

1-1-2002

# PH 501 Philosophy of the Christian Religion

Lawrence W. Wood

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## Recommended Citation

Wood, Lawrence W., "PH 501 Philosophy of the Christian Religion" (2002). *Syllabi*. Book 1102.  
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**SYLLABUS**  
**PH501 Philosophy of the Christian Religion**  
**Asbury Theological Seminary**  
**(Florida Campus)**  
**Fall 2002**  
**Larry Wood**  
**Professor**

***WELCOME!***

I hope you will find this class enjoyable as we explore together in a thoughtful way the meaning and purpose of the Christian faith. This is why this course is called “The Philosophy of the Christian Religion.” As Wesley once said to his preachers in an essay entitled, “Advice to Clergy,” reason is “a candle of the Lord” that enables us to understand the world and the spiritual world beyond nature. Wesley also called reason “the precious gift of God” because it enables us to understand the “oracles of God.” He also said that logic was the most important subject next to a study of the Bible. Wesley on occasions conducted formal lessons in philosophy for his preachers. He also wrote a work entitled, “A Compendium of Philosophy.” It is thus appropriate for a seminary like Asbury with a Wesleyan confession to explore the relation between faith and philosophy.

***CATALOG DESCRIPTION:***

This course intends to be a:

- 1) survey of philosophical method,
- 2) study of the mutual impact of the Christian faith and philosophical discourse upon each other,
- 3) reflection upon the overlap between Christian and philosophical ethics,
- 4) a critical assessment of the relationship between the Christian understanding of reality and other ways of perceiving it.

***LEARNING GOALS:***

Upon completion of this course, the student will have an introductory knowledge of the philosophy of religion, enabling them to:

- 1) identify and appreciate the overlapping concerns of philosophy and theology;
- 2) define the central categories in the philosophy of religion;
- 3) understand the Christian view of reality and alternate ways of perceiving it (ontology);
- 4) define the nature of religious knowledge (epistemology);
- 5) evaluate the basic arguments for God’s existence (natural theology);
- 6) understand why certain portions of reality are more valuable than others (axiology);
- 7) identify the major philosophical and theological trends and movements in the history of thought;
- 8) understand the logic of religious language;

- 9) affirm the complementarity of science and religion;
- 10) understand the problem of evil for Christian apologetics;
- 11) engage in Christian dialog with other religions;
- 12) see the parallel between aesthetic and religious experiences in a common concern for fulfillment and redemption;
- 13) identify the major themes and concerns of post-modern philosophical and religious thought;
- 14) appreciate the Christian command to love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul (ethics).

### ***TEXTS AND REQUIRED READINGS***

- 1) Yandall Woodfin, *With All Your Mind* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980; reprint 2002).
- 2) Jerry H. Gill, *The Tacit Mode, Michael Polanyi's Postmodern Philosophy* (State University of New York Press, 2000).
- 3) C. S. Lewis, selections from *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).
- 4) J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1971).

### ***REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS***

- 1) Read all the daily assignments prior to class sessions. It is expected that each student will stay up-to-date in assignments.
- 2) There are no formal tests.
- 3) Each student will invest the appropriate amount of time outside of class in preparation as stipulated by the ATS Catalog (see section entitled "Academic Information," subsection, "Preparation"). The assignments are made with this guideline in mind.
- 4) Each student will write a set of reflection papers on the assigned readings. You may post your reflection papers in the course center on your First Class Desk Top instead of printing them. These papers are due on the respective day of class. Late papers will not be accepted—except for illness or other medical emergencies. The strictness of this policy is because the purpose of this assignment is in part to insure that the student adequately reads the assignment and is prepared to get the maximum benefit from the class session. Hope you are not offended. Smile!☺

### ***GRADES:***

For a grade of "C" each student will—

- 1) faithfully attend class, having done the appropriate class preparation ahead of time;
- 2) write a reflection paper (one-to-two typed pages each, doubled spaced)) on each chapter in Woodfin, *With All Your Mind*.  
A reflection paper will include the following: identify the major thesis of each chapter and its supporting arguments, evaluate any perceived weaknesses and/or strengths of its arguments, and explain and expand on how each chapter has helped to inform your understanding of the

issue. There are ten chapters and thus there will be ten reflection papers;

- 3) write similar reflection papers on each chapter in Gill, *The Tacit Mode* There are eight chapters and thus there will be eight reflection papers;
- 4) read three scholarly articles from at least two different philosophical or theological journals [report this reading on a collateral form]. The purpose of this assignment is in part to encourage students to read scholarly and critical journals. Due date is Dec. 7, 2002.

For a grade of “B” each student will—

- 1) fulfill the requirements for a grade of “C”;
- 2) write an essay comparing C. S. Lewis’ concept of supernaturalism with Pannenberg’s idea of eschatologicalism (4 pages). Due date is Dec. 7, 2002.

For a Grade of “A” each student will—

- 1) fulfill the requirements for a grade of “B”;
- 2) write a reflection paper on each of the five chapter in J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*. Due date is Dec. 7, 2002.

### ***AN INTERPRETATION OF ASBURY’S POLICY ON INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE***

Asbury has a faculty-approved policy on inclusive language, and so your papers should use nouns and pronouns that are inclusive, such as, “one says” rather than “he says,” or “humankind” for “mankind,” etc. However, Trinitarian theology involves the use of “Father and Son” as normative language for God, though the Holy Spirit is often described in feminine imagery (such as, “the birth of the Spirit”).

The important thing to keep in mind is that God-language is not literally gender-specific, even though God is defined in the imagery of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, God is neither male nor female, but transcends sexual differentiations. Of course, God is personal and thus we speak of Him in terms of personal pronouns.

The significant thing is that Jesus revealed a messianic concept of God in terms of tenderness and caring. Jürgen Moltmann refers to Jesus’ view of God as a “motherly concept of father” as opposed to a condescending patriarchal notion. Although Jesus uniquely defined God as his Father and he taught us to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” he offered a new notion of fatherhood that eliminated patriarchy. Patriarchy is the notion of male domination, absolute sovereignty, and ownership. It assumes that families exist for the sake of the father. As a contrast to patriarchy, Jesus revealed a messianic concept of fatherhood. A father is one who is loving, merciful, kind, concerned for the welfare of his family, and he respects each member of the family as individual persons in their own right. A father is one who empowers the members of his family to be authentic and free to be who they are. [Cf. Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992)].

Although Jesus may have been historically and culturally conditioned to use the imagery of “father” rather than “mother,” we today share in the life of God through Jesus’ awareness of himself as God’s Son. This means that we too will speak of God as

“our Father” inasmuch as our relationship to God is dependent upon Jesus’ self-awareness. The irreversible fact is that the Second Person of the Trinity (the pre-existent Christ) became incarnate in a male who was a Jew, not a woman and not another nationality such as Chinese. Pannenberg refers to this historical conditioning as a part of the meaning of Paul’s statement about the “scandal of particularity” (1 Cor. 1:22-25). He further writes: “We have to realize that the word *father* in Jesus’ own language functioned not as an exchangeable image, but as the name he used in addressing the God he proclaimed. Therefore, in the Christian church the name father, and its use as Jesus used it, belongs to the identity of the Christian faith. It cannot be changed without abandoning that identity, because it is by entering into Jesus’ relationship to God as father that we share in his sonship and—because of our communion with him—obtain the hope of eternal life. [Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Feminine Language About God,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 48.2 (Fall 1993): 28-29].

Out of this historically contingent event comes the revelation that in Christ there is neither male nor female favoritism (Gal 3:28). And out of this historical contingent event comes the revelation that the imagery of “Father” and the “eternal, pre-existent Son” are not males (even though Jesus was a man), but rather the Father and Son are divine Persons who transcend sexuality. So when we use masculine imagery for the Triune Persons, we understand that God is not a male. Rather, this masculine imagery is historically conditioned, and yet it cannot be simply set aside. This is because our faith is contingent upon Jesus’ self-awareness of God as his Father.

Words matter and should be properly understood, but if we change the biblical words we must be careful not to change the reality. For example, if we call God “Mother” we may be substituting matriarchal domineering imagery as opposed to patriarchal tyrannical imagery, and as Jürgen Moltmann has shown, to call God “Mother-Father” (matriarchy—patriarchy) devalues the meaning of human freedom.

All of this explanation is being made here in order to say that we use inclusive language at the human level in our speaking and writing, although we use the masculine imagery of the Triune Persons as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet we understand this God-language is inclusive (non-patriarchal and non-matriarchal) even though masculine imagery is used.

Moltmann shows that this revelation of God as “the Father of Jesus Christ” goes beyond the Old Testament notion that God is the Father-Creator of the universe. The idea of Father-Creator describes one of God’s many functions, but the idea of God as the “Father of Jesus Christ” defines God’s inner life. God is identified as the Father who eternally begets a Son. Thus, the identity of God as the “Father of Jesus Christ” is the basis of our salvation, as Paul put it: “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Paul also writes: “You have received a spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 3:15-16). Pannenberg has shown that because Jesus definitively revealed God as “my Father,” this God-language is normative for Christian faith because it is through Jesus’ identity with God as Father that we come to know God as well.

Moltmann has noted that the real concern of the feminist complaint is patriarchy. He notes that as result of Jesus’ relational concept of his Father as *Abba*, there is no

substantive reason for us to abandon the concept of God as Father because a true concept of fatherhood excludes patriarchy.

Moltmann has particularly noted the social implications of Jesus' concept of father for men today who too easily are abandoning their family responsibilities. Moltmann believes that Jesus' non-patriarchal view of "Father" is just as important for men as women because there is a "growing irresponsibility of men towards their families and children and masculine regression into childish games of narcissitic self-concern." This "irresponsibility" and "regression" is one of the "sorry side-effects of the depatriarchalization of modern society." It is important that men "adopt a masculinity which does not lay claim to domination and a fatherhood without loss of power and feelings of powerlessness." Moltmann believes, in this regard, that Freud demonstrated the importance of the Father's unique role in a child's developing sense of identity, and hence the importance of the Trinitarian concept that shows true fatherhood entails mercy, kindness, love, and preferential treatment for other members of the family in a non-condescending manner.

Some feminists are turning to the insights derived from Trinitarian theology as a basis for understanding the relational equality among all peoples regardless of sex or nationality. Sexism and classism have no place in the Kingdom of God [Cf. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983)]. Moltmann is largely to be thanked for helping to bring about this understanding of the social implication of the Trinity. More so than ever, it is imperative today to proclaim the meaning of Jesus' messianic proclamation that God is *Abba*.

In addition to the problem of calling God "Mother-Father" with its matriarchal/patriarchal implications, an exclusive use of impersonal pronouns for God (Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier) depersonalize the Trinitarian Persons. As part of "the scandal of particularity," it would seem wise to retain the imagery that Jesus used in addressing God as "Father."

However, one can cite examples in Church history where faithful Christians have prayed to God as "Mother." Moltmann shows that Macarius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century referred to the Holy Spirit as Mother, and this concept is found in the mystical piety of the East and West. Count Zinzendorf spoke of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Mother (Holy Spirit). Feminist Wilson-Kastner points out that the concept of God as Mother has emerged in the Christian tradition "to express the nurturing aspect of Christ's work among humanity—Jesus as a mother who seeks to find and heal all of her children." Julian of Norwich in the late Medieval period particularly linked the motherly aspect of Jesus' Sonship with the crucifixion.

Though it may be appropriate to call God "Mother" in certain pastoral situations, it should be also remembered that Jesus taught us that the normative way of praying to God is: "Our Father who is in heaven." As Pannenberg has noted, this is not an "exchangeable image" because it shaped Jesus' understanding of his inner relationship to God as his Father.

One final comment. You are going to find it to be an increasing trend to use inclusive language in reference to God, and consequently it is important to know how to respond in a constructive rather than a reactionary manner. One suggestion might be to address God in this fashion: "Our Father in heaven who is Almighty and yet cares for us as a Mother. We thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus Christ, who gives birth and

life to us through your Holy Spirit.” Until Jesus’ messianic concept of fatherhood is truly understood within the community of believers, praying to God as “Father” will continue to be misperceived in a patriarchal fashion. That is why we need to be pastorally sensitive to this issue.

### **WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

Class time will be spent in clarifying the assigned readings and expanding upon their implications. The class format will consist of lectures interspersed with discussions. There will also be multimedia presentations.

#### WEEK 1 – SEPTEMBER 28

- Lecture - Introduction to Philosophy of Religion
- “Doubting Your Doubts,” A sound recording of a sermon by Harry Emerson Fosdick at the Riverside Church in 1929-1946.
- “Introduction”—Woodfin, pp. 13-14
- “Knowing That You Know God”—Woodfin, pp. 17-37.
- “Come Let Us Reason Together”—Woodfin, pp. 38-59
- Lecture: “The Miracle of Atheism—A Reply to J. L. Mackie”

#### WEEK 2 – OCTOBER 5

- “Video, “Shadowland.” (excerpts)
- “The Moving Image of Eternity”—Woodfin, p. 60-82.
- Lecture: “Eternity, Divine Foreknowledge and Contemporary Physics”
- “Christ—the Clue to Reality”—Woodfin, pp. 83-114.
- “The Naturalist and the Supernaturalist,” *Miracles*, pp. 10-16.
- “The Self-Contradiction of the Naturalist,” *Miracles*, pp. 17-24.
- “Nature and Supernature,” *Miracles*, pp.25-33.
- “A Further Difficulty in Naturalism,” *Miracles*, pp. 34-39.
- “Answers to Misgivings,” *Miracles*, pp. 40-45.
- “Horrid Red Things”—C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 69-82.
- Lecture: “Above, Within, or Ahead? Pantheism, Supernaturalism, or Eschatologicalism?”

#### WEEK 3 – NOVEMBER 2

- Lecture: “Speaking of God.”
- “The Futurity of Beauty,” Woodfin, pp. 115-128.
- “The Sound of Meaning,” Woodfin, pp. 129-143.
- “Christianity and Converging Faiths,” Woodfin, pp. 147-172.
- J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, pp. 1-111.

#### WEEK 4 – NOVEMBER 23

- “The Shadowside of Good”—Woodfin, pp. 207-232
- “The Complementarity of Science and Religion,” Woodfin, pp. 173-206.
- Lecture: “Recent Brain Research and the Nature of the Self.”
- Video: “Creation of the Universe” (a PBS production)

## WEEK 5 – DECEMBER 7

- “Introduction, Deconstructing Modernism,” Gill, pp. 1-10.
- “The Basis of Modern Thought,” Gill, pp. 13-30.
- “The Dynamics of Cognitive Experience,” Gill, pp. 31-50.
- “The Structure of Knowledge,” Gill, pp. 51-69.
- “Deconstructing Deconstructionism,” Gill, pp. 71-88.
- “Tracing the Patterns in Science and Political Theory,” Gill, pp. 91-111.
- “Tracing the Patterns in Art and Religion,” Gill, pp. 137-155.
- “Other Interpretive Insights,” Gill, p. 157-175.
- “Conclusion, Reconstructive Postmodernism,” Gill, pp. 177-183.
- “A Meditation on Personal Faith,” Woodfin, pp. 233-240.
- “Loving God with One’s Heart, Mind, and Soul,” A Video-taped message by Dennis Kinlaw at the 1998 ATS Christian Holiness Conference.