

CE-101 Introduction to Christian Ethics

Methodist Theological School in Ohio

Spring 2009 · Tuesdays 8:30 – 11:20 a.m. · G-150

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Course Description and Objectives

This course is a study of the theological bases for Christian ethical thought and action. Consideration is given to both historical and contemporary varieties of interpretation.

Objectives include:

- To acquaint students with a range of approaches to “doing” Christian ethics.
- To learn about ethical method (authority, sources and norms).
- To enable students clarify the core elements and methods of their own Christian ethics.

Required Texts

Lois K. Daly, ed. *Feminist Theological Ethics*

Robin Gill, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*

Robin W. Lovin *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*

Christine Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty*

Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*

Requirements

In order to get the most out of this course, your participation in the following experiences is essential:

- Attendance at all class meetings and informed participation in class activities
- Careful reading of assigned material
- Five 2-paragraph response papers
- One 5-page Moral Autobiography
- One 5-page Sermon Analysis
- 3/4 –term Exam
- Final Exam

The details of these requirements are as follows:

1. **Attending and participating in class sessions and discussions.**

Because of the format of this class, your presence and involvement at all class-meetings are essential.

- You are permitted one absence during the semester—no questions asked. Additional absences and/or chronic tardiness will result in the lowering of your final grade. Students who take additional absences or who are habitually tardy, are not eligible to receive an A in the course.
- During class discussions, it is not likely that we will agree on all issues. While rude and/or disrespectful behavior is not permitted, a multiplicity of perspectives provides opportunities for practicing the skill of agreeing and disagreeing with one another in love.
- Please turn cell phone ringers off during class. Surfing the internet and sending or receiving text messages are not permitted. I may not call you out for this publicly, but don't think I don't see you!

2. **Reading the assigned materials.**

To learn and insightfully participate in class, you will need to read carefully all the assigned reading. You should arrive in class having completed the reading assignments and prepared to ask and answer questions about the material.

3. **Ethical Lounging with Course Companions.**

It is impossible to Christian ethics alone, because ethics that are genuinely Christian always take place in the context of a Christian community. For this reason, you will meet for at least half an hour each week with a small group of your colleagues from this class to talk about whatever is on your minds as pertains to Christian ethics. I *suggest* that you talk about assigned readings or class discussions, but as long as your discussion connects to Christian ethics, you can talk about whatever you like. Members of the group will take turns emailing me a brief summary of you meeting each week. The summary should include who was present and what you talked about. I will make arrangements with each group to attend one of your lounging sessions.

4. **Five 2-paragraph Response Papers.**

Response papers are your opportunity to demonstrate to me that you have completed and understand the assigned reading. Please keep your 2 paragraph-long responses focused on week's question, and limited to no more than one page in length.

Response papers are due to me via Share Point at the start of class (i.e., Tuesdays at 8:30 a.m.).

5. **Moral Autobiography.**

Experience is one of the most potent sources of moral deliberation—and it never comes raw. By the time we have labeled something as “experience,” someone else has already edited and interpreted it. Yet experience is key in shaping us as moral agents. In this brief moral autobiography, reflect on how your life experiences have shaped how your approach to ethics.

In this account, address some of the significant communities and experiences (related to family, church, geography, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, physical ability etc.) that have shaped you, and reflect on whether you see your own moral agency primarily as a matter of being, doing or seeking (or something else altogether)? What disposes you to think that way?

Because this is short assignment, you can't tell me everything so be selective!

Due: March 17 Length: 5 pages.

6. **Sermon Analysis.**

This assignment asks you to analyze a sermon for how Christian ethical frameworks and concepts are employed. This means not only that you will need to find time to listen to a sermon (that you have not delivered!), but that you should plan on taking copious notes while you listen. Please also consider that since not every sermon is “about” ethics, not all sermons will be good candidates for this assignment. Therefore, please choose a sermon that lends itself to ethical analysis.

Your paper should include the following:

- Who preached the sermon, where it was preached, and the occasion (i.e., a chapel service, Sunday morning worship, etc.).
- The topic and/or lectionary or scripture texts.
- Summary of the sermon
- Identify the ethical methodology or methodologies (i.e., deontology, teleology, virtue, liberationist etc.) employed either explicitly or implicitly in the sermon. Give examples to back up your assessment. (Note: it is quite likely that more than one ethical perspective will be in play. If this is the case, try to tease out the various methodologies.)
- What ethical norms were invoked in the sermon? How were these norms defined?
- In your opinion, what were the strengths or weaknesses of how ethical methodology and ethical norms were used in the sermon? For instance, what was gained or lost/clarified or minimized by framing the issues in the way that they were? Would have the use of another ethical methodology or the application a different ethical norm changed things?

Due: April 14 Length: 5 pages

7. **¾ -term Exam.**

It's neither a mid-term or a final. This exam will cover basic concepts, terms and methodologies in Christian ethics. More information will follow.

In class, April 28.

8. **Final exam.**

Take-home essay exam, due May 21. Details TBA

Grading

Attendance, participation, and ethical lounging: 20%

Response Papers: 10%

Sermon Analysis: 15%

Moral Autobiography: 15%

³/₄-term Exam: 20%

Final Exam: 20%

Grade Scale:

90 – 100 = A

80 – 89 = B

70 – 79 = C

60 – 69 = D

Below 60 = F

All late work is penalized by one letter grade per day.

General Guidelines for papers

1. All papers should be typed and double spaced with 1-inch margins. Font-size should be no larger than 12 pt, and no smaller than 10 pt.
2. Basic rules of grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph structure must be followed meticulously. Contractions (i.e. can't, don't, shouldn't, etc.) are never appropriate in formal papers.
3. Wherever possible, in papers as well as in class discussions, you must use inclusive language.
4. All papers should be proof-read by someone *other than yourself* before they are submitted for a grade.
5. Please refer to the “Expectations for Documenting Work at MTSO” section of the student handbook. If you use parenthetical documentation, the period is placed outside of the last parenthesis, like this (Zimmerman, 37). If you use footnotes, the footnote is inserted into your text after all relevant punctuation, “like this.”¹

Academic Integrity

No cheating is acceptable. Any work that is not your own creative effort or that falls under any of the categories specified as Academic Misconduct in the MTSO Student Handbook (available at http://academics.mtso.edu/Student%20Handbook%20and%20Policies/2007_8_handbook_FINAL.pdf , p.38-39) will automatically be given a zero. No rewrites or second chances will be permitted. Cheating can also result in the complete failure of the course.

¹ Zimmerman, 37.

Class Schedule

INTRODUCTION

Week 1 (Feb 3): Placing Christian Ethics Context

Introduction to the course and the requirements

Read: Harrison, “Doing Christian Ethics” (Online)
Williams in *The Cambridge Companion*

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

Week 2 (Feb 10): Historical Foundations of Christian Ethics

Read: Stout “Tradition in Ethics” (Online)
Ottati “What it means to Stand in a Living Tradition” (Online)
Recommended: Pope in *The Cambridge Companion*

Week 3 (Feb 17): Uses of Scripture

Read: Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, “La Palabra de Dios en Nosotras” (Online)
Wogaman (*A Historical Introduction*), Ch. 1 (Online)
Jones in *The Cambridge Companion*
Countryman, “The Bible, Heterosexism and the American Public
Discussion of Sexual Orientation” (Online)

Week 4 (Feb 24): The Role of Experience

Read: Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, Ch. 2, 7 (Online)
Margaret Farley “The Role of Experience in Moral Discernment”
(Online)

Write: Response paper #1. First, identify and explain in your own words two key concepts from the readings. Secondly, reflect on how you could apply these key concepts in the ethical practice of your own ministry.

FRAMEWORKS FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Week 5 (Mar 3): Methods in Christian Ethics

Read: Lovin, *Christian Ethics*, Ch. 1 – 4
Recommended: MacIntyre “The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition” (Online)
Stanley Hauerwas “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological” (Online)

Week 6 (Mar 10): *HAPPY SPRING BREAK!*

PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Week 7 (Mar 17): Christian Realism

Read: Niebuhr selections (online)
West, “CONTEXT: Niebuhr’s Ethics and Harlem Activists” (Online)

Write: Moral Autobiography (5 pgs)

Week 8 (Mar 24): Bonhoeffer

Read: Bonhoeffer selections (online)

Christine Schliesser, *Everyone who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty* (Introduction, Ch. 2, 9 – 11)

Write: Response Paper #2. What does responsibility mean for Bonhoeffer, and how does his definition of human responsibility connect to Christian ethics?

Week 9 (Mar 31): Christian Responsibility

Read: H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*

Write: Response Paper #3. How does Niebuhr conceive of human responsibility? How is this the same as/different from Bonhoeffer's work on responsibility?

Week 10 (Apr 7): HOLY WEEK BREAK

Week 11 (Apr 14): Liberationist Ethics

Read: Gutierrez selections (Online)

Cone selections (Online)

De la Torre selections (Online)

Write: Sermon Analysis (5 pgs)

Week 12 (Apr 21): Feminist Ethics

Read: Daly, *Feminist Theological Ethics*, Ch. 9, 10,

Reuther selections (Online)

Harrison "Dreaming of a Common Language" (Online)

Week 13 (Apr. 28): $\frac{3}{4}$ term exam

Week 14 (May 5): Womanist Ethics

Read: Daly, *Feminist Theological Ethics*, Ch. 3-5, 11

Emilie Townes, "Living in the New Jerusalem" (Online)

Write: Response Paper #4. First, identify and explain in your own words 2 key concepts from the readings. Second, reflect on how you could apply these key concepts in the ethical practice of your own ministry

Week 15 (May 12): An Ethic of Risk

Read: Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*

Write: Response Paper #5. How does Welch define responsible action? Compare and contrast with Bonhoeffer's and H.R. Niebuhr's conceptions of responsibility.