personal theological views as well as the views espoused by others in the field of pastoral theology. Implicit in the development of a method for theological reflection is the ability to “bracket” one’s own deeply ingrained theological assumptions and presuppositions in order to critically reflect on pastoral theologies that address important contemporary issues. Moreover, we will learn to distinguish, for ourselves and for those in our care, a more intellectual level of theological understanding (e.g., “I believe God is gracious and loving”) from one that is more primitive and operational (e.g., Why did this happen? Is God punishing me?”). By the end of the semester, we will be working toward the development of a flexible and comprehensive methodological framework for evaluating the work of counseling and care. Our focus will intentionally be on the lived experience of those in our care, who, in the face of crisis and suffering, demand from us answers to timeless questions: Where is God? Does God care? Why do the innocent suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Students will be expected to demonstrate the capacity to live and work within the ambiguities and complexities of pain and suffering, since so many pastoral and clinical situations defy easy theological explanations. This assumes the development of a metacognitive perspective, with students learning to “observe” their own application of theology in complex situations of crisis, loss, and suffering. The expectation, then, will be for students to acquire, not only factual knowledge about pastoral theology, but a critical reflective method for evaluating the application of theology in specific situations of counseling and therapy.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Develop the strategy of “bracketing” one’s own theological assumptions and presuppositions, i.e., learning to suspend judgment.
2. Acquire the capacity to critically examine the multi-layered dimensions of one’s personal faith framework.
3. Develop a comprehensive method for reflecting, theologically, on one’s work of pastoral counseling, mental health counseling, and spiritual care.

4. In developing a method of pastoral theological reflection, making use of the resources of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition (Scripture, theology, and spirituality), personal experience, and culture (psychology, science, medicine, feminism, etc.).

5. Identify where one places the most emphasis in terms of personal theological reflection: systematic theology, the Bible, one’s own experience and intuition, the resources of society and culture, and so forth.

6. Develop the capacity to accurately and critically assess scriptural and theological texts, through the application of a well-developed hermeneutic of suspicion.

7. Critically examine the strengths and weaknesses of pastoral theological views of contemporary issues: sin, grace, addiction, anxiety, depression, aggression, and violence.

8. Assess the applicability of pastoral theologies to specific situations of pastoral counseling, mental health counseling, and spiritual care.

9. Identify pastoral and clinical techniques that carefully and effectively apply scriptural and theological resources to specific situations of counseling and therapy.

10. Acquire a historical understanding of various Judeo-Christian theological views of theodicy and suffering.

11. Develop the ability to work in theologically ambiguous situations of care, without feeling the need to resort to theological platitudes.

REQUIRED READINGS:


ASSIGNMENTS:

1. **Self-motivation** and **self-discipline** will be very important components of this online distance learning course, manifested in timely engagement with all assignments: audio presentations, PowerPoint slides, required readings, discussion forums, film clips, case studies, and written assignments. If you have questions and/or concerns at anytime during the semester, please do not hesitate to contact me by email and/or cell phone.

2. Each week in the **Discussion Board** of the Blackboard web site, students will be posting **weekly reflections** on selected topics. Your reflections may take the form of a **Question**: As you reflect on the topic, does a question come to mind? Something that is provocative and/or confusing? Something that needs clarification?
(b) Comment on the Content: Apply a portion of the course material to the topic in order to assess its relevance. What makes the material persuasive/not persuasive?

(c) Subjective Reaction: What was your emotional, spiritual, and/or visceral experience of the course material? Did it evoke a positive/negative experience? Please note: 150-250 words.

3. Each week students will submit online responses to the postings of other students. Each response will be 75-100 words, and will consist of thoughtful and constructive feedback, pro and con. PLEASE NOTE: Timely responses each week are expected in the discussion forums. Tardiness in posting responses will substantially lower one’s grade for the course, so please plan accordingly.

4. Film clips will be presented during each of the modules, so students will need to have access to a video program(s) on their computers: Mp3, Quicktime, etc. Film clips will include: Shadowlands (Module One), When a Man Loves a Woman (Module Two), Crash (Module Three), and Fahrenheit 9/11 (Module Four).

5. An 8 page paper (double-spaced 12-point font) focusing on your methodology of theological reflection. The paper should be inclusive of the following features: (1) an understanding of the nature of bracketing and why it is a fundamental component of any theological reflection; (2) an understanding of the need to incorporate various resources (Faith Tradition, Experience, and Culture) into the reflection process, and which of these resources needs more of your attention for a more balanced theological reflection; and (3) an understanding and critique (strengths and limitations) of your core theological views, and how these views might potentially be advantageous and disadvantageous in your work as a pastoral and spiritual caregiver or as a clinical practitioner.

6. A final exam that will focus on case studies having to do with the application of pastoral theologies of sin, grace, suffering, addiction, anxiety, depression, aggression and violence to specific situations of pastoral counseling and spiritual care.

MODULES:

Module One: Method in Theological Reflection
Method in Ministry, James & Evelyn Whitehead

Evelyn and James Whitehead, in Method in Ministry, put forward a clear and concise method for reflecting, theologically, on one’s work of care and counseling. By developing a methodological framework that is inclusive of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition (Scripture, theology, and spirituality), personal experience, and the resources of culture, we can begin to formulate a more comprehensive critique of our personal theology, the pastoral theologies of the authors of the required readings, and the theology of those in our care. Many of us approach the task of theological reflection by assuming that we are merely to reflect on systematic theology and the Scriptures. This, however, only comprises one aspect of theological reflection. Systematic theology and Scripture are not static entities unto themselves, but are dynamic realities to be held in dialectical tension with human experience and culture. Therefore, prior to analyzing theology proper, we must develop a strategy for determining how much personal emphasis is
placed on the three aspects of theological reflection: the Christian faith, experience, and culture. In order to master this competency effectively, we will need to “bracket” or set aside our personal theological views, assumptions, and presuppositions. Evidence that we are developing a strategy for bracketing our preconceived assumptions and presuppositions about theology in general and theological reflection in particular will be the ability to apply, evenhandedly, the resources of Christian faith, personal experience, and the broader culture. More specifically, this encompasses accurate and creative assessments of scriptural or theological texts, the ability to “track” or “read” one’s intuition and perceptions, and the willingness to be informed by the wisdom of the resources of culture (psychology, science, medicine, and so forth).

Module Two: A Theology of Addiction and Grace
Addiction and Grace, Gerald May

Gerald May, in Addiction and Grace, argues that we as a society have become an addictive culture. “We are all addicts,” he writes, “in every sense of the word.” This goes for the client as well as for the caregiver. It is important, preparatory to our work of counseling and care, to identify our own addictions and how we are dealing with them. Also, it is necessary to clarify our theology of addiction? Is addiction a sin? A disease or dis-ease? Is there a need for grace and truth when working with addictive clients and congregants? Is addiction something that can be cured or healed? What is the difference? Why? All of us, at an unconscious level, have certain attitudes and beliefs about addiction. Some of us believe that if the addict tries harder or exerts more willpower then he or she can be free of the particular addiction. Others, because of our own life story and journey, will feel the need to exonerate the addict as a victim of tragic circumstances. Both of these stances align themselves, respectively, with a theology of truth and a theology of grace. A prerequisite, then, to the development of a theology of addiction is identifying, bracketing, and critiquing our own personal theology of addictive tendencies and behaviors. From there it is then possible to begin formulating a more systematic theology of addiction and grace. In other words, we must be careful not to frame the issue in overly simplistic either/or terms, viewing addiction as either all about sinfulness and a lack of willpower or all about circumstances and forces external to the individual. In so doing, a more complex and nuanced theology of addiction will begin to emerge.

Module Three: A Counterintuitive Theology of Human Shadow Forces
Reckoning With Aggression, Kathleen Greider

Christian theology, down through the centuries, has tended to view the so-called “shadow forces” of human existence in a rather negative light. The human emotion of anger, for example, has been cast as one of the deadly sins, something that must be eradicated from the human person. And yet, is anger, along with aggression and conflict, always a negative force, in every time and place? Or, does it depend on the context and the person(s) involved? Can aggression and anger be, at times, channeled productively, the view espoused by Kathleen Greider and feminist psychology and theology? In
developing a meta-cognitive perspective of human shadow emotions, we are better able to bracket preconceived assumptions, ideas, and presuppositions about these supposed “deadly forces.” For some of us, this will be the most challenging module of the entire course, since the content will run counter to that put forward by many parents and families, educators, faith communities, and even practitioners. However, by objectively critiquing the resources used in this module, and identifying their inherent strengths and limitations, we can find a way to deal creatively and flexibly with the ambiguities and complexities involved in the theological assessment of anger, aggression, violence, and good and evil.

**Module Four: A Cognitive-Theological Approach to Supermodern Anxiety**

*Treating the New Anxiety, Kirk Bingaman*

A new form of anxiety has emerged, stemming in part from our living in a post-9/11 world, but even more from the influence of supermodernity. Postmodernism theorizes an anxiety that results from the collapse or loss of meaning, whereas viewed through a supermodern lens we see that the new anxiety is evoked more by an acceleration or excess of meaning. It is difficult to keep up with the rapid acceleration of human life and with the overabundance of current events and issues that are here today and gone tomorrow. Our psychological and spiritual capacities are pushed to their limits. There is no shortage of serious issues that we are facing, as a nation and as a world, reinforced daily by a bombardment of media fear mongering. This module will focus on the nature of the new anxiety, and will consider, with the void left by the diminishment of religious involvement, whether the therapy or counseling session has become the definitive place for meaning-making. Building on a cognitive therapy approach, which has a proven track record in treating anxiety by emphasizing the belief system of the anxious client, we find that to treat the new anxiety most effectively practitioners must help clients identify and explore the core theological beliefs and spiritual values that give them hope and meaning.

**EVALUATION:**

Students will be evaluated based on evidence of mastery at three levels of performance: Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. The three levels of mastery will correspond, respectively, to letter grades of B-/B, B+/A-, and A.

**TECHNOLOGY HELP:**

For technical support with the Blackboard course management system, you must email blackboard@fordham.edu or call 718.817.2289. For questions about your username and password, you must email helpdesk@fordham.edu or call 718.817.3999 (on campus) or 877.366.HELP (off campus).