**Reading Theological Texts**

Missional Theology Pre-Load Assignment

UDTS | IN 520-60

Dr. Duba

*“Reading is never just about the collection of data; it is always about the cultivation of a deep wisdom rooted in the Spirit’s gracious shaping of our lives.”* – Eric D. Barretto, from *Reading Theologically*

Reading theology is different than reading a novel, a spiritual essay, or a typical textbook. This is because theological texts are not primarily stories, inspiration, or information (though they often include all three), but *arguments*. For this reason, one must read a theological work attentively, tracking the author’s purpose, claims, sources, diction (language choice), and the rhetorical “moves” that carry us from premise to conclusion.

Skimming does not work well when reading theology. This is because unlike textbooks, theological writing will not bold important terms or put definitions into boxes in the page margins. You—the reader—have to discern what is important and why. Passive reading (“tuning out,” reading with the TV on, etc.) also does not work well. To read a theological text well, we must “think alongside” the author, as though we were companions on a journey of thought, rather than passively receive and consume their words.

Here’s the good news: reading theological texts involves learnable skills. It is not necessarily difficult, just different, and there are tactics that can help. Reading theological texts also involves postures you can cultivate, including postures of curiosity, charity, and discernment. These postures arise from an expectation that the wisdom of God gives itself to us in many ways, including through the words of authors we may never meet.

This assignment uses Randy Woodley’s *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (2012) to introduce and practice the skill of reading theological texts with attention and discernment.

**Directions:**

* **Complete Steps 1 and 2 of the assignment before reading the book.** Step 1 will be graded for completion. Step 2 will be ungraded.
* **Complete Step 3 of the assignment as you are reading.** Step 3 will be graded for completion and evidence of thoughtful engagement.
* **Submission.** Type your responses directly into this document, save, and upload it to Moodle for grading.

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Complete Steps 1 and 2 **before you begin reading**. Use the right-hand column to answer questions. Some questions require complete and precise answers (i.e. “What is the full title of the book”), while others lend themselves to notes, phrases, impressions, and lists. Use the space *to serve your learning* by answering in a way that helps you to actively engage the text.

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| **Step 1: Previewing the Text** | |
| **What is the full title of the book?** What expectations does this title create regarding the primary themes or argument of the book? |  |
| **Who wrote this book?** What can you learn about the author from the blurb on the back cover, dedication, and a quick Google search? |  |
| **Who published this book and when?** Reprinted or new? How does this information shape your expectations for the book? |  |
| **Skim the Table of Contents.** Based on this information, what appear to be the primary themes of the book? Can you discern a structure or flow? (In other words, why are the chapters in this particular order?) |  |
| **Scan the Bibliography.** What kinds of sources does this author rely on? Who is this author in conversation with? Do any discernable themes run through the bibliography? Any surprises or anomalies? |  |
| **Any other information** you can glean by previewing the book? Other initial insights? |  |

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| **Step 2: Setting your Intentions** | |
| Holding the book in your hands or on your lap, pause to pray…   * for a spirit of **curiosity**…to be open to learning and growing through an encounter with new ideas; * for a spirit of **charity**…to be a generous reader, eager to hear and to consider the author’s offering; * for a spirit of **discernment**…to weigh ideas well, gleaning what is good; * for what else do you pray? | (You are not required to write your prayer, though if jotting down your intentions is helpful, please do.) |
| We are reading this book as part of a course called “God’s Redemptive Mission.” Make an intention to **listen for any references to “mission,”** “missiology,” or “theology of mission” in the book. Mark those places in the margins. In what ways is this book a “missional theology”? We’ll come back to this at the end. | (nothing required here, though you may use this space to note page numbers of relevant passages if you wish) |

As you begin Step 3, have a pencil or pen in hand. A highlighter is fine, but not sufficient. Use the pencil to take notes in the margins, underline key passages, circle important terminology, define unfamiliar words, jot down questions, and note “moves” in the authors argument, etc.

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| **Step 3: Reading the Text** | |
| Read the **Author’s Preface** and the **Introduction**  Underline and copy here the exact statement(s) in which the author states the central claim/argument/idea around toward which the whole book will build.  Mark any clues about the “why” of this book. Why does this particular argument or topic *matter* to the author? What’s *at stake* for the author in making this claim? What critical conversation is the author entering by writing this? What was the “gap” in existing research that the author is addressing? |  |
| **Read the conclusion or last chapter.**  What goals set in the Preface/Introduction does the author return to, wrap up, summarize, or double-down on?  What seems to be the main argument the author is driving home? How does it connect to the “why” of the book?  As you read the Conclusion, what questions are raised for you that should orient your listening as you work through the chapters? (ie. What does the author mean by….? How does X have to do with Y? etc.)  Other take-aways from the Conclusion? |  |
| **Read Chapter 1**.   * Scan through the **subheadings** of the chapter and **read the first sentence or two** following it (topic sentence of section). This will give you a sense of the structure of the chapter. * Read the whole chapter. * Underline and copy here the exact statement(s) in which the author states what he or she intends to do/discuss/argue in this chapter. * Describe the purpose of the chapter in your own words. * Make some notes about the author’s primary arguments or claims in this chapter. What sources/authorities does the author draw on to support the argument? * What key insights are you taking from this chapter? |  |
| **Read Chapter 2.**   * Scan through the **subheadings** of the chapter and **read the first sentence or two** following it (topic sentence of section). This will give you a sense of the structure of the chapter. * Read the whole chapter. * What are the main claims of this chapter? How does the author support these claims? How do they build on the premise established in Chapter 1? * What key insights or questions are you taking away? |  |
| **Read Chapter 3.**   * Scan through the **subheadings** of the chapter and **read the first sentence or two** following it (topic sentence of section). This will give you a sense of the structure of the chapter. * Read the whole chapter. * What are the main claims of this chapter? How does the author support these claims? How do they build on the premise established in Chapters 1 & 2? * What key insights or questions are you taking away? |  |
| **Read Chapters 4 - 5.**   * Scan subheadings and topic sentences. * What are the main claims of these chapters? How do they connect to or build on Chapters 1-3? * In what way do these chapters mark a shift in the argument of the book? What is at stake here? What are you taking away? How are you being challenged? |  |
| **Read Chapters 6 - 8.**   * Scan subheadings and topic sentences. * What are the main claims of these chapters? How do these chapters connect to or build on Chapters 1-3 and 4-5? * What insights or questions are you taking away? How are you being challenged? * How are the intentions and promises made at the beginning of the book coming to fruition at the end? |  |
| **Thinking Theologically.**  In what ways does this book do the “interpreting,” “correlating,” and/or “assessing” work of theology? (See Stone and Duke, Chapter 2).  What resources does Woodley put into conversation in this text? (See Stone and Duke, Chapter 3).  In what ways is this book a work of “missional theology”? What is the mission, exactly, and who are the agents of it? Who are the receivers of it? In what ways does this challenge or support your own previously held ideas about “missional theology?  Jot down any final questions, insights, curiosities, or confusions that you’d like to remember for our conversation while the book is fresh in your mind. |  |