Everything labeled Christian is not authentically Christian. There are varieties of Christianity that promote a different story than that of the Gospel or include a strong teaching that is incompatible with the teachings of Christ. Contemporary Christianity, especially in North America, is on the brink of devolving into folk religion because there is a lack of reflection, integration, and maturation on the part of Christians. Folk religion resists thinking critically about belief and formalizing confessions of belief, favoring instead pragmatic problem solving and personal feelings. If it feels good then it becomes part of a spiritual practice. The church is more like a support group than a community charged with bearing out truth and tradition. This folk religion prefers small spiritual encouragement groups or social media to anything written or taught by scholars. Those who prefer folk religion have not thought about the issues of theology in sufficient depth. The problem with folk religion is that over time it loses its shape and becomes compatible with anything and everything, a kind of odd eclectic soup. *Something that is compatible with anything and everything is nothing in particular.*

The answer is not to swing to the other extreme and substitute formal, academic, “head knowledge” for a personal relationship with the God of the universe. This is its own type of false religion, crusading for a pet doctrine and eschewing introspection. Those who think that all Christians must behave and believe exactly alike about virtually everything may have failed to consider the issues deeply enough as well. Blaise Pascal, a French Christian philosopher wrote, “a plurality that cannot be integrated into unity is chaos; unity unrelated to plurality is tyranny.” Folk religion and one-sided fundamentalism are not the only options.
False dichotomies and their resulting divisions undermine the credibility of the Christian witness to the world. Incessant quarreling and line-drawing, bickering and cold indifference are scandalous to the outside world and to Christians. The answer lies somewhere in between the swings of the pendulum. Finding the balance can seem exhausting and overwhelming but perhaps if we travel together, the journey will be easier.

A mediating theology values unity and diversity, seeking to identify essential Christian beliefs and distinguish them from secondary beliefs and opinions. A theologian once said, “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.” Within larger unity and agreement, there will be diversity and even disagreement. Christian maturation teaches us this. Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism share much in common when compared to other world religions, philosophies, and worldviews and a mediating theology recognizes that Christians can contribute richness to a single worldview with their various perspectives. At times it may be necessary for us to agree to disagree about secondary matters and come together on common ground.

The goal of this course is to discuss a mediating theology, a bridge between the extremes that often exist within Christianity. We are looking for proper Christian beliefs, not merely beliefs held by most Christians. The spirit of this course will be irenic, meaning aimed at peace, instead of insistent and argumentative. Our goal each week together will be to explore the Great Tradition of Christian theology, learning alongside one another. We will seek to understand the dogmas, doctrines, and opinions that are espoused as Christian theology. We will not downplay the important work we have to do as Christians of separating orthodoxy from heresy. In this course, we will learn the first steps to being theologians.

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Definition of Terms

Theology: the process of examination and reflection that leads to the construction and reconstruction of doctrines; the process, not the product
- One of theology’s tasks is to construct coherent workable models about God as revealed in Scripture and in the life of Jesus
- Older models can be partial and distorted due to the overreaction to other models
- One single model rarely does justice to all that is revealed about a transcendent reality (e.g. light as particlelike and wavelike)
- Being a Christian includes being a theologian, seeking to understand and affirm beliefs about God

Great Tradition: basic assumptions, teachings, and declarations (such as the Incarnation, Trinity, Resurrection, Unity of the church) handed down from the apostles themselves to the early church fathers and mothers, agreed on by most if not all of the church mothers and fathers of the second through fourth centuries plus the sixteenth century Reformers
- What has been believed by everyone everywhere at all times (Vincentian Canon, “everyone” should be interpreted as Christian leaders and teachers
- Helps to distinguish counterfeit forms of Christianity such as cults who disagree on dogma from groups and movements that differ from each other in secondary ways
- Without knowledge of the Great Tradition, Christians are left to reinvent extremely complex solutions to old problems.
- Christians should know their religious heritage as well as they know their Bibles
- Its authority is that of a guide, a map or a compass. It does not stand higher than Scripture but also deserves great respect
  - Scripture is the Constitution and the Great Tradition is the interpretations by the Supreme Court

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Beliefs matter…

**Orthodoxy**: right belief or core of essential beliefs

**Heresy**: radically contradicts orthodoxy
- serious distortion of the Christian gospel and mission such that Christianity becomes unrecognizable
- does NOT imply loss of salvation or having poor moral character
- NOT the same as diverse interpretation
- For Baptists there is no clean, neat way to divide orthodoxy from heresy and the process often leads to schisms but it is still a necessity

**Apostasy**: departure from Christianity altogether, more extreme than heresy

…but not all beliefs matter equally

**Dogma**: What we think of Christ, true beliefs essential to Christianity itself
- required doctrine that cannot be questioned without serious repercussions
- Christian identity is at stake with these

**Doctrin**: secondary category particular to a denomination but not essential to Christianity itself
- Still a relatively complex religious belief
- Clearly revealed in Scripture but not essential to belief in Christ

**Opinion**: speculation, guesswork without strong justification
- No Christian consensus about them
- Clearly not taught in Scripture
- Do not touch on the gospel itself

*NOTES*: ____________________________________________________________

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Protestant groups have no definite process for placing true beliefs in their right categories. It is done through debating, holding meetings, voting at conventions, writing doctrinal statements, and rewriting doctrinal statements. It is messy and ongoing. The Great Tradition helps to distinguish into which category beliefs should be placed.

Your homework this week should you choose to accept it:

What are dogmas for you? What are uncontestable truths?

What beliefs of yours are doctrines?

What beliefs do you hold that are merely opinions, even if strong ones?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Either-Or Theology</th>
<th>Both-And Theology</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a result of the pendulum swing effect of theology, a series of false alternatives</td>
<td>a meditating theology seeking synthesis rather than analysis, combining the truth in models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is three or God is one</td>
<td>God is both three and one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is absolutely all determining or God is not</td>
<td>God is both self-limiting and sovereign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans are totally depraved from birth or there is no need for grace or salvation</td>
<td>Salvation is completely by grace even though humans are genuinely free and must decide freely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are unconditionally predestined by God or salvation is not a free gift</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace is conveyed through sacraments or the sacraments are merely symbolic</td>
<td>Sacraments are more than mere symbols even though they do not convey grace automatically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bounded Set Category</th>
<th>Centered Set Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black and white, either Christian or not Christian, rigid and absolutistic</td>
<td>Views Christianity as a fluid and flexible force field held together by a strong, magnetic center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary identification and maintenance becomes very important</td>
<td>Boundaries are not as important as the center that identifies authentic Christianity, can be ambiguous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding people is a way of demonstrating that Christianity has boundaries and therefore identity</td>
<td>All are recognized as truly Christian who are held in by the center and are not moving away from it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodoxy is inside the boundary and heresy is outside</td>
<td>One can be more or less Christian according to the relationship to the core of Christian experience and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no distinction between the center (the gospel) and the boundaries (orthodoxy)</td>
<td>Allows for genuine diversity of interpretation without relativism; one can be wrong about certain beliefs while being authentically Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Peace if possible, but truth at any cost!” Martin Luther

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOGMA</th>
<th>DOCTRINE</th>
<th>OPINION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ is God incarnate</td>
<td>Baptism is by immersion by those who are old enough to understand their confession of faith in Jesus Christ after repenting of their sins</td>
<td>Intelligent life does/does not exist on other planets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity</td>
<td>Baptism is by sprinkling or affusion (pouring) and can be for infants</td>
<td>The age of the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ is the sacrifice for the sins of the world</td>
<td>Baptism of the Holy Spirit is an experience for all believes after conversion and always involves speaking in tongues</td>
<td>Exact details of the events of the end times such as identity of the antichrist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ is the unsurpassable Lord and Savior</td>
<td>Icons are venerated in worship as points of contact for prayer and meditation</td>
<td>Dinosaurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mary was born without inherited sin</td>
<td>Styles of worship music</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>