

CH-520: THEOLOGY AND SCRIPTURE IN SPIRITUAL CARE PRACTICE

Fall Semester 2026

Hartford International University for Religion and Peace

Course Dates: August 31 to December 16, 2026

Class Meetings: Thursdays, September 3 to December 10, 2026

Time: 7:00 to 9:00 PM Eastern Time

Modality: Synchronous Online

Instructor: Osman Simsek, MAC, BCC

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Office Hours: By appointment. Please email the instructor to schedule a meeting.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines how theology and scripture shape the theory and practice of spiritual care.

People who seek spiritual care often face questions that reach beyond immediate circumstances. They may ask, explicitly or implicitly: Why is this happening? What gives my life meaning? Where is God? What do I believe now? What can I hope for? How should I understand suffering, loss, guilt, death, or forgiveness? Some draw on scripture and religious tradition to respond to these questions. Others draw on philosophy, culture, family, personal experience, or secular and humanist perspectives.

This course explores how people from different religious and nonreligious worldviews reflect on these matters of ultimate concern and how chaplains can respond with theological depth, humility, and professional care.

We will study scriptural interpretation and central theological themes, including the divine, the human person and soul, prophecy, moral struggle, suffering, grief, and meaning-making. We will also explore narrative approaches, contemporary and contextual theologies, and interfaith spiritual care.

Throughout the course, students will examine how their own theology, worldview, social location, and understanding of sacred or meaningful sources shape the way they listen, assess, interpret, and care for others. We will ask not only, “What do I believe?” but also, “How do my beliefs shape the way I see another person?” and “How can I offer care without imposing my own theology on the person I am serving?”

Through seminar discussion, theological reflection, scriptural engagement, narrative work, and case studies, students will develop a working approach to spiritual care that is grounded in their own theological or philosophical commitments while remaining open to people from other traditions, multiple traditions, or no religious tradition.

This course fulfills the following curricular requirements:

- MAC Core Course
- MAIRS: Ministerial Studies, Arts of Ministry

This course does not ask students to adopt a common theological position. It asks students to develop the theological literacy, self-awareness, and pastoral humility necessary to care responsibly for people whose beliefs may be similar to, different from, or entirely outside their own.

The course is taught from a multifaith and professionally grounded chaplaincy perspective, drawing on Islamic, Christian, Jewish, philosophical, and secular sources as particular traditions and resources for theological reflection. The instructor does not claim theological neutrality; rather, the course is designed to teach from a particular tradition and professional location while creating genuine space for other traditions and worldviews.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION OF THE COURSE

Throughout the semester, we will return to one central question:

How does what I believe about God, human beings, suffering, meaning, scripture, and the sacred shape the way I listen, assess, interpret, and care for another person?

This question will guide our readings, class discussions, written reflections, case studies, and final capstone project.

The course will move through four broad movements:

Movement I: The Caregiver and the Theological World

We begin by examining ourselves as caregivers, our social location, our assumptions, and the ways we understand knowledge, scripture, theology, and spiritual care.

Movement II: Theological Foundations of Human Experience

We explore ideas of the divine, the human person and soul, prophetic presence, piety, sin, and moral struggle.

Movement III: Theology in the Face of Suffering and Difference

We turn to the story of Job, known in the Islamic tradition as Ayyub (a.s.), the problem of suffering, grief, loss, narrative, meaning-making, contextual theology, and interfaith care.

Movement IV: Theology in Practice

We bring the course together through case studies, spiritual assessment, theological reflection, care planning, and student capstone presentations.

The purpose of this structure is not to separate theory from practice. Instead, we will repeatedly move between theological ideas and the lived realities of spiritual care.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Interpret sacred texts and theological writings from their own and other religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions with accuracy, critical engagement, and respect, and explain how scripture, philosophy, culture, and lived experience shape the way people respond to questions of ultimate concern.

2. Articulate a working theological, philosophical, or spiritual framework for spiritual care rooted in one's own tradition or worldview (BCCI ITP1), while reflecting on how one's theology, assumptions, social location, and life experience shape one's approach to care (BCCI PIC1/PIC2).
3. Examine how theological and scriptural ideas shape people's understanding of suffering, grief, loss, guilt, hope, forgiveness, death, and meaning, and apply narrative listening and spiritual assessment to real or composite cases, integrating sacred texts, lived experience, and professional judgment into concrete spiritual assessment and care planning (BCCI PPS10).
4. Facilitate a care seeker's own theological, spiritual, philosophical, or existential reflection without imposing the caregiver's beliefs, while recognizing the boundaries between chaplaincy, clergy, therapy, social work, medicine, and other forms of professional care (BCCI PPS8, PIC4/PIC5).
5. Practice offering inclusive, ethical, and respectful spiritual care across multifaith, intrafaith, interfaith, and secular contexts (BCCI PPS1/PPS3, PPS5/PPS6), and communicate theological and pastoral reflection clearly and responsibly in written and spoken form.

REQUIRED READINGS

All required readings will be provided through Canvas, the library, or electronic course reserves as appropriate. Students do not need to purchase books unless they prefer to do so.

Readings are drawn from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and secular or humanist sources. The purpose is not to treat all traditions as interchangeable. Rather, we will learn to engage different traditions with accuracy, respect, and intellectual humility while remaining attentive to the particularity of each tradition.

The readings represent particular traditions and perspectives rather than a single account of theology or spiritual care. Students are invited to engage each source critically, respectfully, and in relation to their own tradition or worldview.

The following books and resources will serve as recurring course texts:

- David Willows and John Swinton, eds., *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000).
- Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, 2nd ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).
- George Fitchett and Steve Nolan, eds., *Case Studies in Spiritual Care: Healthcare Chaplaincy Assessments, Interventions & Outcomes* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018).
- Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *The Syntopicon: An Index to the Great Ideas*, Vols. 1 and 2, 2nd ed. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990).

Additional short readings, including book chapters, articles, sacred texts, encyclopedia entries, and selected literary works, will be assigned throughout the semester and posted on Canvas.

COURSE FORMAT AND LEARNING APPROACH

This is a graduate seminar. The course depends on preparation, presence, dialogue, and reflection.

Our class meetings will include:

- Short instructor presentations
- Close reading of theological and scriptural texts
- Small-group and whole-class discussion

- Theological reflection
- Narrative exercises
- Case analysis
- Spiritual assessment practice
- Peer feedback
- Reflection on chaplaincy practice

Students are expected to come to class having completed the assigned readings and prepared to participate.

The goal is not simply to learn what theologians, religious traditions, or scholars have said. The goal is to develop the ability to think theologically in the presence of another person.

A SIMPLE FRAMEWORK FOR THE COURSE

Throughout the semester, we will repeatedly return to the following movement:

Theology and worldview → Sacred or meaningful sources → Interpretation → Listening and assessment → Pastoral response

When we encounter a theological concept or sacred text, we will ask:

1. What does this tradition, text, or theological perspective say?
2. What does it reveal about human experience?
3. How might it shape the way a chaplain listens to and understands another person?
4. What are the ethical possibilities and limits of bringing this framework into spiritual care?

This framework is intended to help students move from abstract theological knowledge toward reflective and responsible chaplaincy practice.

In spiritual care, scripture and sacred texts are resources that may be meaningful to the care seeker. Their use is guided by the care seeker's own beliefs, needs, consent, and context, not by the chaplain's desire to provide a religious answer.

COURSE SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

Week	Date	Topic
1	September 3	The Caregiver and the Theological World: Introductions and Course Overview
2	September 10	Scripture, Knowledge, and Hermeneutics
3	September 17	Theology, Worldview, Spirituality, and Spiritual Care
4	September 24	The Transcendent and Images of the Divine
5	October 1	The Human Person, the Soul, and Spiritual Assessment
6	October 8	The Prophetic Voice in Spiritual Care

7	October 15	Sin, Piety, and Moral Struggle
8	October 22	Theodicy I: The Story of Job (Ayyub) in Scripture
9	October 29	Theodicy II: From Doctrine to Meaning-Making, Grief, and Loss
10	November 5	Sacred Story: Narrative and Theological Reflection
11	November 12	Contemporary and Contextual Theologies
12	November 19	Theological Difference, Humility, and Interfaith Care
—	November 26	No Class: Thanksgiving and Reading Week
13	December 3	Case Studies: Integrating Theology, Assessment, and Care
14	December 10	Capstone Presentations and Course Wrap-Up

WEEKLY SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Readings should be completed before the class meeting for which they are assigned. The reading assignments are intentionally selective. Students are not expected to read the four recurring course texts in their entirety. Selected chapters, sections, and case studies are assigned when they directly support the theological, hermeneutical, and pastoral questions of the week.

The course readings combine practical theology, theological scholarship, sacred texts, philosophical reflection, literary works, and clinical case studies. The purpose of the reading assignments is not to maximize the number of pages students read. Rather, the readings are designed to help students move between theological ideas, sacred or meaningful sources, lived experience, and professional spiritual care.

The four recurring course texts serve as intellectual and methodological resources throughout the semester. They do not replace primary sacred texts or specific theological voices from the religious traditions represented in the course. Where the course focuses on a particular sacred text, theological tradition, or lived experience, those primary and tradition-specific sources remain central.

Reading assignments may occasionally be adjusted during the semester to respond to the class's needs and interests. Any changes will be announced in advance and posted on Canvas.

WEEK 1 | September 3

The Caregiver and the Theological World: Introductions and Course Overview

We begin by getting to know one another and considering what draws us to spiritual care. We will introduce the central questions of the course and begin to identify the theological, spiritual, philosophical, cultural, and personal sources that shape our understanding of care.

We will also examine social location and power. No caregiver enters a spiritual care relationship as a neutral observer. Our traditions, cultures, histories, assumptions, and experiences influence what we notice, what we ask, and how we understand another person's story. As part of this examination, we will briefly consider the classical sociological critique of religion associated with thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber, and Freud, and ask what resources chaplains can draw from within their own traditions — including, for example, Ibn Khaldun's account of social cohesion and the sacred — to engage that critique seriously rather than defensively. This is not a detour from spiritual care; it is part of understanding the intellectual challenges that have shaped modern approaches to religion and spiritual care, as well as the resources different traditions bring to those conversations.

The guiding question for this week is:

| *Who am I when I enter a spiritual care relationship?*

Required Preparation

- Read the complete course syllabus carefully, including the course description, learning objectives, weekly schedule, assignments, assessment methods, and capstone project.
- Come to class prepared to identify one or two questions about the course that you hope to explore during the semester.
- Reflect on your own theological, philosophical, cultural, social, and personal location as a spiritual caregiver or emerging spiritual care professional.

Required Reading

- Nancy J. Ramsay, "Analyzing and Engaging Asymmetries of Power: Intersectionality as a Resource for Practices of Care," in *Pastoral Theology and Care*, ed. Nancy J. Ramsay (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 149–170.
- Doehring: Introduction ("Introducing an Intercultural Approach"), pp. xiii–xxviii

In-Class Focus

- Course orientation and expectations
- Personal and theological location
- The meaning of "care"
- Power and professional authority
- The caregiver's assumptions
- The reductionist critique of religion, and theological responses from within tradition
- Introduction to the central question of CH-520

WEEK 2 | September 10

Scripture, Knowledge, and Hermeneutics

How does a community understand a text as sacred or authoritative?

This week introduces basic questions of hermeneutics and knowledge. We will consider how people interpret scripture and how caregivers can engage sacred texts responsibly in spiritual care.

We will also begin to ask:

What do I know, how do I know it, and what are the limits of what I can know when I care for another person?

The purpose is not to turn students into biblical or Qur'anic scholars in one week. Rather, it is to develop humility and responsibility when engaging sacred texts in the lives of others.

This week provides the interpretive foundation for the questions we will explore next: how theology, spirituality, worldview, and spiritual care are understood and practiced in different traditions.

Required Readings

- Mortimer J. Adler, The Syntopicon, Vol. 2, "Religion," pp. 466–478.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Scripture."
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Hermeneutics."
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Bible."
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Torah."
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Qur'an."
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Upanishad"

In-Class Focus

- Scripture and sacred authority
- Hermeneutics
- Interpretation and context
- The limits of knowledge
- Responsible use of sacred texts in care
- The difference between interpreting a text and listening to a person

WEEK 3 | September 17

Theology, Worldview, Spirituality, and Spiritual Care

What is theology? What is spirituality? What is spiritual care?

This week compares religious, theological, philosophical, and secular understandings of these concepts. We will consider how theology shapes meaning-making and how spiritual care differs from other forms of professional support.

We will also begin to distinguish between the chaplain's own theological framework and the worldview of the person receiving care.

The guiding question is:

How can I bring my own theological framework into care without making my care seeker carry it?

Required Readings

- Mortimer J. Adler, The Syntopicon, Vol. 2, "Theology," pp. 696–702.
- David Willows and John Swinton: Introduction ("The Spiritual Dimension of Pastoral Care"), E-book pages 12-18.

- Hamza Yusuf, *The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi*, Introduction, pp. 13–24.
- Richard Norman, *On Humanism*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2012), Chapter 1 (Introduction).
- Carrie Doehring: Glossary ("Embedded Theology," "Espoused Theology," and "Lived Theology"), pp. 187, 189.

In-Class Focus

- Theology and spirituality
- Religious and secular frameworks
- The distinction between espoused theology and lived theology
- The chaplain's theological identity
- Spiritual care as professional practice
- Bringing one's own theological framework into care without imposing it.

WEEK 4 | September 24

The Transcendent and Images of the Divine

How do human beings speak about God, the Divine, or the Transcendent?

This week explores different ways religious traditions speak about divine presence, absence, mystery, and transcendence. We will introduce apophatic and cataphatic approaches and consider how images of God shape the experience of suffering, hope, prayer, and care.

We will also consider how chaplains encounter people who understand God differently from the chaplain, who have changed their understanding of God, or who do not believe in God.

The guiding question is:

What happens when a person's image of God is disrupted by suffering?

Required Readings

- Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Ballantine Books, 1993), Introduction, pp. xvii–xxiii.
- Edward Feser, "What is Classical Theism?," in Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons, eds., *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 9–22.
- Carrie Doehring: *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, pp. 102–104 ("A Theology of Broken Symbols").
- Samuel Lebens, "Classical Theism and Jewish Conceptions of God," in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, ed. Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 167–189.
- David Willows and John Swinton: Part Three, Chapter 11 (Swinton: "Friendship in community"), pp. 102–106.

In-Class Focus

- Divine presence and absence
- Apophatic and cataphatic theology

- Images of God
- Broken or disrupted theological symbols
- Relational presence and care
- Sacred presence in pluralistic settings
- Care for people whose beliefs differ from our own

WEEK 5 | October 1

The Human Person, the Soul, and Spiritual Assessment

How do different traditions understand the human person? What do we mean by “soul”? How does a chaplain recognize spiritual distress without assuming that every form of distress is religious?

This week examines theological and philosophical understandings of the human person and the soul. We will consider how religious traditions describe the inner life and how these ideas may influence approaches to spiritual care, and we will pair a classical Islamic account of the soul’s discipline (tazkiyat al-nafs) with a foundational text of the modern chaplaincy movement, Henri Nouwen’s image of the wounded healer, to ask what a fuller theological anthropology of care might look like when these voices are read together. We will also briefly consider the development of pastoral care as a modern discipline through figures such as Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner, placing their approaches in conversation with Islamic and other theological understandings of the human person and spiritual care.

We will also introduce the FICA spiritual assessment framework as one practical tool for exploring a person’s spiritual history, beliefs, sources of meaning, importance, community, and how these dimensions may relate to care.

FICA is introduced this week as one practical framework for spiritual assessment, not as a formula that replaces attentive listening. It is a structure that can help chaplains listen more intentionally and recognize spiritual resources and concerns that might otherwise remain unexplored, while remaining secondary to attentive presence, narrative listening, and clinical judgment. Students will apply this framework directly in the Week 6 FICA Practice Exercise.

The guiding question is:

How can I understand what gives this person meaning, strength, connection, and hope without imposing my own assumptions?

Required Readings

- Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart*, pp. 75–78.
- Mostafa al-Badawi, *Man and the Universe: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 48–57.
- Jonathan Omer-Man, *The Soul of the Matter: A Jewish-Kabbalistic Perspective*, pp. 6–10.
- Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *On Disciplining the Soul and On Breaking the Two Desires: Books XXII and XXIII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din)*, trans. T. J. Winter (Islamic Texts Society, 1995), selected pages.
- Henri J. M. Nouwen, “The Wounded Healer,” in *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings*, ed. Robert C. Dykstra (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), Chapter 7.
- Christina M. Puchalski and Anna L. Romer, “Taking a Spiritual History Allows Clinicians to Understand Patients More Fully,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 3, no. 1 (2000): 129–137.

In-Class Focus

- The soul and the human person
- Religious and nonreligious understandings of personhood
- Tazkiyat al-nafs and the wounded healer in conversation
- Spiritual distress
- Introduction to spiritual assessment
- The FICA framework
- Practicing spiritual assessment through brief case scenarios
- Listening for the deeper dimensions of care
- Limits of theological interpretation

WEEK 6 | October 8

The Prophetic Voice in Spiritual Care

What can prophetic traditions teach us about moral presence, truth-telling, justice, and compassionate accompaniment?

We will examine biblical and Qur'anic understandings of prophecy and ask whether and how prophetic models can inform chaplaincy.

We will also distinguish the chaplain's role from the roles of clergy, therapists, social workers, and other professional caregivers.

The guiding question is:

When does a chaplain speak, when does a chaplain listen, and when does a chaplain simply remain present?

Required Readings

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. xxi–xxix.
- Wendy Cadge & Shelly Rambo (Eds.), *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century*, Chapter 5: "Meaning Making through Ritual and Public Leadership" (pp. 110–120).
- Michael S. Koppel, "The Prophets and Pastoral Care," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 610–625.
- Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, Chapter 2: "Basic Ingredients of Caregiving Relationships" (pp. 39–52).
- Tim Winter, "Jesus and Muḥammad: New Convergences," *The Muslim World* 99, no. 1 (2009): 21–38.
- David Willows and John Swinton: Part Four, Chapter 15 (Billings: "Pastors or counsellors?"), pp. 159–169.
- Steve Nolan, "Autoethnography as a Research Method for Chaplain Case Study," *Introduction to Case Studies in Spiritual Care*, eds. George Fitchett and Steve Nolan, pp. 11–32.

FICA Practice Exercise

Building on the FICA framework introduced in Week 5, students will apply it to a fictional or composite case and reflect on how their own theology and assumptions may influence spiritual assessment.

In-Class Focus

- Prophetic presence
- Moral and ethical distress
- Truth-telling
- Spiritual authority
- Professional boundaries
- The distinctive role of chaplaincy

WEEK 7 | October 15

Sin, Piety, and Moral Struggle

How do religious traditions understand sin, moral failure, piety, repentance, and human weakness?

This week explores the theological language people use to understand guilt and moral struggle. We will consider both the value and the potential harm of these concepts in spiritual care.

The chaplain's task is not to judge the person receiving care. It is to listen carefully enough to understand how the person themselves interprets guilt, responsibility, failure, forgiveness, and hope.

The guiding question is:

How can a chaplain listen to moral struggle without becoming a judge?

Required Readings

- Mortimer J. Adler: The Syntopicon, Vol. 2, Chapter 86: Sin (Introduction), pp. 753–773.
- Carrie Doehring: Chapter 6, pp. 117–134 (Narrative Themes of Loss, Violence, and Coping, particularly: "Trauma, Spiritual Struggle, and Spiritual Integration").
- David Willows and John Swinton: Part Four, Chapter 14 (Lake: "The theology of pastoral counselling"), pp. 127–135.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836).
- Fitchett & Nolan: Chapter 6: "'I was able to go to confession' – Mrs. Helen, a survivor of military sexual trauma perpetrated by a religious leader." pp. 102–119.

In-Class Focus

- Sin and moral struggle
- Guilt and shame
- Piety and religious identity
- Moral injury and spiritual struggle
- Judgment and nonjudgmental care
- Theological language in spiritual assessment
- Listening to moral struggle without becoming a judge

WEEK 8 | October 22

Theodicy I: The Story of Job (Ayyub) in Scripture

Why do people suffer? Why do good people suffer? What happens to faith when suffering cannot be explained?

We will read the biblical story of Job alongside Qur'anic references to Ayyub. Rather than trying to solve the problem of suffering, we will explore how sacred texts hold suffering, patience, protest, divine mystery, and hope.

The guiding question is:

What does a chaplain do when there is no satisfying answer to the question "Why?"

Required Readings

- The Book of Job, chapters 1–2 and 38–42.
- Qur'an, Sad 38:41–44 and al-Anbiya' 21:83–84.
- Carrie Doehring: Chapter 5, pp. 85–101 ("Theological Themes and Reflexivity").
- Mortimer J. Adler: *The Syntopicon*, Vol. 2, Chapter 51: Man, pp. 1–10.
- Fitchett & Nolan: Chapter 2: 'She's already done so much' – Sarah, diagnosed prenatally with trisomy 18, and her family by Patrick Jinks. pp. 52–69.

In-Class Focus

- The problem of suffering
- Job and Ayyub
- The limits of explanation
- Lament
- Divine mystery
- Theological protest
- Presence in unanswered suffering
- The danger of premature answers

WEEK 9 | October 29

Theodicy II: From Doctrine to Meaning-Making, Grief, and Loss

This week moves from classical theological explanations of suffering toward lived experience.

We will consider how people make meaning in the midst of grief, loss, injustice, and trauma. We will read James Cone's theological account of the cross and the lynching tree alongside Sherman Jackson's engagement with the problem of Black suffering from within classical Islamic theology, placing a Christian and a Muslim theological voice in direct conversation on the same lived reality. We will ask how chaplains can accompany people without minimizing their suffering or rushing them toward a predetermined meaning.

The emphasis is on accompaniment rather than imposing meaning.

The guiding question is:

How can I accompany someone in suffering without trying to explain away their pain?

Required Readings

- James H. Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, “The Terrible Beauty of the Cross” and the Tragedy of the Lynching Tree, pp. 29-47.
- Sherman A. Jackson, Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering (Oxford University Press, 2009), Introduction: “William R. Jones and the Challenge of Black Theodicy”, pp. 3–26.
- Sherman A. Jackson, Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering (Oxford University Press, 2009), Conclusion, pp. 157–164.
- Carrie Doehring: Chapter 5, pp. 104–115 (“Thinking About Suffering and Evil”).

Capstone Checkpoint

Submit a one-paragraph proposal identifying the real or composite case you plan to use for your capstone project.

In-Class Focus

- Suffering and injustice
- Grief and loss
- Meaning-making
- The danger of premature theological answers
- Theological and cultural interpretations of suffering
- Accompaniment
- Beginning the capstone project

WEEK 10 | November 5

Sacred Story: Narrative and Theological Reflection

Why does so much theology come to us through story? Why do people often understand their own lives through stories?

This week explores narrative as a theological and pastoral resource. We will examine how chaplains listen to the stories people tell about themselves, their families, their faith, their losses, and their hopes.

We will consider how a care seeker’s story may be shaped by sacred narratives, family narratives, cultural narratives, or secular narratives.

The guiding question is:

What story is this person living inside, and how does that story shape their experience of suffering and hope?

Required Readings

- John Trokan, "Models of Theological Reflection: Theory and Praxis," *Journal of Catholic Education* 1, no. 2 (1997): pp. 144–158
- Michael Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry*, pp. 11–15.
- Ruard R. Ganzevoort, "Narrative Approaches," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 214–217.
- Tim Eberhardt, "Storytelling and Pastoral Care," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 50, no. 1 (1996): pp. 23–31.
- David Willows and John Swinton: Part Six, Chapter 20 (Lynch and Willows: "The narrative dimension of pastoral care"), pp. 181–187.
- Steve Nolan, "I'd Like You to Get to Know About Me": Kristof, a 50-year-old atheist academic admitted to a hospice for palliative symptom control, Chapter 15 in *Case Studies in Spiritual Care*, eds. George Fitchett and Steve Nolan, pp. 223–245.

In-Class Focus

- Narrative theology
- Listening to lived stories
- Listening for meaning without imposing a religious interpretation
- Sacred stories and personal stories
- Narrative identity
- Meaning-making
- Theological reflection through story
- Autoethnography and self-reflexivity in chaplain case studies
- Spiritual care with people who do not identify with conventional religious frameworks
- The relationship between the chaplain's own worldview and the care recipient's worldview
- Moving from theological concepts to lived experience

WEEK 11 | November 12

Contemporary and Contextual Theologies

How does a person's social location shape theology? What happens when theology begins with the experiences of people who have historically been marginalized or unheard?

This week introduces liberation, feminist, and other contextual approaches to theology. We will consider how contemporary and personal theologies can inform spiritual care.

We will also ask how a chaplain's own theological assumptions may affect what they hear and what they fail to hear.

The guiding question is:

Whose experience has shaped the theology I have inherited, and whose experience might I have overlooked?

Required Readings

- Carrie Doehring: Chapter 7, pp. 155–171 ("Systemic Assessment" and "Intersecting Social Oppression").
- David Willows and John Swinton: Part Five, Chapter 18 ("The politics of pastoral care"), pp. 158–169.
- J. Hanson, "'He Is Disappointed I Am Not the Son He Wanted. I Tried and Tried to Deny I Am a Girl': Vicki, a Male-to-Female Transgender Veteran," in *Case Studies in Spiritual Care*, ed. George Fitchett and Steve Nolan (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), pp. 87–101.
- Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Transforming Feminism: Islam, Women, and Gender Justice," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), pp. 147–162.

In-Class Focus

- Contextual theology
- Liberation and feminist perspectives
- Personal theology
- Power and social location
- Theological humility
- Systemic dimensions of spiritual care
- Preparing the capstone

WEEK 12 | November 19

Theological Difference, Humility, and Interfaith Care

How do we hold our own theological convictions while caring well for people whose beliefs differ sharply from ours?

This week explores theological difference, tolerance, humility, boundaries, and interfaith spiritual care.

The goal is not to erase differences. Professional spiritual care requires us to respect the integrity of the person receiving care while remaining honest about our own commitments.

Interfaith care does not require us to erase theological differences. It requires us to understand those differences well enough to respect the person, remain grounded in our own commitments, and care without imposing our beliefs.

We will consider how chaplains can care for people who are:

- From another religious tradition
- From a different interpretation within the same tradition
- Spiritually but not religiously identified
- Agnostic or atheist
- Unsure of what they believe

The guiding question is:

How can I remain grounded in my own tradition while making genuine room for another person's worldview?

Required Readings

- Sherman A. Jackson, On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam, pp. 3–32.
- Carrie Doebling: Chapter 1, pp. 1–6 ("Radical Respect for Alterity").
- David Willows and John Swinton: Part Two, Chapter 7 (Lartey: "Practical theology as a theological form"), pp. 72–77.
- Shipman, Asha. "Space for Spiritual Care." In Hindu Approaches to Spiritual Care: Chaplaincy in Theory and Practice, edited by Vineet Chander and Lucinda Mosher, 177–183. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020.
- Fitchett & Nolan: Chapter 12: "'For myself and for your people with whom I pray' – Mrs. Pearlman, an 82-year-old woman with... Alzheimer's disease." pp. 187-204.

Capstone Checkpoint

Bring a 1 to 2-page draft of your case study and theological analysis for peer feedback.

In-Class Focus

- Theological difference
- Interfaith care
- Intrafaith diversity
- Secular and humanist worldviews
- Professional boundaries
- Humility and hospitality
- Radical respect for the other
- The difference between respecting another worldview and adopting it
- Caring across genuine theological difference

THANKSGIVING AND READING WEEK | November 26

There will be no class meeting on November 26.

- This week is designated as Thanksgiving and Reading Week. Students are encouraged to use the week to rest, catch up on reading, and continue developing their capstone projects.

WEEK 13 | December 3

Case Studies: Integrating Theology, Assessment, and Care

This week brings the course into direct practice.

We will work with published case studies and apply the spiritual assessment framework introduced earlier in the semester. Students will practice connecting theological reflection, worldview, sacred or meaningful sources, spiritual assessment, and care planning.

We will consider:

- What is happening?
- What matters most to this person?
- What worldview, spiritual, religious, philosophical, cultural, or secular resources are present?
- What is the person's own understanding of the situation?
- How might theology or sacred sources be relevant?
- What response is appropriate?
- What are the limits of my role?

The purpose of spiritual assessment is not to diagnose a person's theology. It is to help the chaplain understand what gives meaning, what causes spiritual distress, and what resources may support the person's own goals and well-being.

Required Readings

- George Fitchett and Steve Nolan, eds., *Case Studies in Spiritual Care*, Chapter 9 ("God is just too busy for us right now"), pp. 137–152.
- Carrie Doehring: Chapter 8, pp. 173–186 ("Planning Care: Liberative Spiritual Integration")
- Robert Putnam & David Campbell, *American Grace*, Chapter 15: "America's Grace: How a Tolerant Nation Bridges Its Religious Divides" (pp. 516–550).

In-Class Focus

- Case-based theological reflection
- Applying spiritual assessment
- Integrating theology and worldview
- Sacred and secular resources
- Care planning
- Theological and professional boundaries
- Preparing for capstone presentations

WEEK 14 | December 10

Capstone Presentations and Course Wrap-Up

Students will present their capstone case studies and theological analyses.

Our final class will also return to the central question of the course:

How does what I believe about God, human beings, suffering, meaning, scripture, and the sacred shape the way I listen, assess, interpret, and care for another person?

We will reflect on how our understanding of theology and scripture has changed and how we can continue developing a thoughtful, self-aware, and professionally responsible theology of care.

Required Reading

- Fitchett & Nolan: "Afterword: Case Studies and Chaplaincy Research.", pp. 259-269.

- Mortimer J. Adler: The Syntopicon, Vol. 2, Chapter 101: "Wisdom" (Introduction), pp. 1102–1109.
- Carrie Doebling: Glossary (Review of all terms), pp. 187–192. (A final conceptual "audit" of terms like Theological Reflexivity and Lived Theology)

In-Class Focus

- Capstone presentations
- Peer learning
- Course synthesis
- The Movement Toward Wisdom
- Personal theology of care
- Continuing formation as spiritual caregivers

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Requirement	Weight
Attendance, Preparation, and Professional Participation	30%
Weekly Reflection Posts and Peer Dialogue	20%
Midterm Theological Reflection	20%
Capstone Case Study, Presentation, and Final Paper	30%
Total	100%

The grading structure gives substantial weight to the student's ability to integrate theological reflection with spiritual care practice. The capstone is the largest single component because it represents the culmination of the course and asks students to demonstrate the movement from theological understanding to professional care.

1. Attendance, Preparation, and Professional Participation | 30%

This component recognizes that presence and professional formation cannot be separated in chaplaincy training. Showing up is necessary but not sufficient; how a student shows up matters just as much.

Attendance and Punctuality: 10%

Attendance at all class sessions is expected. Because this is a seminar, attendance means more than being logged into Zoom; students are expected to arrive on time, prepared, and ready to engage in discussion and learning activities.

If you anticipate missing a class, please notify the instructor in advance whenever possible. If you must miss a class, the instructor may ask you to complete a brief written reflection on the assigned reading or another appropriate make-up activity. Repeated or unexcused absences may affect the final grade.

Preparation and Reading Engagement: 10%

Students are expected to come to each session having completed the assigned readings and ready to contribute to discussion.

Professional Participation and Learning Community: 10%

Beyond attendance and preparation, this component also evaluates the professional qualities that are essential to chaplaincy formation. Students are expected to:

- Listen respectfully to others.
- Engage perspectives different from their own.
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality.
- Practice intellectual and theological humility.
- Receive feedback constructively.
- Contribute to a learning community in which others can speak honestly and safely.

The goal is not to speak the most. The goal is to be reliably present, genuinely prepared, and to participate in a way that helps others learn.

2. Weekly Reflection Posts and Peer Dialogue | 20%

Throughout the semester, students will respond to selected weekly prompts on Canvas.

Each reflection should be approximately 250 words unless otherwise specified.

Deadlines: Initial posts are due each week by Sunday at 11:59 PM Eastern Time. Peer responses are due by Wednesday at 11:59 PM Eastern Time, giving everyone time to read and respond before our Thursday class session.

Responses should:

- Engage the assigned readings.
- Demonstrate personal and theological reflection.
- Connect course material to spiritual care practice.
- Use the student's own words and thinking.
- Show curiosity about questions that do not have easy answers.

Students will also respond to at least one classmate's post when assigned.

A strong peer response does more than say "I agree." It may offer a new perspective, raise a thoughtful question, identify a connection to the reading, or respectfully challenge an assumption.

The purpose of these assignments is to develop a habit of theological reflection and collegial dialogue.

FICA Spiritual Assessment Practice

FICA is introduced in Week 5. In Week 6, students will complete a brief practice exercise applying the framework to a fictional or composite case provided in class.

Students will respond to the following questions:

Using the FICA framework, identify what you would want to learn from this person. What questions would you ask? What would you avoid asking? How might your own theology or assumptions influence your assessment?

The purpose of this exercise is to help students practice spiritual assessment as an act of attentive listening rather than as a checklist. Students should consider how the FICA framework can help them recognize a person's sources of meaning, strength, faith, connection, and spiritual concern while remaining aware of their own assumptions and professional boundaries.

The FICA Practice Exercise is a formative exercise and is included within the Weekly Reflection and Peer Dialogue component of the course.

3. Midterm Theological Reflection | 20%

Students will write a theological reflection of approximately 1,500 to 2,000 words, following the sequence on the Divine, the soul, and prophecy, and before we turn to theodicy in Week 8. Due Thursday, October 15, 2026, at 11:59 PM Eastern Time.

The paper should describe the theological, philosophical, spiritual, or scriptural framework that is beginning to shape the student's approach to spiritual care.

Students should engage at least two course readings and include at least one example from personal experience, ministry, field education, clinical practice, or a course case.

The paper should address questions such as:

- What do I understand about the human person, human dignity, and the sources of meaning that shape my approach to care?
- How do I understand suffering, hope, resilience, and the possibility of meaning?
- What role does scripture or another meaningful source play in my understanding of care?
- How does my worldview shape what I notice when I listen to another person?
- What are my strengths and limitations as a spiritual caregiver?
- How might my theology help me care for someone?
- Where might my theology create blind spots or limitations?

The midterm is not intended to be a final statement of a student's theology. It is a snapshot of a developing theology of care.

It is also a bridge between the first and second halves of the course.

4. Capstone Case Study, Presentation, and Final Paper | 30%

The capstone is the culminating project for the course and provides an opportunity for students to integrate theological reflection, scriptural and spiritual resources, spiritual assessment, pastoral judgment, and professional chaplaincy practice.

Students will select a real or composite case from ministry, field education, clinical experience, chaplaincy practice, or another appropriate setting. All identifying information must be removed or changed to protect confidentiality. The case should involve meaningful spiritual, theological, existential, or meaning-related dimensions that allow for substantive reflection and analysis.

The purpose of the project is not simply to describe what happened. Students will critically examine the encounter and explore how theology, scripture, worldview, culture, lived experience, and pastoral judgment shaped the care process. The case study should integrate description of the case, theological and spiritual analysis, spiritual assessment, pastoral response, and reflection on the student's developing theology and practice of spiritual care.

Students should engage substantively with at least five course readings or scholarly sources and integrate relevant scriptural, theological, spiritual, philosophical, cultural, or secular resources into their analysis. An appropriate spiritual assessment framework, such as FICA, should be meaningfully incorporated into the case analysis.

The written case study should be approximately 3,500 to 4,500 words (approximately 14 to 18 double-spaced pages, using 12-point Times New Roman). Students will also present their case orally in Week 14. Each student will have 8 to 10 minutes for the presentation, followed by 2 to 3 minutes for questions and discussion. Students may use slides or other appropriate visual aids.

Capstone Checkpoints

Week 9: One-paragraph case proposal identifying the case, context, and central spiritual or theological concern.

Week 12: 1 to 2-page working draft outlining the initial case analysis and theological reflection, followed by a brief in-class workshop for peer and instructor feedback.

Week 14: Final oral presentation (8 to 10 minutes), followed by 2 to 3 minutes of questions and discussion.

December 31: Final written case study due on Canvas. The final paper is due after the final class meeting to allow students additional time to revise their work following the capstone presentations.

The capstone will be evaluated based on theological and scriptural grounding, depth of theological and pastoral reflection, integration of spiritual assessment, integration of theory and practice, self-awareness and theological positionality, and clarity and organization. Detailed instructions and a grading rubric will be posted on Canvas.

CLASSROOM VALUES

Our classroom will seek to embody the following values:

Mutual Respect

We learn by listening to one another and recognizing the dignity of each person.

Intellectual and Theological Humility

We recognize that our own perspectives are partial and that serious learning often begins with questions.

Respect Across Difference

We welcome religious, theological, philosophical, cultural, and secular perspectives while maintaining an environment in which disagreement can be expressed respectfully.

Attention to the Whole Person

We attend to the histories, experiences, identities, cultures, beliefs, and social locations that shape each person.

Mutual Learning

The classroom is not a one-way transfer of information. We learn from readings, the instructor, professional experience, and one another.

Confidentiality

Students should not share personal information disclosed by classmates outside the learning environment without permission.

ONLINE CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Because this course meets synchronously online, students are expected to create an environment that supports focused participation.

Please:

- Arrive on time.
- Keep your camera on during class whenever possible, except during breaks or when circumstances make this difficult.
- Keep your microphone muted unless speaking.
- Participate actively in discussion and class activities.
- Use a stable internet connection whenever possible.
- Let the instructor know if a technical problem prevents participation.

Please be thoughtful in written communication. Written words do not carry tone, facial expression, or body language, so read messages carefully before sending them.

If you disagree with a classmate, address the idea rather than the person.

When something is unclear, ask for clarification rather than assuming negative intent.

AI AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY

A central goal of this course is to develop your own ability to reflect theologically, listen carefully, exercise pastoral judgment, and articulate your thinking in your own words.

These are skills you will need in direct human encounters where another person may be depending on your presence, judgment, and ability to respond thoughtfully.

For this reason, students may not use generative AI tools to generate, write, or substantially rewrite submitted discussion posts, the midterm reflection, or the capstone project.

Limited uses of technology that support learning without replacing the student's own thinking may be permitted. For example, students may use ordinary spelling and grammar tools. If you are unsure whether a particular use of AI is appropriate for an assignment, ask the instructor before submitting the work.

Unless otherwise authorized by the instructor, students may use AI or other digital tools for basic proofreading, spelling, grammar, translation, or accessibility support, but not for generating substantive ideas, theological analysis, case analysis, or written content submitted as their own.

The central principle is simple:

The theological reflection, interpretation, analysis, pastoral judgment, and final submitted writing must be your own work.

If an AI tool is used in a way that is permitted by the instructor, students remain responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of their submitted work.

This policy is intended to protect the central purpose of the course: developing your own theological voice and your capacity for reflective, ethical, and human-centered spiritual care.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND PLAGIARISM

Academic honesty is expected of every student.

Plagiarism includes submitting work that is not your own, using another person's words, ideas, or data without appropriate acknowledgment, copying substantial portions of another source, or submitting significant portions of your own previous coursework without permission.

Students are responsible for following Hartford International University's academic integrity policies.

When using sources, provide appropriate citations and acknowledge the ideas and words of others.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND RESPECTFUL CARE

Hartford International University is committed to inclusion in its academic life.

Students are expected to communicate in ways that respect the dignity of all people and remain sensitive to diverse cultural, religious, theological, philosophical, and personal perspectives.

In a course on spiritual care, this commitment is especially important.

Students should be prepared to engage respectfully with people whose beliefs about God, scripture, gender, sexuality, suffering, death, morality, or spiritual life may differ significantly from their own.

Respecting another person's worldview does not require abandoning one's own convictions. It requires the ability to listen, understand, and care without unnecessary imposition.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Students may bring appropriate experiences from ministry, field education, clinical practice, or other settings into class discussion.

When discussing actual care encounters, students must protect confidentiality.

Do not share names, identifying information, medical details, institutional information, or other details that could reasonably identify a care seeker.

When in doubt, use a composite case or change identifying details.

The purpose of case discussion is learning, not disclosure.

Working closely with cases of suffering, grief, and moral struggle can also affect the caregiver. Students are encouraged to notice their own responses to course material and case discussion, and to draw on supervision, peer support, or personal spiritual practice as needed. Sustainable chaplaincy practice depends on caring for the caregiver as well as the person receiving care.

ATTENDANCE, PUNCTUALITY, AND EXTENSIONS

Please arrive on time for the 7:00 PM class.

If you know that you will be late or absent, please notify the instructor in advance whenever possible.

If you need additional time for an assignment, contact the instructor before the deadline. Extensions will be considered in light of the circumstances and the needs of the course.

ACCOMMODATION AND WRITING SUPPORT

Students who need accommodation or who would benefit from writing support should contact the appropriate Hartford International University student services office.

Students may also speak with the instructor privately if they have questions about how to access available support.

WRITING AND CITATION

Written assignments should be clear, organized, and appropriately cited.

For questions regarding paper format, footnotes, and citation style, students should consult Hartford International University's writing resources and the institution's guidelines for research papers.

Students may also consult Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 9th edition or later.

Unless otherwise stated, students may use Chicago style or another appropriate academic citation style consistently throughout a paper.

GRADING SCALE

The following grading scale will be used unless otherwise specified by institutional policy:

- **A: 95–100** — Excellent mastery of the material; sophisticated theological reflection; clear integration of course material with spiritual care practice.
- **A-: 90–94** — Strong mastery of the material; thoughtful reflection and effective application to practice.
- **B+: 87–89** — Very good understanding of the material; clear engagement with course concepts and meaningful application.
- **B: 83–86** — Good understanding of the material; meets the expected standards for graduate-level work.
- **B-: 80–82** — Adequate understanding of the material with some weaknesses in analysis, reflection, or application.
- **C+: 77–79** — Basic understanding but limited critical engagement or connection to spiritual care practice.
- **C: 70–76** — Minimal understanding of the material; significant weaknesses in analysis, reflection, or application.
- **F: Below 70** — Does not meet the basic requirements of the course.

A FINAL WORD TO STUDENTS

This course is not simply about learning what theologians have said or memorizing what different traditions believe.

It is about becoming more aware of the beliefs, assumptions, stories, and sources that shape the way we care for people.

As chaplains and spiritual caregivers, we enter rooms where people may be asking questions that have no easy answers. Sometimes those questions are explicitly religious. Sometimes they are philosophical, existential, cultural, or deeply personal. Sometimes they are never spoken aloud.

Our task is not always to provide an answer.

Sometimes our task is to listen carefully enough to understand the question.

Sometimes it is to help a person reconnect with a source of meaning, faith, hope, or strength that is already part of their life.

Sometimes it is to sit with someone when no explanation is sufficient.

And sometimes it is to recognize the limits of our own knowledge and simply remain present.

My hope is that by the end of this course, you will have a clearer understanding of your own theology of care, a deeper respect for the theological and spiritual worlds of others, and a more thoughtful ability to bring theology and scripture into professional spiritual care with humility, wisdom, and compassion.