

Foundations of Christian Worship
THEO 5120-01 & -03, Spring 2026
North Park Theological Seminary – River Correctional Center
(3 credit hours, *syllabus subject to minor changes)

Instructor: David Bjorlin, PhD

Class Description:

An Introduction to Christian Worship examines the history, theology, and practices of Christian worship from an ecumenical perspective. The main goals of the class are to: (1) introduce the discipline of liturgical studies; (2) develop foundations and skills for ritual leadership; and (3) foster theological/pastoral reflection and evaluation of the liturgical life of faith communities.

Learning Objectives:

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

1. Demonstrate a theology and practice of Christian worship that is historically, liturgically, and culturally coherent;
2. observe and constructively critique one's own tradition of Christian worship on the basis of the historical, theological, cultural, and practical norms of Christian worship;
3. articulate key issues (historical, theological, ecumenical) pertaining to the sacrament of baptism and the eucharist;
4. illustrate the connection between the worshiping life of the church and its theological beliefs and ethical actions;
5. describe the basic movements of a rite of passage;
6. design a rite of passage that takes into account historical, theological, social/pastoral, and cultural factors;
7. analyze the main components of liturgical inculturation and engage the diversity of Christian worship.

Accommodations

North Park is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this class related to a disability, contact the SRA program director.

Academic Honesty

In keeping with our Christian heritage and commitment, North Park University is committed to the highest possible ethical and moral standards. Just as we will constantly strive to live up to these high standards, we expect our students to do the same. To that end, cheating of any sort will not be tolerated. Students who are discovered cheating are subject to discipline up to and including failure of a course and expulsion.

Our definition of cheating includes but is not limited to:

1. Plagiarism – the use of another’s work as one’s own without giving credit to the individual. This includes using materials from the internet.
2. Copying another’s answers on an examination.
3. Deliberately allowing another to copy one’s answers or work.
4. Using one’s own work from previous assignments or other class assignments without permission.
5. Signing an attendance roster for another who is not present.

In the special instance of group work, the instructor will make clear his/her expectations with respect to individual vs. collaborative work. A violation of these expectations may be considered cheating as well.

For further information on this subject you may refer to the Academic Dishonesty section of the University’s online catalog, pp. 25-27.

Incomplete Policy

If, due to extenuating circumstances (specifically, illness, personal and family issues) a student anticipates she will be unable to complete course work within the allotted time, that student must submit the request form for a grade of incomplete to the course instructor before the last week of class clearly stating the reason(s) for this request. If the request is timely and meets the criteria, the grade for that class will be listed as “I” until the last day of the following semester. If coursework is not submitted by the last day of the following semester the listing of “I” will automatically be changed to “F.”

Required Texts

1. Duck, Ruth. *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021.
2. Driver, Tom F. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.
3. Cone, James. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991.
4. Jewish Ritual and Values Reader (provided by instructor)
5. Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean, and Hispanic Perspectives*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.
6. Other articles as assigned and provided by instructor.

Assessments

Grading

The grading scale for the course will be as follows:

A	100-93%
A-	92.9-90%
B+	89.9-87
B	86.9-83
B-	82.9-80%
C+	79.9-77%
C	76.9-73%
C-	72.9-70%
D+	69.9-67%
D	66.9-63%
D-	62.9-60%

Late Policy

With exceptions for sickness and emergencies, assignments turned in late will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., a B will drop to a B-) for each day over the deadline. After a week, the highest score you can receive on an assignment is 50%.

Assessments:

Attendance and Participation (10%)

Regular attendance and participation in class discussion is expected. Any absences over two will reduce your participation grade. Note: part of your participation grade will include completing all of the required readings. You will be asked to sign a reading log at the end of the class detailing the approximate percentage of reading done.

Assignments turned in late will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., a B will drop to a B-) for each day over the deadline.

Essay: Christian Worship as Ritual (15%) – [Due: Feb. 2](#)

Write a two-part essay (1000-1250 words total):

1. Part I (500-750 words) – Describe the worship tradition(s) you have been a part of in your life. What was the congregation's demographic (race, age, class, etc.)? What did a typical worship service look like from beginning to end? What were some of the typical characteristics of worship? If you have not been a part of a worship tradition, what other rituals or ritual actions were a part of your life?
2. Write an essay (500 words) that give your initial definition of Christian worship based on the introductory readings and personal experience and how Christian worship can be understood as a ritual.

Book Review: Liberation and Ritual in Cone's *Spirituals and the Blues* (20%) – [Due: March 23](#)

Write an essay (800-1000 words) first presenting the main arguments of James Cone's *Spirituals and the Blues* (in about 200-250 words) and then, based on previous class readings and discussion, elaborating on how the spirituals played a liberating role in the African American tradition and the ways they might still be used as part of liberative rites of passage.

You should use at least two other sources (class lectures count as one) in your essay.

Ritual Observation and Analysis (25%) – [Due: March 2](#)

Analyze the Jewish coming of age through secondary sources and the Bar Mitzvah service we watch during class. In light of your observation and readings, describe how the ritual works in the Jewish community, how it moves the participants through the steps of the rite of passage with specific examples from the rite, and what lessons you might glean for coming of age rites in your own cultural context.

There are three parts to this assignment:

1. Research secondary sources provided by the instructor on the Bar Mitzvah and Jewish religious and cultural values;
2. During class, you will observe a Bar Mitzvah service.
3. Write a paper (maximum 1500 words) that describes:
 - a. how the Bar Mitzvah provides order, community, and transformation to the Jewish community, focusing specifically on what beliefs and values are especially promoted through the rite;
 - b. how the ritual moves the participant through the three stages of the rite of passage (separation, transition, (re)incorporation);
 - c. how the rite could be liberative to the individual and the community, and;
 - d. if you were to develop a coming of age rite of passage for your own cultural context, what ideas does this rite give you? What might need to be added in your own context?

New Annotated Rite of Passage (20%) – [Due: May 4](#)

Students, in teams of three, will create a rite of passage for a life-cycle event or other important transition in the community. The event/rite of passage will be chosen by your group in consultation with your professor. This could include: important milestones (e.g., significant birthdays or anniversaries), beginning of educational programs, graduations, births or deaths of family members outside, etc. The rite of passage should include:

1. An introductory paragraph explaining the rite and the context in which it would be celebrated.
2. Two original prayers
3. At least one central scriptural passage
4. At least two songs (or other musical/artistic expression)
5. Objects/symbols (e.g., use of a ring in a marriage ceremony or candles at funeral)
6. embodied action/physical movement (e.g., processing; dancing; kneeling; etc.)

The service should also have rubrics (i.e., instructions) so that anyone who was given your rite could be able to perform it based on the instructions your group gives for both leaders and participants.

In addition, each element of the service should be annotated, telling the instructor why the particular element was chosen and how it relates to the rest of the elements and overall purpose of the rite.

Individual Analysis of Rite of Passage (10%) – [Due: May 4](#)

Each member of the group will submit an **individual** 1000-word analysis of the ritual. You will describe the ritual, explain why this rite is needed and what pastoral purpose it serves, demonstrate how the rite moves the participant(s) from separation through the transition/liminal phase to reincorporation, and define your individual contribution to the group assignment.

Course Schedule

(Reading Key: **bolded** – main readings; [blue](#) – art resource [everyone read/watch/listen], [orange](#): assignments due)

Week 1 (Jan. 12) – What Is Worship? What Is Ritual? (In-Person Instruction)

Read:

- Isaiah 6:1-8; Deuteronomy 26:1-10; Luke 24:13-38; Acts 2:41-48
- Duck, xv-xxii, 1-27 (Introduction, Ch. 1, Ch. 2 up to “Worshiping with Children and Youth”)
- Reid, Introduction
- Smith, excerpt from “Lovers in a Dangerous Time: Cultural Exegesis of ‘Secular’ Liturgies,” in *Desiring the Kingdom* (handout)
- Smith, “Worship as Ritual” in *Caring Liturgies*, Ch. 1 (handout)
- Wallace, “This Is Water” (handout)

Week 2 (Jan. 19) – NO CLASS – MLK DAY

Week 3 (Jan. 26) – Ritual and Words (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Genesis 1; John 1:1-18
- Duck, 105-117 (Ch. 6)
- Long, “Talking Ourselves into Being Christian” (handout)
- LeGuin, “Telling Is Listening” (handout)
- Driver, Ch 1-2

Week 4 (Feb. 2) – The Body and Sacraments (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Duck, 94-97, 151-65 (Ch. 5: “Movement in Worship” and “Visual Arts in Worship,” Ch. 9)
- Westerfield Tucker, “Knee-Bowed and Body Bent” (handout)
- Williams, “Love Your Flesh: The Power and Protest of Embodied Worship” (handout)
- Doyle, excerpts from *Mink River* (handout)

Due: Christian Worship as Ritual

Week 5 (Feb. 9) – Rites of Passage (In-Person Instruction)

Read:

- Grimes, Introduction to *Deeply into the Bones* (handout)
- Turner, “Liminality and Communitas” (handout)
- Driver, Ch. 3
- Bell, 94-102 (handout)

Week 5 (Feb. 16) – Culture (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Acts 15:1-29
- Duck, 35-59 (Ch. 3)
- Reid, Ch. 4, 8, 11
- Chupungco, “Liturgy and Components of Culture” (handout)
- Nairobi Document (handout)
- Miner, “Body Rituals among the Nacirema” (handout)

Watch:

- Bar Mitzvah Service (in class)

Week 6 (Feb. 23) – Time (Zoom Instruction)

- Exodus 20:8-11; Exodus 23:10-16; Revelation 1:10
- Okoro, “How COVID Changed Our Sense of Time” (handout)
- Stookey, Ch. 1 (handout)
- McClain, excerpt from *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (handout)
- Driver, Ch. 7

Week 7 (March 2) – Song (In-Person Instruction)

Read:

- Duck, 83-94 (Ch. 5 to “Movement in Worship”)
- Saliers and Saliers, “A Sound Spirituality,” in a *Song to Sing, a Life to Live* (handout)
- Reid, Ch. 5, 9, 12

- Bjorlin, "Theologies of Church Music" (handout)
- Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Intro.-Ch. 3

Due: Ritual Observation and Analysis

Week 8 (March 9) – Reading Week

Week 9 (March 16) – Ritual and Theology/Ethics (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Ch. 4-end
- Driver, ch. 8
- Isasi-Díaz, "Rituals and *Mujeristas*' Struggle for Liberation" (handout)
- Niequist, "Too Much Bono in Church?" (handout)

Week 10 (March 23) – Prayer and Planning in Ritual/Worship (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Ephesians 6:12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18; Luke 18:1-8
- Duck, 61-81, 129-134 (Ch. 4 & 7)
- Reid, Ch. 6, 10, 13
- Stookey, Learning a Basic Form for Brief Prayers (handout)
- Driver, ch. 9

Due: Book Review: Liberation and Ritual in Cone's *Spirituals and the Blues*

Week 11 (March 30) – Baptism (In-Person Instruction)

Read:

- Ezekiel 36:24-27; Acts 2:37-41; Acts 8:27-38; Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 3:26-29
- Duck, 167-91 (Ch. 10)
- Scharen, "Baptismal Practices and the Formation of Christians: A Critical Liturgical Ethics" (handout)
- Driver, Ch. 10
- "Baptism" section of Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (WCC) (handout)
- Grimes, 49-55 (handout)

Week 12 (April 6) Communion (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Acts 2:42-46; 1 Corinthians 11:20-29; Matthew 26:26-29; Hebrews 9:11-14
- Duck, 193-214 (Ch. 11)
- Kim-Cragg, "Through Senses of Sharing: How Liturgy Meets Food (handout)

- Carvalhaes, excerpt from *Eucharist and Globalization* (handout)
- “Eucharist” section of Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (WCC) (handout)

Week 13 (April 13) – Dying, Funerals, and Weddings (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Duck, 215-241 (Ch. 12)
- Tom Long, excerpt from *Accompany Them with Singing* (handout)
- Kim Long, excerpt from *Rethinking the Christian Wedding* (handout)

Week 14 (April 20) – Constructing Rites of Passage, Ritual Space, and Work Day Q&A (In-Person Instruction)

Read:

- Smith, excerpt from *Caring Liturgies* (handout)
- Duck, 97-101 (Ch. 5, “A Space for Worship)
- Vosko, “Standing on Holy Ground” (handout)
- Torgerson, excerpt from *Sighting the Unseen* (handout)

Week 15 (April 27) – Coming of Age and Healing Rituals (Zoom Instruction)

Read:

- Numbers 21:4-9; II Kings 5:1-14; Matthew 4:23-25; James 5:13-16
- Duck, 243-269 (Ch. 13)
- Larson-Miller, “Rituals of Care: A Look at the Church’s Ministry with the Sick” (handout)

Week 16 (May 4) – Presentations of Rites of Passage (In-Person Instruction)

No Readings

Due: New Annotated Rite of Passage and Individual Analysis of Rite of Passage