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ST 650 Narrative Theology

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Asbury Theological Seminary-Orlando Campus  
ST650 Narrative Theology - Fall 2003

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Please check for the latest version of this syllabus prior to the beginning of class.

The Fine Print ;-) “This extended learning syllabus is intended for distribution to members of the course only (and not for general distribution on the internet!). If you intend to share part of this material with others you need to ask for permission.”

Course Description

This course intends to explore the limits and possibilities of the ‘narrative’ approach to theological reflection. Our analysis will take its cue from the post-modern critique of method, foundation and systematization in Theology and Philosophy from which the interest in narrative and story have initially emerged. We shall look in turn at various understandings of ‘narrative theology’ as the category is employed in a number of theological accounts and critically assess their claims and performance. Along the way we shall also engage in ‘narrative theological reflection’ ourselves, by looking at a number of well-known biblical passages and consider their meaningfulness for the present theological reflection in general, their peculiar response to the post-modern concerns in particular.

Course Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course the student will be able to:

1. Describe the category of narrative theology, its general aims and concerns as well as its specific employment in various theological accounts.
2. Better evaluate the potential problems of systematic theology in terms of both its hidden reliance upon fashionable ideologies and its connection with the first order language of the Bible.
3. Engage in, and appreciate narrative and literary criticism as useful tools in the study of the Bible.
4. Articulate and defend a theological understanding of history vis-à-vis the post-modern critique of totality.
5. Appreciate, articulate and discern among various understandings of ‘truth’ in the biblical narratives; appreciate the importance of both story and
history; articulate the perennial importance of reference for theological reflection.

6. Identify the possibilities and limits of the narrative approach in the context of both the living confession of the Church and the history of Dogma.

**Required Reading**

Brown, Robert M. "My Story and 'The Story" in *Theology Today*, v. 23, #2, 1975 (available in digital format)


McClendon, James W. Jr. ‘More On Narrative’ (available in digital format)


Ricoeur, Paul, *Figuring the Sacred*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. - selections (pp. 35-47; 144-166; 203-278.)


Wisse, Maarten, *Narrative Theology and the Dogmatic Use of the Bible*. (available in digital form - Utrecht University MWisse@theo.uu.nl).


**Recommended Reading**


Farrow, Douglas *Ascension and Ecclesia*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996. Preface, Chapter 1;


*Other materials (articles, reviews, book selections) may be made available during the course (in digital form).*
Course Schedule

Lecture 1
Introduction
The Categories of Narrative Theology. Historical overview. Philosophical and Theological aspects.

What is special about Narrative Theology? What are its concerns and who are its most representative proponents? These and similar questions will be discussed in the context of the contemporary critique of modernity and its implications for theology.

Required reading
George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, pp. 13-97;
Stanley J. Grenz & Roger Olson, *20th Century Theology*, pp. 271-285;
Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story*, pp. 3-26

Recommended reading

No writing assignments are required for the first meeting.

Lecture 2
Systematic Theology and Modernity. Conservative and Liberal Theologies.

We shall inquire into Systematic Theology's connection with Modernity especially its emphasis on method. Is there a foundation? How can we discuss theologically about ‘founding’? What are the implications of systematization? Can we ‘synthesize’ the Bible in a series of ‘fundamental/overarching statements’?

Study Case. Erickson’s Systematic Theology; Robert Jenson’s Systematic Theology;

Required reading
Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, pp. 1-35;
Lecture 3
Post-Modernity and the philosophy of language.
Epistemology and Hermeneutics. Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel;
From regional to general hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur).
Theological implications;

We shall take a closer look at the revolt against epistemology and the ‘dissolution of method’ in post-modern thought. Particular attention shall be given to the contemporary focus on hermeneutics. Is epistemology as a science passé? What can we say theologically about the present situation?

Required reading
Paul Ricoeur, The Task of Hermeneutics in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, pp. 43-62;
Anthony C. Thieselton, Interpreting God and the Post-Modern Self, pp. 3-43;
Anthony C. Thieselton, The Two Horizons, pp. 293-326;
Nancey Murphy, Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism, pp. 36-61;

Recommended reading
Anthony C. Thieselton, The Two Horizons.
Anthony C. Thieselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics

Lecture 4
The theological response to the epistemological crisis. ‘Revelational theologies’;
Brunner, Barth, Niebuhr.
The Plurivocity of Biblical Revelation; Foundation, Method and Genre;

Is emphasis on Revelation the proper response to the present epistemological crisis? How should we speak about Revelation in general, Biblical Revelation in particular?

Required reading
George W. Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology, pp. 39-69;


**Recommended reading**

Karl Barth *CD 1.1*; Introduction, Chapter 1;


Anthony C. Thieselton *Interpreting God and the Post-modern Self*. Part IV.

**Lecture 5**

Story and History. Reviving ‘the big ugly ditch’ (Lessing)?

Funk, Via, Crossan and the New Hermeneutic.

Study Case – The Parables of Jesus;

What does the category of narrative tell us about the relationship between story and history, fact and meaning? What can be said theologically about the claims and concerns of the New Hermeneutic movement?

**Required reading**

The Parables of Jesus.


Anthony C. Thieselton, *The Two Horizons*, pp. 327-356;

Paul Ricoeur, *The Bible and the Imagination*, in *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 144-166;


**Recommended reading**


**Lecture 6**

History and Totality revisited I.

Salvation History and Narrativity;

Study Case 1 – Christ, Wisdom literature and the dialectic of universal and particular;

Study Case 2 – The Prophetic Vision: History and Counter-History;
It is often contended that concern with grand categories like a philosophy or a theology of history, necessarily entails a totalitarian perspective, a ‘closing’ of history. Is that really the case in the light of Biblical revelation? We shall look at the way the Bible looks at the world focusing especially on two biblical genres: wisdom literature and prophetic discourse.

**Required reading**
Proverbs 8; Jeremiah 18; Isaiah 55; Amos
Paul Ricoeur, *The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narrative of the Prophetic Vocation* in *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 262-278;

**Recommended reading**

**Lecture 7**
History and Totality revisited II.
Word, Action and History. Towards a theological understanding of history;
Study case – Genesis narratives

We shall continue our reflections from the previous course looking this time at the Genesis narratives. Is ‘God’s eye perspective’ an impossible interpretative stance? Moreover, how do we relate this latter perspective with the narrative’s tacit ambition to mediate between theory and praxis, story and history, sense and reference, meaning and significance?

**Required reading**
Genesis 12-50;
Paul Ricoeur, *Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems*, in *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 203-216;
Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 240-296;
**Recommended reading**

**Lecture 8**
Metaphor and Concept. Philosophical and Theological aspects (Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, Ricoeur).
Study Case 1 – John 6;

There has been much discussion about metaphor in recent times. Post-modern critique of metaphysics has led to a re-evaluation of traditional theories of meaning. We shall look at the nature of this development and its implications for Narrative Theology.

**Required reading**
Paul Ricoeur, *Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics* in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, pp. 165-181

**Recommended reading**

**Lecture 9**
The Promise of Narrative Theology I
Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology.
On Naming God
Study Case – Exodus 3.

Theology's paramount focus is the reality and being of God. Given the plurivocity of biblical revelation, how are we to talk about God’s revealed Name? Does Narrative Theology offer a better guide in our attempt to unfold this profound ontological question? Does Narrative Theology really have a special status in Theology or is it simply a tool for recounting the passage from biblical to systematic theology?

**Required reading**
Exodus 3;

**Recommended reading**

**Lecture 10**
The Promise of Narrative Theology II
Study Case – the Gospel of Mathew

We shall evaluate the special place of the Gospel as narrative among the Biblical genres and its connection with both Biblical and Systematic Theology. What is ‘special’ about the Gospel? How does the Gospel ‘name’ God?
Required reading

Recommended reading

Lecture 11
The Promise of Narrative Theology III
Narrative Theology and Anthropology. Narrative Identity, Biography and Testimony
Study case - Hebrews 11
McLendon’s Biography as Theology;

What is the place of narrative identity in a ‘criteriology of Revelation?’ Is Narrative Identity or the notion of testimony central to Narrative Theology? Moreover, is Narrative Theology intrinsically tied to anthropological categories?

Required reading
Hebrews 11
James W. McClendon, Jr. ‘More On Narrative’ (available in digital format)
Brown, Robert M. "My Story and 'The Story'" in Theology Today, v. 23, #2, 1975 (available in digital format)
**Recommended reading**

**Lecture 12**
The Promise of Narrative Theology IV
Narrative Theology, Imagination and Ethics. Narrative identity, character and community.

Personal Identity cannot be separated from the field of action, therefore, from ethics. The deeper connection between narrative identity and community shall be explored in this course and the way in which the concept of narrative bridges the ethical aim (the teleological perspective) with the moral norm (the deontological perspective).

**Required reading**

**Recommended reading**

**Lecture 13**
Narrative Theology, Trinity and Truth. Concluding remarks;
Study Case: The Gospel of John.

How is Narrative Theology related to, say, Trinitarian Theology or Process Theology? Is Narrative Theology better able to express the dynamic character of the Gospel for the contemporary world? If so, how and in what sense? This concluding course will explore such and similar questions in our attempt to situate the specific discourse of Narrative Theology within the broader field of Theology.
Required reading

Recommended reading

Requirements and expectations
You are expected to complete the required reading prior to class session and to produce a written assignment. Specific instructions for both the required reading and the written assignment will be given for each class. During the course, three additional essay questions/topics will be posted. The student is expected to treat ONE topic or answer ONE question only (at his or her choosing). The length of the essay will not exceed 2,500 words.

Assessment and Grading
40 percent of the grade will be constituted by the assignment(s) for each lecture and by the level of interaction in the class. (15% for the level of interaction and 35% for the assignments). The long essay that will conclude the course will make the other 50% of the grade.

I am including below the standards for grading from the seminary catalog.

A 4 = Exceptional work: surpassing, markedly outstanding achievement of course objectives
B 3 = Good work: strong, significant achievement of course objectives
C 2 = Acceptable work: basic, essential achievement of course objectives
D 1 = Marginal work: minimal or inadequate achievement of course objectives
F 0 = Unacceptable work: failure to achieve course objectives

Please note that for ‘good, solid work’ you get the grade of B. In order to get a grade of A, you must produce exceptional work, that surpasses the objectives of the course; That usually translates into a combination of the following:
- Well researched and comprehensive analysis and criticism that goes beyond what is required for the assignment.
- Work that is exceptionally articulated, well structured and concise;
- Insightful and creative work that includes elaborate and profound interaction with the material and advances the present discussions on the subject matter.

Following are the types of issues that devalue a paper listed in the order of their importance.
- Faulty logic; incoherence; lack of discernment in evaluating what is at stake in the argument; answering a different question;
- Insufficient interaction with the material; insufficient research; weak argument; poor structure
- Grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, etc; While I am mainly interested in content issues, persistent grammatical and spelling errors will reduce your grade.

Regarding the writing standards you may want to follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Particular attention should be given to argument construction, outline, the standard of language expected in a paper as well as the proper way of referencing resources. If you plan to work hard anyway, it would be a pity to miss helpful hints on impressing your professor with your wide-ranging erudition:-)

**The due date for the final essay is December 16.**