PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This course takes the perspective that the ultimate challenge of Christian spiritual formation is the purification and re-ordering of desire in the Spirit. Students are engaged in an intensive dialogue between psychology and theology as they approach it at the practical level of how to re-form human desire through spiritual community and practices. On the basis of a fundamentally theological view of the human person, the course explores how psychospiritual desire is manifested and transformed within stories, intimate relationships, community-building, Eucharistic worship, contemplative prayer, and social compassion. An eclectic range of psychological and neurobiological theories are examined in search of what each may offer to enhance the effectiveness of Christian spiritual formation. Students learn to recognize and evaluate the assumptions and methods behind these various theories, while keeping their main focus on developing a coherent Christian spiritual formation program.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:
After taking this course, students will be able to:
1. Articulate a well-grounded theological perspective on the value of employing psychological and neurobiological perspectives in Christian spiritual formation.
2. Describe the trajectory and goals of Christian spiritual formation in both theological and psychological terms.
3. Compare the assumptions, methods, and theoretical stances of various psychological and theological perspectives on several key elements of spiritual formation.
4. Evaluate the impact on spiritual formation of choices made among a range of psychological theories and theological stances.
5. Employ a variety of effective methods of spiritual formation that are enhanced by psychological and neurobiological insight.

ASSIGNMENTS:
1. Each week before class, read either the articles or a complete book from the list provided for each topic. If reading the articles, for each one write a one paragraph summary of what it contributes to reflection on spiritual formation and a second paragraph comparing and evaluating the specific “brands” of psychology and of theology that are being referenced. If reading a book, include this information in a 2-3 page book report. These reading summaries will be turned in at mid-term and at the end
of the semester.

2. Each week there will also be a “Practicum Exercise” to be completed as preparation for the following week’s topic. Each student will post a short report on the practicum on the course web site, and all students will read these before attending class. This process of reflecting, writing, and reading will be an essential part of the preparation for class discussions.

3. The final paper will consist of a 10-15 page statement that includes the following:
   – Brief sketch of the character of a specific context which is the reference point for the student’s discussion of spiritual formation.
   – A well-grounded theological perspective on the value of employing psychological and neurobiological perspectives in Christian spiritual formation.
   – Description of the trajectory and goals of Christian spiritual formation in both theological and psychological terms, with sensitivity to the specific context.
   – Examples of some psychologically-informed spiritually formative practices or methods that the student would propose using in this context.
   – References and bibliography for each of these points.

COURSE OUTLINE:

1 Introduction: Christian Life in an Age of Psychology
   Specific challenges facing programs of Christian formation today, for example, secularism, postmodernism, consumerism. How this plays out in different global regions and cultures. Psychology as lingua franca. Comparison between worldviews of Christianity and psychological science. The range of psychological theories and theological approaches that are in dialogue.


PART I: THE PERSON IN FORMATION

Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 2: Identify three images (metaphors) for what a “good Christian” (the fruit of excellent spiritual formation) would be like.

2 Strong, Loving, and Wise: The Formed and Transformed Christian
Psychological, cultural, and theological perspectives on “wisdom,” “virtue,” and “maturity.” Meanings of “formation” and “transformation.” What kind of person do we hope will emerge from our spiritual formation programs? Dealing with differing cultural norms and ideals.


Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 3: Tell a story (that you feel comfortable sharing) about a time when you have been challenged by your own desires.

3 The Story-telling Self and the Knot of Desire


**Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 4:** Practice “Lectio Divina” with a Psalm (instructions will be provided). Write a paragraph on how (or whether) this is an experience of intimacy with the Spirit.

### 4 The Self and the Spirit: How Does Sanctification Work?

Psychology of the "self" in view of theological anthropology. Theology of sanctification viewed through lense of psychology. Significance of intimacy with other persons and with God. The contributions of contemplative psychology and of mystical writers.


http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2388&Itemid=0


**PART II: THE FORMATION COMMUNITY**

**Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 5**: Report on your experience of participating in a Eucharist with special attention to how the event affects you both psychologically and spiritually.

**5 Maturing through Community, Ritual, and Eucharist**


Dahill, Lisa E. “Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation.” *Spiritus* 1, no. 2 (September 1, 2001): 186–203.


Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 6: Tell a story about companioning someone who is experiencing a crisis or difficult time in life.

6 Accompaniment: Psychotherapy, Spiritual Direction, Soul Friendship

- Distinctions among various forms of individual and group accompaniment.
- Situations in which accompaniment is essential, advisable, or beneficial to enhance human and spiritual growth. Contributions of psychology and spirituality to understanding best practices of accompaniment.


Gubi, Peter Madsen. “A Qualitative Exploration of the Similarities and Differences Between Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment.” *Practical Theology* 4, no. 3 (December 1, 2011): 339–358.


PART III: PERSPECTIVES ON “INNER WORK”

Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 7: Using paint or pencils, create a visual image of God and bring it to class.

7 God and God-Images in the Life Cycle

- Strengths and weaknesses of psychological life stage theory as guide to spiritual growth. Psychological factors contributing to character of God-images in early life and adulthood. Differences among cultures and eras on these matters. Theology of divine ineffability, incarnation, sacramentality as balance to psychological perspective.


**Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 8:** Practice “Healing of Memories” prayer with a text from the gospels (instructions will be provided). Write a paragraph on the experience.

### 8 Working with Imagination and Memory


Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 10: Practice “mindfulness meditation” (instructions will be provided). Report on its effects.

9 Neurobiology of Spiritual Practices: So What?
Findings of neurobiology and cognitive psychology on the impact of practices such as ritual, meditation, and mindfulness. What Christians can learn from Buddhists. Theological view of interfaith practice. Risks and opportunities for enhanced Christian practices.


PART IV: PERSPECTIVES ON HOLISTIC TRANSFORMATION

Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 10: Summarize key events of your own “conversion story.”

10 Perspectives on Conversion
Reviewing research on theological, psychological, and sociological understandings of religious conversion. What Christians need to learn from the human sciences on this topic.


**Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 11:** Tell a story about a discernment process that you have participated in or observed.

**11 Discernment as a Way of Life**

Christian traditions of how to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. What psychology can contribute to this. Case studies of discernment viewed both psychologically and spiritually.


Practicum Exercise to prepare for Topic 12: During the week, notice someone who engages in a compassionate practice. Reflect on what may have contributed to that persons’ capacity for compassion.

12 Formation for Social Responsibility: Best Practices
Theology and psychology of vocation. What enables Christians to experience desire for a more just society and to act effectively to help create it? How can the topics we have studied this semester contribute to forming Christians for social responsibility?


