Christian Theology MPhil module

Theology and Literature: Tragedy

Lent Term

General Description
Tragedy is the artform that raises and processes some of the most painful and perplexing questions of human life, and over the last two centuries has become a focal point for philosophical, ethical, theoretical and theological discussions. This module explores the relationship between tragedy and Christian theology through five seminars. The first two seminars focus on philosophical and doctrinal questions in the work of major 20th century theologians for whom tragedy determinatively shaped their understanding of Christian doctrine: Donald MacKinnon (on ethics and Christology) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (on the Crucifixion and the doctrine of the Trinity). The third seminar explores theological questions through the close reading of a literary text, examining the theme of tragedy and the theology of sacrifice through T.S. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral. The final two seminars explore Shakespearean drama, focusing on the ‘absolute tragedy’ of King Lear, and the theological move ‘beyond tragedy’ in the late Romances, focusing on The Winter’s Tale.

Name of seminar coordinator
Giles Waller

Teaching Provision
5 x 1.5 hour classes

Module Aims
This module aims to introduce students to the interdisciplinary study of religion and literature from a theological perspective, closely examining the work of major theologians who have engaged with tragedy, and engaging with theological questions that arise from the close reading of literary texts.

Module Objectives
By the end of the course, students should be equipped with skills of close analysis of both theological and literary texts. Students should be able to engage both in close reading of literary texts, while also tackling broader theoretical and speculative issues that arise from these texts. They should have developed an understanding of the various literary, philosophical and theological issues raised by tragedy.

Prerequisites (none beyond the entrance requirements for the MPhil)

Senior Seminar
Christian Theology
'D' Society (optional)
Seminar topics

Seminar 1 – Metaphysics, Ethics and the Cross: Donald MacKinnon and tragedy

Set Texts

D.M. MacKinnon, The Problem of Metaphysics, (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), Chapters 1, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Borderlands of Theology, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), Ch. 4

‘Order and Evil in the Gospel’, Ch. 5, ‘Atonement and Tragedy’

Explorations in Theology 5, (London: SCM Press, 1976), Ch. 6, ‘Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time’, Ch. 13 ‘Ethics and Tragedy’


Secondary


Paul Janz, God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking (Cambridge: CUP, 2004)


Hope in Bart’s Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)


Seminar 2 – Hans Urs von Balthasar: Tragedy and the Doctrine of the Trinity

Set Texts


Secondary


Ben Quash, Theology and the Drama of History, (Cambridge: CUP, 2005)


**Seminar 3 – Murder in the Cathedral: Sacrifice and Christian Tragedy**

**Set texts**


**Secondary**


*I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, (tr. James G. Williams), (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001)


**Seminar 4 – King Lear**

**Set texts**

Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Arden edition)


**Secondary**


Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: Violation and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge

**Seminar 5 – Beyond Tragedy? *The Winter’s Tale***

**Set texts**


**Secondary**

Piero Boitani, *The Gospel according to Shakespeare* (Translated by Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff), (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013)


General Bibliography

Primary texts: Greek Tragedy

*Greek Tragedies* (9 Vols.), David Grene & Richmond Lattimore (eds.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

**General and Secondary**


Miguel Beistegui & Simon Sparks (eds.) *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2000)


Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968)


‘Criticism or Construction? The Task of the Theologian’, in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, pp. 3-17.


George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961)


Kevin Taylor & Giles Waller (eds.), *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011)


**Description of assessment**

This module is assessed through a 5,000 word essay. Students may formulate their own title on a suitable topic, within the area of Christian Theology, subject to the approval of the course co-ordinator and the Degree Committee. Students will not be permitted to write on a subject which substantially overlaps with that pursued in the Michaelmas Term.

**Sample Questions**

Essay titles must be agreed with the supervisor and approved by the course co-ordinator and Degree Committee. The following are only intended as a guide for students when approaching the module.

1. ‘Only there is no escape from contingency.’ (Donald MacKinnon) What are the theological implications of construing contingency as tragic?

2. Does an understanding of Christ’s Passion in tragic terms necessitate compromising divine impazzibility?

3. ‘His blood given to buy my life / My blood given to pay for His death / My death for His death’ (*Murder in the Cathedral*). Does tragedy transcend or reinforce the logic of sacrifice?

4. ‘Christianity is anti-tragic, modernism is anti-Christian.’ Does Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* succeed as Christian tragedy?

5. Is ‘Christian tragedy’ an oxymoron?

6. ‘Tragedy enjoins resignation.’ Discuss

7. "To be worst,  
The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,  
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.  
The lamentable change is from the best;  
The worst returns to laughter."

   *(King Lear, IV.1)*

Discuss.

8. ‘Oh, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just.’  

   *(King Lear, III.4)*

What is the relation between *kenosis* and justice in *King Lear?*