The term “contemporary political theologies” could refer to a wide range of approaches, not all of them Christian and not all concerned with left-liberal methods and priorities. This course will not survey all such approaches, but rather offer a focused introduction to one subset that has been especially influential for the past half-century, sometimes known by the (slightly dated) term, “liberation theologies.” This is an umbrella category for several forms of religious (mainly Christian) belief and practice that start from contexts of social injustice and seek to transform them radically in the interests of oppressed people. Such theologies systematically interpret Christian teachings and institutions in light of these commitments; they accent the socio-political dimensions of Christian faith and its capacities for cultural criticism.

The best known of such theologies developed in Latin America starting in the 1950s and sometimes played major political roles, for example in the Nicaraguan revolution. Several North American variants have been equally important: black theology, Christian feminism and other feminist and/or queer spiritualities, theologies of solidarity and resistance among the white middle class, and related movements addressing other communities and issues. Such approaches have major disagreements among themselves (extremely acute ones between Christian and post-Christian feminists), so that crosscurrents and innovations within the movement since the 1970s are complex. Nevertheless their momentum has continued in a loose alliance that forms an influential minority in Catholic, liberal Protestant, and some evangelical circles.

This course will explore the historical development and current concerns of these theologies in the Americas, with primary attention to Latin American, African-American, and feminist variations. We will use a range of disciplinary methods, including not only systematic theology, but also history, sociology, literary analysis, autobiography, and cultural criticism.

Readings:
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
Marcus Borg, *Putting Away Childish Things*
Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*
Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking About God*
Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*

Supplementary Readings for Religious Studies 305

(All books are in the bookstore; other readings will be available at http://online.utk.edu)

Assignments and Evaluation:

The major expectations are a careful reading of the assignments, thoughtful reflection about how they relate to each other, and active participation in the classroom. Lectures and discussions in class will presuppose a reading of the texts, not substitute for it. Since everyone benefits when people come prepared for class and we hold ourselves to high standards, I will use study questions...
and unannounced in-class writing to test your preparation and monitor the pulse of our course. There are no exams, but students will keep journals to demonstrate engagement with core readings and to shape their own critical responses to issues we will address. Each student will read one book-length study and report on it in a (required) short paper and (optional) class presentation.

Due to distractions introduced by text messaging and internet browsing, cell phones and laptops may not be used in our classroom. After three unexcused absences, each additional absence reduces your grade by 2%. Late writing is lowered one letter grade per day unless you make other arrangements in advance. Evaluation is weighted as follows.

Day to Day Classroom participation 25%
Study questions and unannounced in-class writing or quizzes (15%)
General engagement and contribution to discussions (10%)
Journals (graded for breadth, depth, and engagement as discussed below) 40%
Autobiographical introduction (10%)
First and second installments (15% each)
Paper on West and Welch (which is also the third installment of the journal) 15%
Individual Research Reports 20%

Agenda and Assignments (Subject to Revision)

Overtures: Contexts for Reflection and Approaches to Christianity

8/22  R  Introductions

8/28  T  Opening Queries
Read: Soelle, chapter 1 from Theology for Skeptics, Borg, 1-75.

8/30  R  What is a Valid Biblical Interpretation? Who Decides?
Read: Borg, 76-153; Borg and Wright, from The Meaning of Jesus.
Recommended: Excerpts from the Bible.

9/4  T  More About Enlightenment Challenges to Theology
Read: Borg, 154-213; Spong, Christianity Must Change or Die, chapter 1.
Recommended: Capetz, “What Beginning Students Need to Know…”
Dr. Hulsether gone; we will screen For the Bible Tells Me So: details TBA.

9/6  R  What Are Churches For? Do they Have Any Place for Women and LGBT’s?
Read: Borg, 251-338; Nelson, “Homosexuality & the Church”; Daly, “Sin Big”

From Borg’s World to Menchú’s World

9/11  T  From Borg’s World to Menchú’s World
Read: First half of Menchú book (advice for places to skim TBA)

9/13  R  More on Menchú
Read: Second half of Menchú book (advice for places to skim TBA)
Autobiographical introduction to journal due
9/18  T  Debates About Menchú’s book  
Read:  Grandin, “Heaven That They Burned”; Stoll, “Protestant Reformation”

*Latin American Liberation Theologies*

9/20  R  Toward a General Model of Liberation Theologies I  
Read:  Soelle, chapter 1-2.

9/25  T  A Classic Argument by Gustavo Gutierrez  
Read:  Gutierrez, excerpts from *The Power of the Poor in History*

9/27  R  A Classic Theological and Sociological Analysis by Christian Smith  
Read:  Smith, from *Emergence of Liberation Theology  
Dr. Hulsether gone; we will screen Romero or Sankofa: details TBA.

10/2  T  Questions about Legacies of Liberation Theology and Use of Marxian Analysis  
Read:  Levine, “Premature Reports of Death,” “Turner, “Illusions and Liberation”

*Thinking about the Languages of Creation, Sin, and Grace*

10/4  R  Toward a General Model of Liberation Theologies II  
Read:  Soelle, chapters 3, 4.

10/9  T  Creation and Sin in Liberation Theologies.  
Read:  Soelle, chapters 5, 6, 8.  
*First installment of journals due.*

10/11  HAPPY FALL BREAK

*African-American Theologies*

10/16  T  Read:  Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

10/18  R  African American Religion and Black Theology  
Read:  Soelle, chapter 9; Cone, “God is Black”  
*Please turn in a page about your tentative plans for an individual project.*

10/23  T  Interpretations of Jesus and the Cross in Black Theology  
Read:  Soelle, chapters 10-11.

10/25  R  From Black Theology to the Prophetic Pragmatism of Cornel West  
Read:  West, “Black Theology as Critique of Capitalist Civilization”

*Feminist Theologies*

10/30  T  Orientation to Feminist Theologies  
Read:  Read:  Soelle, chapter 7; Harrison, “Reflection in the Struggle…”
Placing Welch in Wider Conversations
Read: Welch, pp. 11-19 and chapter 6; Ruether, “Black Vs. Feminist Theology.”
Second installment of journals due.

Welch and Soelle on Ethics and Faith Amid Deep Cultural Differences
Read: Welch, chapter 7; Harrison, “Soelle as a Pioneering Postmodernist”
Please turn in a paragraph stating your final and specific plan for your project.

Welch and Soelle on the Immanence of the Divine and the “End of Theism.”
Read: Welch, chapter 8; Soelle, chapters 14-15.

The Case of Cornel West Vs. Sharon Welch
Read: West, “Faith, Struggle, Reality” (his review essay on Welch)
Reflection paper on Welch and West due (rubrics will be announced)

Dr. Hulsether gone; we will screen The Camden 28: details TBA.

11/20 and 11/22  NO CLASS:  HAPPY THANKSGIVING

Complex Dialogues Within a Liberation Paradigm

Student Presentations I  (Questions about Ecology? Sexuality?)
Read: TBA (short readings may be added to help spark discussion)

Student Presentations II  (Liberation Theologies in Popular Culture?)
Read: TBA

Student Presentations III  (Wild Card)
Read: TBA

Scheduled Final Exam 12:30 to 2:30:  Final Book Reports Due

The Journal

This course does not presuppose a commitment to Christian faith in any form. Its goal is simply to understand and analyze the claims of a key set of political theologies. However, most liberation theologies are unlike the kinds of modern religious thought that pride themselves on being “objective” and accessible to all people. In contrast, most liberation theologians insist that anyone who claims to “impartially analyze” them is actually revealing that he/she has not understood what they are saying. This is true, according to liberationists, not because the ideal of impartiality is irrelevant—one can be more or less accurate and fair-minded—but because religious thought can only be understood as integrated within concrete communities and life experiences, and it is impossible to be impartial about such things, especially while one’s communities experience acute oppression. Moreover, the meanings of religious concepts change from one context to another: for example, the practical meaning of “sin” or “acts of love” may appear different through the eyes of rich and poor people. This poses a challenge for us, because it means (according to liberationists)
that we cannot understand them solely by reading about them—especially in a university that cannot require the commitments that they presuppose.

To minimize this problem, all participants in this course must agree to reflect critically, through comparison and contrast, on how the social-political standpoints of liberation theologies compare to their own standpoints and how the commitments of liberation theologies compare to their own religious commitments (or lack thereof). In this sense, the class is not a purely objective study. Your work includes making your own standpoints self-conscious and explicit for the purposes of critical analysis. Your grade does not depend on whether you agree or disagree with the authors we will analyze. However, you must agree to dialogue with them about how your social location and commitments affect your analysis. The journal is designed to help you do this.

Your first task is a 3-4 page personal introduction which (1) makes explicit your socio-political standpoint for studying theologies and (2) reflects on the difference between this standpoint and that of key people in the books by Menchú and Borg. Begin by sketching your family history—and your place within it—with attention to social location (e.g. economic class, ethnic identity, etc.), gender roles, and religious practices (or lack of them). There are no right and wrong answers in this part of the assignment because students will have various religious commitments (or lack of them), define their families differently, and have access to diverse information. Be concise and selective; focus on a few issues that you feel comfortable discussing. Then identify the key comparisons and contrasts between yourself and people in the Menchú and Borg books. What do you have in common? Do the contrasts give you a different understanding of the meanings and purposes of Christianity? If Menchú or Borg read your analysis, how would they respond?

In the main installments, you may organize your writing in any way you wish, provided that you accomplish two tasks. First, include analytical writing addressing the core ideas of (a) the key authors in each unit (e.g., Cone/West, Welch, and Soelle) plus (b) at least two shorter readings or films from the unit. I will grade your work for accuracy, clarity, and engagement with central issues of the course. It is not enough to make a list of anecdotes from the books; you must identify the core arguments, then summarize and critique them in your own words, with specific examples. Second, write personal critical responses to the readings. Do you agree or disagree? Why? What related ideas do the authors provoke? Here again we enter a territory where I can grade few answers as simply correct or incorrect, and if I write comments it is to engage you in dialogue. However, I can evaluate your level of effort and your ability to present other people’s ideas in a fair and accurate way. I strongly prefer thoughtful writing with which I disagree, to shallow and sloppy presentations of ideas that I endorse.

In general, strive for an optimum combination of in-depth analysis and comprehensive breadth (some trade-offs are inevitable). Increase the complexity of your ideas during the term, as your journal records a dialogue with a widening set of authors. Imagine yourself participating in a conversation in a room where more and more people keep arriving; as you discuss the ideas of newcomers, maintain your conversation with others in the room. Since this course has no exams, the journal is your main way to show that you have read and understood the assignments. Its final installment is an integrative reflection on Cornel West and Sharon Welch—this is the closest this course comes to a final exam and is weighted accordingly.
Please submit your journal typed, double-spaced, with space for comments in the margins. An approximate minimum length is eight to ten pages per installment, using standard fonts. There is no maximum limit, but please do not go above fifteen pages unless you are certain you have something important to tell me and that you cannot do it without the extra space.

Book Suggestions for Final Projects

Dozens of excellent books on contemporary political theologies did not make the final cut for this course. If you have personal reasons to substitute one of these for a book on our list, please talk with me and I will try to negotiate this; I want everyone to have a chance to explore their primary interest within our general field in some depth. Here is a list, by no means exhaustive, of texts that I recommend as a starting point for selecting a final project. I may be able to suggest others that are better for your particular interests.

Tried and True Top picks:

Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Horizons in Feminist Theology* (recent debates)
John Cobb, *Postmodernism and Public Policy* (process theologies meet justice issues)
James Cone, *God of the Oppressed or For My People* (classic black theology)
Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City* (fundamentalist vs. liberationists) or *Future of Faith*
Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* or *Gyn/Ecology* (classic post-Christian feminist)
Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (debate with new atheists)
Beverly Harrison, *Making the Connections* and/or *Justice in the Making* (socialist feminist)
Anna Peterson, *Being Human* (environmental ethics and liberation)
Rosemary Ruether, *To Change the World* or *Sexism and God Talk* (classic feminist)
Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind* (a memoir) or *The Silent Cry* (on liberation and mysticism)
Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*

Other Contenders:

Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering* (overview of political theologies)
Carol Christ & Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* and/or *Weaving the Visions* (readers)
William Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity American Style*
Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Theology at the End of Modernity* (a range of approaches)
Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red* (classic on Native American religions)
Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society* (economic justice issues in North America)
David Griffin, ed., *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (liberationist meets process)
Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (classic Latin American)
Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left* (rise of liberation theologies from Niebuhrians)
Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin* (queer theologies and LBGT issues)
Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* and/or *Models of God* (ecological issues, liberal method)
Anna Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion* (El Salvador)
Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*
Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and...Christian Ethics*
Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (black feminist)
Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance* or *Prophetic Fragments* (“prophetic pragmatism”)


John Shelby Spong, from *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1998), chapter 1 (chapter 11 is included but optional)


Mary Daly, “Sin Big” *New Yorker* (11/26/96), 76-88.


James Cone, “God is Black” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Harper and Row, 1990), 81-94.


