

Roman Catholic Apologetics: The Difficult Questions

Wednesday 6-8:30pm on campus or online

MA / M.Div Syllabus

Teaching team:

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# Overview of Topic:

Apologetics has traditional involved a defence or plea for tolerance, as in early Christianity, or a defense of doctrine in the face of critique. It typically involves two distinct conceptual frameworks and an attempt to mediate between the two. For example, Tertullian and Justin Martyr seek to invoke classical precepts within Roman culture in order to plea for tolerance towards Christians (Tertullian) or to defend the rationality of Christian truth claims (Justin).

Such a mediation may not have been possible in late modernity. Scholars as diverse as Alasdair McIntyre[[1]](#footnote-1), John Milbank[[2]](#footnote-2), Charles Taylor[[3]](#footnote-3), and Catherine Pickstock[[4]](#footnote-4) have all questioned whether a shared discourse (“tradition of enquiry”, for McIntyre) exists to enable a coherent dialog between Christianity and secular modernity. As such, while classical presuppositions facilitated Justin and Tertullian, while Platonism facilitated dialog between Origen and diverse traditions in Alexandria, and Aristotelianism mediated between figures such as Aquinas and Avicenna, for such scholars Kantian modernity has emerged as a rejection of Classical Christian suppositions about knowledge and the nature of the real, such that coherent dialog between Religion and the secular has not been possible. This “impossibility” has been most visible in religious traditions least coherent with the western enlightenment project, such as Islam, and, as will be the subject matter for this course, Roman Catholic Christianity.

Late 20th century reconsiderations of both the secular and Christianity may contribute to making dialog more possible than it has been. Continental, post colonial, and other philosophical perspectives have shaped understandings of secularity while Milbank, Pickstock and others have made possible a reinvigoration and reinterpretation of many pre modern forms of Christian thought. Has this (post/hyper/etc) modern context implications for 21st century Roman Catholic apologetics? Have shifts in both philosophical and theological “norms” made possible a discourse that might not have been possible even 50 years ago? This course aims to explore such questions. It aims to do so by focussing on the most “difficult” questions for Roman Catholic theology in late modernity, the very questions in relation to which there seemed a concrete impasse between Roman Catholic theology and secular modernity. Pollinating these questions by recent philosophical and theological research, we will ask whether a 21st century Catholic apologetics is possible by focussing specifically on these most “difficult questions”?

# Learning Outcomes:

1. All students will become familiar with the arguments both for and against the traditional Roman Catholic positions in the areas discussed.
2. All students will engage patristic and medieval understandings of core areas in theological thought, witnessing how more recent Roman Catholic thought (in the past few centuries) often offers accounts quite distinct from these patristic and medieval sources.
3. Roman Catholic students will engage these “difficult questions”, equipped with new resources from recent philosophy and theology that may offer paths beyond the secular/theological impasse.
4. Students will come to a deeper appreciation of the sophistication and nuance of the pre and post modern positions in these areas and become better able to speak about them with coherence in public contexts.

# Readings:

Each week the readings will be placed on an online folder from where it can be read, downloaded or printed. The readings will involve one core text and supplemental Church documents sections of the Catechism. Other readings which you may find useful will also be available in this online folder. It is expected that students in the M.A. and M.Div streams will extensively engage the additional material.

# Evaluation:

**Mid term essay (2000 - 3000 words) (35%)** - This essay will be on some aspect of the material covered before Wed Nov 6th (at which time the essay is due). The goal is for you yourself to decide the title based upon an aspect of the course that has proved interesting to you by that stage. Essay titles should be cleared with me before submission

**Final essay (3000-5000 words including footnotes but not including bibliography) (65%)** - The final essay, is to be submitted by Monday December 9th. It can be on any aspect completed in the course. The title, again, can be worked out in dialogue with me.

I’d like all essays to be in 12 pt font in whichever font you’re comfortable with (not choosing one of the regular ones, Times New Roman, Cambria, Helvetica and so on, is not advised). Your paper should have footnotes and a bibliography. It should be double or 1.5 spaced.

**Week outline**

Wed Sept 11th General introduction of the key themes: This will be the short, uninteresting, but really important class. Our goal is that everyone will come to know the goals of the course and how we aim to achieve them.

Wed Sept 18th Concrete: In this week we will have an overview of the late modern, western, secular context in which we are. Our goal is to get a sense of the modes of thought operative today. The positions modern people tend to adopt on key issues are based on underlying assumptions. Often dialog about moral issues needs first to be a dialog about the underlying assumptions. Our reading is Chapter One of Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal - Introduction and p. 1-24

Wed Sept 25th How to break concrete: For the catholic Christian perspective to have any chance of convincing people the dominant approach to knowledge must be contested. Here we seek to contest it by showing some of the pathologies in this approach to knowledge. The reading is Chapter One of Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal page 24 to page 42.

Wed October 2nd An Alternative understanding of the real. The catholic Christian understanding of reality differs from that dominant in our age in that it sees God as the most real. Thus, reality refers more properly to God and only then to existing things. We need to be able to understand and express this understanding of reality. The readings are Chapter Two of Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal page 1 -17 and the Summa Theologica 1, Q.3 (in the folder) and a section from Augustine’s confessions Chapter 7, also in the folder.

Wed October 9th Participating in reality. For catholic Christians we participate in reality (God) through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. All the moral theology that will follow in this course depends upon this. Our readings are Chapter Two from Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal p. 18-46 and Augustine on the Trinity, p. 119-224

Wed October 16th Sex and Sexuality. We are spending two weeks on sex and sexuality as few areas of contemporary life see a greater juxtaposition between catholic Christian thought and the dominant secular ideology. In this week we will explore some of the foundations for the secular approach and begin our unpacking of the traditional catholic Christian approach. Our readings are Chapter Three of Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal p. 1-24, Augustine’s Confessions, book 2 and Question 153 from Aquinas’ Summa 2:2. All these readings are in the folder.

October 30th Good sex. Apologetics, as we’re understanding it, involves both calling into question the assumptions of those who attack catholic Christian positions and articulating the beauty and coherence of the catholic Christian position. Our readings are from Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal, Chapter Three page 24=46 and the selections from St Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the body. All, as always are in the folder.

Nov 6th Abortion : Isn’t the Roman Catholic position on abortion not one more example of the Catholic Church’s millennia old war on women? How can the Church’s defence of the unborn make sense in a postmodern capitalist world?

Nov 13th Euthanasia : Wouldn’t a loving God want people to be able to choose when to stop suffering? Isn’t the Catholic position another legacy of ancient foolishness that has no place in the modern world? The reading is a Chapter from Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal, which is available on the folder.

Nov 20th Transubstantiation : How can Catholics expect people to accept the idea that the bread and wine at communion becomes the real body and blood of Jesus Christ? The reading is a Chapter from Resisting the Tyranny of the Banal and Question 75 from Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologica 3

Nov 27th Mary / All male priesthood / Suffering of innocents : This week looks at a host of frequently heard charges against the Catholic Church and analyses them suggesting responses. Texts TBD

December 4th Sexual abuse : The Sexual Abuse crisis has cost the Catholic Church massive amounts of credibility. In this week we will acknowledge this, interpret it and look for opportunities for reform and renewal in light of the genuine pathologies in the Church which the sexual abuse crisis has revealed. The reading is two chapters from the book “Still Unhealed” both are available on the folder.

Plagiarism Policy

Plagiarism is a serious breach of integrity both for the individual and the institution, and it requires serious sanctions. The School has a policy on plagiarism which is also understood to include unacknowledged collaboration among students on assignments. Various sanctions may be invoked, ranging from reduction in mark to failure on the assignment or course to suspension from studies. There is provision for appeal. In cases of sanctions involving more than failure of the assignment in question the student will meet with his / her Faculty Advisor and the Dean before any penalties are assessed. Copies of this policy may be obtained through the Academic Office or accessed in the Student Handbook.

Late Submission of assignments

Assignments are due at the beginning of the class on the dates specified above. I must be informed in advance if work is going to be submitted late. For assignments submitted late, graduated penalties could be levied. Instructors may make exceptions to the above for compassionate reasons, but these do not include claims of excessive workload. Instructors are not obliged to accept work submitted late.

Grading System

A+ (93-100) ‘Exceptional’ All the attributes of an A quality paper coupled with the kind of analysis that distinguishes a truly special theological talent.

1. (87-93) ‘First Class’ A comprehensive grasp of the subject matter, outstanding evidence of original thought; sound critical evaluation of the material; an excellent ability to organize, analyse, synthesize and to express thoughts; mastery of an extensive knowledge base.

A-(80-86) ‘Excellent’ All the qualities of a B-level performance and an excellent capacity for original, creative, and/or logical thinking; excellent ability to organize, analyse, synthesize, and integrate ideas; broad knowledge base in the subject matter.

B+ (77-79) ‘Good’ A good performance with substantial knowledge of the subject matter; a very good understanding of the relevant issues; familiarity with relevant literature and techniques; good ability to organize, analyse, and examine the material in a constructive and critical manner.

1. (73-76) ‘Acceptable’ A generally adequate performance with a good knowledge of the subject matter; a fair understanding of relevant issues; some ability to work with relevant literature and techniques; some ability to develop solutions to difficult problems related to the subject material.

B- (70-72) ‘Marginally Acceptable’ Some familiarity with the subject material; some understanding. Satisfactory understanding of relevant issues; attempts to solve moderately difficult problems related to the subject material in a critical and analytical manner are only partially successful.

C (60-69) ‘Unsatisfactory’ A C grade indicates unsatisfactory academic performance. At the discretion of the instructor, supplemental work may be negotiated to upgrade the mark to a B range. A student who receives a C in this course, as a Foundation course, must repeat the course to achieve a B- or better, and cannot use the C grade to meet prerequisite requirements for advanced courses. If the student repeats one of these courses and receives a B- or better, the previous C grade remains on the transcript but is not counted towards the total of C grades that may lead to academic dismissal. Credit will be given only once for any course.

F (0-59) ‘Failure’ Student has not grasped subject matter; does not understand issues involved; cannot work with relevant literature.

1. 1. Alasdair C MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Pub, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Simon Oliver and John Milbank, eds., The Radical Orthodoxy Reader (London: Routledge, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)