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CH 751 Readings in Western Spirituality

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CH 751 Dr. Collins

1. Texts:


14)______. “Spirituality and Critical Thinking: Are They Really So Different?”  (The Evangelical Journal  (Fall 1997)

2. Course Description and Objectives:

Post-modernism as a philosophical movement is in the process of critiquing the multi-faceted legacy of the Enlightenment. More specifically, post-modernism calls for a reevaluation of some of the central tenets of the Age of Reason, namely, its celebration of reason, its incipient naturalism, and its belief in unending progress. Indeed, through their critical work, contemporary theologians and philosophers are becoming increasingly aware that reason is, more often than not, "interested reason" with a perspective, viewpoint, or perhaps even a bias behind it; that "objectivity" in the pursuit of knowledge is not as impartial as was once supposed, but itself constitutes a perspective which of necessity excludes others; and that scientific and technological progress must not be mistaken for general cultural achievement.

The import of all this, especially for the kinds of discussions which take place in the classroom, is that speculative, impersonal, and objective analyses of human problems and concerns have dominated the modern discussion. For example, to consider what a human being is merely in terms of "looking downward," (the preferred approach of science by the way) that is, in terms of the material causes which make up all human beings, will invariably result in some form of reductionism. However, is the whole greater than the sum of the parts? In addition, is an analysis of components always the best explanation for a complex reality like a human being? Some post-modern philosophers and theologians are beginning to wonder.

In light of this, the course will freely consider questions, as the ancient Greek philosophers and the fathers and mothers of the Christian church did centuries ago, which look "upward" rather than downward. That is, the course will assess what a human being is in terms of spiritual trajectories as they are oriented towards purposes, ends, or goals. Here teleology will be offered as an answer, at least in part, to scientific reductionism and abstract speculation. Indeed, philosophy (love of wisdom) for Plato, in his realization of the forms, was a participatory activity which engaged not only the ratio (the speculative intellect) but also the intellectus (intuitive knowing). In other words, Plato's philosophy called not only for engagement but for transformation as well. It involved the whole being. The following selection from Huston Smith's book, Beyond the Post-Modern Mind illustrates this truth: Smith writes:

A few years ago the Review of Metaphysics published an essay by Jacob Needleman with the arresting title, "Why Philosophy is Easy."  In the past,
Needleman noted, philosophy was thought to be anything but easy. Only the ablest citizens were expected to undertake it, and even they, only after training not only their minds but their bodies, their emotions, and their wills as well. This has of course changed. Today everyone is encouraged to try his or her hand at the art, even high school students. The switch has occurred because rational abilities are now considered the only prerequisites. The reason the others have been dropped, Needleman goes on to say, is that the wisdom the modern philosopher seeks through his philosophy is no longer a new state of being. The abandonment of this former objective more than any single conceptualized point of view is what distinguishes modern philosophy [and one might add modern theology] from so much of ancient and medieval philosophy.¹

The point is--and it's an important one--Plato as well as the authors of the classics of Western spirituality asked different kinds of questions about the pursuit of knowledge and virtue--questions which have largely been excluded by the modern paradigm. In light of this, and to rectify this problem, the present course will, in the spirit of post-modern openness and tolerance, reintroduce such questions (they were once a part of the first universities during the Middle Ages) as integral to the educational task. Not surprisingly, the course will view religion and spirituality more as an art than a science; a divine and human activity which goes back as far as humanity and which is concerned with aesthetic sensitivity and development, intuitive powers, and the quest for meaning and the good--areas largely beyond the framework of the scientific paradigm and hence beyond the modern one as well. In fact, this approach will not only offer students a critical perspective on their own approach to knowledge and the good, but it will also issue in an informed and judicious assessment of the presuppositions which inform modernity.

As such, the course will accomplish its critical task by exploring the spiritual writings of Plato in the fourth century B.C. to Christian spiritual writers in the twentieth century. Indeed, the scope of the course will be quite broad in order to provide students with a wealth of material. It will not only include selections from Protestantism, but from Roman Catholicism as well.

Moreover, the principal vehicle of the course in the achievement of its goals will be the examination of texts of various traditions as key expressions of religious experience and of transcendence. More to the point, the five major questions which will dominate the course are the following: First, how is God conceived or revealed in this personal literature, and how does this depiction compare with other traditions? Are there any similarities or differences? Second, what is the nature of a human being according to the greatest saints of the church and how does this compare with modern conceptions? Third, what is the basic problem with humanity according to this literature and what is its prescription? Fourth, what are the psychological dynamics, the human components of religious experience, present in this material? Are there any recurring elements in these spiritual trajectories? Fifth, what are the epistemological (pertaining to knowledge) and
metaphysical assumptions (pertaining to what is real) of this material and what is their status in the modern world? Are questions of meaning and purpose handled differently in these writings than in contemporary literature and culture? If so, why does this difference exist, and what is its larger significance?

3. **Requirements:**

Since this is a seminar course which emphasizes reading and discussion, students are required to read all fourteen selections listed above. Many of these texts are small, and only parts of others will be read (Modern Christian Spirituality, for instance), so students should have little difficulty completing the assignments.

Students will keep a daily notebook in which they outline the principal teachings of each work, paying significant attention to the five questions described above as well as to the salient issue: “What is spirituality?” The professor will provide additional details on this matter the first day of class.

A major research paper (15-20 pages) which explores some aspect of the discipline of spirituality will be due no later than one week before the last day of class.

4. **Grading:**

Course grade will be determined by these factors: the paper (33%), the notebook (33%), seminar participation (33%).

An incomplete will be given if the student fails to complete all of the assigned readings.

5. **Attendance:**

Since this is a seminar course, participation by the students is crucial. Therefore, absenteeism is most strongly discouraged. Students will not be permitted to miss more than two classes without grade reduction.

6. **Note:**

This syllabus may be altered from time to time, for academic reasons, as the professor sees fit.

8. **Bibliography:**

I. Books


Aubert, Roger. *Sacralization & Secularization*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, --.


Hall, Mary. *The Impossible Dream: The Spirituality of Dom Helder Camara*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Books Demand, --.


II. Articles


Moore, Robert L. "Revisioning Spiritual Theology: the Next Agenda." Chicago Theological Seminary Register 72, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 1-9.

Morrison, Truman A. "Readings in Spirituality [bibliog essay]." Chicago Theological Seminary Register 72, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 40-43.


Schneiders, Sandra M. "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?"  *Horizons* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 253-74.


Notes