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**TH5-752 HEAVEN AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**  
**July 10-14, 2023 9am-12pm**

**PURPOSE:** The concept of heaven has played an important role in Christian thought since the earliest New Testament writings, and the Christian vision of Heaven has influenced the world. How do we intersect with this concept, starting with what we were taught and continuing through the sense-making we've done for ourselves around the idea of heaven? What do we think Heaven is and isn't, and how does it motivate, comfort, trouble, and inspire us? In addition to reading about the conceptual history and theology of Heaven, we will watch movies that reimagine the afterlife, and engage in extensive discussion with each other to understand how Heaven has played diverse roles in our own thinking.

**PREREQUISITES:** None

**COMPETENCE OBJECTIVES:** Students who successfully complete the course will be able to:

- Situate concepts of heaven in their historical and cultural contexts
- Identify the significance of concepts of heaven for Christians and the broader culture
- Reflect theologically on the meanings given to us about heaven (from our socialization and our traditions)
- Reflect theologically on the meanings we've developed autonomously about heaven (from our experience and our thinking)
- Communicate a personal credo of meaning about heaven, developed theologically.

**FORMAT AND CONTENT:**

- **Attendance:** All students taking the course for Certificate or Degree credit must participate in all class sessions in person or via Zoom. Auditors are encouraged to participate synchronously, but may request to watch class recordings asynchronously. 100% attendance is required of Certificate and Degree students.
- **Readings:** All students including auditors are expected to do all the required readings.
- **Class participation:** All students in attendance are expected to participate in all class discussions and activities.
- **Assignments:**
  - **For Certificate and Degree students:**
    - *Four (or Five) Questions:* Each evening, before the next day's class, submit answers to the assigned Four (or Five) Questions through Populi. These answers will be used to build an agenda for the next class.
    - *My Credo:* Construct a personal statement of belief about heaven, based on reflections you generated from class materials and discussions. Your credo should consist of at least 5 short paragraphs (3-5 sentences each), each beginning with "I believe."
  - **For Degree students only:**

- *Constructive theology paper*: Write a paper elaborating on the theological basis for one or more statement(s) from your credo.
  - **Basic degree**: 1000-2000 words, at least 5 additional sources. Discuss the theological basis of one (or two closely-related) credo statement(s). Support, compare, and/or contrast your position with reference to at least two other major theological positions/authors. **Due August 7<sup>th</sup>**
  - **Advanced degree**: 2000-3000 words, at least 10 additional sources. Discuss the theological basis of 2-3 credo statements. Support, compare, and/or contrast your positions with reference to at least five other major theological positions/authors. **Due Sept 5<sup>th</sup>**
- **Format**: Work in the course consists of daily 3-hour classes. Small group and whole group discussions centered on the readings are the major activity. Films will be shown on days 2 and 4, followed by discussion.
  - Readings may be completed before the course begins; however, Certificate and Degree students should expect to either read, consult notes, or otherwise refresh their memory of the daily assigned sections in order to complete the “Four or Five Questions” assignment to prepare for each day’s class. All papers will be submitted to the instructor via Populi.

### **TEXTS:**

- **Required of all students**: Alistair McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003)
  - *Note*: Any format acceptable. Purchasing used copies, or utilizing library copies, strongly recommended. Ebook is available through the publisher’s website only.
- **Required of degree students**: J. Edgar Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford UP, 2002)
  - *Note*: Any format acceptable. Purchasing used copies, or utilizing library copies, strongly recommended.

**If you intend to purchase your books online, please allow at least four weeks for delivery, and five weeks for the UK. Copyright law prohibits copying more than 20% of a book, no matter when the book is shipped or arrives.**

**RESERVES:** Any additional material will be made available on Canvas.

### **COURSE POLICIES**

1. **Attendance** For an intensive course, VST requires 100% attendance.
2. **Reading and assignments** Students are expected to read all required assignments before class and to complete all assignments as outlined in the syllabus within the specified dates of the course and term.
3. **Academic honesty** Students are expected to adhere to VST’s requirements for academic honesty as published in the Student Handbook.
4. **Inclusive language** In speaking and writing, inclusive language is expected when making reference to humans and a variety of metaphors are anticipated when making reference to God.
5. **Assignment and Course Evaluation**

- Course evaluations at VST combine a letter grade system (A+ to B-; course failure is “Not Approved”) including narrative comments based on the competencies of the course. No number grades or weights of assignments are calculated, nor are final grades given numerical equivalents.
- Individual assignments within a course are given narrative evaluations, that is, APP (Approved) or INC (Incomplete) with narrative comments, based on the competencies and expectations set for that assignment. One re-write is allowed on any assignment that is INC. The re-written assignment is due two weeks after the work is returned. The final evaluation for an assignment can be APP or NAPP after a re-write.
- For a passing grade in the course, all assignments must be Approved.

#### 6. **Late assignments**

Submission of assignments on time is a part of academic, professional and pastoral competence and a part of every course at VST. All assignments in courses are due on the dates specified in the syllabus. Failure to submit an assignment on time will be noted in the narrative evaluation of an assignment. Repeated failure to submit assignments on time may affect the final grade for the course.

#### 7. **Limitation on use of social media**

Ordinarily, the use of electronic devices in the contexts of classrooms or meetings will be to support the learning, formation, or agenda at hand.

#### 8. **Limitation on use of class material and images**

No material from Zoom classes, including screen capture pictures of their fellow students, professors, and CTAs cannot be posted to Facebook or any other social media without the express consent of the affected individuals.

#### 9. **VST is committed to creating safe space and an inclusive learning environment.** If you have a diagnosed or suspected learning disability, chronic condition, mental health concern, or physical requirement which you anticipate may impact your participation in this class, you are encouraged to discuss your needs with the instructor and the Dean within the first week of classes.

### CALENDAR

**Monday July 10:** Introduction to collaborative theologizing; Cities and gardens

- *Reading:* McGrath preface, ch. 1-2
- *Assignment (Certificate and Degree Students):* Four (or Five) Questions, due on Canvas **Sunday July 9 at 8 pm**
  - **Note:** Daily assignments for Certificate and Degree students are due the night before class.

**Tuesday July 11:** *A Matter of Life and Death* (film and discussion)

- *Reading:* McGrath ch. 3
- *Assignment (Certificate and Degree Students):* Four (or Five) Questions, due on Populi Monday July 10 8 pm

**Wednesday July 12:** Atonement and transcendence

- *Reading:* McGrath ch. 4
- *Assignment (Certificate and Degree Students):* Four (or Five) Questions, due on Populi Tuesday July 11 8 pm

**Thursday July 13:** *Defending Your Life* (film and discussion)

- *Reading:* McGrath ch. 5
- *Assignment (Certificate and Degree Students:* Four (or Five) Questions, due on Populi Wednesday July 12 8 pm

**Friday July 14:** Hopes and longings

- *Reading:* McGrath ch. 6
- *Assignment (Certificate and Degree Students:* Four (or Five) Questions, due on Populi Thursday July 13 8 pm

**EXPECTATIONS, ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATIVE CRITERIA**

**Four (or Five) Questions:** This assignment for Certificate and Degree students is due by 8 pm **before** our class meeting. Evaluation is on a credit/no-credit basis; meet all specifications to receive credit. Daily assignments have three main purposes.

- Prompt you to reflect on, synthesize, or respond to what you just read.
- Create accountability for the day's reading assignment, so that we are all confident that our classmates have done the work to prepare for discussion.
- Generate material such as reactions, ideas, and discussion questions, that can be used as an agenda for the class.

**Task:** Submit **brief** answers to the following "Four (Or Five) Questions."

Your answers can be listed by number, and need not be structured in essay form. This is exploratory writing -- writing as thinking. A personal reaction and response is the goal, rather than give "correct" answers. Follow a train of thought, write in the first person, and react honestly to what you've read.

1. What are your takeaways from this reading? Devote 1-3 sentences to a takeaway from each assigned chapter. Focus on what's significant to you, given your personal history, goals, or interests.
2. What fact or idea in this reading surprised you, or taught you something new? (At least one, but more if you like.)
3. What idea, insight, suggestion, or question found in this reading would you research further, if you had the time? (At least one, but more if you like.)
4. [Optional: What premise or conclusion in this reading might change if approached from another discipline or another perspective?]
5. What's at least one question that you think the class should discuss?

\*\* Tip: Ask questions about concepts, values, or your classmates -- about what things mean, what we ought to do about them, or whose perceptions and experiences you could learn from -- rather than questions about what the facts are. *How*, *why*, and *should* are words that often appear in these kinds of questions.

**Specifications:**

- Answers all parts of the prompt (tip: use headings, numbers, bold/italic, or other indicators to make this clear)
- Submitted to Populi on time

**Credo:** This assignment for Certificate and Degree students is due by 9 am on the final day of class (Friday July 14). Religious traditions often formalize their core claims and convictions in the form of a *credo*, a series of statements adherents ritually recite. *Credo* is Latin for "I believe." In the course of examining religion (and lack thereof) from the perspective of health, you have clarified what you do and don't believe -- what claims you stake yourself to at this moment, and where you perceive definite movement toward an eventual position. Formalizing those claims and vectors provides a snapshot, and perhaps a touchstone, of where you currently stand with regard to the search for a healthy (and felicitous) belief. Evaluation is on a credit/no credit basis; meet all specifications to receive credit.

**Task:** Construct a personal statement of belief about heaven, based on reflections you generated from class materials and discussions. Your credo should consist of at least 5 short paragraphs (3-5 sentences each), each beginning with "I believe." Keep in mind that this is not an essay, but a creed that could be chanted or proclaimed.

**Specifications:**

- At least 5 statements, each beginning with "I believe"
- Each statement 3-5 sentences
- Expresses core values or convictions related to the concept of heaven
- Submitted to Canva on time

**Constructive Theology paper** (Basic and Advanced Degrees): Write a paper elaborating on the theological basis for statement(s) from your credo. Evaluation based on evidence of meeting the learning competencies for the course.

- *Basic degree:* 1500-2000 words, at least 5 additional sources. Discuss the theological basis of one (or two closely-related) credo statement(s). Support, compare, and/or contrast your position with reference to at least two other major theological positions/authors.
- *Advanced degree:* 3000-4000 words, at least 15 additional sources. Discuss the theological basis of 2-3 credo statements. Support, compare, and/or contrast your positions with reference to at least five other major theological positions/authors.

**Specifications:**

- Meets listed word count
- Meets listed number of additional sources (assigned textbooks should be cited in the bibliography if used, but do not count for this number)

- Appropriately cited
- Shows evidence of proofreading and revision
- Clearly structured

### **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Allegheri, Dante. *Paradiso*. Translated by Robert and Jean Hollander. Anchor, 2008.

Ehrman, Bart. *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife*. Simon and Shuster, 2020.

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McDannel, Colleen, and Bernard Lang *Heaven: A History*. Second edition. Yale UP, 2001.

Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*. Princeton UP, 1997.

----- . *Paradise Mislaid: How We Lost Heaven – and How We Can Regain It*. Oxford UP, 2007