

**Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary**  
**SOCIETY, RELIGION AND GOD**

TS-730 (3 units)  
Spring 2008 (August 25 – December 12)  
Tuesdays, 6:00 – 9:00 p.m.

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course serves as an inquiry into contemporary faith and the nature of God in light of major transitions in society, religion and theology. It is intended to engage students in an exploration of the diversity and complexity of contemporary dialogue concerning God.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

1. Explain the central themes/doctrines of the Christian faith, especially as related to an understanding of God.
2. Analyze, synthesize, and engage contemporary church and world issues from a biblical theological perspective.
3. Describe how the principles of such social scientific approaches as psychology, anthropology and sociology apply to the mission of the church.
4. Identify ways in which the institutional church has both shaped and been shaped by society.
5. Write a paper that articulates a theological theme in a way that connects with and confronts a cultural context.

**RELATED DEGREE OBJECTIVES**

6. Articulate integrated theological and social scientific understanding through such written work as personal theological philosophy of ministry, cultural context analysis, and theological position.
7. Dialogue respectfully, witness effectively, and serve and lead faithfully among diverse cultural and religious communities.

**TEXTS FOR THE COURSE**

Texts are available at Pacific Bookshop and on reserve at Hiebert Library.

**Books**

Berger, Peter L. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. Anchor, 1990.

Einstein, Mara. Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age. Routledge, 2007.

McFague, Sallie. Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age. Fortress, 1987.

Pinnock, Clark H., editor. The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God. Intersity Press, 1994.

Stackhouse, John. Can God Be Trusted: Faith and the Challenge of Evil. Oxford, 2000.

### Articles

Bhandari, Lok M. "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Biblically, Historically, Theologically, Culturally, and in Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Evangelical Review of Theology, Oct. 2002, V. 26, Issue 4, p. 292ff. Accessed via ATLA on the EBSCO database.

Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy*, Jan. 1995, V. 6, Issue 1, pp. 65-78. Accessed online at: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/DETOC/assoc/bowling.html>

### NATURE OF THE COURSE

This course is designed to help students identify and begin to shape answers to the most basic questions regarding contemporary faith and the character of God. It will function as a seminar course requiring discussion and interaction based on a series of reading assignments. As such, it provides an excellent opportunity for student input into the learning process.

### REQUIREMENTS – See attached schedule for due dates.

1. **Class participation.** Students are expected to read the assigned texts and come to class with questions/issues for discussion. Regular attendance is expected as well as evidence of preparation for class and appropriate participation in classroom discussions. See schedule for assigned readings.
2. **Reading Journal.** Students are expected to prepare a one-page, single-spaced journal report for each reading assignment, to be handed in at the end of class on the day the book/assignment is to be discussed. Journal entries should identify the thesis of the book or reading assignment, demonstrate critical reflection on the material, and identify a question for further exploration or discussion.
3. **Immersion/reflection.** Students are expected to identify and acquaint themselves with a sub-culture of the larger society. Through personal observation, interviews, and research, the student is to identify the basic demographics of the group, as well as rituals or behaviors that give the group meaning. The student is expected to write a one-page description for presentation to the class. (10-12 hour project)
4. **Memoir or novel review/presentation.** In addition to the assigned readings, each student will choose and read a spiritual autobiography, memoir or novel for presentation to the class. (Title to be approved by professor.) The written review (2-3 pages) should explore how the author addresses the issues or questions raised by the assigned readings.
5. **Research paper.** A major research paper (20-22 pages) will be prepared for presentation in class. (Sample topics are listed below.) Papers will be graded on originality, comprehensiveness, evidence of critical research, level of engagement and reflection on the topic, clarity and conformity to standard form and style.
6. **Presentation.** Each student will present their paper to the class and lead a discussion of the subject or issue studied. Student presentations should demonstrate preparedness,

creativity, as well as the ability to communicate subject matter clearly and effectively.  
See schedule for presentation dates.

## GRADING

A detailed statement of MBBS **grading standards** is printed in the current Academic Handbook and serves as the basis for all class evaluations. Written material will be graded on clarity of thought, comprehensiveness and originality. Plagiarism is unacceptable and work deemed as such will be graded F. **Absences/class participation** will be noted and may affect the student's final grade. Percentage points may be deducted for **work turned in late**. "Late" is defined as any time after I have graded the class assignment.

Class participation	+/- 5%
Immersion/reflection	15%
Journal	30%
Review	10%
Research paper	25%
Presentation	15%

## POLICY NOTES

**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, accommodation for disabilities, incomplete course work, extensions, dates for changing registration, non-discriminatory and inclusive language, appeals, 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 the professor or consult the Registrar.

## LIST OF POSSIBLE PAPER TOPICS

Pluralism in contemporary society  
Polytheism and modernity  
Post-enlightenment culture  
The existence of God/Gods  
The nature of the identity crisis in modernity  
Idolatry in contemporary society  
Western atheism and Christian faith  
Modernity and the eclipse of the transcendent  
The modern quest for presence  
The modern quest for meaning  
God and history  
The nature of theological language  
The sacred in modern or post-modern culture  
Searching for God in popular culture

## SCHEDULE AND OUTLINE

*Reading assignments highlighted in bold.*

<b>August 26</b>	Introduction	
<b>September 2</b>	<b>Putnam, <u>Bowling Alone</u>*</b>	<i>Exploring the shape of our cultural context.</i>
<b>September 9</b>	<b>Berger, <u>Sacred Canopy</u>*</b>	<i>Understanding the function of religious expression</i>
<b>September 16</b>	Immersion presentation	<i><u>Immersion/reflection due for presentation</u></i>
<b>September 23</b>	<b>Bhandari, <u>Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries</u>*</b>	<i>Evangelicalism as subculture</i>
<b>September 30</b>	<b>Einstein, <u>Brands of Faith</u>*</b>	<i>Religious belief in a consumer culture</i>
<b>October 7</b>	NO CLASS	<i>Intensive Week</i>
<b>October 14</b>	<b>McFague, <u>Models of God</u>*</b>	<i>Constructing theology; language and images of God</i>
<b>October 21</b>	Religion and God in the Media	<i>Contemporary portrayals of God in popular culture</i>
<b>October 28</b>	<b><u>Pinnock, The Openness of God</u>*</b>	<i>Exploring God's work in history &amp; with people</i>
<b>November 4</b>	TBA	<i><u>Please confirm paper topic and presentation date</u></i>
<b>November 11</b>	<b>Stackhouse, <u>Can God be Trusted?</u>*</b>	<i>The problem of evil</i>
<b>November 18</b>	Student Presentations	
<b>November 25</b>	Student Presentations	<i>To be assigned</i>
<b>December 2</b>	Student Presentations	.
<b>December 9</b>	Personal Reflections / Book Reviews	<i>Contemporary explorations of faith</i>
<b>December 12</b>	<i>Last day for acceptance of papers.</i>	.

**\*Journal Entries due**