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303-01 Christian Ethics: Methods and Questions

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS: METHODS AND QUESTIONS
Theology 303-01
Spring 2014
TH 10:00-11:15

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*The easiest and most efficient way to reach me outside of my designated office hours is by e-mail (helmerj@xavier.edu). I will endeavor to respond to e-mail within 24 hours.

Course Description

This advanced level undergraduate course is an introduction to the sub-discipline of Christian Ethics. This course falls under the Ethics/Religion and Society (E/RS) component of the undergraduate core curriculum at Xavier, which serves to promote critical ethical and religious reflection on issues central to our collective social and political life from the perspectives of the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. (http://www.xavier.edu/ers/index.cfm) This course builds on THEO 111: Theological Foundations, which introduces students to the discipline of theology understood as a critical dialogue between Christian traditions and contemporary human experience.

THEO 303 begins with an overview of the leading meta-ethical and normative ethical theories (deontological, consequentialist, virtue-centered approaches) as these have been variously appropriated within contemporary Christian theological ethics, and then moves on to consider in further detail and through the lens of the Christian theological tradition particular ethical questions, issues, and controversies in the areas of sexual ethics, biomedical ethics, ecological ethics, and social ethics. Specific issues of consideration typically include: the ethics of gender, sexuality, marriage, and reproduction; the ethics of human enhancement (gene therapy, therapeutic cloning, stem cell research); and the ethics of killing (sex-selective abortion, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, capital punishment, killing in conflict situations).

Credit Hours: 3 Credits

Prerequisite: This course presumes the successful completion of “THEO 111 - Theological Foundations”

This course is a requirement for the Theology Major.

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

The overarching objectives of this course are, first, to familiarize students with the main methods and approaches to ethical reflection and judgment within the sub-discipline of contemporary Christian ethics in order that, second, students might better understand how these approaches might be brought practically to bear on contemporary issues of ethical concern. In so doing, students will gain a deeper appreciation of the ethical resources of religious traditions (and more specifically, the Christian tradition) and how dialogue with these sources as well as with contemporary religious and philosophical ethical perspectives can serve to deepen one’s own understandings of one’s own practical ethical commitments. The successful realization of these overarching objectives should lead to the achievement of the following learning outcomes:
1) A foundational understanding of significant texts, methods, and approaches in the discipline of contemporary Christian ethics;
2) A deeper appreciation of how these resources might be brought to bear on issues of contemporary ethical concern in a social context that is culturally, ethically, and religiously plural, and of how these resources might contribute importantly to the public moral and political discussion of these issues;
3) In engaging in critical theological reflection on ethical and religious questions of social significance, you will deepen your capacities for moral and religious insight and understanding while enlarging your moral capacities for a sense of justice and a sense of compassion;
4) In probing fundamental questions and experiences arising from the human condition, such as those concerning the nature of morality, the essence of justice, and the meaning of religious faith, you will increase your capacities for critical analysis and evaluation;
5) By organizing your ideas in writing and in oral communication, and by presenting clear and cogent arguments, you will become more effective communicators.

**Course Texts**


*Other readings/resources on Blackboard (http://blackboard.xavier.edu) are denoted by (RSV) on the course syllabus.*

**Course Requirements/Methodology and Grading**

Course Medium: As noted in the School's course catalog and in the course description above, this is an advanced level course in Theology. The course will run in a twice weekly lecture and discussion-style format, and will integrate the reading, (individual and group) analysis, and discussion of texts, films, and other media.

**Course Assignments and Responsibilities:**

1/ **Class Attendance, Class Preparation, and Class Participation**

**Class Attendance:** Regular and punctual attendance is essential, both in terms of fulfilling the course requirements, and in terms of your success as a student, and you are expected to have prepared for lectures and class discussions through a careful consideration of the assigned readings. The assigned daily readings and class discussions will provide you with an opportunity to critically respond to the assigned texts and to enter into conversation with one another on various significant ethical issues. Each and every person in the class will be expected to have engaged conscientiously with the daily readings so that she or he will be able to contribute actively to the daily class discussions. You will find that if you prepare carefully for each class the course will be more interesting and more to your enjoyment.
A sign-in sheet will be available at the beginning of each scheduled class date. In order to be recorded as present for any particular class day, you MUST sign the class register for that date on entry to the classroom at the beginning of the class period. In order to be recorded as present for any particular class day, you must also arrive punctually and be prepared to begin at the scheduled class start time. Tardiness without a reasonable excuse will constitute an unjustified class absence. No one will be admitted to class after five minutes past the scheduled start time.

If you are unable to attend a scheduled class meeting for any reason, please notify me by e-mail (helmerj@xavier.edu) in advance, whenever possible. If the absence is necessitated by personal illness, death in the immediate family, or duties performed for the University, you should seek an excused absence through the appropriate office and designated procedure as specified in the Student Handbook (http://www.xavier.edu/deanofstudents/documents/studenthandbook.pdf). Upon consultation with the instructor, you may be permitted to make up any course work missed as the result of the excused absence. Unexcused absences for more than two classes will automatically result in a lowering of your grade by one (numerical) point per subsequent missed class, and more than three unexcused absences may result in automatic failure of the course. I will notify you in writing (i.e. by e-mail) once you have two unexcused absences.

**Class Preparation:** What does it mean to be “prepared” for this class? Carefully complete all of the assigned readings prior to coming to class, and take notes on the readings. The purpose of these notes is to allow you to participate fully in class discussion and to provide you with a study resource. Whatever you read for a given day should be brought to class on that day. Successful class preparation depends on developing and exercising good study habits. What works best varies from person to person, according to her/his particular learning habits, but here are a few suggestions:

1. Schedule a fixed period of time for class preparation.
2. Do your readings in an environment where you will be least distracted (e.g. in the library). Lack of distraction will help you to focus better, and to work more efficiently overall.
3. Preparation includes both reading and note-taking. Try to summarize that day’s readings in your own words, as though you were explaining the thesis of the reading selection to a friend who is not in the course. Your summary should include questions that you can raise during class discussion.
4. Discuss each day’s reading assignment with a friend in the class. After completing steps one through three, get together with a friend (at Starbucks or elsewhere) and compare your individual notes.

**Readings:** This is a reading-intensive course, so you should schedule your time to allow you to complete all of the assigned readings carefully. Diligent completion of assigned reading is an essential foundation for understanding class lectures, participating in class discussion, and for completing writing assignments. If you do not understand some part of the reading, please do not hesitate to e-mail me or to come to see me with questions. These readings are outlined below in the **Reading Schedule**.

When you read, keep the following questions in mind:

1. What are the most important points in the text? Why are they important?
2. Do you agree with the claims that the author is making? Why or why not?
3. Is there anything in the reading that you do not understand?

**Class Participation:** This is a discussion-intensive course. Given the nature of the class, participation in class discussion is essential. The goal of these discussions is to help you better understand the readings and lectures, and also to provide you with practice in engaging these challenging issues with others. The key purpose of class discussion is just that: to discuss. Intensive class discussion provides you with ongoing opportunities to develop your abilities to think critically and to articulate and defend your particular point of view. This in turn requires an
environment where participants are willing to listen to and to rationally consider arguments that they may disagree with so that everyone feels comfortable to communicate their own views. Even though there are divergent and even opposing opinions on different issues covered by the course, it is essential that you develop the skills to engage and to discuss such issues in a receptive and fruitful way.

- Regular class attendance, class preparation, and class participation will comprise 26% of your overall grade.

2/Weekly Response Papers: Each student will prepare a one page response paper (single-spaced, twelve point font, 1 inch margins, with the class information (“THEO 111-03”) and your name included in a header at the top of the page) for each Tuesday class meeting to be submitted in paper/hard copy form to me at the beginning of that particular class day. The response paper is to be formulated in response to a discussion question distributed in advance (typically the Thursday class prior) and the paper should engage critically with the main argument of the text under consideration for that day, and raise questions in response to the main claims being advanced in the text. In your response you may either agree or disagree with the main claims that the author is making (and indicate the reasons for your dis/agreement), raise issues about points that the author either fails to consider, or ought to consider more seriously than s/he does, and relate the author’s perspective to other texts that we have been considering in the course.

Each paper will be graded pass or fail, and the minimum quality needed for a passing paper is a B. Each paper will count for 2% of your overall final grade. Barring exceptional circumstances, the failure to submit a required response paper by the required time (i.e., the beginning of the class period on the class day that the paper is due) will result in a loss of credit for that particular response paper. ***N.B. For the week of October 7th, the paper will be due on Thursday, October 10th rather than Tuesday, October 8th (fall break that Tuesday).

- The Weekly Response Papers will comprise 24% (12 papers @ 2% per paper) of your overall grade.

3/Midterm Examination: There will be one take-home written examination in the course. The take-home midterm examination, which will be due (submitted in PDF format and by e-mail) by 5PM on Thursday, October 17, 2013, will cover the material that is treated in the first half of the course and it will comprise 20% of your overall grade. The examination, which will be comprised of a short-essay format, will cover all of the assigned reading, as well as the class lectures. The examinations will require you to synthesize and apply what you have learned through class lectures and discussions.

- The Midterm Examination will comprise 20% of your overall grade.

4/Final Paper/Case Study: Prepare an analysis and critique a particular ethical issue (either one that we have studied in the course, or another of your own preference) by developing a case study. In this paper (10-12 double-spaced pages in length; 12 point font; standard 1 inch margins top-bottom, left-right), you may defend or critique a particular position discussed, expand and extrapolate a position discussed, or creatively address the topic in another way. You could, for example, select an issue within the areas of sexual, biomedical, or ecological ethics, or alternatively, you could elect to treat another issue (e.g., one pertaining to the ethics of killing). But you need to narrow your analysis down by focusing on a concrete “real world” case and context that also provides adequate material with which to conduct your analysis. This paper is intended to provide an opportunity to explore something that is of particular interest to you, and I would be pleased to help you to select an appropriate topic.
The assignment and its grading are broken down as follows. These dates are firm and failure to hand in any portion of the following on time will result in a loss of the respective points allotted to that portion:
a) **April 1st** – submit in PDF format and by e-mail a paragraph outlining your proposed paper topic (10%)
b) **April 15th** – submit in PDF format and by e-mail a 1-page outline of your proposed paper and a list of the readings that you will be engaging in the creation of your paper (20%)
c) **May 7th** – submit in PDF format and by e-mail the final draft of your completed case study (70%)

I will provide you with a more detailed handout containing the instructions for the case study in due course.

→ The final paper/case study will comprise 30% of your overall grade.

**Course Grading:**

Class Preparation, Class Attendance, Class Participation 26%
Weekly Response Papers 24%
Take Home Midterm Examination 20%
Final Paper/Case Study 30%

My expectation is that you will observe the basic requirements of grammar and syntax in all of your written work. Aside from the basics of correct grammar and syntax, your overall performance will be assessed in relation to: 1) your overall comprehension of the material (apprehension and understanding of the facts, terms and concepts in the readings and class discussions); 2) your analysis of the material (the ability to understand the structure of and relationship between the parts of a given text); 3) your synthesis of the material (the ability to relate items of a given text or idea to other texts and ideas, creating new ideas in the process); 4) your overall contribution to class discussion; and 5) your clarity of communication (your ability to communicate what you have comprehended, analyzed, and synthesized to others). These basic criteria can be summed up in terms of two scholarly virtues in relation to which your written work will be assessed: those of **accuracy** and **precision**. (For more on grading see, http://www.xavier.edu/theology/Grading-Policy.cfm)

**Accuracy** refers to how accurately you present or represent the views of your interlocutors, either the views of those authors whose work we are reading, or those of your classmates. While there is always some reasonable hermeneutical latitude in presenting someone else’s views, there are at the same time reasonable limits to the practice of interpretation that are provided for by a commitment to truth in moral enquiry. Thus, there is a close link between the accurate (re-) presentation of someone’s views and the principle of charitable dialogue which enjoins one to present the perspectives and arguments of one’s interlocutors in the fairest possible light and without distortion (i.e., by giving them the benefit of doubt and attributing to them the strongest/most defensible version of the view that they are advocating). As with any highly complex discussion, the overall success of our class as a form of extended conversation will depend highly on the practice of charitable dialogue, and accordingly, a high value will be placed in the accurate presentation and representation of various views. The desideratum of **Precision** presupposes accuracy but differs from it in that precision pertains to the clarity and conciseness with which one’s views are expressed. The presence of sufficient precision in self-expression provides for the possibility of one’s claims being grasped in their fullness and thus, of being appropriately responded to.
In accordance with Academic Regulations, the following grading scale will be used:

**Undergraduate Grading Scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quality Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Exceptional</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VF</td>
<td>Failure to officially withdraw</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Official withdraw</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU</td>
<td>Audit, no credit, no effect on GPA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Satisfactory, credit earned, no effect on GPA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory, no credit earned, GPA is effected</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NC</td>
<td>No credit earned, non-graded</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Incomplete Work - Undergraduates**

Course assignments are due at the time specified by the instructor. Extension is time beyond the termination of the course is rarely granted and only for a serious reason. If an extension of time is granted, the grade of "I" (Undergraduate Incomplete) will be assigned and calculated as an "F" in the grade point average. Unless the work is completed and submitted by the fifteenth calendar day of the academic semester following the course, the student will fail the course and the "I" will be permanently changed to an "F" (summer term is excluded). Exceptions to this policy must be approved in writing by the appropriate dean prior to that date. The faculty member initiates the grade change process once the student has made up the incomplete work.

If the student is deferred for graduation due to a grade of "I" (Incomplete), he or she may be eligible for the original date of graduation. Work must be completed, graded and recorded within thirty days of that term's graduation date.

**Students with Special Needs**

Students with documented disabilities are entitled to reasonable accommodations as needed in accordance with general academic regulations. If you need accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible. Accommodations will not be granted retroactively.

**Academic Integrity Policy**

Please cite your sources on all assignments prepared outside of class (both papers and case studies). Quoting or paraphrasing work without properly citing it constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism on an assignment will result in a failing grade for that assignment and possibly a failing grade for the semester. Cheating on an examination will likewise result in a failing grade for that assignment and possibly a failing grade for the semester.

**Grade Disclosure Policy**

It is a violation of federal law for me to communicate with you about your grades by e-mail or over the telephone; this constitutes a breach of privacy because these media are not fully secured. Grades will be provided in the report of academic achievement that is sent at the end of each term. Should you have questions about your grades, I would be pleased to speak with you personally after class or to make an appointment to meet with you at another time.