

Desire of Every Nation: How Christianity Illuminates Reality

Davenant Hall, Trinity Term 2022

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Course Description

Many who are persuaded of the basic moral and metaphysical picture of orthodox catholic Christianity (monotheism, natural law, etc) feel *less* intellectually assured of the aspects of their creed which are the most *distinctively* Christian...which are the most strange. The heart of the Christian, valuing the truths of the kingdom above all else, and loyal to Christ for His saving Lordship, nevertheless *clings* to these strange things, not as some liability, but rather as unto life itself. Fortunately for us, we are not alone in this juxtaposition, for it is a well-trodden path in every age and its distinctive intellectual challenges and temptations. The *weird things* of the faith (atonement, wild-eyed prophets, incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the “end-times”) have remained part of Christian grammar through millennia of trial and error. Along the way, it has become clearer and clearer that their endurance is not merely because they are so firmly rooted in the Scriptures (though this is a sufficient reason for them to endure), but also because they have progressively helped illuminate the world of man. Philosophy has often played the role of handmaiden to theology, but the peculiarities of history are also that theology has played handmaiden to philosophy - gesturing the mind that sits in its distinctive truths to new imaginings about the whole. The Bible begins to play the role not simply of catalyst to our minds, but also of “end,” pre-containing in itself motifs and a density of truth that the human mind has only begun to arrive at. A catalyst and end, the Bible is also sufficient to the *now* of each historical moment. This is not disconnected, of course, from the history of interpretation, but the task of interpretation remains irreducibly *contemporary*. Our tutors include those in the past, but however we script ourselves, we understand, speak, and act *now* and as ourselves. And it is precisely at this intersection that the strangeness of the faith has historically served the Christian. For its truths are living, and illuminate all men in all circumstances. As C.S. Lewis writes, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

In this course, we will walk through the Christian creed in its orthodox peculiarity, and ask whether its grammar and its claims help us to interpret our world both in the perennial sense, but also to interpret what is most distinctive and peculiar about our own circumstance. Thinking *alongside* Christian claims concerning creation, angels, sin, atonement, incarnation, prayer, judgment, can it be shown that such motifs lead us to see the world and our situation with greater clarity? Can it be that the strangeness of our faith proves itself precisely by finding us where we thought ourselves most idiosyncratic and impenetrable? Are we immune from the illumination of

He whose light has conquered all manner of people in all manner of circumstance? It is very good news that we are not.

Course Format

The format of the course will be a roughly equivalent mix of lecture and guided discussion. It is assumed that students will come having read and engaged with the text selection for that day, and with thoughts (and critical questions) prepared to contribute. Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate. Supplementary student interaction (both informal and formal) is highly encouraged, and I also aim to make myself available to you.

Course Objectives

This course aims (1) to introduce students to the comparative grammar of other religious and philosophical traditions, (2) to dialogically engage, learn from, and help train students in the art of thinking well, and (3) to encourage students concerning the veracity of the Christian faith by means of an expanded (rather than calcified) imagination.

Course Requirements

1. Weekly reading (due before each class). 40% of grade.
2. Prepared critical comments or questions (due during each class). 10% of grade.
3. Paper proposal (due on the 6th class session). 10% of grade.
4. 12-16 page integrative paper (due on the final day of class). 40% of grade.

Course Texts & Schedule

Bavinck, Herman. *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2022).

Clark, Stephen R.L. *The Mysteries of Religion: An Introduction to Philosophy Through Religion* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986).

Corduan, Winfried. *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity & World Religions* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

White, Thomas Joseph. *The Light of Christ: An Introduction to Catholicism* (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

Course & Reading Schedule

Note: Lectures in this course will be less based on the reading than has been typical for my courses. As such, focus on the Bavinck, Corduan, and White readings if you are pressed for time, and incorporate the Clark text as you go along. The readings below are not *due* for each class, but they represent roughly how I will work through the texts this semester.

Week	Date	Discussion Topics	Reading
1	4/11-17	Introduction	Bavinck, 13-50; Clark, 1-15; White, 1-7
2	4/18-24	Modernity and Truth	Clark, 16-48; Corduan, 11-30; White, 8-46
3	4/25-5/1	God and Creation	Bavinck, 51-80; Clark, 49-93, 122-43; Corduan, 31-54; White, 47-103
4	5/2-8	Man and Sin	Bavinck, 81-94; Clark, 94-108; Corduan, 79-106; White, 104-34
5	5/9-15	Christ, History, and Redemption	Bavinck, 95-127; Clark, 108-21, 144-61; Corduan, 55-78, 107-34; White, 135-79
6	5/16-22	Holy Spirit and New Humanity	Bavinck, 128-33, 161-76; Clark, 232-45; White, 180-223
7	5/23-29	On Being Saved	Bavinck, 134-60; Clark, 162-79, 214-31; Corduan, 135-70
8	5/30-6/5	On Last Things	Bavinck, 177-94; Clark, 196-213; Corduan, 171-94; White, 261-87
9	6/6-12	Midwives of a New Creation	Clark, 180-95; Corduan, 195-220; White, 224-60
10	6/13-19	Conclusion	Clark, 246-60; Corduan, 221-40; White, 288-302