

Enhancing Life Studies

Approaches to Suffering: Theological Perspectives and Contemporary Meditations

This seminar, designed for graduate students in Theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, allows for close reading of historical and contemporary texts that can resource theological reflection on suffering. One thesis of the course is that theodicy need not be viewed as the sole theological approach to suffering. Rather, suffering can be—and, effectively, has been—thematized theologically in relation to the enhancement of life, including to inform interpretations of the vulnerability of life and to orient resistance to life's endangerment.

Framed by a consideration of Susan Sontag on the representation of suffering, Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, and Judith Butler on grievable life, this seminar seeks to extend and enrich such contemporary meditations by putting them into conversation with varied historical theological approaches to suffering. The resulting conversation is organized by three topics: 1) suffering, spectacle, and cultures of remembrance and healing; 2) Can suffering elevate understanding? and 3) grievability, vulnerability, and transformation.

Few of the texts considered offer systematic theological arguments, in fact, one is not a written text at all, but the Isenheim Altarpiece, and several other genres are represented, e.g., early Christian accounts of martyrs, Bonaventure's *Life of Saint Francis*, Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, Howard Thurman's meditation on the sorrow songs, Simone Weil's and James Baldwin's potent essays.

The course then allows exploration of a range of possible theological approaches to suffering other than theodicy, including frameworks of creation and providence, wounding and healing, and crucifixion and resurrection, together with religious responses such as introspection, contemplation, mourning, witness, and resistance. Suffering as a reality and a topic of theological reflection is not construed in simple opposition to the enhancement of life, but rather suffering is complexly interrelated with the full aliveness and enhancement of life.

Approaches to Suffering: Theological Perspectives and Contemporary Meditations

The Divinity School, The University of Chicago
THEO 46006, meets twice weekly

Kristine A. Culp
kculp@uchicago.edu

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COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

week 1.1 Introduction

Suffering, spectacle, and cultures of remembrance and healing

week 1.2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

For further reading:

Sontag, *On Photography*; *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*; also Sontag at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>

week 2.1 Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 24-103.

week 2.2 Castelli, 104-33; 172-203.

For further reading: Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (HarperOne, 2013).

week 3.1,2 Isenheim Altarpiece (c. 1512-16) - **first class session will involve viewing slides of the work**

Andrée Hayum, "The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 1977), pp. 501-517

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3049705>

For further reading:

Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton University Press, 1989); James H. Marrow, "Inventing the Passion in the Late Middle Ages," in Marcia Kupfer, ed., *The Passion Story from Visual Representation to Social Drama* (Penn State Press, 2008), 23-52.

Also: Athanasius, *Life of Antony*; also Jerome, *Life of Paul of Thebes*; both in *Early Christian Lives*, trans. and ed., Carolinne White (Penguin Books, 1998) [and elsewhere].

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1:244-48*; also excerpted in Clifford Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 222-26. *N.b., Barth had a print of*

the crucifixion panel above his desk, and famously reflected on painting's image of John the Baptist pointing to a crucified Jesus in relation to the central theme of his theology—the witness to God's act in the free act and suffering of Jesus Christ.

Can suffering elevate understanding?

- week 4.1 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), Introduction and Part 1, especially 1-63 and 108-57
- week 4.2 Scarry, part 2, especially 161-243, 276-326.
- week 5.1 Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis* (1260), trans. Ewert Cousins (Paulist Press, 1978; HarperOne, 2005)
For a critical life of Francis, see Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Francis of Assisi: The Life* (Ithaca and Londo: Cornell University Press, 2013).
For more on mysticism, Francis, and Bonaventure, see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*; Vol. III, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), Intro - ch 2.
- week 5.2 Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross. "Heidelberg Disputation (1518)," "A Meditation on Christ's Passion (1519)," and "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague (1527)" in Lull and Russell, eds., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press). *N.b. the Lull reader has been through three editions; these essays are in all three.*
For the period between Francis and Luther, see Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), esp chs 6 and 7.
- week 6.1 Howard Thurman, *Deep River [1945]* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death [1947]* (published as one volume, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975)
For further reading:
Howard Thurman, "Suffering (1963)" in Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumbler, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Luther E. Smith Jr, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991)
- week 6.2 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951; repr. Harper Perennial, 2009), "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," and "The Love of God and Affliction."
See also: Introduction by Leslie A. Fiedler; Letter IV - "Spiritual Autobiography"; and Letter V - "Her Intellectual Vocation."
- week 7.1 Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Westminster John Knox, 2009), chapters 1-2, 4-7, 9.

Grievability, vulnerability, and transformation

- week 7.2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), Introduction, chapters 1, 2, 5.
- week 8.1 John Calvin on the Psalms
Calvin, "The Author's Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms," "Psalm 16," "Psalm 23," "Psalm 51," "Psalm 90," "Isaiah 55:1-13." In John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, *John*

Calvin, Steward of God's Creation: Selected Writings (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2006), 161-257. *Note: these texts can be found online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin>.*
Jones, "Soul Anatomy: The Healing Acts of Calvin's Psalms," *Trauma + Grace*, ch 3, 43-67.

- week 8.2 John Calvin, *The Life of a Christian*
Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.6-10; Theodore Beza, "The Death of John Calvin." In Thornton and Varenne, 74-115, 401-11. *Note: this collection uses Beveridge's translation of Calvin's 1559 Institutes; please feel free to read the McNeill/Battles version; it is generally more readable, and its notes are very useful.*
- week 9.1 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time: "My Dungeon Shook" and "Down at the Cross"* [1963]
- week 9.2 Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), chapters 6-8.
- week 10.1 *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), chapters 4-7.
- week 10.2 Concluding session
- week 11 Final paper due

COURSE REQUIREMENTS - *All papers may be submitted by email in Word or pdf format.*

1. Preparation for and participation in the seminar.

Close reading of the assigned texts and preparation to discuss the ideas offered, elaborated, and suggested in those texts is a basic and crucial requirement. Final course grades will include an assessment of seminar participation.

2. Seminar paper and presentation (*due 5pm the day before the seminar*).

Each member of the seminar will be responsible for preparing a pithy, discussion-provoking paper (4-5 pages, double-spaced) for an agreed-upon seminar session. The paper, which will be distributed to others, should help to launch and focus discussion. Therefore, rather summarizing the reading, you may wish to focus on an issue or two, on a pivotal passage, or on a key idea, concept, or trope.

EITHER: 3a. Three additional papers on seminar readings (5-6 pages double-spaced). These should be similar to the seminar papers—concise, focused on key issues or ideas rather than simply offering a summary—but will be *due by the end of the day after the seminar* (e.g., May 15 after May 14 seminar).

OR: 3b. Final research paper.

This paper offers an opportunity for a substantive engagement that extends or expands perspectives and possibilities of the course. It can incorporate (but does not necessarily have to) your seminar presentation paper. Other approaches and topics are possible. All topics to be agreed upon in consultation with Professor Culp. Approximately 20 pages in length.