

The Search for Meaning

BCOR 310.01

BSB 219 | TR 12:00-1:20
Spring 2018

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Course Information

ACU Mission

To educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world.

Course Mission

To equip students with frameworks through which to address meaning in their lives through the exploration of God and the good life.

Catalog Description

A detailed study of systems of meaning through which human beings make sense of their lives. Students will compare Christianity with Islam and other systems of meaning. Includes analysis of creative expressions of these systems.

Prerequisites

CORE 110

CORE 210

Junior-level standing (60 hours)

Required Textbooks

Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins and Evolution of Islam*. Random House, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-385-73976-4.

James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-58743-380-1.

Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*. Rev. Ed. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1995. ISBN: 978-0-913836-58-3.

Other readings and resources will be made available via Canvas.

Course Description and Overview

How do human find and make meaning in life? What values, ideas, and stories guide that search for meaning? How do we decide which version of the “good life” we will embrace? What are some of the visions of the good life that are present in our society today? How does God fit in with all of this?

This course will take you through a series of readings illustrating how others have sought to answer these questions, culminating with the opportunity to explain your own vision of the good life and its relationship to God.

Unit 1: The Way of Eastern Orthodox Christianity

What is Christianity? What are some of the diverse expressions of Christianity? What is the “good life” according to Christianity? How does one’s faith in the Christian story shape the way they engage the world? How does Christian theology inform a believer’s approach to other religions and philosophies?

Unit 2: The Way of Islam

What is Islam? Who is Allah? Who is Muhammad? What is the Qur’an? What are some of the diverse expressions of Islam? What is the “good life” according to Islam? How does one’s faith in the Islamic narrative shape the way they engage the world? How does Islamic theology inform a believer’s approach to other religions and philosophies? How have Christians and Muslims interacted in the past, and what informs their present interactions?

Unit 3: The “American Way”

How does Christianity interact with national culture and political systems? What is the history of Christianity in America? How does a believer’s faith inform their interaction with political powers? What are the diverse approaches to national and political engagement within Christianity? Why do nations claim national religions? Is America a Christian nation, and what does it mean to describe America as such? How might a Christian’s beliefs inform his or her interactions with neighbors and enemies, local and abroad?

Unit 4: Finding Our Way(s)

How do you live your story in the world? What is your personal vision of human flourishing? How do your beliefs guide you into the good life?

Course Competencies and Measurements

Grade Scale

A	90-100%
B	80-89%
C	70-79%
D	60-69%
F	Below 60%

Competencies

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate a critical awareness of how human beings discover, create, or inhabit narratives that give meaning to their lives.
2. Analyze the intersections of Christianity and Islam from multiple perspectives (i.e., theological, historical, textual).
3. Analyze the intersections of Christianity and nationalism, politics, and society from multiple perspectives.
4. Explain the implications of living an integrated, contextualized life.

Assignments	Competency	Description	Weight
Participation & Attendance	1, 2, 3, 4	Your participation grade is a direct reflection of your attendance and participation in the course. Participation in group discussions and activities is required. Distractions, such as sleeping, playing games, checking Facebook, and texting during class, will result in a lower participation grade. For the attendance policy, see below.	15%
3-2-1 Reading Responses	1, 2, 3	Students will be required to complete an assignment for each reading throughout the semester. Please see Appendix A for the assignment description.	30%
Church Reflection Essay	1, 4	Students will write a 3-page reflection on their experiences with church. Please see Appendix B for the assignment description.	10%
Midterm Essay	1, 2	This essay will cover the material from the first half of the semester. Please see Appendix C for details.	15%
Sacred Spaces Presentation	1, 4	Students will explore sacred spaces in Abilene with their groups from class. Then they will record their observations, take pictures, and present their observations to the class. Please see Appendix D for details.	10%
Final Essay	2, 4	The take-home final is an essay that ties together all of the components of the semester. Please see Appendix E for details.	20%

Course Policies

Participation and Absences

Students are expected to attend class unless a personal acute illness, a death in the close family, or university business prevents their attendance. Students who participate in official university activities must provide the required university form in advance to qualify for an excused absence. If a student misses class due to illness, the student must submit a

doctor's note. In any case of absence, the student is responsible for contacting the professor and borrowing notes from a classmate.

Please come to class on time. Three tardies will amount to an unexcused absence.

Students are permitted three unexcused absences without penalty. After the third unexcused absence, the student's *participation* grade will drop 25 percentage points per unexcused absence. An excess of 7 absences, whether excused or unexcused, may result in the student being dropped from the course with an F.

Late Work

Ignorance of an assignment will not excuse late work, so please keep up with the schedule of assignments in the syllabus and any updates made later. For every day that an assignment is late, the maximum grade will be reduced by 5 points. Late assignments will not be accepted more than two weeks after the original due date, except in extraordinary instances and only with the express approval of the professor.

Subject to Change Clause

The professor reserves the right to alter the readings, assignments, and due dates as needed during the semester. She will make every effort to communicate these changes to students well in advance and in written form.

Academic Integrity & Plagiarism

"Violations of academic integrity and other forms of cheating involve the intention to deceive or mislead or misrepresent, and are therefore a form of lying" (ACU Academic Integrity Policy). For the full university policy, see <http://www.acu.edu/community/offices/administrative/office-of-the-provost/academic-integrity-policy.html>.

Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to):

- Intentional or unintentional failure to give credit to sources used in a work, especially (but not only) in an attempt to present the work as one's own.
- Submitting for credit in whole or in part the work of others.
- Submitting a paper previously submitted for another course (self-plagiarism) is also not permitted.

Any degree of academic dishonesty will result in an automatic zero for the assignment. A second violation will result in an F for the course. All instances will be reported to the administration following university procedure, and it will be noted in your permanent academic record.

Special Needs Policy

Abilene Christian University is dedicated to removing barriers and opening access for students with disabilities in compliance with ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The Alpha Scholars Program facilitates disability accommodations in cooperation with

instructors. In order to receive accommodations, you must be registered with the Alpha Scholars Program, and you must complete a specific request for each class in which you need accommodations. If you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, please call the Alpha Office at (325) 674-2667.

I am committed to providing reasonable accommodation to students with disabilities, so as not to discriminate on the basis of that disability. Students are responsible to inform faculty at the beginning of the semester of their need for accommodations and to provide authorized documentation through designated administrative channels.

Technology Policy

Unless the professor has given express permission to a student to use a laptop, tablet, or mobile phone in class, these items should be turned off and put away during class. There will be times during the semester when students will be allowed to use technological devices in a classroom activity, but otherwise such devices should not be in use. Any student who persistently disregards this policy may lose points on his or her participation grade, after sufficient warning.

Recording Policy

Students may only record a class with prior written permission of the professor.

Course Schedule

Date	Unit	Topic	Reading/Assignments Due
1/16		Introduction and Syllabus	
1/18	Unit 1: The Way of Eastern Orthodox Christianity	Introduction to Eastern Orthodox Christianity	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Church</i> , Introduction & ch. 10 (pp. 1-8, 195-207; PDF on Canvas) <i>See Appendix A for 3-2-1 Reading Responses</i>
1/23		God as Mystery	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Way</i> , Prologue & ch. 1 (pp. 7-25)
1/25		God as Trinity	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Way</i> , ch. 2 (pp. 27-41)
1/30		God as Creator	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Way</i> , ch. 3 (pp. 43-66)
2/1		God as Man	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Way</i> , ch. 4 (pp. 67-87)
2/6		God as Spirit	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Way</i> , ch. 5 (pp. 89-104)
2/8		Field trip: St. Luke's Orthodox Church	Arrange a carpool to St. Luke's (501 Sunset Drive). Please arrive on time.
2/13		God as Prayer	Ware, <i>The Orthodox Way</i> , ch. 6 & Epilogue (pp. 105-138)

2/15		Special Topic: The Church	Church Reflection Essay due (bring a hard copy to class; <i>see Appendix B</i>)
2/20	Unit 2: The Way of Islam	The Prophet Muhammad	Aslan, <i>No god but God</i> , preface, prologue, & chs. 1-2 (pp. xiii-xxvi, 3-49)
2/22		Muhammad, Jihad	Aslan, <i>No god but God</i> , chs. 3-4 (pp. 50-108)
2/27		Politics, Theology	Aslan, <i>No god but God</i> , chs. 5-6 (pp. 109-173)
3/1		Diversity: Sufis & Shi'a	Aslan, <i>No god but God</i> , ch. 7-8 (pp. 174-224)
3/6		Special Topic: Jesus in Islam	Reading TBA
3/8		Special Topic: Christians & Muslims	Reading: "A Common Word between Us and You" (PDF/link on Canvas) Bring a recent article on a current event in Muslim-Christian relations to class.
3/13	Spring Break!		
3/15			
3/20	Unit 2: Islam, cont.	Special Topic: Sacred Spaces in Jerusalem	Virtual tours of the Dome of the Rock & the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (links on Canvas) Midterm essay due (<i>see Appendix C</i>)
3/22	Unit 3: The "American Way"	What is an "American"?	Complete the online survey; reading TBA
3/27		Nationalism	Excerpt from Benedict Anderson, <i>Imagined Communities</i> (link to ACU library e-book on Canvas)
3/29		When did America develop a sense of nationhood?	Jasper Trautsch, "The Origins and Nature of American Nationalism" (PDF on Canvas)
4/3		American Civil Religion	Robert Bellah, "American Civil Religion" (PDF online)
4/5		Is America a "Christian Nation"?	Reading TBA
4/10		Special Topic: Race & Religion in America	Excerpts from James Cone, <i>The Cross and the Lynching Tree</i> (PDF on Canvas)
4/12		TBA	TBA
4/17	Unit 4: Finding Our Way(s)	What do you love?	James K.A. Smith, <i>You Are What You Love</i> , preface and chs. 1-2 (pp.

		xi-xii, 1-55)
4/19	Christian Worship & the Way of Christ	James K.A. Smith, <i>You Are What You Love</i> , chs. 3-4 (pp. 57-110)
4/24	Liturgy: Home & Family	James K.A. Smith, <i>You Are What You Love</i> , chs. 5-6 (pp. 111-170)
4/26	Discerning a Vocation	James K.A. Smith, <i>You Are What You Love</i> , ch. 7 & benediction (pp. 171-190)
5/1	Presentations	Sacred Spaces presentations (see Appendix D)
5/3	Presentations & Reflection/Conclusion	Sacred Spaces presentations
Finals Week		Final Essay due Thursday, May at 12:00 pm (see Appendix E)

Appendix A: 3-2-1 Purposeful Reading Responses

For each class period's assigned reading, students will write reflections of approximately 300-500 words. These reading reflections are due **before class** and will be submitted via Canvas. (NB: a tablet or an iPad may not be fully compatible with Canvas; submit your work using a laptop or desktop.)

Each student may drop up to three reading responses over the course of the semester. Students are responsible to read all of the assigned reading, even for the days that they elect not to do a reading response. Reading responses are worth 30% of your final grade, so it is important to establish a regular habit of posting your responses on time early in the semester.

3-2-1 Purposeful Reading

- **3 Concepts:** After reading the whole assignment, describe three aspects you deem most important (concepts, issues, factual information, etc.). Why is each of these important or relevant to the topic addressed?
- **2 Questions:** What two questions does the reading surface that leads you to investigate further or piques your curiosity? Prioritize these two questions and choose the most relevant one. If you had a change to pose one question directly to the author, what would you ask that brings clarity or insight into the topic addressed? Justify your best choice.
- **1 Quote:** Choose a quote (with page number) and explain why it is illustrative of the reading, or memorable/meaningful to you.

Appendix B: Church Reflection Essay

Students will write a reflection on their experiences with church thus far. The essay should address the following questions:

1. Did you grow up going to church? Would you describe your family as religious or non-religious? Did you have a positive or negative experience with church? Are you currently involved with a church?
2. What is the purpose of church?
3. At its best, what good can come from church?
4. At its worst, what bad can come from church?

The essay should be no fewer than 3 pages in length, double-spaced, with 12-pt font, and 1-inch margins.

Students may use first person pronouns in this essay, as this assignment does not require a formal tone. (See “Writing Tips” section below.)

This assignment is worth 10% of the final grade, and it is due **at the beginning of class**, in hard copy, on **Thursday, February 15th**.

Appendix C: Midterm Essay - Analysis of a Current Event in Muslim-Christian Relations

Using the article that is due in class on March 8th, students will provide an informed analysis of the current event they have selected. The student’s analysis should clearly incorporate no fewer than two specific references to class readings and in-class discussion. One goal of this assignment is to offer a balanced and well-informed analysis, while avoiding emotionally charged or wildly opinionated claims. Another goal of this assignment is for students to synthesize and apply the material of the course to a real life circumstance. Students should include the following information in their analysis:

What happened?

Where and when did it happen?

Who was involved?

Why did it happen?

How have people dealt with the event? Has there been a diversity of responses?

What information might be helpful in understanding the event?

The essay should be 2-3 pages in length, double-spaced, with 12-pt font and 1-inch margins. (See “Writing Tips” below.)

The Midterm Essay is worth 15% of the final grade and is **due by midnight on Tuesday, March 20th**. It will be submitted via Canvas.

Appendix D: Sacred Spaces Group Presentations

With their discussion groups, students will attend a worship service and make observations. This assignment will work best if they attend a worship service at a church that they do not regularly attend.

During the last week of the semester, each group will give a presentation to the class on the worship service they attended. Each presentation should include no fewer than 5 pictures of the location of the worship service, and each person in the group must contribute to the presentation. Each presentation should be approximately 10-15 minutes; points will be deducted for presentations that are too short or excessively long.

Groups will sign up for presentation times, which will occur on the last two days of class (**May 1 & 3**). Each student will also submit a confidential Peer Evaluation of their group members to ensure that every member receives the grade that they earned. The presentation is worth 10% of the final grade.

Please address the following in your presentation:

- What kind of worship service did you attend, and where was it?
- How would you describe the order of worship? What parts of the service received the most emphasis?
- How was the worship space decorated? (include notes on colors, symbols, objects, etc.)
- Is there anything missing from the space that you would usually find in other worship spaces?
- From what you observed during the worship service, how does this particular community understand the “good life” – what is the purpose of life, and how do we best flourish?

Please do not be distracting during the worship service. Be discrete as you take notes, and please do not take pictures *during* the worship service.

Appendix E: Final Essay - Finding Our Way(s)

For the final exam, students will write an essay that articulates their own understanding of how one’s faith should interact with culture. The final exam should follow this format:

1. Describe your faith and/or personal convictions. What are the beliefs and principles that guide your life and give it meaning?
2. According to your beliefs, what is the “good life”? What makes for an abundant life? What is the ultimate goal of life, according to your beliefs?
3. How does your faith (and/or personal convictions) inform your interaction with people of different beliefs and convictions?
4. How do you understand your place and role in our society, according to your faith and/or convictions?

This essay should be 5-7 pages in length, double-spaced, with 12-pt font and 1-inch margins. (See “Writing Tips” below.)

This final exam is worth 20% of the final grade, and is due by 12:00 pm on **Thursday, May 10th**. It will be submitted via Canvas.

Writing Tips

Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you write essays for this class:

- “Good prose is like a window pane.” –George Orwell
 - Make every word and phrase count.
 - Develop your thought clearly and succinctly. Clarity is better than sounding clever.
 - Avoid needlessly wordy sentences. (Substantive content is more important than meeting the required length.)
 - Focus on the subject at hand. If you aren’t the subject, avoid writing prose that points back to you.
- Proofread
 - Check your spelling, grammar, and syntax carefully before submission. (Make sure to leave enough time for this.) Even better, have a friend proofread for you.
 - Read your paper aloud to yourself. (Really!) It’s a good way to notice convoluted sentence structure, verbosity, a lack of clarity, and plain ol’ bad English.
- Use gender-inclusive language
 - Avoid using “man” (and compounds like “mankind”) as a generic term for people or humanity.
 - Likewise, “he” should not be your only go-to pronoun (unless you’re talking about a specific male person). If “he or she” feels clunky, you can alternate between the two or use the generic “one.”
- Structure your paper
 - Always give your papers a coherent structure. This usually means writing an introduction, thesis, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion.
 - Focus each paragraph on a focused topic that contributes to the ultimate aim of the paper. Order the paragraphs in a logical way.
 - Transition smoothly between paragraphs.
- Follow the assignment instructions
 - Make sure that you do everything that the assignment asks of you.
 - If there is a rubric provided for the assignment, make sure that you address all of the areas on which you will be graded.
- Always cite your sources
 - If you quote directly or rely heavily on someone else’s ideas, give them credit.
 - Give a full citation using the citation style you’re most comfortable with; just be consistent.

GST Classroom Virtues

The GST (ACU's Graduate School of Theology) invites students to participate in a process of theological and spiritual formation. Knowing how to think theologically comes by habit and by imitation, not simply by acquiring isolated facts. The assumption here is that books alone are insufficient for addressing difficulties of life and forming people into the image and likeness of God. Ultimately, we strive to form communities of inquiry, inviting you to inhabit a shared world of learning. Within such an environment, the goal is to cultivate critical skills of reflection, spiritual disciplines, interact authentically with one another, and learn to function as a community of inquiry. A large part of this involves connecting areas of life rather than pitting them against one another. Prayer, study, and other dimensions of life are all integral to the process of formation. Consequently, we invite you to participate in a set of practices; nurtured within this context, you pursue "intellectual, moral, spiritual excellence" the result of which is the formation of the whole person.

- a. **Desire for truth in the context of love**—the aptitude to discern whether belief-forming processes, practices, and people yield true beliefs over false ones. People motivated by this desire will be more likely to conduct thorough inquiries, scrutinize evidence carefully, investigate numerous fields of study, and consider alternative explanations while respecting and caring for others.
- b. **Humility**—the capacity to recognize reliable sources of informed judgment while recognizing the limits of our knowledge and the fallibility of our judgments. This is not created in isolation but takes into account feedback and correction from other sources of informed judgment.
- c. **Honesty**—the capacity to tackle difficult questions without seeking simple answers. Ignoring complex and difficult questions only solidifies vices such as intellectual dishonesty, close-mindedness, and rash judgments. These vices preclude the possibility of refining our thinking and of participating in conversations with others.
- d. **Openness**—the desire to engage in an open-ended search for knowledge of God, including receptivity to different ideas, experiences, and people. Listening becomes a discipline that acknowledges the other and respects diversity. The art of being a student and a teacher is an ongoing process that necessitates hospitality, patience, and love.
- e. **Courage**—the ability to articulate one's position while considering other perspectives. The aptitude to express convictions involves risk yet fosters opportunities for meaningful dialog. Responding to objections entails tenacity but should not be confused with close-mindedness.
- f. **Wisdom**—the capacity to offer a synthetic discernment of knowledge on behalf of the community. The aim is not merely the dissemination of information but a pastoral implementation of faith for the building up of the community. It solidifies various pieces of data, practices, and experiences and aptly applies knowledge and faith to particular situations.
- g. **Stewardship**—the commitment to one's accountability to the gifts and responsibilities that one brings to the classroom. Classroom engagement includes proactively participating in the course goals, seeking mastery of course competencies, and collaborating with faculty and fellow students in the development of a learning environment. Committing oneself to spiritual and intellectual well-being and growth is a faithful response to the opportunities graduate education affords.
- h. **Hopefulness**—the receptivity to the future possibilities of God. The cultivation of thankfulness for our heritages and expectation for our future ministries engenders a guard against cynicism and a spirit of perseverance during times of stress and disorientation.
- i. **Prayerfulness**—the making of space to commune with God. The task of learning and teaching so that we are formed into the image of Christ through the Spirit involves our consistent reliance on God's sanctifying work.