

# Theo 500: Introduction to Theology

Modality:	in person
Term:	January 2024
Instructor:	Dr. Brian Bantum
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Office Hours:	by appointment

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## Course Structure

January 16 - January 19, 9am to 5pm (there will be breaks throughout the day)

Course Rhythms: Our days together will be a combination of lecture, individual and group reading, individual and group work and discussion, as well as in-class graded quizzes and writing exercises. I can understand that an eight hour day of theology for five days a week might feel a little overwhelming. My approach to theology is one of journey, questions, dialogue, and experimentation. This week will not be days and days of frantically taking notes. That said, there will be some lecture and we will be covering a lot of ground pretty quickly. In this process I ask you to come with questions, an open mind, and a willingness to move through ambiguities. I will be available throughout the week for questions or concerns.

### Preparing for the week:

Prior to our first meeting you have two assignments.

- 1) read and journal through *The Death of Race* and *Introducing African Women's Theology*
- 2) Complete theology "quiz"

#### 1) Reading and Journal

In the two weeks prior to class, read Brian Bantum's *The Death of Race* and the selected chapters from Mercy Oduyoye's *Introducing African Women's Theology*. (The chapters are short, and if you read one chapter per day it should be pretty manageable.) As you read, keep a journal, reflecting on key passages, moments that gave you pause, questions that arose. Journal entries don't need to be long, maybe a quote and a few sentences about what stood out to you. Both books are very accessible and my hope is that you would approach them devotionally. What is the story you've been formed into about who you are and who God is? How are these texts telling a different story? As you read think about how each author describes the theological task, who is God, what is a human being? What do they not describe? What are the resources they draw upon?

Before the first day of class you will be asked to self-report what percentage of the reading and how many entries you completed. You don't need to turn in your journals.

## 2) Theology "Quiz"

In addition to your journals you will complete a short quiz online asking you to provide a few sentences describing your understanding of several theological terms. There is no right or wrong answer for this quiz. It is simply a way to give me a sense of the theologies and viewpoints you are bringing into class with you.

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### Course Description

Christian theology is the purposeful reflection upon God and God's world. Our beliefs about who God is (or is not) are bound to the way we live and who we live among. Theology shapes us as we struggle to discern the meaning of our lives in relationship to God, to one another, and to creation itself. This course serves as a starting point in exploring the questions, approaches and themes of systematic and constructive theologies.

By *systematic* I mean there is an interrelationship between the beliefs and doctrines that shape Christian faith. Sometimes these doctrines are explicit and sometimes they are implicit. But our faith and lives as disciples are animated by how we describe who God is, what we believe creation to be, what are human beings, what has gone wrong in our world and what does God do to "save" or "heal" or "restore" or "judge." Depending on the phrase we associate with salvation we already see implicit assumptions about who God is and what's gone wrong. Systematic theology is the process of thinking about these interrelationships with respect to who we believe God to be, and who we believe our ourselves to be.

By *constructive* I mean that theology is not simply a process of describing what others have said, the systems that some traditions or denominations or believers have articulated over time. While there are many ways of describing constructive theology, my invocation of the term implies that theology is a creative and co-creative process. Theology is a way of being and a way of describing that draws from the descriptions, problems, formulas, and performances of theology that precede, but also speaks from its moment. In this speaking, we draw from the artists, theories, sciences, and histories that help us to describe our moment more faithfully and then discern what it might mean to say that God is acting and present in our moment.

And by *theologies* I mean that descriptions of God working in this world are always multiple. Sometimes they intersect, sometimes they are in conversation, and sometimes they are in opposition. If we confess that our God is transcendent, that God is one who cannot be known or captured within our language or knowledge or experience, then we might begin to open ourselves to all of these descriptions as offering us an insight into who God is. And yet we are also confronted by a God who brings a people into being, who is called by a name, who has a particularity, a personhood. How do we begin to discern who God is in the midst of this transcendence and personhood?

Throughout this course we will examine theology through many of the central doctrines of Christian confession (God, creation, humanity, the fall, Christology, etc.), attending to various treatments (or lack of treatment) of these doctrines, and the historical development of early creeds and confessions.

In addition to comparing theological claims and descriptions we will also endeavor to construct or speak of God and God's world in light of these descriptions, asking how our theological work might contribute to drawing people into a deeper sense of God in their midst.

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## Learning Objectives

- Examine differences and similarities in various theological systems/descriptions.
- Identify interrelationships between doctrinal claims within theological systems.
- Understand theological ideas as having a history and examining several examples, particularly regarding Christology.
- Draw upon theological descriptions to articulate an emerging constructive/systematic theology.

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## Required Books

- Brian Bantum. *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World*. Grand Rapids: Fortress Press, 2016 [isbn: 978-1506408880 , Amazon, \$16.99]
- Dorothy Soelle. *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015 [isbn: 978-1498295765, Amazon, \$18.59]
- Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Way*. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2018 [isbn: 978- 0881416299, Amazon, \$18.00]
- Additional readings will be available on Moodle

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## Grading/Assignments

- Daily activity (20%): Each day we will engage in an activity (written reflection or artistic practice) completion of activities receive full credit.
- Comparative Theological Exercise (30%): The midweek assignment will provide an opportunity to examine two theologians and their understand of a single theological doctrine. The aim here is to consider how their "system" hangs together, what problems it tries to address, and what it begins to point to in terms of who God is and what the Christian life ought to look like. You will consider the doctrine of God and creation for Mercy Oduyoye and Kallistos Ware. Drawing on the readings for each theologian so far in the class, how do the two doctrines relate to each other? How do you see the methods or approaches or problems shaping their thought about who God is and what creation is. We will have time during the class to write and reflect on these similarities and differences and discuss them together as a class. You will have the opportunity to type and/or revise these reflections to submit by the end of the week. (Grade is based on understanding of each theologian's ideas, attention to detail in interpretation and comparison, analysis of the relationships between the doctrines and the differences between the theologian)

- Visual Theology Project: (50%) The visual theology project will guide you through a series of exercises that ask you to connect critical reflection on theological concepts with reflective practices of creation and meditation. These exercises will not be graded on "artistic" ability, but rather the quality of reflection and connections demonstrated, and how those reflect an understanding of critical concepts.