

Theology Department
Graduate Course Descriptions
Fall 2026

THEO 403-001: Biblical Commentary Through History
Dr. Olivia Stewart-Lester
MWF 9:20-10:10

This seminar will analyze the history of biblical commentary, tracing the ways that commentary on scripture predates “the Bible” and contributes to its creation. We will survey commentary internal to scripture, the category of ancient texts formerly known as “rewritten Bible,” including Jewish Greek literature and texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and conclude with an examination of medieval Bible commentaries. In-class discussions will also integrate artistic and musical commentary on scripture. The course will explore the blurred boundaries between scripture and commentary, tracing the ways that each makes and sustains the other.

THEO 420-002: Cognitive and Evolutionary Approaches to Religion
Dr. Hugh Nicholson
T-Th 1:00-2:15

This course aims to understand why it is that virtually all known human societies have had some form of religion, this despite the fact that religious belief and practice serve no obvious practical function and indeed are costly in terms of time, material resources, and cognitive effort. From a cognitive scientific perspective we will ask what is it about the human mind that makes counterfactual beliefs in nonphysical agents (gods, spirits, demons, and the like) and some form of postmortem existence not only plausible but natural, even self-evident, for most people. From a cultural evolutionary perspective we will ask what vital functions religious beliefs and practices likely served in ancestral human societies, how religions acquired new functions as human societies underwent radical changes, and why it is that religion has persisted even in contemporary societies where a scientific worldview has established itself.

Resources (Representative but not exhaustive)

Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The evolutionary landscape of religion* (Oxford 2002).

Jesse Bering, "The Folk Psychology of Souls," *BBS* 29: 453-498 (2006).

Paul Bloom, "Religion Is Natural," *Developmental Science* 10 (1): 147-151 (2007).

Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought* (Basic Books, 2001).

Walter Burkert, *Creation and the Sacred: Tracks of biology in early religions* (Harvard 1996).

Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday: What we can learn from traditional societies?* (Penguin Books, 2012).

Stewart Guthrie, "A Cognitive Theory of Religion," *Current Anthropology* 21 (2): 181-203 (1980).

Joseph Heinrich, *The Secret of Our Success* (Princeton 2016).

Robert McCauley, *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* (Oxford 2011).

_____ and George Graham, *Hearing Voices and Other Matters of the Mind: What mental abnormalities can teach us about religions* (Oxford 2020).

Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How religion transformed cooperation and conflict* (Princeton 2013).

David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, religion, and the nature of society* (Chicago 2002).

THEO 420-001 **Religion and Nationalism**
Dr. Tracy Pintchman

This course explores the relationship between religion and nationalism in the modern world. The course will begin with theoretical issues: what is a nation/nationalism? What is religion? How is religious nationalism different from other kinds of nationalisms? How does nationalism emerge and then take on new forms in the 19th and 20th centuries? The course will then consider several case studies. Examples of possible case studies include Christian nationalism in the contemporary US, Hindu nationalism in India, Southeast Asian Buddhist nationalism (in Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka), Islamism in the Middle East, and Christian Nationalism in Brazil.

THEO 477-001 **Feminist and Womanist Theo-Ethics**
Dr. Aana Vigen
Mon 4:15-6:45

This combined upper-level undergraduate and graduate seminar engages central themes in Christian theologies and ethics, focusing on perspectives found especially in white feminist and black feminist/womanist thought along with select authors from Latina/*mujerista*, Asian American, and other feminist sources. We will read both classic texts and more recent works as we observe the difference that sex, gender, race, socio-economic class, global location, etc. make to the

theological and ethical enterprise. In short, this course introduces students to the history of feminist theological and ethical thought while also exploring pressing contemporary issues in theology and ethics by listening to distinct, at times contrasting, voices.

This course is intended not only for formal students of theology, but for *anyone* who is eager to explore this content in the context of an upper-level elective. Students do need a keen interest in both theological and ethical concepts/issues to appreciate, and learn from, the course.

Authors will likely include Kelly Brown Douglas, Traci West, Delores Williams, Teresa Hinga, M. Shawn Copeland, Musa Dube, Ivone Gebara, Christine Pae, and others.

THEO 421-001 **Intermediate Biblical Hebrew**
[Dr. Tom Wetzel](#)
T-Th 2:30-3:45

THEO 523-001 **Historical Jesus**
[Dr. Chris Skinner](#)
Wed 4:15-6:45

Jesus is the foundational figure of Christian history, teaching, and proclamation. Especially in the western world, interpretations of his life, ministry, death, and ongoing significance have shaped societies, influenced world cultures, and determined the various trajectories of religious devotion, politics, and popular culture. The New Testament introduces us to a Jewish man named Jesus but not in a singular form. Instead, we meet various iterations of the man from Nazareth and these versions of Jesus become fodder for his reception throughout history. The formal pursuit of the “historical Jesus” has occupied scholars for portions of the past three centuries and has largely attempted to sift “history” from “tradition” while also deliberating on “what actually happened.” This course will introduce the critical assumptions of historical Jesus research, trace the various shifts this scholarly pursuit has taken, and provide students with the tools to think critically and meaningfully about the important distinctions between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith.”

The class will be devoted to exploring the following topics in detail:

1. A History of the Three “Quests” for the Historical Jesus
2. Our Sources for Studying the Historical Jesus
3. Jesus, Early Christian Gospels, and the “Multiformity” of Early Christianity
4. The Emergence of Social Memory Theory
5. Prospects for Future Research
6. What Can We Really Know?

THEO 536-001
Dr. Brian Flanagan
Wed 10:25-12:55

Ecclesiology

This seminar will examine the theology, history, and practice of synodality. Topics will include the scriptural and historical foundations of synodality and other forms of conciliar practice, comparative ecumenical forms of synodal discernment and decision-making, the recent revivals of synodal practice within the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council and in the papacy of Pope Francis, and the implementation of the Synod on Synodality in various Catholic contexts.

THEO 570-001
Dr. Hille Haker
Fri 10:25-12:55

Moral Agency and the Moral Self

The theory of moral identity and moral agency points to the self-constitution of the subject of morality, the agent who develops a particular (moral) identity that is associated with one's character and dispositions to act, one's commitments, one's values and conscience, and more generally, one's life-story as lived experience and narrated story in which one gives an account of oneself.

This first-person perspective may be a challenge for any top-down normative approach to ethics because the singular, unique self is as much a body that is disciplined as it is an embodied moral agent that is a source of resistance to pathological (and pathologizing) social norms.

In the emphasis on freedom and autonomy, the vulnerability of moral agents is sometimes overlooked or repressed – especially in the Western liberal tradition. Yet in the Christian context, selfhood is grounded in the “given-ness” of human existence in the relation and relatedness between God and humans. Here, moral identity merges with a spiritual-religious identity, reflected in multiple narratives of religious experiences and autobiographies.

The course will examine moral identity and moral vulnerable agency through the lens of Christian ethics of self-formation and hermeneutical ethics, with view on newer literature from psychology, sociology, philosophy. It will serve as a foundational approach to Christian ethics that contributes to the tradition of self-formation, conversion, and virtue ethics.