



EP-282: Faith, Politics, and Public Square Spring Semester, 2022 Syllabus

Instructor Information

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Office Hours and Meetings: By appointment via email
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Engaging students is very important to me, and I prefer to do so by email. Though I will try to reply promptly, please allow at least 24 hours for this, and longer on weekends and holidays.

Course Description

From the Catalog: Exploration of significant public issues and political processes and their theological and practical implications. Involves seminars and meetings with public officials, political figures, lobbyists, advocates, and activists based within and outside the church.

For generations, Washington, D.C. has served as an overdetermined figure in public imagination. For some, it represents aspirations for achieving a more perfect union, forging (as best we can) a common good for a pluralistic democratic republic. For others, it is a symbol emptied by disillusionment, operating not in response to deliberations about the right or the good, but on competing interests, rancorous resentment, and ambition without conscience. For yet others, it represents only the central node of a system of structures of domination – its iconic buildings having been built by enslaved persons; its power brokers waging war and immiseration across the globe for decades now. And of course, we may sense in ourselves some measure of all of these impulses, and more.

As if that imaginative figuration weren't complicated enough, commitment to the Christian gospel adds new stakes and entanglements to political life. Christians in the U.S. share, at least in principle, a belonging with and to Christians around the world that on most theological accounts ought to run deeper than national allegiance. Christians are enjoined to use their citizenship – if they are citizens! – in mundane political communities to display and embody the norms of the reign of God that holds their true citizenship. And along the way, there are the simple, everyday vocations of discipleship to which no exceptions exist for engaging something called “politics”: love your enemies, take up your cross, be not conformed to this world.

This course invites two types of conversation at exactly this busy intersection. The first type is a seminar that engages several kinds of literature: public and political theology and ethics, political theory and analysis, and commentary and insight into the contemporary U.S. landscape. The second type includes meetings with people whose work engages the political world – broadly construed – in ways that can inform our own practice of faithful witness, whatever shape it may take. The wager of this course is that the large conversation between these two types will deepen, extend, and clarify your future public witness.

Wesley Curricular Objectives

Area	Religious Heritage			Cultural Context			Ministerial and Public Leadership			Personal and Spiritual Formation		
Goal	(I) Students will cultivate deep roots in the foundational biblical and theological traditions of the Christian faith			(II) Students will engage diverse cultural contexts sensitively, critically and constructively			(III) Students will hone their own skills for ministry and enable the ministry and leadership of others			(IV) Students will strive toward deeper integration intellectually, morally, emotionally and spiritually		
Objectives	IA	IB	IC	IIA	IIB	IIC	IIIA	IIIB	IIIC	IV A	IV B	IV C
Course Goal or Objective	x	x			x						x	
Assignment #	1,2,3,4	1,2,3,4			1,3,4						1,2	

Course Objectives

- 1.) Think in depth, both critically and constructively, about faithful life in relation to political communities, belonging, and responsibilities.
- 2.) Represent and evaluate helpful figures and perspectives from traditions of theological, ethical, and political reflection.
- 3.) Act in and among various communities with an operative knowledge of how to interpret political situations so as to open opportunities for meaningful, creative action.

Textbooks and Course Materials

There are no required books for this course. Readings below are either freely available online, if a web address is given, or available on Blackboard (under “Readings”) otherwise.

Graded Activities/Assignments

- 1.) Careful and thoughtful preparation of course readings and participation in online discussion (50 possible points), based on these qualities:
 - a. Regular, on-time attendance.
 - b. The frequency of your spoken contributions to class discussion, as well as the thoughtfulness of those contributions (e.g., drawing on the text, staying on topic, and advancing the conversation).
 - c. The degree of your engagement with and attentive listening to others by, e.g., responding to others’ comments and using their names.
 - d. Completion of your weekly journal entry.
- 2.) A weekly one-paragraph “Thesis” Blackboard post that we will use in class discussion (20 possible points), starting in the second week of class.
- 3.) Two short papers, due March 4 and April 8 (25 possible points each)
- 4.) A final essay, due April 29 for graduating students/May 2 for others (50 possible points)

Course Schedule

This class meets on Mondays via Zoom. From 1pm-3pm eastern time, we will meet in a seminar format to discuss the readings and topics of that week. From 3:30pm-5:30pm eastern time, we will reconvene in conversation with our guests for that week. Because this is a four-credit course, all four hours of course meeting are required.

January 23 – *Faith-ful and political*: Locating ourselves in the public square; Founding documents; “Church and state”

- Read the following quickly to identify where they mention religion/faith/the church and how:
 - U.S. Constitution (<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>)
 - Declaration of Independence (<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>)
 - Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists (<https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>)

Potential guests: David McAllister-Wilson, Mike McCurry

January 30 – *Varieties of Christian engagement*: The social implications of the Gospel; locating the church’s theology; the need to reckon with religion

- Leah Daughtry, “Treat the People’s Needs as Holy,” (<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/treat-the-people-s-needs-as-holy>)
- Grace Y. Kao, “‘One Nation under God’ Or Taking the Lord's Name in Vain?: Christian Reflections on the Pledge of Allegiance”
- Shaun Casey, “The Trillion Dollar Hedgehog,” from *Chasing the Devil in Foggy Bottom*
- Daniel K. Finn, “What is a Sinful Social Structure,” Selection: pgs. 136-142, 151-163

Potential guests: Shaun Casey, Leah Daughtry

February 6 – *American Civil Religion(s)*: Power and its legitimating theopolitical stories; state religion in the United States; the religion of the market

- Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma”
- Robert Bellah, “The Civil Religion of American”
- John F. Kennedy, First Inaugural Address, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwM6s55no6U>
- David Loy, “The Religion of the Market”
- Guest: Robert J. Jones; Rev. Warnock, a comedian, Jemar Tisby; Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Potential guests: Robert J. Jones, Jemar Tisby, Raphael Warnock, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

February 13 – *The Religious Shape of Secularity:* The post-Protestant shape of secular religion in the United States; the divine claims of the state; resisting state idolatry

- William Cavanaugh, “The Creation Myth of the Wars of Religion,” *The Myth of Religious Violence*
- Listen to Dan Spencer read an excerpt from John Muir’s “Windstorm in the Forest” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHPMT4QUEQQ>)
- Nicolas Howe, “The Spiritual Gaze,” *Landscapes of the Secular*
- Listen to Jeremiah Wright, “Confusing God and Government,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ShST47ILYI> (or read it [here](#))
- Guests: Deb Haaland, Vahior, UMC minister

Potential guests: Deb Haaland; (Vahior, UMC minister?)

February 20 – *The task of political theology:* The necessity and task of thinking politics and theology together; a case study of a Christian contribution; ritual and public life

- Luke Bretherton, “Introduction,” *Christ and Common Life*
- Melissa Snarr, “Living Wages: Religious Ideology and Framing for Moral Agency,” *All You That Labor*
- Jeffrey Stout, “Rites of Solidarity, Commitment, and Mourning,” from *Blessed are the Organized*

Potential guests: Luke Bretherton or K. Melissa Snarr; Stephanie Summers

February 27 – *The Church’s promise and complicity:* The distinctives of the Church; grace from within the capture; beyond self-referentiality

- Stanley Hauerwas, “The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics”
- Jemar Tisby, “[Understanding Liberty in the Age of Revolution and Revival](#),” *The Color of Compromise*, pgs. 40-55
- Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §177-241 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)
- Antonio Eduardo Alonso, “Introduction,” from *Commodified Communion*

Potential guests: Robert J. Jones; Neal Christie; Moya Harris or Terrance McKinley

First Short Paper Due on Friday, March 3 at 5pm, submitted on Blackboard

No class March 6 for Reading Week

March 13 – *Race, Racism, and Structures of White Supremacy*: Historicizing and analyzing processes of racialization; a structural analysis of how race is made and sustained in the U.S.; thinking theologically about racial justice and solidarity

- Barbara and Karen Fields, “Introduction,” from *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*
- Brian Bantum, “Race Must Die,” from *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*
- Richard Rothstein with Terry Gross, “A ‘Forgotten History’ of How the U.S. Government Segregated America”
- Jonathan Tran, “Critical Race Theory can help us serve others: Why would we refuse the help?”

Potential guests: TBD

March 20 – *Political Economy*: Work, money, and class as subjects of Christian reflection; capitalism as a racial, political, and social order; the meaning of solidarity under conditions of inequality

- Matthew Desmond, “American Economy is Brutal. You Can Trace That To The Plantation.” <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>
- Kathryn Tanner, “How Finance Capitalism Deforms Us,” from *The Christian Century*
- Thelathia Nikki Young, “Praface,” *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and the Philosophical Imagination*
- “Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez,” Daniel Hartnett, *America Magazine*, 2/3/2003

Potential guests: TBD

March 27 – *Difference in Public*: Rethinking the public in a plural democracy; difference as complicating resistance; structural obstacles to speaking across difference

- Danielle Allen, “Toward a Connected Society” from *Our Compelling Interests*
- Emilie Townes, “To Pick One’s Own Cotton,” from *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*
- Andrew Perry and Samuel Whitehead, “A House Dividing,” *Taking America Back for God*
- Siva Vaidhyanathan, “Making sense of the Facebook menace”

Potential guests: TBD

April 3 – *Reimagining Democracy*: The crisis of democracy as opportunity; democracy and “civic faith”; the need for democracy; rethinking institutions

- Hélène Landemore, "Introduction," from *Open Democracy*
- Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, "Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century" (Review and select one proposal to discuss in your thesis; note the term "civic faith"-- what might it mean?)
- H. Richard Niebuhr, "Children of Light and Children of Darkness"
- Whyte, K.P., "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions"

Potential guests: TBD

Second Short Paper Due Friday, April 8 at 5pm, submitted on Blackboard

April 10 – *Climate Change and Collectivity*: Theologies and Christian ethics of ecology; the connections between environmental justice, race, and colonialism; the problems and possibilities of mass politics and structural change

- James Cone, "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?"
- Michael Northcott, "Climate Change and Christian Ethics"
- Olúfémi O. Táíwò, "What's Next," from *Reconsidering Reparations*

Potential guests: TBD

April 17 – *Police and Prison Abolition*: Shifting structures of racial caste; reformist and non-reformist reforms; the police and justice in minoritized communities

- Interview with Michelle Alexander, "10 years after *The New Jim Crow*," *The New Yorker* (January 17, 2020) <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/ten-years-after-the-new-jim-crow>
- Mariame Kaba, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police," *The New York Times* (June 12, 2020)
- Winright, Tobias, "Faith, Justice, and Ferguson," *Religious Education*
- Winright, Tobias, "Postscript," from *Serve and Protect*
- Richard G. Mack Jr.; Jon Cakmakci, "The Tale of Two Thieves: Practical Steps to Confront Wage Theft as Vigorously as "Common" Theft"

Recommended: Sonia Sotomayor, "D.A.'s Office: Learning the Ropes," from *My Beloved World*; Sonia Sotomayor, Dissent, *Utah v. Strieff*

Potential guests: Sonia Sotomayor;

April 24 – *Reproductive Justice*: Reframing pro-life advocacy; the frame of reproductive justice; law and maternal health

- Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Cooperation with Good"

- Emily Reimer-Barry, “Another Pro-Life Movement is Possible”
- Loretta Ross, “Understanding Reproductive Justice”
- Maya Manian, “The Consequences of Abortion Restrictions for Women’s Healthcare”
- [Optional: Rebecca Todd Peters, “Changing the abortion conversation from justification to justice”]

Potential guests: TBD

April 30 – *The End is the Beginning*: thinking about the dynamics of agency and organizing; an encouragement as you go on

- Barbara Ransby, “Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement,” 6/12/2015 (<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>)
- Bayard Rustin, “Soul Searching vs. Social Change” and “From Protest to Politics”
- Bernardo Zacka, “Impossible Situations: On the Breakdown of Moral Integrity at the Front Lines of Public Service”
- [We will watch together in class] Watch Brian Massingale’s “The Magis and Racial Justice,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyMYQFizmZQ>

April 30 – *The Opioid Epidemic*:

- Terry Gross, “Journalist Investigates 'Crime Story' Of The Sackler Family And The Opioid Crisis,” *Fresh Air*, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/986736258/journalist-investigates-crime-story-of-the-sackler-family-and-the-opioid-crisis>
- Travis Rieder, “America’s Three Opioid Epidemics,” *In Pain*
- Scott Higham and Sari Horwitz, “American Cartel: Inside the Battle to Bring Down the Opioid Industry,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/07/07/american-cartel-book/>
- Churches?

April 30 – *Christian Nationalism*

- Paul Miller
- Stephen Wolfe

Final Essay due Friday, April 28 at 5pm for students graduating from Wesley; due Monday, May 2 at 5pm for continuing students. If you are joining us from another institution and your

home institution might have other time constraints, please put me in touch with your registrar's office (or the equivalent office) early in the semester so that we can agree on feasible deadlines.

Course Requirements

Attendance

The main site of our work will be the time we spend together in conversation. Because of the time commitment involved in the course meetings, I don't plan to require you to watch weekly recorded lectures in advance. However, this means that our seminar conversations will demand your full attention, and we will need to start them on time.

I recognize that, under these circumstances, many of us have unusual responsibilities of care, disrupted access to our typical resources, and other significant challenges. I am disposed to be understanding about these: you may miss up to two class sessions without penalty and without needing permission from me in advance. If you miss more than two class sessions, whether for good reason or otherwise, you and I will need to talk about either substantial make-up work or a participation grade that honestly reflects that much missed class.

Late Work Policy

Emailing me and asking – no reason necessary – will be sufficient to extend either short paper deadline by one week. A request for a longer extension may be granted at my discretion after you and I have a conversation about your circumstances. The final essay is trickier, since grades are due promptly after the semester concludes: I strongly recommend planning to finish this by the deadline. If you do not, you will need to get the Dean's approval for a course extension.

Your weekly "Thesis" is not useful to our discussion if it is late, so no extensions will be granted. However, the stakes of missing one or two posts are relatively low.

Course Covenants

I would like you to join me in making the following covenants with each other:

- We will be *especially* mindful to show respect and consideration in the online environment, aware of the online disinhibition effect and other dynamics that can cause us to forget our common humanity. This does not preclude disagreement in any way! It does require that any engagement show respect and care.
- We will not publicly circulate – by recording, screenshot, or any other means – conversations, presentations, or papers from our course, especially broadly on the internet: while it is not a purely "private" environment, the classroom (even the virtual one) is a place that requires honest questioning and venturing ideas of which one is unsure in a way that can be quickly decontextualized and subjected to violence in internet culture. We will hold each other accountable, if and when appropriate, but not outside the class forums we have established.
- We will exert ourselves, given the online format of the course, toward special attention to our work and our colleagues and care in expression and engagement. This means minimizing distractions and pausing over what we read to consider it thoughtfully.

Grade Scale

There are 170 available points in this class. As a result, these point totals correspond with the following letter grades: A: 158-170 A-: 153-157 B+: 147-152 B: 142-146 B-: 136-141 C+: 130-135 C: 125-129 C-: 119-124 F: 118 or fewer

Changes Due to Seminary's Response to COVID-19 or Other Factors

This course meets on Zoom, and so I predict that there will be few, if any, changes to our regular rhythms. However, the seminary takes into account the whole life circumstances of our community: if local school districts declare a snow day, it may be difficult for students with children to participate in class, etc. If there are changes or disruptions due to pandemic, weather-related, or other factors, I will send an email with details about how we will adjust. In general, you can find information on the seminary's pandemic response at: <https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/covid-19-faith-community-resources/>

A Statement on Language

I strongly encourage you to (and may object if you do not) use gender-inclusive language where appropriate. This certainly includes using "humanity" instead of formerly conventional terms such as "mankind," etc., since we should all take care to avoid the implication that men are exclusively or paradigmatically human. The case of God is more complicated, but I think that it is dangerous, at least, to refer to God exclusively with masculine pronouns. If you do so in writing, you ought to footnote the first use of such pronouns with a justification for doing so.

Accommodations/Disability Support

If you have a disability of any kind and might require accommodations in this course, please contact the Office of Community Life early in the term (or beforehand) regarding Wesley's policies and procedures for documenting and accommodating disabilities. The seminary allows accommodations only through this policy.

Academic Honesty & Integrity

The Seminary's policy on academic misconduct is clear: All students have signed the Covenant of Professional Ethics and Behavior. This must be adhered to, particularly with respect to academic honesty and plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will result in substantial penalties, including the possibility of academic dismissal.

I don't require "Works Cited" pages, though if you are in the habit of generating them, I don't object to them. I prefer footnotes that use Turabian/Chicago style citations, but I will accept any complete citation style you would like to use. A quick reference to Chicago style for almost anything you are likely to cite in our course can be found here:

https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

When in doubt, cite it. Err on the side of citing something, even if you are unsure about the proper format of the citation. If still in doubt, be in touch with me with questions.