

STMM 504 Christian Ethics (Spring 2011)

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Thursdays 1:30-4:20 Room: Hunt 100 home phone (360) 656 5482 (Bellingham)

(Most Thursdays I will be available for individual appointments before or after class)

Course description

We will consider the different biblical, historical and ecclesial roots of Christian ethics, major sources, figures and trends, and how Christian ethics has evolved into approaches that today can be characterized as universal (for all people), subversive (for the excluded), and ecclesial (for the church). Strengths and limits of these approaches will be compared, critiqued and tested out in relation to key ethical challenges today – in areas that are global, political, economic, environmental, and bioethical. What are the implications for our own personal faith journeys, as well as for the church's public witness in the world?

Attention will also be given to

- how we are formed and transformed morally, including by theological ethical traditions different from ours,
- the moral significance of what we see, how we analyze situations, and how we make ethical decisions
- the ethical significance of marginalization due to inequities of power, race/ethnicity, gender, class and nationality,
- critically discerning how theology can either impede or empower the pursuit of justice, and
- how to lead ethical deliberation and discernment in communities of cultural and religious diversity.

Course objectives

- To develop a critical appreciation for the different biblical, historical, and ecclesial roots of Christian ethics, and probing more deeply into one of these traditions, trends or figures
- To gain a deeper understanding of how the Bible plays an authoritative role in ethical life, and how to draw appropriately upon the Bible in ethical discussions
- To become more aware and appreciative of the distinctive questions, approaches and intended purposes of different types of Christian ethics, how they are related, and when and how they are most applicable
- A deeper appreciation of the distinctive moral knowledge and discernment that comes from those who have been marginalized, and why this is crucial in Christian ethics today.
- To acquire greater clarity as to how we personally has been formed morally, how our core ethical convictions are reflected in how we approach ethical questions, and how we can lead from spiritual depth toward practices of justice and wholeness in the world

- To grow in appreciating how others approach ethical questions, competence for engaging with them across our differences, and openness to being transformed through such engagement
- An enhanced understanding of urgent global, economic, environmental, and bioethical challenges today, and demonstrated competence in probing and developing ethical argumentation with regard to a focus in one of these arenas.
- A greater confidence and ability to lead ethical deliberation in local communities of faith, and to draw critically and constructively on Christian ethical traditions for the sake of a more just, sustainable world.

Required course readings

Birch, Bruce C. and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, revised and expanded edition (Augsburg Fortress, 1989)

Wells, Samuel and Ben Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011)

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

Rieger, Joerg, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics and the Future* (Fortress, 2009)

In addition to the above, as indicated in the syllabus, some required articles/documents will either be made available to you online (via email), or can be accessed on the Web, or printed copies will be made available (at total copying costs not to exceed \$5.)

Course Requirements

1. In preparation for the first week of class, spend about an hour writing a **brief paper on "how I have been formed morally."** This will be handed in but not graded, and will provide your "benchmark" as we begin the course. You might reflect and write on: (a) what "communities" (family, church, neighborhood) have contributed significantly to your moral formation, (b) what events in your personal life have especially affected this, (c) what broader political, economic, cultural factors (etc.) have played a significant role in this, and (d) what are three of your key moral convictions today?
2. Each week, **read and critically reflect on the required readings** in their entirety before the designated class session, prepared to question and discuss them in class.
3. For the purpose of class discussion, consider the focus questions listed for each week, and write out some **"critical thinking notes"** on each week's readings, how they relate to your evolving understandings, and how they may intersect with your life and context. These will not be turned in or evaluated (unless a student appears not to have done this preparation).
4. **Participate fully** in the class sessions, bringing your experiences, knowledge, perspectives and questions to "the table", listening "actively" and respectfully to one another, and contributing to a constructive, participatory learning environment. Reflect on how you and your perspectives are transformed through engaging with those who are different from you. The intent is that each week's focus will also be exemplified in terms of some timely ethical issue; you are encouraged to bring in such examples.

5. Choose one of the significant ethicists, trends or denominational traditions (see chapter 4 of Wells and Quash) which you would like to probe further. **Read at least 50 additional pages on that figure, emphasis or tradition.** For suggestions, see Wells, p. 108ff (References and Further Reading), or read selections from one of the following books (on reserve in the SU Lemieux Library)

- Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Blackwell, 2010)
- James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (University of Chicago, 1978)
- Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, eds. *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998)
- Douglas F. Ottati, *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species* (Louisville: Geneva, 2006).
- Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2003)

Then, **write a paper** (of approximately 750 words), in which you discuss distinctive emphases and perspectives that the figure(s), trend or tradition you selected has brought into Christian ethics, why this was important, and your own critical engagement with such. **This paper is due to the instructor by Monday, April 18.**

6. **Final paper:** Focus on one significant ethical challenge for you, your current or projected ministry, and/or your community/world. It is recommended that this be a specific issue in one of the broad areas of "key ethical challenges today" (see weeks 6-9 of syllabus). This final research paper (of 4500-5000 words) is expected to include these aspects:

- *Descriptive:* why and how this is a significant/urgent ethical challenge today,
- *Analytical:* a contemporary analysis of the relevant factors involved (draw upon at least five cited sources)
- *Theological:* relevant biblical/theological/ethical traditions and perspectives (from at least three cited sources, plus your own reflections), and how these inspire and guide an ethical response
- *Comparative:* how would universal, subversive, and ecclesial approaches to this challenge differ, and what are the respective strengths?
- *Persuasive:* argue for where you come down and why, and
- *Deliberation and practice:* discuss how you would lead a faith community in deliberating and acting on this challenge

(Note: A variation of this method is also found on p. 69 of De Le Torre.)

This paper is due no later than Monday, June 6 (by email to the instructor).

7. Attend all class sessions and turn in all written assignments on time. Unexcused absences or repeated late arrivals will lower one's participation grade. Ask a colleague to take good notes and/or record a session that you cannot attend. Unexcused late submission of papers will be reduced in grade

Criteria for evaluation

The course grade will be based on:

- The paper probing a figure, trend or tradition in Christian ethics 15%
- The final paper 45%
- Class participation (including preparation) 30%
- Your overall growth during the course (from the first benchmark paper) 10%

Papers will be evaluated by whether they include the aspects indicated above, the quality and depth of the content, understanding and persuasiveness, and the clarity of writing.

Academic integrity: Please review the Academic Honesty Code in the Student Handbook, which every SU student is expected to comply with. Be fully aware of what constitutes plagiarism, and always avoid it, even if unintended; if violated, this will significantly affect your grade.

Disability notice: If you have a disability, even if invisible (e.g., learning disability, chronic mental or physical health condition), that interferes with your participation as a student, you are encouraged to arrange for support services through the Disabilities Service Staff (Loyola 100, 296-5740).

SCHEDULE

Note: There are likely to be some changes (especially in the focus questions and perhaps some additional readings) in the following syllabus as the course progresses, in order to adapt to who is in the class and what is occurring in the world – because it is crucial that Christian ethics be responsive to changing contexts and developments in the world.

Week 1 (3/31)– Introduction

Required reading: Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 11-74 (top), 100-133 (top)

Recommended: Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 74-99

Focus questions:

What has shaped us morally?

What is Christian ethics?

What is ethical decision-making?

Bring to class your brief paper on "how I have been formed morally"

Week 2 (4/7)– The Bible and Christian ethics

Required reading: Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 141-202; Wells, pp. 3-29; Terence E. Fretheim, "The Authority of the Bible and Churchly Debates Regarding Sexuality" (online)

Focus questions:

How is the Bible authoritative in Christian ethics?

What are appropriate and inappropriate ways of drawing upon the Bible in Christian ethics?

What becomes normative amid the ethical diversity in Scripture?

Week 3 (4/14)- Historically, how has Christian ethics developed?

Required reading: Wells, pp. 31-108

Focus questions:

How have social contexts and the church's status in society historically affected its ethical stances?
What have been distinctive contributions of reform movements to the development of Christian ethics?

Your paper probing more deeply into a figure, trend or tradition in Christian ethics is due to the instructor (by email) by Monday, April 18.

Week 4 (4/21)– Moral knowledge and discernment from the margins

Required reading:

Miguel De la Torres, pp. 3-69, and (the following articles will be copied; the books on reserve):

- Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love" in *Making the Connections*, Carol S. Robb, ed (Beacon, 1985), pp. 3-21.
- Kelly Brown Douglas, "Daring to Speak: Womanist Theology and Black Sexuality" in *Embracing the Spirit*, Emilie M. Townes, ed (Orbis, 1997), pp. 234-245.
- Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, "Articulating Love-Justice-Power" in *Dirty Hands: Christian Ethics in a Morally Ambiguous World* (Fortress, 2000), pp. 73-93.
- Kim Kupperman, "Of Borders, Infidelity and the Ethics of Love" in *An Ethical Compass*, ethics prize essays compiled by the Elie Wiesel Foundation (Yale, 2010), pp. 57-65.

Focus questions:

What is the ethical significance of disruptions from "the margins"?
How does this challenge traditional understandings or approaches in Christian ethics?
What is an appropriate method for ethical discernment from the margins?
Reconsidering again who is at the margins, and how borders are transformed (Kupperman)

Week 5 (4/28)– Universal, subversive and ecclesial Christian ethics today

Required reading: Wells, pp. 115-206

Focus questions:

What are the distinctive questions, purposes, and approaches of these three types?
At what points are they in disagreement and why?
How might they be in conversation with each other, or complementary?

Due by class time: a one paragraph description of what you intend to focus on in your final paper.

KEY ETHICAL CHALLENGES TODAY...

Note: based on what you intend to focus on in your final paper, it is expected that you will be one of the initiators of class discussions in the week most related to your topic, giving you an opportunity to test out with others some perspectives related to the paper you will be developing.

Week 6 (5/5)– ...amid global disruptions (e.g., international politics and trade, conflict/violence, human rights, immigration, role of US in the world today)

Required reading: De la Torre, pp. 73-121

Wells, pp. 209-239

Bloomquist, "An Ecclesial Ethic in a Globalized World" in *Communion, Responsibility, Accountability* (The Lutheran World Federation, 2004) (online)

And other short readings TBD (online or handout)

Focus questions:

What do we need to hear and learn from those beyond the US?

What do you consider to be the most critical global ethical challenges that churches need to address today, and how? Which of the three approaches (from Week 5) are most appropriate?

Week 7 (5/12)- ... amid economic disruptions

Required reading: Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Fortress, 2009)

(read as much of the book as possible, especially what is least familiar or most relevant for you)

Recommended reading: Wells, pp. 243-271; De la Torre, pp. 148-168

Focus questions:

What "faith" really is driving what is occurring in US society today? With economic decline, how is that changing? What should the church distinctively be saying and doing in the midst of this?

How can theology either impede or empower the pursuit of justice?

Week 8 (5/19)– ...amid environmental disruptions

Required readings: Wells, pp. 336-357, and

- Puleng Lenka Bula, "Privatizing Property that Belongs to All" in *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World*, Karen L. Bloomquist, ed (The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), pp. 193-209 (online)
- From Bloomquist, ed., *God, Creation and Climate Change* (The Lutheran World Federation, 2009): Christoph Stuekelberger, "Who Dies First? Who is Sacrificed First? Ethical Aspects of

Climate Justice" (pp. 47-62) and George Zachariah, "Discerning the Times: A Spirituality of Resistance and Alternatives" (pp. 75-91) (both articles online)

Focus questions:

How do environmental challenges today challenge some prevalent theological and ethical assumptions? What do we especially need to hear and learn from those facing these challenges in other parts of the world?

Week 9 (5/26) --....genetic and other challenges at the beginning and end of life

Required reading: Wells, pp. 311-331, and

- Beverly Wildung Harrison, "A Feminist-Liberation View of Abortion" and Karen Lebacqz, "Reflection" in *On Moral Medicine*, Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, eds (Eerdmans, 1998 second edition), pp. 617-623 and 666-667 (copied, and book on reserve)
- "Genetics, Faith and Responsibility," a proposed social statement of the ELCA (online)

Focus questions:

How are these challenges assessed differently depending on who you are and where you are located? What role should scientific knowledge play in ethical discernment and decision-making? What should be given ethical priority in biomedical and genetic quandaries?

Week 10 (6/2) – Ongoing ethical deliberation and witness in pluralistic societies

Required reading:

- Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 133-140
- Globethics.net, "Principles for Sharing Values Across Cultures and Religions" (online)
- Bloomquist, "Negotiating cultural differences in our common public life" (online)

Focus questions:

Why is it important for the church to be a community of ethical deliberation in society? What are the challenges and possibilities for this in increasingly interfaith and secular contexts? How will you provide leadership and encouragement for this to occur in local communities?

Final paper is due by Monday, June 6.