

Course Name: **Re-imagining Faith and
Theology through an Indigenous
Worldview**

VST Indigenous Studies Program

Year 2018
Summer

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Course Starting Date:
July 16, 2018
Course Completion Date:
July 20 (M.Div. October 15, 2018)
Credit: M.Div., Con.Ed. Audit
9:00am-Noon

Course Description

This course is an examination of North American Indigenous spirituality and worldview in the Jesus Way, as compared to normalized Western colonial Christian perspectives. The course seeks to provide an alternative lens for viewing church history and theology and provide an alternative paradigm to Western Christian spirituality by creating opportunities for contributive learners (co-learners) to gain perspective through participation in Indigenous North American discussions and spiritual exercises.

Co-learners will be exposed to the history and spirituality of America's First Nations through readings, shared experiences, and various media. We will examine the roots, approaches, and results of missionary efforts among First Nations. The values associated with the Indigenous American harmony concept will be explored along with an understanding of Indigenous North American theologies of the land. Co-learners who are Christians will be challenged to examine the values of Jesus alongside of North American Indigenous values and given the option to incorporate these values and theologies into their own authentic North American Native, Jesus-focused spirituality.

Course Learning Outcomes

It is hoped that each co-learner will:

- Demonstrate more clearly how one's worldview is related to one's spirituality
- Come to know the socio-history of their own land and the land of others
- Differentiate between abstract truth and local truth
- Identify the differences in traditional and Pan-Indian religious practices
- Be exposed to the spiritualities and giftedness of Indigenous North Americans
- Explore how new possibilities may exist for personal and corporate experiences as a result of exposure to Indigenous North American spirituality
- Integrate through opportunities for Indigenous American spirituality to help form one's own spirituality

Required Texts/Materials

- *Voices in the Stones: Life Lessons from the Native Way* by Kent Nerburn
- Various related readings (provided by instructor)
- M.Div co-learners will choose a book below (Assignment C) for their final project.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Assignment Due Dates: You are required to meet all deadlines for assignments and activities as outlined in your program. You will need to contact the professor in advance, for consideration due to extenuating circumstances.

Learning Community Engagement: Class attendance is required in order to create a robust community learning environment. Therefore, if you are unable to be in class for more than 1 day throughout the course, you will likely not pass the course (except for Audits).

Inclusive Language

Please try to use inclusive language, images, and metaphors for humans in classroom dialogue, in-class presentations, and all writing assignments.

Course Assignments

Assignment A: Reading Summaries, Creative Complex Question and Discussion

Prior to each regular class you will read one supplemental article. Prior to each day you will post or email the instructor a paragraph summary of the reading. In addition, you will include a critical, complex question of interest. NB: These assignments are due the night BEFORE the start of class the next day.

Summaries: Each summary is meant to be an exercise of integration of the reading. Do not give your opinion of the content. Do not express your agreement or disagreement. You can add these in your journal. Do not quote the writer. Simply integrate the content of the whole chapter/article into a concise paragraph. Do not write more than 1 paragraph per chapter or article. Con. Ed. co-learners may include the reading summary and question in their daily journals.

Critical, Complex Question (CCQ): Your one question each night should be well thought out. Your CCQ should not be rhetorical (trying to get people to agree with you or state an obvious point). It should not be easily answered (with a yes or no response). Your CCQ should elicit thoughtful consideration and demonstrate a careful reflection of the reading. Do not ask something you already know the answer to but rather ask something that will provoke an important discussion. Above all else, only ask a question of which you have honest interest and on which you are willing to lead a meaningful discussion.

Interaction: Your first interaction in class will be your Critical Complex Question. You should also respond to other people's questions and make any thoughtful responses asked of your own question. In addition, you should make a significant and thoughtful contribution to at least one ongoing interactive discussion in class.

These four weekly components (Reading/Summary/Question/Discussion account for 75% of your total course grade. Any missing component of the four weekly assignments creates an incomplete for the week and must be made up.

Assignment B: Group Project On the final day of the course you or your group (1-3 people) will give an oral or visual presentation integrating the week's learning into a new paradigm, a story or some form of

visual presentation. The project must reflect the values and theology of a First Nations' worldview. Presentations should be 10-15 minutes in length. Your group presentation represents 25% of your grade.

Assignment C: MDiv ONLY: Book Review/Blog: The book review/blog is meant to be an integrative exercise and also allow you to develop critical questioning skills. The total length should be 750-1000 words. It should give readers an engaging, informative, and critical discussion of the work. Some points to consider:

- Who is the intended audience for the book and who would find it useful?
- What is the background of the author?
- What are the main ideas and major objectives of the book and how effectively were these accomplished?
- What is the context or impetus for the book? Identify the main narrative.
- Make constructive comments about the strength and weaknesses of the book, including criticism it has received and why?
- What social/political/religious/etc. meta-narrative do you believe the book fits and why?

Include the author(s) or editor(s) first and last name(s) (please indicate if it is an edited book), title of book, year of publication, place of publication, publisher, number of pages. At the end of your review, please include your first and last name. The book review is due to the professor by October 1st. Late submissions receive a grade but no comments. The book review/blog must be completed for you to receive your total course grade. A list of books from which to choose are found at the end of this syllabus.

Course Schedule

Day 1 (MON 7/16) Introductions, America Before Columbus and Worldview Differences

Reading Due: Please read the Syllabus and Reading #1

Assignment Due:

- Post or email a 1 paragraph summary and your Creative Complex Question (CCQ).
- Be ready to lead a discussion on your question and interact with others in class.
- Choose your Group Project Partners

Day 2 (TUE 7/17) Christian Doctrine of Discovery, The Indians Meet the Christians and Traditional Indian Religion

Reading Due: Please read Reading #2

Assignment Due:

- Post or email a 1 paragraph summary and your Creative Complex Question (CCQ).
- Be ready to lead a discussion on your question and interact with others in class.
- Meet with Group Project Partners to brainstorm and decide on the format your project will take

Day 3 (WED 7/18) Traditional Spirituality, The Land is Sacred and Ten Harmony Way Values

Reading Due: Please read Reading #3

Assignment Due:

- Post or email a 1 paragraph summary and your Creative Complex Question (CCQ).
- Be ready to lead a discussion on your question and interact with others in class.
- Contact Group Project Partners, decide on roles and formulate your project

Day 4 (THU 7/19) Orality as Tradition, Symbol, Ceremony and Dance and Reflections

Reading Due: Please read Reading #4

Assignment Due:

- Post or email a 1 paragraph summary and your Creative Complex Question (CCQ).
- Be ready to lead a discussion on your question and interact with others in class.
- Contact Group Project partners and practice Group Presentation

Day 5 (FRI 7/20) Reflections and Final Group Projects Presented and Discussed

Reading Due: Please read Reading #5

Assignment Due:

- Post or email a 1 paragraph summary and your Creative Complex Question (CCQ).
- Be ready to lead a discussion on your question and interact with others in class.
- Present Final Group Presentation

Other Important Considerations:

I consider the content of the syllabus to be an agreement between co-learners. By taking this course, you agree to do your absolute best at completing the assignments and other requirements. I will do my best to facilitate learning. Along these lines there are a few distinct considerations about my courses that are also important to remember.

My goal as a professor is to set the context for education of co-learners at all levels. I fully believe that the primary agent of learning is the learner, not the teacher. As contributive learners, you may participate fully and be ready to engage during each session. As your professor I will bring my expertise (experience, knowledge and wisdom) to each session, laying out a “framework,” if you will, for you to build upon through your engagement with the subjects presented. Your feedback throughout the course is sought by me and appreciated. I solicit your suggestions, via email or in person, in order to create the best learning environment and the most enjoyable experience possible for us all and the more I know about you, the better I will be able to relate the course content to your context. The following are some of my teaching strategies:

- Course lectures and discussions on key ideas and concepts via course sessions, PowerPoint, videos and group discussions
- Group postings and discussion of topics and assignments online
- Course participation in Indigenous American spiritual exercises and activities
- Quick feedback loops
- Periodic ritual to bring us back to the reality that we are spiritual-physical beings
- Narrative
- Organic, impromptu discussions
- Recognition of the dialogue as a sacred space that is unique, never to be repeated again.
- An emphasis on decolonization and indigenization of all people
- Humor and jibbing, which I hope goes both ways
- Utilizing space in creative ways as a teaching tool
- Colorful language to drive a point
- Playing “devil’s advocate” to engage critical thinking skills

A Word About Safeness:

I came up in a very rough neighborhood, near Detroit Michigan. Early on in my teaching career I had to re-teach myself to trust the instincts that kept me safe in the midst of chaos and danger. What I discovered was those same life-skills I learned on the streets, and in the course of my life, can work for me in the classroom. Why? By allowing myself to move freely with what I see happening around me organically, shifts the classroom zeitgeist from a theoretical, abstract reality to a more organically-real, shared reality-achieving a deeper level of honesty. Most *co-learners*, (aka students) respect and even desire the level of honesty I am suggesting. Even when discussions don't work out as planned, co-learners seem to respect my honest regrets and my apology. In the meantime, whether the discussion is a "once-in-a-lifetime" hit or a "write-off," I am hopefully, still modeling a paradigm that is teaching you by example to trust your instincts and go with the organic, sacred moment. Hopefully, I am also modeling humility.

I realize there is a great deal of valid concern over co-learning gathering safeness. Perhaps I view it differently than some of my colleagues. In my experience, safeness has nothing to do with the subject matter at hand but rather, safeness is primarily about our respect for the sacredness of how we handle the conversation. With social norms changing at a rapid pace, especially in the current political climate, I am discovering that people are afraid to talk honestly with one another, although many, including myself at times, are willing to talk *at* one another. This type climate only promotes isolationism, binary position-taking and *we/they* attitudes. Education is about people learning from each other. How can we learn if we cannot talk with one another honestly? Obviously, we can't. But, back to the danger. What if it goes too far?

More than once in our discussions, co-learners have taken their polemic too far, and hurt another person's feelings. At that point, if another co-learner does not stop the process, I will stop the conversation and do a check. Together as a group, we will take three deep breaths and have a moment of silence. I will then ask if we are still committed to the values of truth-seeking, mutual respect and the sacredness of the moment we are in? If you are the person who crossed the line, please consider making an apology for the inability to express your thoughts without getting personal. Also, if you are the offended person you might consider whether you may have taken the polemic too personal. I will encourage the group to share any thoughts about the process and then ask if we are ready to go further in the conversation or come back to it at another time.

In many of our Native American traditions we have a prayer that goes something like, "have pity/understanding on me Creator and remember, I am just a human-being." The idea behind this prayer is that perfection is the enemy of attainment. We are all simply human-beings, imperfect, but learning from our mistakes. Those mistakes make us human. And, being human, is often being "unsafe." But perhaps, it is by "climbing out on a limb" in order to reach others, that becomes the most spiritual state of being in which we may find ourselves. I wish I could say I have these sacred moments in every co-learning gathering, I do not. But, I do encourage these moments through risky honest conversations. And when those special moments come, I hope the whole room feels like we have experienced something together that is truly sacred. As your professor, I consider promoting knowledge among my co-learners in an atmosphere of sacred space, to be the most important role I have as a scholar and a spiritual leader. Thanks for your participation in this space.