

Political Theology

Course Syllabus and Outline

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Course Description

Political theory as a discipline seeks to answer questions dealing with the legitimacy of authority, the purpose of political community, and the limits that may rightly be placed on politics. Many theorists from Ancient Greece to the present have offered secular answers to these questions. However, there is a long tradition of thought that seeks to offer religious, theological, and exegetical responses to the challenges of living in society with other human beings. These ideas and answers, broadly categorized under the aegis of ‘Political theology’ will form the basis of this course. In it, you will encounter some of the most provocative, influential, and thoughtful theological responses to political questions, and read thinkers from the Apostle Paul to Martin Luther King Jr. Over the course of the term, you will not only encounter and familiarize yourself with these works, you will learn how the methods of political theology differ from those of philosophy or political theory, and will have the opportunity to complete several projects of political theology.¹ In line with the limits of time, the course will focus on the threads of political theology developing from the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Course Objectives

Students should aim to, through engagement with the course assignments and material, complete the following objectives:

- Gain familiarity with key works and thinkers who have tackled the intersection between politics and theology.
- Come to appreciate the ways in which politics and religion are related not only theoretically, but sociologically, politically, and historically.
- Improve one’s analytic and theoretical skills through the application of a variety of methodological tools to reading, writing, and discussing political theology.

¹ *N.B.* According to many, the field of ‘political theology’ refers to one specific branch of modern, formalized discussion—perhaps beginning with the works of Spinoza or the 20th century jurist Carl Schmitt. These thinkers (and the tradition built on their works) are important, however they will not form the primary basis for our course development. Instead, we will take a broad view of what counts as “political theology,” reading works spanning the development of the Jewish and Christian faiths in history.

Course Themes

While we will read texts that deal with a wide variety of issues, many of the readings will focus on one or more of the following themes: The nature of the covenant community of faith, and its relationship to the state; the purpose and nature of law (divine, natural, and political); the toleration of false worship; the nature of history, progress, and the future; social and economic inequality and justice. The primary texts will be generally presented in chronological order, yet these themes may emerge and reemerge at many different points in history. Take care to note how the discussion of these themes differs based on the immediate context of each formulation.

Challenges

There are many challenges to reading—and more so, understanding—historical works of political theology. This should serve as a brief outline and introduction of those challenges.

First, many of these works are linguistically foreign to us, with dense and unforgiving prose. You will be served well to read carefully, repetitively, and cautiously, with a pencil in one hand and a dictionary near at hand.

Second, many of these works are *conceptually* distant from us. For those of us with thoroughly modern sensibilities, it may seem preposterous to read Dante's defense of monarchy or St. Augustine's ruminations on sin. It is difficult to say whether this challenge is more difficult for those who come from a religious background, or for those who have no religious commitment of their own. You will have to strive to understand and apprehend the specific and technical meanings of concepts such as original sin, the atonement, sacrifice, the resurrection, and the eschaton.

Third, these works are often *methodologically* distant from us. Many religious thinkers, particularly those who belong to religious movements with sacred texts, will appeal to divine inspiration or the divinely rooted authority of sacred texts. You do not have to agree with their implicit trust in Scripture in order to evaluate, understand, and appreciate their arguments and conclusions. This course *will not* devolve into a discussion of textual criticism or the legitimacy of textual claims to authority. Instead, you will be asked to grant for the sake of learning the epistemological premises an author presents, and then evaluate their arguments on that basis.

Fourth, few (if any) of the thinkers we will read considered themselves to be political theorists, or even political theologians. Instead, many of these works stem from pastoral concern—the concern a minister may have for teaching and informing those under his care regarding the issues they encounter in the world. To that end, we must take care to appreciate this context, and be hesitant to impose historically anachronistic or conceptually foreign categories on the works we read.

Course Requirements and Grading

Reading

You must read every assigned reading carefully and in detail prior to seminar. If you have not completed the reading, please excuse yourself from participation.

Participation (20%)

As is always the case in seminar classes, the course relies heavily on regular and informed participation. To that end, you should come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, as well as any pertinent or related questions you may have. Some members of seminar may, for reasons related to their own personal identity or experience, find regular verbal participation challenging. While I cannot excuse you from contributing to our seminar, I encourage such students to contribute in other ways, with my consultation. You might contribute by writing brief reflections on major themes in the assigned readings, by regularly speaking with me about the texts and themes of the class, or by sharing resources with your classmates (with my approval). In addition, participation is not graded merely on the quantity of vocalizations, but also on their quality. A single well-thought out and helpful question that guides us in our pursuit of understanding may be worth more than many uninformed questions or comments.

Exegetical Essay (20%)

As you will note, many of the thinkers we read perform an exegetical reading of a sacred text or Scripture, whether it be the Hebrew Tanakh, the New Testament, or the Qu'ran. In this 1200-1600 word paper, you will perform a similar exegetical task, by selecting a passage from a sacred or scriptural text, and presenting a critical reading, explanation, or interpretation of that text. This project is intended to cultivate in you a deeper understanding of how authors may use sacred texts as authoritative sources for political theology. For example, in the story recounted in John 18:33-40 in the New Testament, Jesus makes the controversial claim that "my kingdom is not of this world" in justifying his disciple's capitulation. An exegetical essay might interpret this passage to require Christians to pursue pacifism in wartime, or to suffer oppression rather than pursuing the securement of their religious liberties. Your essay should be carefully argued, and may make reference to commentaries and secondary sources on the text in question.

Philosophical Essay (20%)

This paper assignment gives you the opportunity to investigate a theme in political theology, using the methods of philosophical or theoretical reflection. This will be, in many ways, similar to other papers you may have completed in philosophy or political theory classes: it will consist of evaluating an argument or arguments presented by one or two thinkers on an issue, and offering a conclusion. For example, you may choose to write a paper evaluating St. Thomas Aquinas on the toleration of false worship. The paper should be between 1200-1600 words, and submitted in 12

pt. Times New Roman. You may use the citation style of your choice, so long as you use it correctly and consistently.

Term Paper (40%)

Your final project, which comprises a significant portion of your final grade, is to produce a well-argued, carefully-written, and interesting original work of political theology. I expect your paper to use either (or some combination) of exegetical and theoretical methods, and to discuss or analyze some issue related to one of the main themes or topics covered in this class. Generally speaking, I envision four general types of projects (though there are, no doubt, others).

1. *The Exegetical Interpretation*: This type of project would offer a new reading of either a specific passage or set of passages contained in the Tanakh, Qu'ran, or New Testament. I am open to projects based on other sacred texts, with my consultation. This type of project should make careful reference to commentaries and alternate interpretations, taking care to both support your own interpretation and differentiate it from others.
2. *The Deep Dive*: This type of project would seek to clarify or discuss a puzzle contained in the work of a specific thinker—say, a paper discussing the complicated relationship between St. Thomas' view of law and religious toleration.
3. *The Comparative Paper*: This type of project compares, contrasts, and evaluates arguments presented by two or three thinkers on a single issue—for instance, a paper comparing Dante and Calvin on the ideal form of government.
4. *The Contemporary Debate*: This manner of project takes a contemporary issue related to political theology (say, the Swiss ban on the construction of minarets, or the rising rate of economic inequality), and offers a solution based in political theology. Take care that this *must be a theological solution*—not a solution based in cost-benefit analysis, secular political philosophy, or history. It must, then, make reference to the divine, the community of faith, and how these values or theological concepts may help us make sense of the conflict.

Your final paper must be turned in by the University Last Day of Class, and should be a minimum of 3000 words (excluding footnotes and headings).

Technology and Classroom Behavior

Laptops, tablets, e-readers, cell phones, and other electronic devices will not be needed for this class, and should be silenced and put away. Pedagogical studies suggest that material is better processed and retained when students take notes by hand. Further, the use of electronics in the classroom is often a distraction not only for users, but for those seated around them. I may grant exceptions to this policy on an individual basis for those who have documented accessibility needs.

This course covers big ideas and concepts that may be divisive or contentious. I expect the highest standard of civil discourse and mutual respect from, and for, all participants in this seminar.

Communication

I am easiest to contact via email, at mhyoung@live.unc.edu. I strive to be prompt in responding to emails throughout the school week, though I do typically work normal 8-5 hours. If you have a question that will require a detailed or lengthy response, I recommend speaking with me via office hours or arranging an appointment. I do not, as a rule, read or respond to emails on Sunday.

Required Texts

The Holy Bible. (You may use any formal-equivalency translation. Popular translations include the KJV, NKJV, NASB, RSV, or ESV).

St. Augustine, *City of God*. Edited and abridged by Vernon Bourke. Image Books.

St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics, Trans. and ed. Paul E. Sigmund. Norton.

John Calvin, *On God and Political Duty*. Ed. John T. McNeill. Library of the Liberal Arts Press.

All other texts are supplied in PDF form. You should print these out, and place them in a binder to form your own 'course reader.'

Course Schedule

Unit One: The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

Week 1: Introduction to Political Theology

Session 1: Introductory lecture and group exercise.

Session 2: God covenants with Israel.

- *Exodus*, chapters 19-40.

Week 2:

Session 1: Israel demands a King

- *1 Samuel* (entire)

Session 2: Israel perverts justice.

- *Amos* (entire)
- Corinne Sauer, *Judaism, Markets, and Capitalism: Separating Myth from Reality*. Acton Institute, 2012.

Week 3:

Session 1: The New Testament, and the new community in Christ.

- *John*, chapters 12-21.
- *Romans*, chapters 9-15.

Session 2: The Early Church on Economic justice

- David Lay Williams, “Early Christianity and Economic Inequality,” in his forthcoming book on the history of inequality.
- Eberhard Arnold, “The Economy of the Early Church” *Plough Quarterly*, No. 2. Autumn 2014.

Week 4: Gnosticism and Messianism

Session 1:

- *Joel* (entire)
- *Revelation* (entire)

Session 2:

- *On the Origin of the World* from the Nag Hammadi Library (entire, pdf).

Unit Two: The Medieval Period.

Week 5: St. Augustine

Session 1:

- Etienne Gilson, “Foreword” in St. Augustine’s *City of God*.
- St. Augustine, *City of God*. Book I, entire; Book XII, chapters 1-9; Book XIV, entire.

Session 2:

- St. Augustine, *City of God*. Book XV, chapters 1-6; Book XIX, chapters 4, 10, 11, 17, 20, 28; Book XXII, chapters 21-25, 29-30.

Exegetical Essay due.

Week 6: St. Thomas Aquinas

Session 1:

- St. Thomas, *On Politics and Ethics*, 1-40.
Interpretations in volume: Gilson, Copleston.

Session 2:

- St. Thomas, *On Politics and Ethics*, 41-83.
Interpretations in volume: Finnis.

Week 7: The High Middle Ages

Session 1:

- Dante, *De monarchia*, selections (pdf).

Session 2:

- Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*. Discourse I, chapters I-VII; Discourse II, chapters I-IX (pdf)

Week 8: **Break**

Unit Three: The Reformation

Week 9: The Reformation

Session 1:

- Luther, *On Christian Liberty* (1520)

Session 2:

- Calvin, *On God and Political Duty*. Introduction, “On Civil Government,” and “Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans.”

Week 10: Protestant Reasons for Toleration

Session 1:

- Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Myserie of Iniquitie* (Books 1-3, pdf)

Session 2:

- Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, selections (pdf).
Philosophical Essay Due.

Unit Four: The Contemporary Period.

Week 11: Contemporary Political Theology

Session 1: Introduction

- Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* chs. 1, 3.

Session 2:

- “The Naked Public: A Symposium on Richard John Neuhaus’ *The Naked Public Square*.” Hauerwas, Glendon, Cox, Mittleman, Murphy, Elshtain, Wood, Hertzke, Novak, McClay, and Neuhaus. *First Things*. November 2004.

Week 12: The Jewish Question

Session 1:

- Gershom Scholem, “Towards An Understanding of the Messianic Idea of Judaism.”
- Levinas, “Promised Land or Permitted Land” and “Judaism and Revolution” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Aronowicz, Indiana University Press 1990.

Session 2:

- Hannah Arendt, “Zionism Reconsidered” and “We Refugees,” in *Jewish Writings*, eds. J. Kohn and R. H. Feldman. Random House, 2008.
- David Novak, “Judaism, Zionism, Messianism: Telling Them Apart.” *First Things*, February 1991.

Week 13: Christian Resistance

Session 1:

- Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” (pdf)
- Stanley Hauerwas, “Dietrech Bonhoeffer” (pdf).

Session 2:

- Reinhold Niebuhr, “Must We Do Nothing?”
- H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing.”
- Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Only Vote Worth Casting In November.”

Week 14: Christian Politics

Session 1:

- Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*.
- Luke Bretherton and Devin Singh, “The Axes of Debt: A Preface to Three Essays”

Session 2:

- Stanley Hauerwas, “The Politics of the Church: How We Lay Bricks and Make Disciples.”
- Charles J. Chaput, “Strangers in a Strange Land,” 2014 Erasmus Lecture. *First Things*.