

School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle University

STMM 504: Christian Ethics
Hunt 100
Spring 2008
Wed. Mon. 5:45 – 9:00

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“Your vocation is where the world’s deep hunger and your deep joy meet”.

F. Beuchner

“And this is the meaning of ethics: to express the ways in which love embodies itself and life is maintained and saved..”

Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil....not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“The problem with much contemporary discourse is that affirmation masquerades as argument.”

Stephen Brookfield

“Walk forward questioning”

Zapatista slogan

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What are communities of faith called by the whispering of the Spirit to do and be in this particular society at the dawn of the 21st century? What does it mean to live a “moral life” in a world of exquisite beauty that also is brutalized by colonialism, racism, a soul-shattering gap between rich and poor, gender inequity, and “ecocide”? What is my vision for a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world? Who or what forms that vision? Who or what mal-forms it? With whose eyes do we see society as it is and as it could be? As it ought be? Who are our conversation partners in asking questions like these and in digging for responses? Participants in this course will explore these questions with diverse contemporary voices, and with figures and communities of the past.

This course will introduce the practice and theory of moral formation, discernment, and conduct in Christian communities, through the inter-disciplinary lens of Christian Ethics. Christian Ethics will be viewed as the art-science enabling Christian communities to draw critically upon their traditions, and to read the “signs of the times” in order to shape ways of living consistent with faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced in the Spirit. Participants will dialogue across the ages with faith forbearers, and with diverse contemporary voices. Particular attention will given to views

from Athe underside,” to the relationship of Christian scripture and traditions to contemporary moral deliberation, and to the ambiguity and complexity underlying moral dispute. Three components of Christian ethics will be considered, and located in a practical conceptual framework. Those components include: the historical legacy of Christian morality; tools for moral formation, discernment, and action; and specific contemporary moral issues in their historical contexts. The informing undercurrent of this course is hope and moral-spiritual empowerment in the face of profound moral challenges facing contemporary U.S. society.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The overall intent is that participants will experience themselves as critical, constructive, collaborative theological ethicists rooted in Christian traditions, and will lay groundwork for on-going ethical work that weds morality, spirituality, and theology in the everyday practices of Christian life and ministry.

To that end, the intended outcomes for those who participate fully in this course and complete it are:

- To gain tools for bringing religion (including scripture) to bear appropriately on issues of public life in a secular society, and tools for critiquing inappropriate use of religion in the public sphere.
- To develop critical consciousness regarding culturally produced assumptions that parade as natural, normal, inevitable, or divinely ordained.
- To develop working familiarity with the discipline of Christian Ethics: its methods, tools, “languages,” vocabulary, key concepts, vibrancy, contested areas, and multi-faceted diversity.
- To explore and articulate one’s working method for ethical discernment.
- To appreciate the diversity of Christian moral traditions, how they are formed and altered, and the interplay between moral traditions and their cultural, political, economic, and ecological contexts.
- To nurture hope and a sense of agency for bringing faith to bear on crucial and vexing moral issues of our day.
- To become attuned to what “voices are missing from the table” of theological and ethical discourse.
- To enhance the capacity to have moral convictions, while respecting deeply the differing convictions of other people.
- To ask good probing question about all of the above.
- To have a good time as a community of theologically informed and critically conscious Christian ethicists working together.

A second set of intended outcomes pertain to intellectual formation.

- To develop skill in various modes of thinking (systematic and creative; analytical and synthetic; sympathetic and critical), and to experience the value of so doing for the life of faith.
- To develop the intellectual virtues of concentration, curiosity, perseverance, generosity, and mutually supportive collaboration with others.
- To nurture tenacity in the face of intellectual roadblocks (not to give up when the going is difficult).

- To experience the joy, freedom, and power to be found in disciplined intellectual inquiry into faith life and ministry using the tools of Christian ethics.
- To enhance contextual imagination (the capacity to perceive others= perspectives and situations, and through that perception to develop critical insight into one=s own).
- To deepen the ability to live with paradox and ambiguity while also maintaining conviction and seeking clarity.

TEACHING/LEARNING METHODS

1. Active reading of texts, and varied forms of interaction with their authors. (Please consider yourselves dialogue partners with each other and with the authors read. Put your knowledge and experience in conversation with the knowledge of other people: other students, contemporaries whose perspectives will be read, faith forebearers, and the professor.)
2. Structured classroom question asking and discussion.
3. Interactive lectures.
4. Written assignments: one short paper, one medium length longer final paper, “Moral Formation Autobiography,” “Critical Reading Notes.”
5. Peer consultation groups.
6. Film and discussion of it.
7. “Testimony to Hope and Moral Agency.”

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Read *and reflect on* all readings in their entirety before the designated class session; be prepared to question and discuss them in class.
2. Contribute to the development of a trusting and exciting learning community in the context of this course:
 - Bring your relevant experience and knowledge “to the table of discourse” in the course.
 - Participate respectfully--verbally and non-verbally--in seminar group discussions and in full class discussion.
 - Occasionally, at close of class session, contribute to the professor written comments on “when I was most engaged, and when most disengaged in the class this day,” or on “what I found particularly empowering or disempowering in the class this day.”
3. Turn in written assignments on the designated dates at beginning of class session.
4. Do all reasonably possible to read the assigned texts as early as possible in the week so that during the week you may reflect on how these readings intersect with your life, and may test out--in interaction with someone else--a claim made in the readings.
5. Bring to class for discussion purposes your “Critical Reading Notes.” They are brief written notes reflecting your on-going engagement with the readings for the week and the readings and classroom work of the previous weeks. The notes are *not* meant to be formal and will *not* be turned in or evaluated, unless students are not doing them. Should that

occur, I will begin to record their completion. Do them in whatever note-taking form works best for your learning purposes, and to enable your participation in classroom discussion. The notes should respond to whatever study questions are assigned in the previous class. If no study questions are assigned, please respond to the following:

- What is the main question asked or the main thesis argued in each reading?
- How do these readings intersect with my experience (historical or current) or the life of a community of which I am a part? (The readings might intersect with another class, home life, church life, national or international affairs, ministry, community life, workplace, or elsewhere.)
- What have I learned from discussing or testing out a concept, theory, or claim developed in these readings?
- What one or two key questions for class discussion that I formulate from reading these texts as a self-conscious Christian ethicist?

6. Attend all class sessions, arriving on time. (Necessary absences or lateness will, of course, be accommodated. If you *must* miss a session, I recommend two complementary steps: ask a colleague in the class to tape the session for you, and ask two colleagues to take especially readable notes for you to copy, noting in particular any revisions made in the syllabus.)

7. Contribute to one class project. It will require very little outside work and will not be graded. It will be explained in class. It is called, “Testimony to Hope and Moral Agency.”

Note: A suggestion, but not a requirement: Shortly before each class session, review your reading notes (in book margins and notes taken), the written work you are turning in, and your journal entry.

CRITERIA AND METHODS OF EVALUATION

The course grade will consist of:

- Moral Deliberation Paper (25%)
- Critical Response Essay (15%)
- “Moral Formation Autobiography” (15%)
- Small group presentation with outline (15%)
- Participation and preparation (including attendance) (30%)

This includes includes completion of all required reading and written assignments on time, completion of “critical reading notes, “ attendance, and verbal and non-verbal contribution to a learning community (offering knowledge, experience, perspectives; listening attentively; respecting others’ opinions).

Papers will be assessed for the following:

- doing what was assigned.
- content: depth of understanding and thought; extent of drawing upon relevant reading and lectures from the class; clarity of thought and organization of expression; skill in descriptive, critical, and constructive thinking where appropriate to the assignment (we will learn and work with these distinctions in class); coherence.
- effort.

- quality of writing: writing conventions (grammar, punctuation, spelling, correct endnotes or footnotes, etc.); voice; word choice; sentence and paragraph structure; organization and clarity.

- late assignments will be reduced in grade.

Please note: On the two papers, respect yourself, your work, and my time enough to turn in your best writing. Make every paragraph, sentence, and word have a purpose. Write multiple drafts, review and edit them. Proofread final draft three times: once for solid paragraphs, once for complete sentences, once for grammar/ spelling/ punctuation.

TEXTS (REQUIRED)

* West, Tracy. *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006.

* Gudorf, Christine; Robert Stivers; Alice Frazer Evans; Robert Evans; Stivers, Robert. *Christian Ethics: A Case Method Approach*. Orbis, 1996.

* Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia. *Public Church: for the Life of the World*. Fortress Press, 2005.

* De La Torre, Miguel A. *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004.

* Birch, Bruce and Larry Rasmussen. *The Bible and Ethics*. rev. ed. Augsburg Press, 1989.

* Coursepack (for purchase at Student Pavillion.)

Additional readings downloaded and printed from the web.)

Suggestions for Expanded Reading

If you would appreciate expanded (additional) reading, please request it. I am happy to provide!

COURSE SCHEDULE, READINGS, ASSIGNMENTS

Readings for each week are listed in the order that I recommend reading them for ease of comprehension.

Week One (April 2)

Introduction to Each Other and to the Course, and to Christian Ethics.

What is Christian Ethics? Mapping the Terrain of Moral Formation, Deliberation, and Practice.

Week Two (April 9)

Moral Discernment: The Art of Critical Mystical Vision

Readings:

Birch and Rasmussen: Preface, Intro, Chaps 1 and 3, pp. 17-19 and 100 – top of 103.

Maguire: Ethics: How To Do It (Coursepack)

Moe-Lobeda: “A Christian Ethical Framework” (Coursepack)

Stivers, et. al.: Peruse to choose 3 top choices for your moral deliberation paper.

Assignments Due:

List of top three choices in order, for final paper.

Critical Reading Notes TBA.

Moral Formation Autobiography Inquiry #1.

Week Three (April 16)

The Bible and Other Sources in Ethics: What Sorts of Authority? How? Why?

Readings:

Birch and Rasmussen. *Bible and Ethics*: Review ch.1; ch. 8 and 9.

Anderson. pp. 216-227 (Coursepack).

Long. Edward LeRoy. *To Liberate and Redeem*: Introduction.

(Coursepack.)

West: Ch. 3.

Assignments due:

- Critical Reading Notes: 1) How do you or your faith community commonly use scripture as an authority in moral considerations, 2) How would you critique that “method,” and 3) How might revise it given what you have learned in this class and in particular the readings for this week.

In class: Receive Kennedy handout for Week Four.

Week Four (April 23)

(Film: “Weapons of the Spirit”)

Moral Character and Social Structure: Moral Formation and Malformation

Readings:

Kennedy (Coursepack; Handout???)

Birch and Rasmussen: Chaps. 4 and 5.

SKIM and bring for work in class: *United Nations Human Development Report 1998*, “Overview:” pp. 1-14 and “skim” pp. 15-26.

(Download and print from the web: <http://hdr.undp.org/reports>.

Select “1998.” Select “Global Report.”) A hard copy of 1-14 is required.

Initial reading of West: chap 2 in order to “practice”

Assignment due:

- “Moral Formation Autobiography” Inquiry # 2.

- Rough draft notes for Critical Response Essay (Engaging a Written Voice re: West chapter two)

Week Five (April 30)

Moral Formation in Contexts of Structured Injustice

Reading:

West: Preface, Intro, chaps. 1 and 2.

Assignment Due:
Critical Response Essay .

Week Six (May 7)

Moral Practice in Contexts of Structured Injustice

Reading:

West: chaps. 4 and 5.

Assignment Due:

“Moral Formation Autobiography” Inquiry # 3 and 4.

Please turn in the entire “Moral Formation Autobiography”

Week Seven (May 14)

Ethics from the Margins

Reading: De La Torre: Preface, chaps. 1, 2, and 3.

Assignment Due:

Paragraph regarding final paper; see paper assignment.

Week Eight (May 21)

The Over-all Christian Moral Norm: Justice-Making, Earth-honoring Neighbor-love

Readings:

Moe-Lobeda: pp. 23 – 39.

Brady (Coursepack)

Maguire, Moral Core, chapter on “Justice.: Selected pages (To be emailed)

Assignments Due:

Phase One of the final paper (optional; see paper assignment)

Be prepared to discuss: Drawing upon these readings and the readings and discussion of previous weeks, what is my emerging method of doing ethical deliberation? (Consider, for example: the norms, basic convictions, moral vision, and sources that inform your method.)

Week Nine (May 28)

Public Church: Gathered, Fed and Watered, Sent

Readings:

Moe-Lobeda: Entire book except pp. 23 – 39.

Assignment Due:

Week Ten (June 4)

Hope and Moral Agency: Practicing the Art of Christian Ethics

End of course celebration

Readings:

Birch and Rasmussen. Chaps. 7 and 10.

Review Readings TBA (Different readings to be assigned to different students)

Assignments due:

- Final Paper.

- Be prepared to discuss the most important learning or challenge that you have encountered in doing your final paper, and one thing that you have learned in this course and do not want to forget..

APPENDIX

Operative Guidelines for Responsible Collaborative Learning in this Learning Community

1. One never sees clearly until one sees the world outside of one's inherited perspectives. This implies a commitment to enabling the perspectives of historically under-represented people and peoples to be heard. The course is designed to honor that commitment.
2. Knowledge is not what is produced and transmitted by experts, but has to do with how we know, learn, and engage our world. Learning happens more deeply when it is, at least in part: collaborative/relational, participatory/active, integrative, experiential, and embodied. Therefore, in this class we will strive to: 1) be collaborative in our inquiry; 2) actively interpret material; 3) make interdisciplinary connections even within the discipline of Christian ethics; 4) draw upon and honor the rich life experience brought by each student, and 5) attend to what is learned through the senses and the heart, as well as through the intellect.
3. Different students learn differently . We will engage in diverse modes of learning.
4. The ecological crises of our day and the imperative of forging sustainable Earth-human relations call for a shift from anthropocentric philosophical, theological, and scientific frameworks to eco-centric ones. This shift entails fascinating and difficult moves in language, conceptual frameworks, theory, and method. We will struggle toward those shifts, recalling, as we interact with the course material, that human being is part of a larger web of life.
5. Follow your intellectual passions. If you do you'll find yourself surrounded by a lovely community of friends--living and passed. If you become highly interested in particular moral situation, historical community, concept, figure, or dilemma, and wish to do further reading and work on it, see me.
6. Aim at questions and at provisional answers not at answers cast in concrete.

! Thank you for the privilege of working with you !