Fundamental Theology

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This course addresses the foundational questions of human existence and how divine revelation provides a unique and uniquely satisfying response to them, as reflected in the Church's basic creedal statements. Students in this course will be equipped to:

- explain the Judeo-Christian understanding of God as Yahweh Elohim and how this understanding of God differs radically from any alternative view regarding the divine
- explain how the doctrine of original sin stemming from an initial fall from primordial grace, as depicted in the narrative of Garden in the book of Genesis, provides a means of addressing the problem of evil in the world in a way that also preserves the Judeo-Christian tradition's fundamental optimism about God and creation, and how even this disaster still involves a dimension of good news.
- explain how the Judeo-Christian understanding of God connects with Christian teaching regarding life beyond death, in its various aspects, such as personal immortality, bodily resurrection, heavenly glory, and the possibility of hell
- explain what is fundamentally at stake in the Christian assertion that Jesus of Nazareth is the true human Incarnation of the One True God, and how this truth comes to bear on teachings about the Church, Judgment, and forgiveness of sins, and the possibility of acceptable sacrifice according to an authentic biblical meaning of the concept
Fundamental Theology
Syllabus & Objectives

The following lectures will be provided in this course:

- What Do We See When We Look Out the Window?
- An Overview of the Formation of a Religious Consciousness in Human Beings
- What Comes After Death?
- The Rise of Monotheism
- Yahweh Elohim: An Entirely New Idea About the Divine
- Now that we know God: original sin as the explanation for what should be, what went wrong, and how it can be fixed
- Now that we know God: the culture of Life and Love
- What Christ brings: The Incarnation closes the gap between creator and creation
- What Christ brings: Our brother makes sacrifice possible for us
- What Christ brings: Our brother is our judge
- The Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church
- Forgiveness of Sins, Resurrection of the Body, and the Life of the world to come
What Do We See When We Look Out the Window?

If you did not already know through divine revelation that there is a supreme God beyond the cosmos, who created the world in love, and who is All-Good and All-Loving, is such a belief about God the likely natural attitude given the basic human experience, bracketing modern technology and social organization (which, historically have been developed in large measure as a product of the Judeo-Christian culture)?

Imagining life in a more primitive age, without the benefit of technology and complex systems of law and justice, without a politico-social apparatus for mitigating against the worst outcomes of disadvantage, and so on, taking into account the staggering presence of disease, death, infant mortality, famine, and other unmitigated suffering all around us, would we be inclined to think that the world is good or evil?
What Do We See When We Look Out the Window?

How might we think about the spiritual realm on the basis of such experiences of reality? Would we imagine that God or the gods cared about us, or sought to bless us? Would we imagine divine benevolence or divine caprice or even malevolence?

How might we think about human beings in such a world? Are human beings a glorious good? Are we the highpoint of the cosmos? Are we, perhaps, more pitiable than the beasts for being aware of our condition, or even the pinnacle of evil, the personification of the darkness and chaos we see around us and cannot escape?
What Do We See When We Look Out the Window?


Notes:
An Overview of the Formation of a Religious Consciousness in Human Beings

What do scholars generally believe to be the basic starting point of human religious consciousness? Are human beings naturally religious? What do the most primitive cultures generally hold about the spiritual realm, and what is the term used to describe this family of primitive religious belief?

What are the four basic stages of polytheism, from the most primitive to the most culturally advanced?

What are the different forms of monotheistic belief? Is monotheism necessarily synonymous with belief in the biblical God?
An Overview of the Formation of a Religious Consciousness in Human Beings


Notes:
What Comes After Death?

How does the problem of imagining our own non-existence give rise to conjecture about what becomes of us after the moment of death?

What is sociological immortality? Where do we tend to see that view reflected, and how is it fundamentally different from the idea of "life after death"?
What are some of the main ideas about what happens after death represented in the world's major systems of belief, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, or even ancient religions, such as the Egyptian cults of the Pharaonic era? Can you think of other views we did not address here?

Do all of these views involve the idea of "personal immortality?"

Consider the most optimistic view of life after death we have considered here, outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. What is the most striking difference between that view and the understanding of personal immortality at work in Christianity?
What Comes After Death?

Notes:
The Rise of Monotheism

Based on the ancient Semitic terms for powers and divinities, can we attempt to construct a path from more primitive animistic and early polytheistic concepts or reality to the properly Hebrew concept of God as both radically transcendent and yet capable of thinking and willing that which is other than itself?

What are the limitations associated with monotheism in the Greek philosophical context? What if we have only one God, but he is not cause of beings as such (he is not ontopoic)? What if we have only one God who is the cause of everything other than himself? What philosophical portraits have emerged for us on these bases? Why do they not quite involve the concept of "creation" in the proper theological sense?
The Rise of Monotheism

Notes:
Yahweh Elohim: An Entirely New Idea About the Divine

What is entailed in the meaning of the word Yahweh (הַיָּהָוָה)?

What is entailed in the meaning of the word Elohim (אֱלֹהִים)?
Yahweh Elohim: An Entirely New Idea About the Divine

Explain how creation in the proper theological sense (as a radically transcendent God thinking and willing that which is other than itself, imposing being upon nothingness) is rooted in the Hebrew understanding of God, whereby Yahweh and Elohim are identified as One God.

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, the invocation of a name held certain implications. How does this cultural understanding of the invocation of a name help us to see how the name Yahweh is a kind of paradox? How does this perspective on the divine name help us to understand the development of a prohibition against pronouncing it?
Yahweh Elohim: An Entirely New Idea About the Divine


Notes:
Now that we know God
Original Sin

If God is all good, all powerful, and all loving, he could not have created the world as evil. While Israel's neighbors tended to view the world as fundamentally dark and evil, the Hebrew people did not, yet the same facts about the world that led their neighbors to adopt pessimistic views of reality found a different account from within the perspective of faith in Yahweh Elohim. How do the first chapters of Genesis describe the primordial purity of God's creation at the very beginning? How does the Garden narrative explain the evil we experience in the world as rooted in human choice?

Contrast the fourfold harmony of the primordial condition of purity "original justice" with the fourfold alienation by which the fallen world is characterized as a consequence of "original sin".
Now that we know God
Original Sin

The so-called "curses" after the Fall also contain hidden blessings. What are those blessings, and how do they reflect the fundamental hope that follows upon faith in Yahweh Elohim?

The doctrine of the "original sin" involves a mysterious relational quality to sin, such that the sin of the one can hold implications for the condition of another. How is this truth about sin, which at first appears as a disaster in the Fall of creation itself through the act of our first parents, actually good news, and the anthropological precondition for our salvation in Jesus Christ?
Now that we know God
Original Sin

Suggested Readings: Genesis 2:5-3:24; Romans 1:18-32.

Notes:
How is it that when we do not affirm Yahweh Elohim we cannot affirm Unbounded Love, Unbounded Life, Unbounded Goodness, but instead see these things as always constricted, rationed, and limited by the countervailing powers of hatred, death, and evil?

Why is it, then, that the world without Yahweh Elohim is a world beholden to the authority of death-a world in which we must negotiate a space for ourselves on death's terms?

How is it, then, that affirmation of Yahweh Elohim represents acceptance of that Truth which "makes us free," by allowing us to live under the unrivaled and undiluted authority of Love, Life, and Goodness?
Now that we know God: the culture of Life and Love


Notes:
What Christ brings: The Incarnation closes the gap between creator and creation

Why is it not enough, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, that God would create the world to exist as other than himself only to leave it in its otherness?

How is the idea of reditus or return radicalized in the Incarnation, Eucharistic communion, and ultimately, the resurrection of the body?

What is the common mark of the early Christological heresies, such as Docetism, Arianism, Nestorianism, Appolinarian Monopsychism, Monophysitism, and Monotheletism? They all fail to affirm what basic truth about what God accomplishes in and through the Christ?
What Christ brings: The Incarnation closes the gap between creator and creation


Notes:
What Christ brings: Our brother makes sacrifice possible for us

The Cain and Abel narrative paints a picture of two different approaches to sacrifice, based on two different ideas about the divine. Cain represents the pagan perspective on the divine and thus a pagan approach to sacrifice. Abel represents the Hebrew perspective on God and thus the meaning of sacrifice from a Hebrew point of view. How do these two views differ?

Why is it that, after the Fall, we are not fully able to offer sacrifice to God in the way that we ought? Why is it that even had there not been a Fall, the sacrifice of one person could not suffice for everyone, until Christ?

What does it mean to say that Christ is our "vicarious" sacrifice? How is this view different from mere substitution?

How does the idea of Christ as the "New Adam" provide the framework for understanding this notion of vicarious sacrifice?
What Christ brings: Our brother makes sacrifice possible for us


Notes:
What Christ brings: Our brother is our judge

Why did the idea of a post-mortem judgment by God originally begin to impress itself upon Hebrew consciousness? What basic problem of human life gives rise for this need in light of the idea of God as a God of Justice?

What are some of the images of judgment that we find in the Bible? Do they give us occasion to take seriously the possibility that things can turn out badly for us, and that how we live our lives now matters to God?
What Christ brings: Our brother is our judge

In the early Church, Christians looked with enthusiasm upon the expected coming Judgment. How does this fact tell us how they understood the Judgment in light of what they professed about Jesus Christ? Was the Judgment itself good news? If so, why? Why did the early Christians, though deeply aware of their own unworthiness, nonetheless live in a "sure hope" of their salvation?

How might we understand the relationship between the Particular Judgment faced by the particular person at the end of the present life and the General Judgment at the culmination of all things? How might we attempt to understand the mystery at work here, why there are two events?
What Christ brings: Our brother is our judge


Notes:
The Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church

The Western Theological tradition has a difficult time discussing the Holy Spirit in ways that do not reduce to a Modalist representation—that is, to identification of the Holy Spirit as a particular mode of operation on the part of God. This fact is do to our experience of the Holy Spirit in and through the operation of grace in our lives, through the sacraments and in prayer, where what we know first of all is something that God does. But the Nicaeano-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 contains certain important affirmations that situate the Holy Spirit beyond merely Modalist categories. What are those statements? How have we attempted to translate the Greek in our lecture to bring out the full meaning of the Creed's wording?

What does it mean to say that the Holy Spirit is the "Giver of Life," especially where "life" is the Greek zoë (ζωή)? Do you remember what this term means in Judeo-Christian usage? How does this idea then shape our whole understanding of sacramental grace?

What does it mean to suggest, as Augustine does, that the Holy Spirit can be understood as "the soul of the Church"?
The Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church


Notes:

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Forgiveness of Sins, Resurrection of the Body, and the Life of the world to come

Given the connection between sin and alienation, sin and death, and death and alienation, explain how resurrection of the body is intrinsically connected to the idea of forgiveness of sins? How does it already represent some participation in forgiveness? How might we understand it as a kind of mercy, even for those who chose to be lost?

What are some of the qualities of physical existence in this world that appear to bespeak the domination death exercises over life in the fallen world? How might we imagine that those qualities of material existence might be transcended in the state of glory, such that only the qualities of physical being we associate with harmony and communion are retained?
Forgiveness of Sins, Resurrection of the Body, and the Life of the world to come

How might we understand the idea of resurrection of the body in the case of those who choose to be lost? The Bible employs many images here. How have we attempted to approach this mystery it in the present lecture?

In the early Church, creedal statements more often than not affirmed a belief in the "resurrection of the flesh" rather than "resurrection of the body," which became the form expressed in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicaeano-Constantinopolitan Creed. What do these two distinct articulations of the mystery or resurrection mean, respectively, and why was the option for "resurrection of the body" made at the time that it was made? What is potentially lost if we do not retain both forms of the articulation of this mystery in the universal Tradition of the Church?
Forgiveness of Sins, Resurrection of the Body, and the Life of the world to come


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