

THEOLOGY OF PASTORAL COUNSELING & SPIRITUAL CARE

PCGR-6380-R01: Fall 2015

Wednesdays: 7:00-8:50

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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 views long enough to critically reflect on pastoral theologies that address important contemporary issues. 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, therefore, will be for students to acquire, not only factual knowledge about pastoral theology, but a critical reflective method for evaluating the application of theology to one’s clinical or pastoral practice.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Develop the strategy of **bracketing** one’s theological views and assumptions, i.e., learning to temporarily suspend judgment.
2. Develop a method for reflecting, theologically, on one’s work in the field of pastoral care and counseling, making use of the resources of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition (Scripture, theology, church teachings, etc.), personal and collective experience, and culture (psychology, science, medicine, etc.)
3. Develop the capacity to reflect on situations of human suffering without resorting to theological platitudes.

REQUIRED READINGS:

- Bingaman, Kirk. 2014. *The Power of Neuroplasticity for Pastoral and Spiritual Care*. Lexington.
- Greider, Kathleen. 1997. *Reckoning with Aggression: Theology, Violence, and Vitality*. Westminster John Knox.
- May, Gerald. 2007. *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*. Harper.
- Whitehead, Evelyn & James. 1995. *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*. Sheed and Ward.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. **Attendance** at all class sessions. Please let me know by email if you are unable to attend a weekly class session. More than one unexcused absence will constitute a failing grade for the course. Also, please inform me if you need any accommodations to enable you to fully participate in this course.

2. **Participation** in class discussions. It is important that you come to class prepared to discuss the assigned reading for the week. Because this is a graduate course with students from varied backgrounds, you will discover that there is a reciprocal learning in the context of our class discussions.

3. In-class **learning groups** that focus on specific issues noted in the lectures, class discussions, film clips, and handouts. Students working in groups will be expected to apply a critical method of theological reflection to complex issues of human life and experience. Please note that that you will need to keep up with the readings in order to fully participate in the group discussions.

4. A **15-minute class presentation** applying the course material to a case study from your work of pastoral, clinical, and/or spiritual care. You will be assigned to a module of the course and will be assessing your case in terms of the issue(s) discussed in that particular module. Please be specific with your theological reflection and how it would inform your intervention as a practitioner. The expectation is that your presentation will be creative and engaging as you go about applying the material from the assigned module to the case. Additionally, you will also be submitting a **3-page paper** (double-spaced) that summarizes your presentation and your theological reflection.

5. A **5-6 page paper** that summarizes *and* critiques your personal method of theological reflection and how it has changed/evolved over the course of the semester. Keep in mind the importance of bracketing and the need to incorporate various resources into your theological reflection.

6. A **final (oral) exam** that will focus on case studies having to do with the application of pastoral theology to the issues discussed in the modules of the course.

MODULES:

Module One: A Method of 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 we will be reading, 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 the resources of culture. Therefore, prior to analyzing theology proper, we must develop a strategy for determining how much personal emphasis is placed on the three areas of theological reflection: the Christian faith, experience, and culture. In order to master this competency effectively, we will need to "bracket" or set aside, temporarily, our personal theological views, assumptions, and presuppositions. Evidence that we are developing a strategy for bracketing our preconceived assumptions and views 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 taken-for-granted views, and the willingness to be informed by the wisdom of the resources of culture (psychology, science, medicine, and so forth).

- Sept. 2: Introduction to the Course
Sept. 9: A Model and Method for Theological Reflection
Whiteheads: *Method in Ministry* (Part I)
Sept. 16: Bracketing and Critical Reflection
Whiteheads: *Method in Ministry* (Part II)
Film Clip: *Shadowlands*

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?

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 personal history, may 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 views of addictive actions and behaviors. From there we can begin to more effectively construct a theological framework that holds truth and grace in dialectical tension.

- Sept. 23: The Characteristics of Addiction
May: Preface-Chapter 2
- Sept. 30: The Psychology and Neurology of Addiction
May: Chapters 3-5
 Film Clip: *When a Man Loves a Woman*
- Oct. 7: Sin or Disease: Toward a Theology of Addiction
May: Chapters 6-8
 Class Presentations

Module Three: A 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 we must work to subdue. 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 constructively, the view espoused by pastoral theologian Kathleen Greider? In developing a meta-cognitive perspective of human shadow emotions, we are better able to bracket preconceived assumptions and ideas about these so-called “destructive 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 some educators, faith communities, theologians, and pastoral practitioners. However, by objectively critiquing the resources used in this module, and identifying their strengths and limitations, we can find a way to deal creatively with the inherent complexity involved in the theological assessment of anger, aggression, violence, and good and evil.

- Oct. 14: NO CLASS
- Oct. 21: The Shadow Side (“Mr. Hyde”) of Human Existence
Greider: Introduction-Chapter 1
- Oct. 28: Toward a Theology of Aggression and Violence
Greider: Chapters 2-3
 Film Clip: *Crash*

Nov. 4: Aggression, Culture, and Acts of Care
Greider: Chapter 4-Epilogue
Class Presentations

Module Four: Contemplative Healing: Insights from Neuroscience
The Power of Neuroplasticity for Pastoral & Spiritual Care, Kirk Bingaman

Studies in neuroscience demonstrate that a focus on mindfulness meditation and contemplative spiritual practice has the capacity to increase our non-anxious awareness and significantly lower our stress. Not only are these findings of immediate importance for pastoral counselors and psychotherapists, they will even necessitate a paradigm shift in the way that pastoral and spiritual practitioners approach the general care of souls. The starting point for such a paradigm shift is an acknowledgement of the built-in negativity bias of the brain, and how certain beliefs and theological views may inadvertently reinforce the bias to the detriment of individuals and faith communities. To balance the neural predisposition toward negativity and anxious awareness, it is necessary for pastoral and spiritual caregivers, and those in our care, to cultivate a regular contemplative-meditational practice. Through the daily practice of contemplative prayer and meditation, we can literally calm the stress region of the brain in order to live less anxiously and experience more fully the peace and joy of the present moment. The introduction of acceptance- and mindfulness-based counseling approaches provide an important therapeutic framework to situate our work, from which we can make more informed and effective interventions geared toward using the mind to change the brain.

Nov 11: The Human Brain: Wonderfully and Fearfully Made
Bingaman: Chapters 1-2
Nov. 18: Calming the Anxious Brain
Bingaman: Chapters 3-4
Film Clip: *Fahrenheit 9/11*
Nov. 25: NO CLASS
Dec. 2: A Therapeutic Framework for Neuroplasticity
Bingaman: Chapters 5-6
Class Presentations
Dec. 9: Final Exam

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.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

It is assumed that all students are familiar with the Graduate School of Religion & Religious Education's policy on academic integrity. Any instances of academic dishonesty cannot be tolerated and will be brought to the attention of the dean and associate dean. Plagiarism of any kind, **including quotations from the Internet** without supplying proper bibliographic data, is unacceptable, as is working collaboratively on written assignments (papers, final exam, etc.). **Note:** When in doubt about issues of academic integrity, please contact me first with your questions before submitting any written work. Additionally, the use of electronic equipment in class is strictly prohibited, except computers for note-taking purposes **ONLY**.

TECHNOLOGY HELP:

For technical support with Blackboard, you must email blackboard@fordham.edu or call 718.817.2289. For help with your username/password, you must email helpdesk@fordham.edu or call 718.817.3999 (on campus) or 877.366.HELP (off campus).