

Christian Existentialism: Faith, Freedom, and Meaning

Fall 2026 | Tuesday/Thursday | Dr. Julius Bailey

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Office: Hollenbeck 324 | Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday, 8:00-10:00 a.m.; Tuesdays by appointment

Course Description

This course explores the intersection of existentialist philosophy and Christian thought, examining how thinkers across history have wrestled with meaning, desire, suffering, despair, freedom, faith, responsibility, and hope. Victor A. Shepherd's *The Committed Self* is the primary and only required purchased textbook. Selected primary and supplemental readings will be posted on Moodle or distributed in class.

Rather than treating Christian existentialism as a collection of abstract doctrines, the course asks living questions: What does it mean to become a self? What happens when reason cannot settle the question of faith? Why do innocent people suffer? What is despair? What makes freedom frightening? Can faith survive injustice? What is the relationship between hope and action? What might a committed Christian self look like today?

Course Learning Outcomes

LO2 - Writing

Students will be able to produce clear, organized, and persuasive analytical writing that develops a defensible thesis, engages course texts, uses appropriate evidence, and communicates complex philosophical and theological ideas effectively.

LO10 - Historical and Critical Analysis

Students will be able to situate major existentialist and Christian existentialist thinkers and texts within their historical, philosophical, theological, and social contexts; critically compare their arguments; and evaluate how existential ideas develop across historical periods and lived circumstances.

Required Text and Moodle Readings

Required text: Victor A. Shepherd, *The Committed Self: An Introduction to Existentialism for Christians*.

The Shepherd text will become the conceptual spine of the course beginning in Week 3, allowing students time to obtain the book. Week 1 and Week 2 readings will be distributed in class or posted on Moodle. We will not read every Shepherd chapter in full; selected portions will be identified in advance. All other readings, including Macquarrie, Augustine, Job, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Tillich, Thurman, West, and Bailey, will be supplied through Moodle or class handouts.

How Reading Works in This Course

Not every reading produces a written assignment. Students will complete eight short graded Reading Guides across the semester. Other readings are due for discussion and may include ungraded questions to consider. The aim is serious engagement with manageable readings, not an assignment attached to every class meeting.

Direct Instruction and Practice

For LO2, direct instruction includes thesis development, philosophical argumentation, organization, textual evidence, and revision. Students practice these skills through Reading Guides, the paper proposal, draft feedback, and in-class writing discussions.

For LO10, lectures provide historical and intellectual context, while comparative discussions model how to identify continuities, differences, and tensions among thinkers. Students practice historical and critical analysis through Reading Guides, comparative exercises, Jeopardy review, exams, and the final project.

Evaluation - 1,000 Points

Assessment	Points	Notes
Three Unit Exams	300	Sept. 24, Oct. 22, Nov. 12; 100 points each
Eight Reading Guides	200	25 points each
Two Jeopardy Review Competitions	100	50 points each; graded collaborative review
Paper Proposal & Working Thesis	75	Due Nov. 3
Draft 1 of Final Project	100	Due Nov. 24
Final Integrative Existential Analysis Project	225	Due Dec. 10

Total: 1,000 points

Second Draft / Revision Check: Dec. 3, if needed. This is a formative checkpoint and carries no additional points.

Signature Assignment

The Final Integrative Existential Analysis Project is the signature assignment for LO2 and LO10. Students will develop an original argument around a major problem in Christian existentialism while engaging multiple course thinkers. LO2 is assessed through thesis quality, organization, evidence, clarity, and revision; LO10 through historical contextualization, comparison, critical analysis, and synthesis.

Reading Guides

RG 1 - Macquarrie: Existentialism and Biblical Thought

RG 2 - Augustine: Restlessness, Desire, and the Divided Will

RG 3 - Shepherd/Kierkegaard: Abraham, Faith, and Fear and Trembling

RG 4 - Job: Suffering, Protest, and the Whirlwind

RG 5 - Shepherd/Kierkegaard: Faith, Selfhood, and Despair

RG 6 - Shepherd/Buber: I-Thou and the Relational Self

RG 7 - Thurman: Jesus, Fear, and the Disinherited

RG 8 - West: Nihilism, Meaning, and Hope

Course Schedule

Readings are due at the beginning of class. Moodle readings will be posted electronically. Shepherd begins in Week 3; exact selected portions will be identified in advance.

Week	Date	Topic	Reading / Assignment Due
Week 1	Aug. 25	Opening Day: What Is an Existential Question?	No advance reading. Genesis 22:1-19 read/discussed in class. Macquarrie handout distributed.
	Aug. 27	Existentialism and Biblical Thought	Macquarrie, An Existentialist Theology, Section 4, pp. 14-20/21. RG 1 due.
Week 2	Sept. 1	Augustine: The Restless Self	Confessions, Book I, Chs. 1-5 and Book II, Chs. 4-10 (Moodle).
	Sept. 3	Augustine: The Divided Will and Conversion	Confessions, Book VIII, Chs. 5-12 (Moodle). RG 2 due.
Week 3	Sept. 8	Augustine in Review: Desire, Will, and Becoming a Self	No new reading. Historical context + comparative/writing exercise.
	Sept. 10	From Augustine to Kierkegaard	Shepherd, Ch. 3, selected portion on subjectivity, Abraham, and key themes.
Week 4	Sept. 15	TBA / Kierkegaard: Abraham, Faith, and the Absurd	Shepherd, Ch. 5, selected portion on Fear and Trembling; reread Genesis 22. RG 3 due.
	Sept. 17	JOB - Guest Lecture with President Brady	Job 1-3; 29-31; 38-42 (Moodle). RG 4 due.
Week 5	Sept. 22	Unit I Integration + JEOPARDY I	No new reading. Review Macquarrie, Augustine, Kierkegaard/Abraham, and Job.
	Sept. 24	EXAM I	No new reading.
Week 6	Sept. 29	Kierkegaard: What Is Faith? What Is a Christian?	Shepherd, Ch. 4, selected portion. RG 5 due.
	Oct. 1	Despair and Becoming a Self	Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, short excerpt (Moodle).
Week 7	Oct. 6	Dostoevsky: Do Human Beings Really Want Freedom?	The Brothers Karamazov, Book V, Ch. 5, 'The Grand Inquisitor' (Moodle).
	Oct. 8	NO CLASS	No class.
Week 8	Oct. 13	NO CLASS	No class.
	Oct. 15	Tillich: Anxiety, Finitude, and Courage	The Courage to Be, Ch. 2, assigned portion (Moodle).
Week 9	Oct. 20	Putting the Existential Self Together + Exam Review	No new reading. Return to Shepherd and compare Augustine/Kierkegaard/Dostoevsky/Tillich.
	Oct. 22	EXAM II	No new reading.
Week 10	Oct. 27	Buber: The Relational Self	Shepherd, Ch. 8, selected portion on I-Thou and personhood. RG 6 due.
	Oct. 29	Buber Continued: I-Thou, I-It, and Christian Existence	No new reading. Continue through lecture and comparative exercise.
Week 11	Nov. 3	NO CLASS - PAPER PROPOSAL DUE	Working thesis + project proposal due (75 points).
	Nov. 5	Thurman: Existence Under Oppression	Jesus and the Disinherited, Chs. 1-2 (Moodle). RG 7 due.

Week 12	Nov. 10	West: Nihilism, Meaning, and Hope + JEOPARDY II	Race Matters, 'Nihilism in Black America' (Moodle). RG 8 due.
	Nov. 12	EXAM III	No new reading.
Week 13	Nov. 17	Sartre: Freedom Without God?	Shepherd, Ch. 11, selected portion on possibility, meaning, and freedom.
	Nov. 19	Bailey: Christian Existentialism, Desire, Race, and Justice	Bailey, 'The Metaphysical and Political Trace of Desire in Saint Augustine,' selected portion (Moodle).
Week 14	Nov. 24	NO CLASS / WRITING DAY - DRAFT 1 DUE	Draft 1 due (100 points).
	Nov. 26	NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING	No class.
Week 15	Dec. 1	The Committed Self: Where Do We End?	No new reading. Semester synthesis.
	Dec. 3	Second Draft / Revision Check, if needed	Formative revision checkpoint; no additional points.
Finals	Dec. 10	FINAL PROJECT DUE	Final Integrative Existential Analysis Project due (225 points).