

Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
Exploring Faith: Spiritual Memoirs and Christian Formation

TS- 605 (1, 2 or 3 units)

Professor: Valerie Rempel, Ph.D.

Summer 2009 (May 26 – August 22)

Office: 452-1722; Home: 453-9162

June 3-4, 6:00 – 9:00 p.m., MBBS campus

E-mail: vrempel@mbseminary.edu

June 5-6, Retreat Days

On-line, June 3-August 21

Assignments: rempelwork@mbseminary.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will explore Christian faith formation in both classical and contemporary understanding. It will seek to nurture an awareness of, and commitment to the practices of faith that deepen our relationship with God. It will also serve as an inquiry into contemporary faith and the nature of theological reflection. Through the stories of others (the spiritual memoirs), students will be invited to reflect on their own lives and to interact with the theological assumptions of the authors/books chosen.

This course will meet the 2-unit MBBS requirement for Spiritual Formation. Alternatively, it may be used as a theology elective. There is no prerequisite and auditors are welcome to participate.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The MBBS curriculum is guided by a set of desired outcomes for each of the degree programs. This course is designed to help meet the following objectives. That every student shall:

Demonstrate commitment to live as a disciple of Jesus in Christian community

- Practice spiritual disciplines that promote maturing authentic discipleship
- Demonstrate self-awareness that promotes maturing, authentic humanity
- Develop relationship with a cohort of fellow learners under the auspices of MBBS
- Witness persuasively to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a postmodern secular context

Interpret one's own and other cultural contexts of ministry using theological perspectives integrated with social scientific approaches

- Describe the *missio Dei* view of church as a people called and sent to represent God's reign as community, servant
- Utilize theological and social scientific tools and practices to understand and interpret the culture of a ministry and the cultural context of the ministry
- Assess the significance of cultural context for interpreting Scripture within and across cultures

TEXTS FOR THE COURSE

Required – All Students

Bass, Dorothy C. *Practicing Our Faith*. Jossey-Bass, 1997.

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**Two Unit Students – One from each of the following pairings (must include at least one book written by opposite gender)**

**Three Unit Students – Five titles from the following list**

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Krivak, Andrew. *A Long Retreat: In Search of a Religious Life*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Winner, Lauren. *Girl Meets God: On the Path to a Spiritual Life*. Shaw Books, 2004. (Older versions available – buy what is cheap!)

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Kirk, Patty. *Confessions of an Amateur Believer*. Thomas Nelson, 2007.

Steele, Mark. *Half-Life/Die Already: How I died & Lived to Tell About It*. David C. Cook, 2008.

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Koessler, John. *A Stranger in the House of God: From Doubt to Faith and Everywhere in Between*. Zondervan, 2007.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*. HarperOne, 2007.

Note: All titles will be on reserve at Hiebert Library (should be available May 18ff). Cheap copies of the above titles are widely available at Amazon.com, Half.com and other websites. Local bookstores carry some of these titles in stock as well. The local public library system also has some of these titles available.

NATURE OF THE COURSE

This course is designed with three components. The first section (June 3-4) will serve as an introduction to the course, the practice of Christian formation, and questions related to the practice of autobiographical writing. The aim is to become acquainted with the history of Christian formation (the classical disciplines of spiritual formation) and to explore the nature of theological writing that is oriented in personal experience (questions of perspective, truth, biblical faithfulness, universality, meaning-making, etc.). The second section (June 5-6) will explore the practices of Christian formation in a retreat setting. Together, we will explore some of the practices that have shaped Christian communities throughout the centuries. We will also use this time to begin to reflect on our own stories of formation. The third section of the course will be conducted as a kind of online book club. Using threaded discussion on the class website, students will read, reflect and interact with the assigned material and each other.

2-units credit: Section 1 and 2 (June 3-6), plus selected memoirs and related assignments

3-units credit: Section 1, 2 and 3 (full syllabus)

REQUIREMENTS

All Students

1. **“Experiment” and Reflective Essay (8-10 pages).** *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass, offers perspective on twelve practices of the Christian life. Each student is expected to choose one of the practices discussed in the book as the basis of a summer “experiment” lasting at least 30 days. (Alternatively, you may choose to practice one of the classic spiritual disciplines such as fasting, reading scripture, journaling, prayer, silence, etc.) In choosing a practice students are expected to try something new. Please do not choose something that you are already engaged in as a regular practice. You should expect to give roughly 15 hours of participation in this practice. Your essay should discuss what drew you to the practice, how you engaged in the practice and what you observed/learned/ enjoyed/struggled with as you pursued your experiment. You may want to reflect on how your experiment is affirmed or challenged by your memoir reading. *The heart of the essay should include significant theological reflection around some aspect of your experiment.* “B” work will be basically descriptive of the practice and your engagement with it. “A” work will show significant insight and self-reflection as well as theological engagement. **DUE: July 24. Submit to: rempelwork@mbseminary.edu**
2. **Discussion Forum.** This class has been designed to run throughout the summer session in an online version of a book club. Students are expected to reflect on the readings and to engage with other readers on the forum section of the class website. This is a significant component of the class and students are expected to spend 3 – 4 hours writing posts and responding to comments for each book you read. There are four types of postings expected for each book:
 - **Initial postings** in response to each book by Monday noon, Pacific Time. See schedule for exact dates and their corresponding books.
 - **Responses** to at least two students’ initial postings by Wednesday midnight, Pacific Time.
 - **Comments** (at least two postings) in response to any postings including at least one visit to the forum in addition to the previous two and your final posting.
 - **Final postings** by Saturday noon, Pacific Time

Detailed description of each of these four postings follows. Grading will be done on a cumulative basis for each book discussion, meaning that one grade will be posted at the end of each forum discussion. Each section is worth one-third of the final grade.

Initial postings (20 pts): Write an initial 300-400 word response to each book in the discussion forum. You may post this at any time prior to the Monday deadline but it is expected that you will not post until you have completed (or nearly completed!) the book. Please post on time. Late posts will be noted and graded accordingly. Your post should do one of the following: **1)** identify a theological issue raised by the author and assess his or her treatment of that issue, **OR 2)** identify and assess the way in which the author engaged with one of the “practices” of the Bass book, **OR 3)** identify some way in which the author’s story has challenged or affirmed your understanding of the Christian life. You will be graded on clarity of thought and communication, depth of analysis and reflection, and the degree to which you engage with the material. You will receive 16-18 points if you give sufficient evidence of having read the book and identified a question or issue for discussion. You will receive 19-20 points for demonstrating some

depth of insight, excellence in writing and for doing something extra—making connections to other authors, drawing on other biblical or theological material, or bringing in helpful content from another course.

Response and group discussion (20 pts): By midnight Wednesday each student will respond to the initial posts of at least two other students in the discussion group. Please put “response” in the subject line. Your response does not need to be long but should seek to drive forward the substance of the discussion. You can do this in a variety of ways: you might elaborate on something the other person said; you might ask a question that probes at a point the person made; you might enquire about the evidence used or the logic employed; you might even say that you disagree and give your evidence. In all cases you will express your ideas carefully and respectfully to one another—even when you strongly disagree.

Students are expected to further the group discussion by contributing at least two comment posts. These conversational posts may be responses to any of the other postings. Please put “comment” in the subject line. The expectation is that you will visit the forum at least one other time in addition to your initial post, your two responses and your final post. You will receive 16-18 points if you fulfill the requirements for quantity of participation and make contributions that contribute to and enhance the discussion. You will receive 19-20 points if your contributions go beyond the minimum expectations in quantity and display excellence in “listening” to and understanding others as well as depth of insight and integration in your contributions.

Final postings (20 pts): write a final statement (150-200 words) to the group in which you describe how this author and the discussion has shaped your thinking about what it means to be Christian. Put “My Final Posting” in the subject line of your post. This should be posted by Saturday noon, Pacific Time. Again, you will receive up to 20 points based on clarity, level of insight and your thoughtfulness in response to the author and topics raised throughout the forum discussion.

NOTE: The professor will read the discussion forums and may post an occasional comment. However, the expectation is that students will conduct the discussion. At all times students are expected to express their opinions in a way that demonstrates respect for others.

3-Unit Students

In addition to the above assignments, students enrolled for 3 units of credit are expected to write two (2) additional essays.

3. **Theological Reflections** – Each student is expected to expand two initial posts into longer essays (5-7 pages each). The essay should identify an issue raised in your reading of a particular memoirist (e.g., an assessment of Mark Steele’s understanding of suffering, or Barbara Brown Taylor’s understanding of what it means to be “fully human,”), or a recurring theme that you encounter in your reading (e.g., ascetic practices, understanding God’s will, what it means to be converted, etc.). The essay should move beyond description to personal and theological engagement with the issue. Good essays will engage the resources of the Christian tradition as well as your own response, experiences and reflection around the issue. The essay should seek to explore how the author(s) are making meaning out of their lives and assess the faithfulness of their work to the Christian tradition. “B” essays will identify an issue and demonstrate a basic level of engagement with it. “A” essays will demonstrate the student’s ability to draw on biblical and theological material in their assessment/engagement with the memoirist. As always, grades reflect a student’s

clarity of thought, excellence in writing and depth of engagement with the material.
Due Dates: First essay is due July 3. Last essay is due August 21. Submit work to rempelwork@mbseminary.edu

Workload and Grading

Two-unit course (90 hours)

Class – 20 hours		
Reading – 35 hours		
Forum – 10 hours	(3 books x 25%) =	75%
Experiment & essay – 25 hours		25%

Three-unit course (135 hours)

Class – 20 hours		
Reading – 50 hours		
Forum – 20 hours	(5 books x 12%) =	60%
Experiment & essay – 25 hours		20%
Theological reflections – 20 hours	(2 essays x 10%)	20%

Academic Policies

MBBS academic policies (as well as other school policies) are described at <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/>. These policies provide guidance on academic integrity and plagiarism, accommodations for disability, incomplete course work, extensions, dates for changing registration, non-discriminatory and inclusive language, appeals, grading templates, etc. Students are expected to be familiar with these policies and will be held responsible for adhering to them. If you have questions about how these policies relate to you or to a situation that you face in your studies, please speak to your professor or consult the Registrar. Course evaluations are to be completed online and are due one week after the completion of the course. Official grades will not be posted until the student's evaluation of the course is completed.

Schedule**Class**

June 3	Introduction to class and memoirs
June 4	Making meaning and practice of theological reflection
June 5	Exploring the practices of Christian faith (review Bass book)
June 6	All-day retreat (on campus) – schedule to be distributed

Forums

June 15-20	Winner, <i>Girl Meets God</i>
June 29-July 4	Krivak, <i>A Long Retreat</i>
July 13-18	Kirk, <i>Confessions of an Amateur Believer</i>
July 20-25	Steele, <i>Half-Life/Die Already</i>
Aug. 3-8	Taylor, <i>Leaving Church</i>
Aug. 17-22	Koessler, <i>A Stranger in the House of God</i>

Essays

July 3	Theological Essay 1 (3-unit students only)
July 31	Reflective Essay on Experiment – All students
August 21	Theological Essay 2 (3-unit students only)