**IST 2206 Progressive Christianity (Online)**

**Interterm 2020**

Instructor: Antony Alumkal

Office Phone: 303-765-3131

Email: [aalumkal@iliff.edu](mailto:aalumkal@iliff.edu)

**Course Description**

A critical examination of the popular religious movement known as Progressive Christianity. Students will learn how the movement builds on the traditions of American liberal Christianity and Unitarianism, how its leaders market themselves to the public, its contradictory relationship to evangelicalism, and how it continues to reflect white, middle-class privilege.

**Objectives**

The course aims to familiarize students with the following aspects of the Progressive Christianity: 1) its historical and sociological context, 2) the arguments of its most popular writers, 3) critiques leveled against it, and 4) how it operates as a social movement. Additionally, students are encouraged to arrive at their own theological and normative evaluation of this tradition.

**Contacting Me**

Email (not Canvas) is the best way to contact me during the week. If you have lengthy issues to discuss, we can set up a time for a phone conversation or Zoom meeting.

**Course Readings**

1. The following books are required texts for the course. (Note that inexpensive used copies are readily available online.)

Borg, Marcus J. 2003*. The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. San Francisco: HarperSanFranciso.

Evans, Christopher. 2010. *Liberalism without Illusions: Renewing an American Christian Tradition*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Spong, John Shelby. 2018. *Unbelievable: Why neither Ancient Creeds nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today*. San Francisco: HarperOne.

2. The following readings are available as pdfs on the Canvas site:

Edles, Laura Desfor. 2013. “Contemporary Progressive Christianity and Its Symbolic Ramifications.” *Cultural Sociology* 7: 3-22.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. 1996. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. New York: HarperOne. Chapter 1.

Tinker, Tink. 2013. “Why I Do not Believe in a Creator.” Pp. 167-179 in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, edited by Steve Heinrichs. Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press.

3. The following reading is available for free download:

Little, Anita. 2017. “A Progressive Christian Conference with an All-White Lineup: What Could Go Wrong?” *Religion Dispatches*.

<http://religiondispatches.org/a-progressive-christian-conference-with-an-all-white-lineup-what-could-go-wrong/>

Long, Thomas. 2017. “The Binary Christianity of Marcus Borg.” *The Christian Century*. <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/binary-christianity-of-marcus-borg>

Sachs, William. 2018. Review of *Unbelievable: Why neither Ancient Creeds nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today* by John Shelby Spong. *Reading Religion*. <https://readingreligion.org/books/unbelievable>

**Assignments**

Iliff’s previous interterm courses all met in person for large blocks of time over one or two weeks. Given current realities, we will use a combination of synchronous Zoom sessions and asynchronous discussions on Canvas.

1. Students are responsible for attending the four synchronous Zoom sessions. Please have the assigned readings finished beforehand. I will post a written lecture in Canvas that will provide some background information about the readings and some questions that we can include in our discussion. Come with any additional questions or issues related to the readings that you would like to discuss.

2. Following the Zoom session will be a discussion assignment on Canvas. Please make a post engaging the readings in some way. Appropriate posts would include (but not be limited to): 1) discussing something that you have learned, 2) offering a comparison with your previous experience (“that reminds me of…”), 3) raising a question that you have about the readings, or 4) discussing your areas of agreement or disagreement with the readings.

After you have made your initial post, please make a substantive response to another student’s post. Appropriate response posts would include (but not be limited to) the following: 1) answering a question posed by your classmate, 2) discussing your agreement or disagreement with the post, 3) asking a question about the post, 4) relating the post to your experience. Deadlines for the two posts will be listed in Canvas.

3. Students are required to write a final research paper, which will be due after the synchronous meetings have ended. Find a cultural product (book, article, website, video, etc.) produced by an individual or organization that identifies as Progressive Christian. Discuss how the theological ideas in this product compare to those in the American liberal tradition as described by Evans. Then discuss how the theological ideas compare to those of Borg, Spong, and their critics. Approximately 8 pages, not including bibliography. Due date: December 21.

**Discussion Group Conduct**

The course should involve a free exchange of ideas, which means you are welcome to express your viewpoints and to disagree with the viewpoints of the instructor or your fellow students. This should always be done in a way that shows respect for the other people involved in the course. If you are not sure how to disagree without coming across as disrespectful, try saying, “I would like to respectfully disagree with that.” Many students like saying, “Let me push back on that…” which also works. Posts that fail to adhere to Iliff’s standards of conduct will be marked down.

**Grading:**

Zoom Participation: 25%

Discussion Posts: 25%

Final Paper: 50%

Students may take the course pass/fail. You do *not* need to provide an explanation for why you are choosing this option.

My assumption is that students in a masters program can be expected to produce above average academic work. Therefore, the modal grade I assign is B+. A paper will earn a B+ if it 1) fulfills all of the requirements of the assignment and 2) demonstrates that the student has a solid (though not necessarily flawless) understanding of the con­cepts in the course readings and lectures. A paper will earn a grade higher than a B+ if it fulfills the assignment and demonstrates exceptional insight into the course concepts. A paper will earn a grade of B or B- if there are minor to moderate shortcomings in either fulfilling the assignment or demonstrating understanding of course concepts. Grades below B- are reserved for papers with major shortcomings in either area.

Students will receive full credit (an A) for active participation in the Zoom sessions and for completing their Canvas posting according to the guidelines.

**Course Schedule**

1. Synchronous Session 1: Monday, November 30, 1:00-2:30 pm (Mountain Time)

Readings: Evans—*Liberalism without Illusions*

2. Canvas Forum 1: Tuesday, December 1

Additional comments and questions about Evans (detailed directions in Canvas).

3. Synchronous Session 2: Thursday, December 3, 1:00-2:30 pm

Readings: Borg—*The Heart of Christianity*

Long—“The Binary Christianity of Marcus Borg”

Tinker—“Why I Do not Believe in a Creator”

Please watch the following short video prior to the session:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPmPsTAMZKM&t=2s>

4. Canvas Forum 2: Friday, December 4

Additional comments and questions about Borg and his critics.

5. Synchronous Session 3: Monday, December 7, 1:00-2:30 pm

Readings: Spong—*Unbelievable*

Sachs—Book Review of *Unbelievable*

Please watch the following short video prior to the session:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJICIGQl0JU>

6. Canvas Forum 3: Tuesday, December 8

Additional comments and questions about Spong.

7. Synchronous Session 4: Thursday, December 10, 1:00-2:30 pm

Readings: Johnson—*The Real Jesus* (Chapter 1)

Edles—“Contemporary Progressive Christianity and Its Symbolic Ramifications”

Little—“A Progressive Christian Conference with an All-White Lineup”

<https://progressivechristianity.org/the-8-points/>

<https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

8. Canvas Forum 4: Friday, December 11

Additional comments and questions about the Progressive Christianity movement.

9. Final paper due December 21, 11:59 pm Denver time.