

## **ASSOCIATED CANADIAN THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS OF TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY**

### **Graduate Course Syllabus**

**Course Number:** THS 631A

**Course Name:** Theology of Suffering

**Semester and Year:** SU2023

**Instructor:** Michael Morelli, Ph.D

**Contact Information:** michael.morelli@twu.ca

**Course Instruction:** June 26-30, 2023 | 8:30am-12:30pm

**Office Hours:** By appointment with instructor (email me to schedule a time)

### **Course Description**

Just as people who journey with suffering are inclined to ask “why?” it is common for theological treatments of suffering to seek satisfying answers to the question: why does suffering exist? This course adopts a counterintuitive approach to suffering by asking the “how?” question—specifically, how do we live well with God, other people, and ourselves in light of the ubiquitous, often devastating realities of suffering? Scripture and theology are the predominant frames for this question, but other disciplinary perspectives and resources will be engaged as needed to help us answer this complex, concrete question in substantial, enduring, and healing ways.

### **Course Objectives**

This course will help you:

- Experience a deepened, transformative perception and response to the mystery of a God who can “sympathize with our weaknesses,” “has in every respect been tested” (Hebrews 4:15), and consequently understands and responds to our suffering (1-3 & 6).
- Integrate scripture and theology with the resources of other disciplines and practices to theoretically and practically answer the question: how do we live well with God, other people, and ourselves in light of the ubiquitous, complex, and often devastating realities of suffering (1-4 & 6-7)?
- Discern areas in your life where acute and/or chronic suffering has affected you and journey towards healing in relationship with God and other people (3 & 5-7).

- Compassionately, creatively, and responsibly care for individuals and groups who are experiencing or have experienced acute and/or chronic suffering (1-7).
- Externalize your suffering in imaginative and healthy ways to live well in light of suffering, help others to do the same, and in so doing strengthen healing relational connections with God and other people (1-7).
- Plan and implement a communal liturgy (work of worship) to help people acknowledge and express suffering in ways that draw people closer to God in transformative love and worship (1-7).

## **Course Learning Outcomes**

### **1. Knowledge and its Application**

- demonstrate in-depth knowledge of a particular field of study and/or profession
- demonstrate ability to apply knowledge and discipline specific methodology to solve unique problems
- demonstrate superior ability to identify and interpret new ideas and research in a specific discipline
- demonstrate superior skills in academic research, writing, and communication act as skilled practitioners to move beyond knowledge into practice

### **2. Cognitive Complexity**

- show ability to carry out discourse and research as an active member of a discipline
- demonstrate the ability to “undertake inquiry and analysis, to solve problems with a high degree of innovation, divergent thinking and risk taking”
- give evidence of integrating knowledge and applying the knowledge across disciplinary boundaries
- give evidence of originality in the application of knowledge (master’s) and undertaking of research (doctoral)

### **3. Inter-and intra-personal Wellness**

- demonstrate a holistic awareness of their personhood, purpose, and calling within the context of the communities in which they live and study
- demonstrate an appreciation of the role of community in wellness.
- demonstrate increased professional capacity and autonomy
- demonstrate superior organizational and time management skills
- demonstrate academic and personal integrity

### **4. Aesthetic Expression and Interpretation**

- consider and practice creative engagement and interdisciplinary thinking
- demonstrate the ability to engage in a dynamic educational environment within which intellectual and imaginative products are brought into relation with the most pressing human issues of our time

### **5. Social Responsibility and Global Engagement**

- demonstrate the ability to analyze, appraise and evaluate their discipline in a social context
- develop the ability to become socially responsive agents with a commitment to understanding global issues

## 6. Spiritual Formation

- demonstrate greater understanding of and connection to God's work in the world
- utilize spiritual practices for self-reflection and the helping of others
- exemplify a Christian ethic in pursuit of truth, reconciliation, compassion and hope

## 7. Leadership

- demonstrate high level innovative expertise, collaborative knowledge and the capacity to inspire others and achieve results
- demonstrate academic proficiency to communicate effectively and to enter into conversation and constructive dialogue with others
- demonstrate integrity and humility in all matters

## Required Texts and Materials

- John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
- Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018).
- Daryl R. Van Tongerent and Sara Showalter Van Tongerent, *The Courage to Suffer: A New Clinical Framework for Life's Greatest Crises* (Conshohocken, Templeton Press, 2020).

## Additional Texts and Materials (to be used as needed for seminars and assignments)

- Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downer's Grove: IVP Press, 2015).
- Nancy L. Eisland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).
- Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2001).
- James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

## Course Instructional Content

Date/Time	Seminar	Focus text(s)
Monday, June 26: 8:30am-12:30pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Course introduction</li><li>• Moving from "why?" to "how?"</li></ul>	<i>Raging with Compassion</i>
Tuesday, June 27: 8:30am-12:30pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Trauma informed theology</li></ul>	<i>Resurrecting Wounds</i>
Wednesday, June 28: 8:30am-12:30pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Courage, compassion, and care</li></ul>	<i>The Courage to Suffer</i>
Thursday, June 29: 8:30am-12:30pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prophecy, lament, and liberation</li></ul>	<i>Prophetic Lament and The Disabled God</i>
Friday, June 30: 8:30am-12:00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Liturgies, or the works of the people who suffer</li></ul>	<i>Walking on Water and The Spirituals and the Blues</i>

## Course Assignments

Due Date	Assignment	% of Final Grade
Jun. 26-30	Class Participation	15%
Jul. 21	Your Theology of Suffering Essay	22.5%
Aug. 4	Re-Imagining the Job Dialogues	20%
Aug. 25	Confronting Suffering	20%
Sept. 15	Liturgies of Lament	22.5%

## Course Assignments (Descriptions)

### **Class Participation (15% of Grade)**

Dialogue is a key component of this course. It is important for you to come to class and engage in curious, constructive conversations. Life does not totally shut down for school, so you may not make every class. That is fine. But if you miss over 25% of our gatherings without providing a reasonable explanation for your absence, or if you show up to class and do not engage, I will wonder about your investment in this course—and that wondering likely will result in a lower participation grade.

### **Your Theology of Suffering Essay (22.5%)**

**Due: 11:59pm, July 21**

Engage scripture, the texts assigned for this course, and other texts/resources as needed to write an essay that articulates your own theology of suffering. Make sure your essay,

- Meaningfully considers in your own words and experiences the mystery of a God who can “sympathize with our weaknesses,” “has in every respect been tested” (Hebrews 4:15), and consequently understands and responds to our suffering.
- Integrates scripture and theology with the resources of other disciplines and practices to theoretically and practically answer the question: how do we live well with God, other people, and ourselves in light of the ubiquitous, complex, and often devastating realities of suffering?
- Practically applies all the above to the context in which your faith and vocation primarily are expressed, with particular attention given to how this context usually perceives and approaches suffering (i.e., compare these perceptions of and approaches to suffering with your own theology of suffering as articulated in this essay).

Your essay should be approximately 3000 words.

### **Re-Imagining the Job Dialogues (20%)**

**Due: 11:59pm, Aug. 4**

Use the Book of Job’s form, plot, and content to re-imagine its dialogues about suffering. As you think about how your dialogue will take shape, imagine the people failing to comfort Job in the actual Bible story acting in ways that offer true, helpful comfort to Job as he experiences intense suffering. What would these people do? What would these people say? And, at what point would God show up in the

story if these people did and said things that were helpful for Job, and what would God do and say when God shows up?

Present your version of the story as a short story, a script for theatre, film, or TV scene, a philosophical Socratic dialogue, a poem, a song, a short audio and/or video piece, a visual or plastic art piece, a comic, or any other creative media that helps you re-imagine the Book of Job as outlined here. Note: your re-imagining does not have to be the same length of the Book of Job, but make sure there is enough content in your work to flesh out, in a clear and compelling way, your re-imagined Job dialogue.

### **Confronting Suffering (20%)**

**Due: 11:59pm, Aug. 25**

Using the insights of scripture, *Raging with Compassion*, *Resurrecting Wounds*, and *The Courage to Suffer* that most resonated with you write a 1500–2500-word reflection that,

- Describes area (or areas) in your life where acute and/or chronic suffering has affected you and/or is affecting you.
- Considering this suffering, describes practical ways you can journey towards healing in relationship with God and other people.

Once you are finished your reflection, share it with a safe person who you can trust to provide honest and compassionate insight into what you have written. Ask them to provide their perspective on the area(s) of suffering you mention and what you have proposed to journey towards healing. Some questions that may be helpful for you to ask are:

- Have you noticed this area (or these areas) of suffering in my life?
- Whether or not have you noticed, how do you think I am coping with this area (or these areas) of suffering?
- Do I have any 'blind spots' that are worth considering?
- Are my proposed ways to journey towards healing helpful and/or can they be strengthened?
- Are there any other practical things I can do to journey towards healing?

Once they have provided their feedback, provide a 500-1000 word follow up reflection that describes (1) what it was like sharing the work you have done for this assignment with someone else; (2) the key insights this person offered you; (3) how sharing this assignment may have, for better or for worse, changed your relationship with this person, (4) what you learned about suffering; and (5) what you learned about God and other people.

### **A Liturgy of Lament (22.5%)**

**Due: 11:59pm, Sept. 15**

Using scripture, required and additional texts, as well as other resources as needed, to plan and implement a communal liturgy (work of worship) to help people acknowledge and express suffering in ways that draw people closer to God in transformative love and worship. The goal of this communal liturgy is to:

- Compassionately, creatively, and responsibly care for individuals and groups who are experiencing or have experienced acute and/or chronic suffering.
- Externalize your suffering in imaginative and healthy ways to live well in light of suffering, help others to do the same, and in so doing strengthen healing relational connections with God and other people.

Provide an outline of your liturgy plan that includes the setting; general description of who will attend and participate; the essential structure and content of the liturgy from start to finish; and any materials that you will use in the implementation of your plan.

Following the implementation of your liturgy, provide a follow up reflection that describes (1) how you envisioned this liturgy being engaged by yourself and other people versus how it was actually engaged by yourself and others, (2) in what ways you sensed the presence of work in God as this liturgy was engaged, (3) what you learned about suffering in planning for and implementing this liturgy, (4) what you learned about God and other people in planning for and implementing this liturgy, and (5) if you were to perform this liturgy again, if you would alter it in any way. If possible, provide comments from participants if they are willing and able to share them.

## Course Evaluation

Near the conclusion of this course, you will be asked to complete a course evaluation. Because feedback is very important, the course evaluation is a required part of the course and is tied to the submission of your last assignment. The course evaluation will be integrated into the Moodle classroom in Week 8.

## Grading System

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description	Grade Point	Meaning in Graduate Work
A+	97-100	Superior	4.30	Exceptionally well-reasoned, compelling development of position. Outstanding incorporation of personal vision as well as of references and resources. Strikingly appropriate examples. Extraordinary insight, critical analytical and evaluative ability, and creativity. Superlative style and language usage. Makes an original contribution and is potentially publishable.
A	93-96.99	Excellent	4.00	Well-argued and convincing development of position. Insightful incorporation of personal vision as well as of references and resources. Notably appropriate examples. Excellent insight, critical analytic and evaluative ability, and creativity. Impressive style and language use.
A-	90-92.99	Very Good	3.70	Thorough and plausible development of position. Skilful incorporation of personal vision as well as of references and resources. Very good examples. Very good insight, analytic and evaluative ability, and creativity. Commendable and fluent style and language usage.
B+	87-89.99	Proficient	3.30	Proficient development of position. Appropriate incorporation of personal vision as well as of references and resources. Relevant examples. Good quality insight, analytic and evaluative ability, and creativity. Clear and correct style and language usage.
B	83-86.99	Good	3.00	Competent development of position, but possibly with some gaps and/or limitations. Good incorporation of personal vision as well as of references and resources. Good examples. Reasonable insight, analytic and evaluative ability. Little creativity. Generally good style and language usage, but possibly with some minor flaws.
B-	80-82.99	Average	2.70	Average development of position, but with obvious gaps and/or limitations. Satisfactory incorporation of personal vision as well as of references and resources. Satisfactory examples. Reasonable insight, analytic and evaluative ability. Little creativity. Generally satisfactory

				style and language usage, but possibly with some minor flaws.
C+	77-79.99	Adequate	2.30	Adequate development of position with significant gaps and/or limitations. Some incorporation of personal vision as well as references and resources. Adequate use of examples. Very little creativity. Considerable number of issues related to coherence and style.
C	73-76.99	Acceptable	2.00	Limited development of position with a noticeable lack of consistency with personal vision or references. Limited integration with external sources. Acceptable analytic and evaluative ability. Numerous weaknesses in terms of clarity, coherence, and grammar.
C-	70-72.99	Needs Work	1.70	Passable but unimpressive development of position. Position not completely consistent with personal vision or references and resources not taken fully into account or examples are basic or not completely convincing or barely acceptable insight and analytic and evaluative ability. Adequate style and language usage, but with weaknesses in some respects (e.g., clarity, coherence, grammar). Overall quality shows noticeable deficiencies.
F	Below 70	Below Standard	0.00	Unacceptable work at graduate level. Shows lack of understanding and/or competence in several of the criteria described above. This grade is a failing grade at the graduate level.

## **Grade Appeals**

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Students can appeal their grade to the course instructor by stating in writing their reasons for contesting the grade. Deadline for such appeals is one week after the student has receipt of grade. Formal course grade appeals can be made with the ACTS Office.

## **Course Policies**

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### **ADD/DROP POLICY**

All ACTS World Campus courses are open for registration until the first day of class. Once the class has begun, students wishing to drop the class must complete a course drop form (<https://www.actsseminaries.com/assets/acts-add-drop-change-of-registration.pdf>) and submit it to the Registrar's Office using the TWU HelpDesk feature ([twu.ca/help](http://twu.ca/help)). Tuition (excluding fees) refund rates are as follows:

Weeks 1-2 - 100%  
 Week 3 - 60%  
 Week 4 - 50%  
 Week 5 - 40%  
 Weeks 6-8 - 0%

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND AVOIDING PLAGIARISM AT TWU**

One of the core values of Trinity Western University is the integration of academic excellence with high standards of personal, moral, and spiritual integrity. The University considers it a serious offence when an individual attempts to gain unearned academic credit. It is the student's responsibility to be

informed about what constitutes academic misconduct. For details on this, and on identifying and avoiding plagiarism go to the [University Homepage > Academics > Academic Calendar](#) (p. 47). <https://prezi.com/od62fxnkbmxxh/plagiarism-how-to-get-it-out-of-your-life/> (Prezi presentation) <http://bit.ly/1p00KX3> (Google Slide presentation offering more comprehensive information)

## **STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY**

Students with a disability who need assistance are encouraged to contact the Equity of Access Office upon admission to TWU to discuss their specific needs. All disabilities must be recently documented by an appropriately certified professional and include the educational impact of the disability along with recommended accommodations. Within the first two weeks of the semester, students must meet with their professors to agree on accommodations appropriate to each class. Students should follow the steps detailed by the Equity of Access Office on their website at: <http://www.twu.ca/student-life/student-success/disabilities-and-equity-access>.

## **HOSPITALITY IN THE CLASSROOM**

TWU is committed to an ethic of inclusion centred on the principles of Christian hospitality, reciprocity and reconciliation. We seek to cultivate generous learning spaces that are based on respect for differences and are open to diverse views, opinions, and identities that are thoughtfully expressed in a collegial manner. We welcome and value all voices, including those from under- represented groups or those who have been marginalized.

The following policies are optional but recommended, to allow you to efficiently respond to student challenges to the syllabus. *Click on these fields and press delete if you do not wish to use them:*

## **CAMPUS CLOSURE AND CLASS CANCELLATION POLICY**

In the event of extreme weather conditions or other emergency situations go to the <https://www.twu.ca/campus-notification>.

## **COURSE GRADE APPEALS**

Students can appeal their grade to the course instructor by stating in writing their reasons for contesting the grade. Deadline for such appeals is one week after the student has receipt of grade. Formal course grade appeals can be made with the ACTS Office.

## **PAPER FORMATTING**

The preferred manner for citations is the Turabian Notes (Bibliography) format. For information and accuracy you may wish to reference the following style guide: Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, 9th ed. Students may find the following website helpful: [http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian\\_citationguide.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html)