

University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
HT567 Christianity & the Common Good
3 credits | Letter or Pass/Fail | Distance | Fall 2022



Instructor: Rev Dr. Christopher James
Email: cjames@dbq.edu

Course Description

Recent political events and national issues have brought perennial questions about the role of church in society back to the forefront of Christian reflection and debate. Drawing insights from biblical and historical approaches, this class will focus on the late modern American context with particular interest in the fraying and reweaving of the social fabric. In a time when the West is increasingly ‘post-Christian’ and in which political tensions are high, students will learn from ecumenical voices in contemporary political theology. Exploring questions at the intersections of ecclesiology (what is church?), eschatology (where is God leading history?), and missiology (how is the church to join in God’s mission?), this class will approach the contemporary moment enriched by grounded theological reflection and with a clear interest in gaining practical insights for leading among God’s people in a post-Christian, pluralist democratic republic.

Course Learning Outcomes

As a result of taking this course, engaged students will be able to:

- Distinguish multiple ecumenical approaches to Christian political theology
- Perceive features of the late modern American context relevant to Christian witness
- Demonstrate energy to engage in Christian mission for the common good
- Facilitate group reflection on Christian engagement in the public sphere

Program Learning Outcomes

MDiv

- Lead and nurture congregations to promote peace and justice in the public arena and encourage the witness and service of the church in mission to the world
- Engage contemporary theological and ethical issues with insight and humility
- Evangelize the world with faithfulness and contextual sensitivity

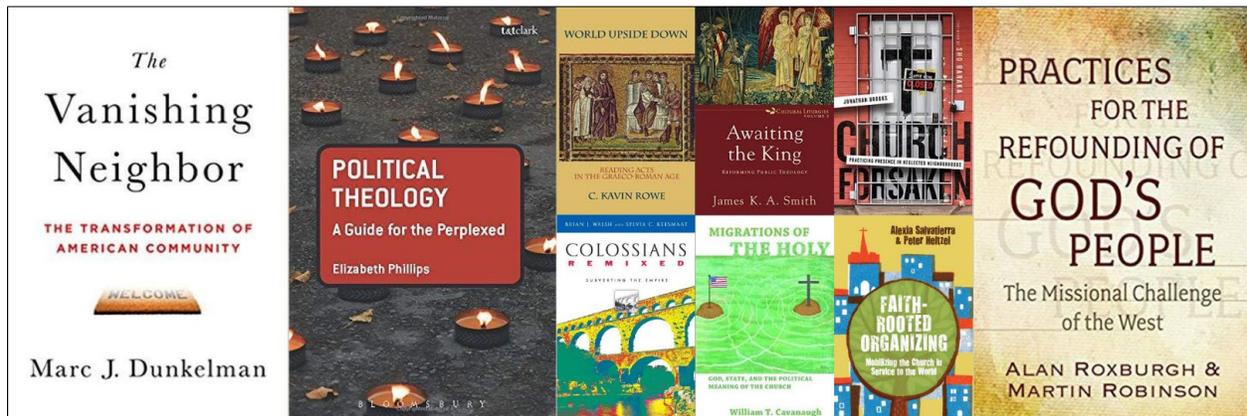
MAMD

- Articulate and reflect critically and constructively on the biblical and theological foundations of God's mission to the world
- Develop, implement, and assess strategies for missional living in a specific cultural context
- Develop skills and capacities for faithful and competent Christian witness

MACL

- Identify and interpret key themes from the Christian scriptures
- Articulate key theological affirmations of the church's theological tradition
- Develop a missional strategy with attention to a particular cultural context

Required Texts (7)



1. *The Vanishing Neighbor*, Marc Dunkelman (2014)
2. *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Elizabeth Phillips (2012)
3. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr. (1963, PDF available on Moodle)
4. *Practices for the Refounding of God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West*, Alan Roxburgh & Martin Robinson (2018)

In addition, you will sign up (first-come, first served) for one three-book bundle below (either A or B). These two bundles keep the page counts roughly equivalent. You can also opt to swap a book for the other one that is also in the same spot (5, 6 or 7), but only *if* the one you want to read is marked with a +, indicating a greater page count. For example, you could read *Colossians Remixed* instead of *World Upside Down* along with the other two in bundle A.

Bundle A

5. *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age*, C. Kavin Rowe (2009)
6. *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, James K.A. Smith+ (2017)
7. *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, Jonathan Brooks+ (2018)

Bundle B

5. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, Brian Walsh & Sylvia Keesmaat+ (2004)
6. *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, William Cavanaugh (2011)
7. *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*, Alexia Salvatierra & Peter Heltzel (2013)

Course Requirements & Weighting

- | | |
|--|------|
| 1. Conscientious preparation and engaged participation:
<i>Evaluated based on your engagement with posted lectures and materials as well as consistent and substantive participation.</i> | 20% |
| 2. Chapter Summary, Quotes & Response – CSQRs (2) | 20% |
| 3. Quotation & Comment or Question Sheets – QCQs (3) | 20% |
| 4. Live Questions Artifact Presentation & Self-eval | 10% |
| 5. Letter to the Editor | 10% |
| 6. Common Good Initiative Proposal | 20% |
| 7. <i>Extra Credit</i> Case Study (optional) | 1-5% |

Assignment Descriptions

Forum Conversations

On a nearly weekly basis you will be prompted to contribute to forum conversations. Specific instructions for length and type of post will be found in the forum description.

Chapter Summary, Quotes & Response (CSQR)

This assignment asks you to engage with, summarize and respond to your book in such a way that your classmates who have not read the book may read your paper and grasp the overall argument and key ideas.

In a short introductory paragraph (2-3 sentences), you will summarize the thesis and approach of the book.

For each chapter, you will create a left-aligned heading with the number and chapter title. Then, below the chapter heading, you will include 2-3 brief selected quotations from the chapter (1-2 sentences each) that capture key ideas from the chapter and/or that contribute to the overall argument of the book.

These quotations will be centered and italicized with page reference like this (54).

Below these quotations, you will summarize the main idea(s) of the chapter in your own words in 50-100 words. Finally, you will offer your own response to the chapter in 75-150 words. Your response should be more substantive than simple agreement or affirmation. It may include suggesting implications, exploring an idea further, connecting ideas to a contemporary situation or life experience, or posing critical questions that challenge the author's claims. If—as in several of Phillip's chapters—there are two or more opposing viewpoints presented, your response should include stating which position you find most compelling *and why*.

In a concluding 200 words, tell your classmates what value you think the book has for students in this class and leaders in the church. Instead of saying “It’s a great book!” answer questions like: How does the author’s unique perspective and approach add to what we’re learning? What new insights does it contribute? How might this book help Christians seek the common good? What does it compel you to do?

You will complete this assignment twice this semester. The first will be for *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. The second will be for one of the three books in your bundle, which

you will sign up for (see Moodle). Your paper, in part or in full, may be featured for class interaction.

Quote & Comment or Question Sheets (QCQ)

A QCQ is a one-page, single-space document that includes three quotations from the book of not more than 60 words each, from three different sections/chapters of the book.

Quotations will be italicized, centered, and include page numbers like this (34).

You will select quotations that feature ideas important to the author which highlight their unique contribution to our reflection on Christianity and the common good in this contemporary U.S. moment. Below each quotation you will *either* respond with a substantive *comment* or craft a related *question* you could use to generate fruitful discussion among Christians in your church or in this class. Avoid vague, complex, yes/no, and rhetorical questions. In comments, don't summarize; express what you think about the ideas in the quotation and their relevance. To be clear, simply agreeing with or praising the author's insight is not a substantive comment. Strive to advance the conversation by making connections to other readings, course ideas, contemporary events, theological themes, biblical episodes, local realities or personal experiences. You're practicing making connections between a book and its ideas with your own experience, community and local context (a skill needed for facilitating group reflection on Christian engagement in the public sphere). Your three responses in each QCQ will either be two comments and one question or two questions and one comment—not three of either. Your QCQ, in part or in full, may be featured for engagement.

You will submit a QCQ three times this semester: for *The Vanishing Neighbor*, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People*, and *one* of the books in your chosen bundle (your choice).

'Live Questions' Artifact Presentation

At least once this semester, you will attend a live, synchronous one-hour Zoom session with the instructor and other classmates to discuss how the perennial questions at the center of our course are relevant or "*live*" questions in our historical, political, and ecclesial American moment. You will bring to this session one contemporary artifact that demonstrates the live-ness of our questions in your community. This artifact could take many different forms but, for example, might be a news article about how religion is playing a role in our electoral or legislative politics, a popular meme that purports to settle the dispute on the relation of the gospel and social justice, or a thread on Twitter making the case against churches remaining tax-exempt. The artifact can be something created by either Christians or non-Christians. You will prepare to present your artifact (5 min) and facilitate a discussion about it (10 min) that is informed by our readings (not just opinions). For the discussion, you will prepare two questions. The first will be a question inviting responses to and analysis of the artifact itself. The second question will directly draw on ideas and themes in the course to help us think more deeply about how Christians can faithfully engage with the dynamic that the artifact signifies.

This assignment is an opportunity to develop skill at facilitating generative conversations about Christian engagement in the wider society, so, consider how you want to invite your classmates to engage; be deliberate about the questions you craft and clear about how you want them to respond (aloud, in chat, etc.). You will be responsible for watching the clock, inviting classmate participation and guiding the conversation. The instructor will not take a lead role but may

participate in the discussion and/or make comments between presentations. Synchronous sessions on Zoom will be scheduled every other week at different times. You are encouraged to attend all synchronous sessions since dialog is a learning-rich environment, but you are only required to attend in full the one during which you are presenting. See Moodle to sign up for one of four presentation date/time slots.

After your presentation, you will submit a short self-evaluation, of no more than 1 page. In your self-evaluation indicate: 1) what you think you did well, 2) what you would have done differently if you had the chance, and 3) what you learned from observing the ways your classmates facilitated their presentation and discussion. Your grade for this assignment will depend on both the presentation + facilitated conversation (60%) and the evidence of learning in the self-evaluation (40%).

Letter to the Editor

Read a half-dozen letters to the editor in your *most local* paper. In response to some issue related to the common good in your local community, write a 150-200 word letter to the editor for publication. Make clear how the issue concerns the common good. In developing your position, make only one point and draw on your own Christian identity and reflection. My recommendation is to address a local concern that is not (yet) thoroughly polarized. Approach writing as if you are bearing witness and inviting a conversation (As a follower of Jesus, I...) rather than pronouncing judgment and foreclosing on discussion (“all real Christians must...”). You are encouraged—but not required—to submit the letter for publication. Either way, do note in the header the name of the most local paper you read from and could submit it to. Bear in mind that if you submit your letter, it will be read by members of your congregation and the wider community. I am not inviting you to provoke controversy or to “get political” (and certainly not to be partisan) but rather to practice Christian witness by applying a Christian theology of the common good to a relevant local concern.

Common Good Initiative Proposal

This assignment is your opportunity to show what you’ve learned in the course by applying it to your own local context. Drawing widely on our readings, lectures and discussions, develop a *clear, concise* (800 word), and *actionable* proposal for an initiative that you, your family, your small group, your neighborhood and/or your church could enact. Your proposal should contribute to deepening understanding of and commitment to the church’s call to seek the common good and/or toward the reweaving of the social fabric, reinvigoration of democracy, or development of ‘civil economy’ in your local community.

Your proposal should begin with a clear rationale for the proposed initiative (why is it needed?) that is grounded in a description of one particular challenge to the common good (what’s the problem—and how is it a threat to the common good?) This first section should draw on two or more books or lectures from the course that describe the plight we find ourselves in. Then, in a second section, your proposal will offer a theological response to that challenge to the common good (What do God, the Bible, the gospel, and/or the Christian tradition have to say about the nature of that particular challenge, about God’s engagement with it and about the proper response of God’s people?). This section should draw on two or more books or lectures including the scripturally-focused book you read. In the final section, you will propose meaningful concrete actions that could be undertaken to partner with God in seeking shalom and welcoming the inbreaking of God’s reign. This section should draw on two or more books or lectures that

propose postures and practices for the church. Your proposals ought to envision a network of relationships engaged in a series of practices and events over a six-month period rather than one big event. Be sure to make clear how your proposal reflects the primacy of God's agency and is distinctively Christian and not simply the kind of thing any benevolent organization might do in the particular way you propose. Your proposal may include graphic or video elements.

Extra Credit Case Study

With a partner, research, record and upload to Mediasite or YouTube a 10-min presentation on one of the following initiatives for your classmates to view. Make connections to our readings and lectures. Offer your assessment of how this initiative seeks to contribute to the common good and reflects a vision of Christian engagement in the public sphere. Depending on the breadth of your research and quality of your presentation, you and your partner will earn 1-5% extra credit on your final course grade. Include in your presentation evidence of whatever research you conducted – any interviews you did, books or articles you read, videos watched, etc. See Moodle to sign up. Websites below are offered as a starting place not as sufficient for completing this assignment.

1. Faith in Public Life – *faithinpubliclife.org*
2. Vote Common Good - *votecommongood.com*
3. The New Poor People's Campaign - *poorpeoplescampaign.org*
4. Together for the Common Good - *togetherforthecommongood.co.uk*
5. Neighboring Movement – *neighboringmovement.org*
6. Sojourners – *sojo.net*
7. The Catholic Worker Movement - *catholicworker.org*
8. Christians for Social Action - *christiansforsocialaction.org*
9. Q - *qideas.org*
10. & Campaign - *andcampaign.org*
11. ForCharlotte - *forcharlotte.org*
12. Center for Public Justice - *cpjustice.org*
13. Christians and the Vaccine - *christiansandthevaccine.com*
14. Embedded Church Podcast - *embeddedchurch.com*

Course Notes and Policies

1. Note: You will submit written assignments for two of the three books in your bundle (one will be a QCQ, and one will be a CSQR) but you are expected to read all three. Which assignments you will complete for which books will be based on a first-come, first-served sign up. If you choose to turn in four QCQs, your lowest QCQ score will be dropped.
2. Civil Discourse: No two topics are more charged than religion and politics and in this class we will be discussing both—and their points of intersection. Learning how to speak simultaneously with conviction, civility, and curiosity on these topics has never been more important. You are admonished to strive for this ideal in our discussions.
3. Due Dates: All assignments are due at 11:00pm on the due date listed. If there is ever an inconsistency between Moodle and the syllabus on a due date, the syllabus is correct.
4. Late work: The assignment schedule exists to help you (and us) keep moving at a good pace through the material and to be able to build on ideas as we do so. The deadlines help give me time to grade and offer feedback to promote that learning journey. But there is nothing sacred about the deadlines. So, if you ask me for an extension, because you're

dealing with something – like a global pandemic – I’ll be inclined to give you one. However, I don’t offer extensions retroactively so communicate before the deadline. Also, work submitted late without an extension will be graded, but feedback will not be provided.

5. Moodle: Engaging with less than two-thirds of posted materials and forums is an automatic “F” for the course, per seminary policy.
6. Academic Integrity Statement: There is no good reason to plagiarize in this class. Be sure you know what plagiarism is. Do not plagiarize. Spotting plagiarism is my superpower. No, seriously. It’s not worth it. Also, your papers will be run through Turn-it-in.
7. Students with Disabilities (ADA statement): If you believe you have a disability that may affect your performance in this course, you should consult with me about accommodations as well as with the campus ADA compliance office, in confidence, ASAP. UD’s ADA compliance office is in the Academic Support Center (563.589.3262 x3570).

This course description is subject to change.