

God: Essence and Attributes The Communicable Names

Semester: Spring 2021
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Course Description

This course articulates systematics on the *locus de deo uno* (the divine essence and attributes), with focus on what are often called today the “communicable” attributes, such as goodness, wisdom, and others of this sort. The course aims to give the student some understanding of these divine perfections, in the vein of the orthodox tradition particularly as it has been expounded in the Latin West (a tradition frequently called today “classical Christian theism”). For this reason the course is a systematic presentation of these divine attributes injected with extensive historical *ressourcement*. Main topics will include: intellect and knowledge, life, will and love, justice, mercy; however, it is expected that exploration of these names will provide principles for dealing with any other names in this line. Through this course the student will obtain insight into the orthodox boundaries and methodological sensitivities involved with these questions as well as the breadth of the tradition on supplied answers, particularly as it occurs in the Reformed orthodox of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Care will be taken to equip the students with operating principles of good method when it comes to doctrine of God, so as to enable them to labor through other divine attributes and speak well of God generally in the practice of divine praise, in the spirit of St. Augustine: “What are You to me? Have mercy, that I may speak.”

Course readings will be in English. The primary text is the relevant questions in Thomas Aquinas’s *ST I* (qq 14–21), which will broadly serve as grist for the lectures. However, lectures will take care to pull from the high medievals (e.g., Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Capreolus, Denis the Carthusian), the neoscholastics (e.g., Cajetan, Ferrara, Banez, Zumel, Vasquez), and of course some of the best of the Reformed orthodox (e.g. Voetius, Polanus, Mastricht, Danaeus, Musculus, Maccovius, De Moor). The result will be a thorough exposition of the above attributes that deals with our contemporary scene on these questions primarily by a positive presentation of a carefully developed orthodoxy, which does not neglect a healthy irenicism.

NB: this current course is the “second” part of God: Essence and Attributes, the first of which covered the “metaphysical” or “incommunicable” names; however, this course is fully stand-alone, and Essence and Attributes: Incommunicable Names is not its prerequisite. Further, Dv in future we will proceed to topics covered under providence and predestination (*ST I* qq 22–23).

Course Format

This class is lecture-based but does leave space for student questions and engagement. Additional student participation and interaction can take place on a private discussion board if desired. I am also available via email to deal with issues or questions.

Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for temporary access for students to view who cannot participate.

Course Requirements

- Reading of the assigned texts (10% of grade for for-credit students)
- Careful attendance and engagement with the lectures

Additional Course Requirements for Course Credit

- A half-page summary of each attribute covered in the course, at a lay level. The purpose is to highlight the main elements of importance, in a way that would be suitable as a summary or rough hand-out

for a Sunday School lesson or other ministry opportunity for teaching doctrine of God. This requirement will be further explained in class (35% of grade).

· One 3000-word essay providing a systematic articulation of some narrow element within the course's scope, in consultation with the professor. This requirement will be further explained in class (55% of grade).

Course Objectives

· Students will be able to articulate not just the basics of these attributes of God but understand the internal logic of systematic theology proper.

· Students will be able to understand the strengths and vulnerabilities of theological understanding and will be equipped to mediate the issue of simultaneously preserving orthodoxy while maintaining a strong irenicism that recognizes the complexity of the historic tradition and what this entails for the contemporary church in all her forms of communion.

· Students will be able to articulate the place of the attributes within the entire sphere of theological loci.

· Students will be able to navigate contemporary accounts of essence/attributes. The student will be expected to humbly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of accounts currently on offer and adjudicate them from the standpoint of orthodoxy while continually preserving the spirit of irenicism, especially as informed by the Reformed commitment to Holy Scripture and its intense articulation without perverted speculation.

· Students will be introduced especially to the pastoral/practical implications of essence/attributes and pushed to deploy doctrine to promote “knowledge unto piety” both in themselves and in others within the universal church.

Course Texts

Aquinas, *ST* qq 14–21. (If Latin is known, please read the commentary Cajetan provides on these questions—available in the *Leonine* edition of Thomas [I can provide this pdf].) Available here: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I>; additionally: <https://isidore.co/aquinas/>.

Barth, *KD/CD* II, 1.

Bavinck, *RD*, vol. 1, relevant pages.

Mastricht, *Theoretical Practical Theology*, vol. 2, relevant pages.

Muller, *PRRD*, vol. 3.

Pohle-Preuss, *Complete Manual of Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, select pages (available here: <http://iteadthomam.blogspot.com/2017/09/pohle-preuss-dogmatic-theology-12-vols.html>)

Te Velde, *Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School*.

Webster, *God without Measure*, vol. 1.

Webster, “Mercy,” in *God without Measure* vol. 2.

Webster, *Confessing God*, vol. 1, relevant essays.

Webster, *Confessing God*, vol. 2, relevant essays.

Webster, “God’s Perfect Life,” in *God’s Life in Trinity*.

A note on the reading: Not all texts are of equal value, and I expect you to navigate the readings by wisely discharging your time strictly in accord with the value of the text. Nonetheless, for some guidance as to what this means, regard the extremely brief and generalist notes as follows. The principle text not only for this course but also of greatest value for your time is *ST I* qq 14–21. Medieval texts, Thomas’s included, are extremely different in what they are compared to modern texts, and they must be read differently. If one can plow through two hundred pages of a modern text in an hour, one can perhaps push through two paragraphs of Thomas in the same compass (and this is not an exaggeration). Reading Thomas is intensely difficult and *very slow*. He rewards careful, diligent, and repeated reading. Barth is of great value because despite his claims to the contrary he operates with the names of the divine attributes much as though he were working out of the “metaphysical” attributes or negative names covered in the first part of this course; he is thus of good value to soak oneself in, to grab hold of how to function well *out of negative names*, in doing only the names of the divine attributes (roughly speaking). Nonetheless he can be rather long-winded, and if you feel like you are getting the mind of Barth one can pull away from his superfluity on certain points. I recommend especially the earlier parts of the II, 1, where Barth treats much more thoroughly on the relevant methodological points. Webster is all of Barth’s gold, none of his slag, and brings in deeper intuitions also related to working out of the primacy of God in proclaiming He Who Is, which is the functional goal of the negative names. Working through Webster even on the negative names, is helpful to drive deeper their integral connection and distribution in actually doing theology positively. I suggest you spend, after Thomas, most of your time here. Pohle-Preuss is a standard, old vanilla treatment of various points on this course, and does suffer from still being encrusted with a more manualist bent. Nonetheless I want you to be familiar with it on the generalities--I do not suggest you spend an inordinate amount of time on this text. Maastricht serves as another foil for you to further be familiar with, and an older example of doing theology which sublates much of the Reformed orthodox in a catalogue fashion; likewise, I do not suggest you spend an inordinate amount of time on this text. Bavinck supplies this much better though can suffer from being enlaced with his then-contemporary debates that are not of such value for us now. Muller and Te Velde, while both extremely worth your time, are nonetheless to be treated more as references for this course, given the course constraints; in particular, Te Velde’s volume is of special value for this course in teasing out different methods and their implications and iterations in the history of Protestant theology, as well as supplying a good first-stop for bibliographical resources on the same.

Course Schedule

TBD