

# Theological Thinking for Everyday Life and Ministry

Wesley J. Wildman — Boston University — Spring, 2009 — STH TT852

## *General Matters*

Background: Students must have taken STH TT810 (Theology II) or its equivalent, or have obtained the instructor's permission. This is a Theology III core elective for MDiv students, an elective for MTS students, and a course in the STH Pastor-Scholar Program.

Course Description: "Theological Thinking for Everyday Life and Ministry" is an opportunity for students to connect powerful contemporary understandings of the world to the practical contexts in which they already or will soon work. It adopts the "start where you are" approach to developing theological skills. The newspaper, the Bible, life experiences, science, literature, family life, pastoral situations, events at work, educational research projects—anything can be the starting point for serious theological reflection. However, this approach to theology is more difficult than it might seem at first because to start at all is to open a can of worms. All of the big themes in theological reflection through the ages come wriggling out demanding attention. Managing the resulting chaos can be confusing, but it is also second to none as a way to learn to think theologically on your feet.

For theological thinking to avoid superficiality, it is important to have both a solid understanding of the situations that get us thinking and a serious grasp of theological debates and ideas. An ability to think with precision and creativity is also vital. These skills and bodies of knowledge can lead to deep insights and also help us to avoid pitfalls and dead ends as we do our own theological thinking.

This course aims to teach theological thinking by doing a lot of it. In particular, the class is designed to place the specific experiences of participants in conversation with each other, with the wisdom of the authors of our readings, and with the classical theological tradition. The result should be a thought-provoking, exploratory process that helps us become more effective theological thinkers.

Readings: We will read the following books, available from the BU Bookstore:

- ▶ Rena Gelissen, *Rena's Promise* (Beacon; 978-0-8-0707071-0)
- ▶ Melissa Fay Greene, *Praying for Sheetrock* (Random; 978-0-4-4990753-5)
- ▶ Jeanette Haien, *The All Of It* (Harper; 978-0-0-6097147-2)
- ▶ Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (Random, Hilda Rosner translator; 978-0-5-5320884-9)
- ▶ Lesley Thomas, *Flight of the Goose* (Far Eastern Press; 978-0-9-6788421-9)
- ▶ Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom* (Beacon, 978-0-8-0701057-0)

We will also read the following, provided by the instructor:

- ▶ Tim LaHaye et al., *Left Behind Graphic Novel* (Tyndale House; 0842355022)
- ▶ Wesley J. Wildman and S. Chapin Garner, *Found in the Middle!* (in manuscript; forthcoming with Alban Institute, 2009)

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Classes: Classes will meet Thursdays 9:30-12:30 in STH 319, 745 Commonwealth Avenue. Classes involve discussion, lectures, presentations, and “brainstorming sessions.” Sometimes we will lunch together at noon, or watch movies into the lunch hour.

Instructions for Presentations: When a student is assigned to lead the class discussion, a single page summary of the assigned material should be distributed in class as a basis for discussion. This summary should aim to (i) state the main theses of the reading, briefly outlining supporting arguments; (ii) assess the significance of the reading; and (iii) pose a couple of questions with which to begin the discussion.

Project: Each student is required to develop and complete a theological reflection project. Each project is to be an extended act of theological thinking. We will talk more about what this might involve in class, but imaginative proposals and group projects are encouraged. The projects are to be approved in advance, will be discussed several times during the course, should be suitable for posting on the course web site, and are to be handed in at the last class meeting. To see past examples visit the archive on the WeirdWildWeb’s site for this class. The project is due at the beginning of the final class meeting.

Evaluation: Grades are based on the project (50%), presentations (15%), and participation, including attendance (35%). No incompletes will be allowed, except in case of dire emergency; STH requires paperwork. Make yourself completely aware of rules surrounding plagiarism and academic honesty, and follow those rules with care.

Contact Information: Prof. Wildman’s email is [wwildman@bu.edu](mailto:wwildman@bu.edu). His office hours are Wed 12:30-1:30, and by appointment. The WeirdWildWeb is located at <http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb>.

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## *Class Schedule*

- R 1/15/09   ☒ Stepping Back, Looking Around I: The meaning and methods of theological thinking  
☒ Brainstorming I: theological thinking about current events
- R 1/22/09   ☒ **Reading I: Theological thinking about the Bible** (LaHaye)  
☒ Brainstorming II: theological thinking about the Bible and religious authority
- R 1/29/09   ☒ Film I: *Dopamine*  
☒ Brainstorming III: Preliminary discussion of *Dopamine*
- R 2/5/09    ☒ Film I: Discussion of *Dopamine*  
☒ Brainstorming IV: theological thinking about religious experience
- R 2/12/09   ☒ **Reading II: Theological thinking liberal-evangelical theology** (Wildman & Garner)  
☒ Brainstorming V: theological thinking about *Liberal and Evangelical*
- R 2/19/09   ☒ **Reading III: Theological thinking about nature** (Thomas)  
☒ Brainstorming VI: theological thinking about encountering nature
- R 2/26/09   ☒ **Reading IV: Theological thinking about spirituality** (Hesse)  
☒ Brainstorming VII: theological thinking about *Siddhartha*
- R 3/5/09    ☒ Project Discussion I: Introduction to student projects  
☒ Stepping Back, Looking Around II: The meaning and methods of theological thinking
- R 3/12/09   ☒ No Class: Spring Recess
- R 3/19/09   ☒ **Reading V: Theological thinking about evil** (Gelissen & Macadam)  
☒ Brainstorming VIII: theological thinking about social horrors
- R 3/26/09   ☒ **Reading VI: Theological thinking about society** (Greene)  
☒ Brainstorming IX: theological thinking about racism and institutional evil
- R 4/2/09    ☒ **Reading VII: Theological thinking about moral-spiritual integration** (Thurman)  
☒ Brainstorming X: theological thinking about spirituality
- R 4/9/09    ☒ Project Discussion II: Update on student projects  
☒ Film II: *Girl in the Café* (extends into lunch; bring food)
- R 4/16/09   ☒ Film II: Discussion of *Girl in the Café*  
☒ Brainstorming XI: theological thinking about global poverty
- R 4/23/09   ☒ No Class: Monday Schedule
- R 4/30/09   ☒ **Reading VII: Theological thinking about ministry** (Haien)  
☒ Brainstorming XII: theological thinking about *The All Of It*  
☒ Stepping Back, Looking Around III: The meaning and methods of theological thinking

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## *Detailed Schedule*

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Thursday 1/15/09

**Stepping Back, Looking Around I: Introduction to course: the meaning of theological thinking**

Introduction to course; discussion of requirements and student interests; description of course activities, including “brainstorming” and projects. Discussion of the course’s two main claims: (1) theological thinking is a skill that can be cultivated; and (2) anything can be the object of meaning theological reflection because divine reality is related to everything that is.

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**Brainstorming I: theological thinking about current events**

Brainstorming in relation to the day’s newspapers.

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Thursday 1/22/09

**Reading I: Theological thinking and the Bible**

Read the graphic novel version of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ *Left Behind* (vol. I). Today’s class bounces off this famous book series to examine the diverse ways people use the Bible in their theological reflection. We broach the questions: is there a right way to use the Bible? a wrong way? a best way? standards for better and worse ways? The web is thick with examples of both bizarre and poised biblical interpretation; Poke around and see what you can find to bring to class. Look for something you think is excellent and something that is unacceptable. Try to identify the standards informing your reactions.

For a useful online survey, see the one at [ReligiousTolerance](#). For a comprehensive survey from a solidly evangelical perspective, have a look at William W. Klein, et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Word, 2004; 0785252258). For similar resources from a more moderate and philosophical perspective, check out W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hendrickson, 1997; 1565632524); or Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scriptures, and Hermeneutics* (Intervarsity, 2002; 0830826815).

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**Brainstorming II: theological thinking about the Bible and religious authority**

Ask yourself why many Christians stress the authority of the Bible, many Muslims stress the authority of the Qur’an, many Jews stress the authority of the Torah, many Hindus stress the authority of the Vedas, many Chinese stress the authority of the Chinese Classics, and so on. What, socially speaking, is going on here?

For relevant background, consult Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. For background information on Peter Berger as well as useful information about and study guides for *Sacred Canopy*, see the [Peter L. Berger Room](#).

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Thursday 1/29/09

## **Film I: *Dopamine***

Bring your lunch to eat toward the end of the movie, which will extend into the lunch hour. Find out about Dopamine before you watch it. Visit the [site](#), which contains links to a bunch of [reviews](#). See if you can locate other reviews not filtered by the film's promoters.

Prepare to watch this film by pondering how you watch films, and how you might watch films differently, or in such a way as to intensify your appreciation both of the technical artistry of the filmmakers and of the film's construction of narrative, mood, and message.

Get a handle on the science at Wikipedia's articles on [Neurotransmitters](#), [Dopamine](#), and [Interpersonal Chemistry](#). Does having a neurological understanding of love have to lead to despair and cynicism? Why or why not?

## **Brainstorming III: Preliminary discussion of *Dopamine***

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Thursday 2/5/09

## **Film I: Discussion of *Dopamine***

### **Brainstorming IV: Theological thinking about religious experience**

The *Dopamine* movie casts religious experience into a fascinating light... If the brain mediates all of our experiences, it is not just love (the theme of *Dopamine*) but also our religious feelings and thoughts that have thoroughly embodied, neural expression. What is the theological significance of this?

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Thursday 2/12/09

### **Reading II: Theological thinking liberal-evangelical theology** (Wildman & Garner)

Read Wildman & Garner, *Found in the Middle! Theology and Ethics for moderate Christians with both liberal and evangelical instincts*.

### **Brainstorming V: theological thinking about *Found in the Middle!***

Is there a distinctive liberal-evangelical view of theology, Christology, ecclesiology, ethics, and gospel message? How to you think through your own faith in relation to the polarized extremes of US politics and religion?

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Thursday 2/19/09

### **Reading III: Theological thinking about nature** (Thomas)

Read Lesley Thomas, *Flight of the Goose*. (It is a longish novel so you may have to start reading it earlier than just the week before class.) Check out Thomas's [website](#) and find out about the book and its background before coming to class.

### **Brainstorming VI: theological thinking about encountering nature**

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Flight of the Goose offers numerous avenues for theological reflection. One concerns the human encounter with nature. What are your experiences of encountering nature? Ask yourself: Can nature really aid theological thinking? Do we tend to idealize or trivialize or objectify nature? If so what is the price of those ways of thinking? If nature turns out to be often hostile to human life, what does that tell us about God's creative power? If nature is sometimes gloriously majestic, what does that tell us about the divine character? Come with your own stories about adventures in nature to share with the class. These hopefully hilarious and moving stories will be the basis for our theological reflection today.

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Thursday 2/26/09

## Reading IV: Theological thinking and spirituality

Read Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*. Before class, visit the extensive [UCSB Hermann Hesse](#) page, paying special attention to the [Hesse Biography](#), the [Siddhartha Glossary](#), and the [Siddhartha Resources](#). Also see [Hesse's Nobel Prize](#) page, including his autobiography and acceptance speech.

From the Encarta Online Encyclopedia:

**Hesse, Hermann** (1877-1962), German-born Swiss novelist and poet, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946. Hesse was born in Calw, Germany.

Enrolled in a seminary, he soon left school and later expressed his rebellion against formal education in his novel *Beneath the Wheel* (1906). As a young man he worked as a freelance journalist, which inspired his first novel, *Peter Camenzind* (1904).

During World War I (1914-1918) Hesse, a pacifist, moved to Montagnola, Switzerland, becoming a Swiss citizen in 1923. His writings focused on the spiritual search for new goals and values to replace the no longer valid, traditional ones. *Demian* (1919) was strongly influenced by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. Hesse's novels subsequently became increasingly symbolic and psychoanalytical. *Journey to the East* (1932) examines, in Jungian terms, the mythic qualities of human experience. *Siddhartha* (1922), however, reflects Hesse's interest in Eastern mysticism.

*Steppenwolf* (1927), perhaps Hesse's most innovative novel, deals with the split between rebellious individuality and bourgeois convention, as does a later work, *Death and the Lover* (1930), translated in 1968 as *Narcissus and Goldmund*. Hesse's last novel, *Magister Ludi* (1943), translated in 1969 as *The Glass Bead Game*, is set in a utopian future and is a resolution of Hesse's concerns.

## Brainstorming VII: Theological thinking about *Siddhartha*

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Thursday 3/5/09

### Project Discussion I: Introduction to student projects.

Come prepared to discuss your project idea and get feedback from the class about possible resources and refinements.

### Stepping Back, Looking Around II: The meaning and methods of theological thinking

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Thursday 3/12/09

No Class: Spring Recess

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Thursday 3/19/09

## Reading V: Theological thinking about evil

Read Rena Gelissen, *Rena's Promise*.

Before class, visit the [US Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) site and the [Buchenwald Memorial](#) site. Explore the links [here](#) and [here](#). See the website for the [New England Holocaust Memorial](#) and visit the memorial in Carmen Park, Congress Street, near Faneuil Hall (instructions are on the website). Visit the [Bangladesh Holocaust Memorial](#) site and the [Nanjing Massacre Memorial](#) site. Also look up Steve Katz's work on the history of genocides, *The Holocaust in Historical Context, vol. I: The Holocaust and Mass Death Before the Modern Age*. On Gelissen & Macadam, *Rena's Promise*, [The History Place](#) has some useful introductory material.

*Rena's Promise* as introduced at [Amazon.com](#):

Among the first 999 Jewish girls on the first transport brought into Auschwitz on March 26, 1942, was twenty-one year old Rena Kornreich who would endure the Nazi death camp for the next three and a half years. This remarkable story of Rena's survival reveals at its core not a lone heroic struggle, but the power of an unusual relationship between Rena and her younger sister, Danka, who gave her the will to go on under unimaginable circumstances.

## Brainstorming VIII: theological thinking about social horrors

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Thursday 3/26/09

## Reading VI: Theological thinking about society

Read Melissa Fay Greene, *Praying for Sheetrock*.

Civil rights has been and continues to be an enormously complex issue. To make the most of the time we have, we need to choose one angle on the subject and then try to think theologically about what we see from that angle. The aim of today is to juxtapose the civil rights movement with simple economic analysis. Before class, do some background research. On Green's *Praying for Sheetrock*, see [Amazon's reviews](#) (one is below). Explore the [educational material](#) gathered at the Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley. Then look further afield for economic information that might be relevant to understanding the civil rights movement as it continues in less prominent ways today. For instance, see the [US Census Bureau's economic statistics for African Americans](#).

*Praying for Sheetrock* as recommended by the Editor of Politics and Current Events (see the review at [Amazon.com](#)):

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Despite what it said in the *New York Times* or the *Congressional Record*, not everybody in America got the word right away about the civil rights movement. Thus it was that well into the 1970s, McIntosh County in backwoods Georgia remained a place where the black majority still had never elected one of their own to any county office, where black kids were bused away from the white school, and where the white county sheriff had his hand in every racket there was. *Praying for Sheetrock* is the saga of how, thanks to the leadership of a black shop steward turned county commissioner named Thurnell Alston, together with the aid of a cadre of idealistic Legal Services lawyers (Melissa Greene was one of their paralegals) this situation began to change. The story, written as grippingly as a novel, is charged with twists that only nonfiction can deliver; for example, Alston, for all the brave good he did, ultimately got caught in a federal sting and went to jail while the corrupt sheriff walked. This is, writes Greene, a story of "large and important things happening in a very little place."

## **Brainstorming IX: theological thinking about racism and institutional evil**

Greene's *Praying for Sheetrock* is a good way to gain some understanding of the intractability of racism and the difficulty of overcoming its pernicious effects—especially the subtlest of them.

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Thursday 4/2/09

## **Reading VII: Theological thinking about moral-spiritual integration**

Read Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*. Visit the [Howard Thurman Papers Project](#) site. How do we achieve moral-spiritual integration in life and ministry?

## **Brainstorming X: theological thinking about spirituality**

How do we join spiritual vibrancy, ethical power, and intellectual depth? Thurman is a superb example of this synthesis and his writings inspire us to emulate him. But how do we work toward this integration, practically speaking? How do we understand both it and our perpetual failure to achieve it theologically?

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Thursday 4/9/09

## **Project Discussion II: Update on student projects**

### **Film II: *The Girl in the Café***

Bring your lunch to eat toward the end of the movie, which will extend into the lunch hour. Visit the official HBO [site](#) for this disturbing but quaint film. Find out about the "One Campaign" [here](#); look for the video on that site. Check out the Millennium Development Goals [here](#) and [here](#). Find out about the [G8 Summit](#) that took place in Spring 2005, which this film was designed to influence. What is the theological significance of our desires to change the world, to relieve suffering, to overcome helplessness, and tame institutional inertia and heartlessness?

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Thursday 4/16/09

## **Film II: Discussion of *The Girl in the Café***

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## **Brainstorming XI: theological thinking about global poverty**

Consult the official site on US foreign aid [here](#), and an alternative perspective [here](#) (which includes some interesting links). Before class, check out charitable foundations that take aim at global poverty and needless childhood diseases, such as the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#).

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Thursday 4/23/09

**No Class: Monday Schedule**

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Thursday 4/30/09

## **Reading VII: Theological thinking about ministry**

Read Jeanette Haien, *The All Of It*.

Scour the web for background on the book and its author.

## **Brainstorming XII: theological thinking about *The All Of It***

### **Stepping Back, Looking Around III: The meaning and methods of theological thinking**

Now is the time to take a step back from all of the theological reflection we have been doing to ask methodological questions. Half way through the class we paused in an effort to understand what we are doing in theological reflection. At this point we can revisit the question with better understanding. Can conceptual models of theological reflection help us do the job better? Which method of theological reflection and analysis works best for you?

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