

BIBLICAL ETHICS AND MODERN DILEMMAS (BES 640-01)

Fall 2003

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Lexington Theological Seminary, Mandrell Hall, rm. 210
Class Meetings: Wednesday, Friday 11:00 AM-12:15 PM
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This course seeks to guide students in tackling the complex relationships between the Bible and modern issues of ethics and morality. We will examine the moral worldviews that inform the biblical texts and try to understand the diverse perspectives found in them. As we do this, we will inquire into our ethical assumptions, learning to think clearly, to place our thoughts in the broad continuum of history and scriptural interpretation, and to read texts closely and critically. At the same time, I also believe that true ethical thinking involves the conscious ability to think with our hearts and feel with our minds. We will strive to do that every day.

In the first portion of this course, we will study core scriptural values (e.g. honor and shame, group orientation, authoritarianism, obedience, or wholeness), as found in the Bible and as elucidated by biblical interpreters. With an increased awareness of the complexity of biblical thought and of its distinctiveness, we will move on to consider those ethical issues that are currently prominent in the news and that require a great deal of wisdom to comprehend and assess. By placing contemporary problems in the light of scriptural tradition, we can evaluate the extent to which our values coincide with, and diverge from, biblical values. We will need to decide which biblical values we have misconstrued, which we should reclaim, which we should continue to maintain as the spiritual foundation of our moral lives, and which we should recognize as the product of human frailty, created under particular socio-historical conditions and therefore no longer applicable.

Some of these values may at times conflict with one another, even when (for example) they are both biblical values or modern values. Or certain people may regard particular values as much more significant than others. We will try to determine the dynamics at play.

At the same time, we will attempt to examine the moral and spiritual dimensions that undergird current emotional issues, moving from a consideration of the apparent debate to deeper, underlying concerns. In doing this, we may find a bedrock of core moral principles that animate our own beliefs and actions. Consequently, while dealing with particular issues, we will also identify a variety of moral, social, and spiritual virtues to which we aspire: e.g. honesty and trustworthiness; common decency; integrity; courage and confidence; persistence and hard work; thrift; generosity and charity; contentedness; humility; restraint; compassion, empathy, and lovingkindness; repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation; wisdom; justice; reverence and awe; prayer; and peace.

As the course moves along, we will also develop discussion guidelines to help us engage in civil and thoughtful discourse. A major goal of this course is to learn how to talk with one another in a humane fashion, to listen in a deep and profound way, to disagree respectfully (where appropriate), to understand the dynamics that motivate our beliefs and values, and to begin to regard one another not as collections of opinions, but as fellow seekers of wisdom.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Every week (except Weeks 1, 7-8, and 15) on Friday each student will prepare a brief RESPONSE PAPER of approximately one to two pages on a topic specified by me. As long as you can write clearly and coherently and put some effort and thought into the assignments, you should find that you will do quite well. These will receive marks of simply “H” (highest pass = A range), “HP” (high pass = B range), and “P” (pass = C range). I expect the vast majority to be in the “HP” range, and you will not get below a “P” if you do the work. There will be a take-home MID-TERM EXAMINATION due back to me on October 17. This will be a book report on Daniel Friedmann, To Kill and Take Possession, consisting of a summary of the book and your assessment of the book as it relates to our course (in terms of topics, readings, and discussions).

Those taking this course for credit will divide into TEAMS of two persons, who will choose a topic that interests them and who (along with me) will lead class discussion for one session. Naturally, I will advise the discussion group leaders and work with them. At the end of the semester, those teams will submit a term paper on the relevant subject. With the consent of the team members and myself, auditors can also participate on teams (as third members).

This course places tremendous emphasis on class discussion. Therefore, regular attendance and effective participation (not quantity, but quality) will constitute a significant portion of the grade. The BREAKDOWN OF YOUR FINAL GRADE WILL BE AS FOLLOWS: 1) response papers 25%; 2) mid-term examination 15%; 3) final term paper 30%; 4) attendance, effort, and participation 30%.

WRITING AND READING: If you ever feel that you need assistance with WRITING, you should consult with Anne Gregory. As I deem it appropriate, I will refer any student to Anne Gregory. THE ABILITY TO WRITE IS A KEY COMPONENT FOR REACHING YOUR GOALS IN THIS CLASS. You should feel no embarrassment at seeking help. Writing is a form of expression and a tool that we all (including me) need continually to develop and improve. Having the ability to write clearly, properly, and articulately will rightfully give you confidence in many aspects of your professional and personal life.

The ability to READ CRITICALLY is also extremely important. This means that (1) you are able not only to understand the meaning of each sentence and paragraph, but that you have the ability to ascertain the overall structure and thrust of a discussion or argument. When you have done that, you will need to have (or to develop) (2) a knack for comparing the ideas of one essay with those of other essays. Finally, you are not obligated to read every single word of every essay. Sometimes you may need to (3) SKIM in a structured and thoughtful manner. Together these three elements constitute important features of the ART OF READING.

COURSE MATERIALS

- Daniel Bonevac, Today's Moral Issues: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives (4th ed.; Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002). = "Bonevac."
- Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman, Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality: A Reader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). = "DN."
- Richard B. Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics. = "Hays."
- Daniel Freidmann, To Kill and Take Possession: Law, Morality, and Society in Biblical Stories (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson)
- John L. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (eds), Handbook of Biblical Social Values (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993). = "Handbook."

IN ADDITION, I WOULD RECOMMEND FOR PURCHASE THE FOLLOWING TWO BOOKS:

- J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993)
- J. Philip Wogaman, Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook: Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996)

August 27 Introduction to the class

August 29: Core Scriptural Values

Handbook, "Introduction" (pp. xv-xl) and pp. 1-19

J. Philip Wogaman, "The Legacies of Christian Ethics," pp. 1-24 in J.P. Wogaman, Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction (on library reserve)

DN, Chapters 2-3

September 3: Core Scriptural Values

DN, Chapter 4

Hays, "Introduction" (pp. 1-15) and Chapter 9

Handbook, pp. 19-40

September 5: Core Scriptural Values

DN, Chapter 5

Handbook, pp. 40-102

September 10: Core Scriptural Values

Handbook, pp. 102-20

Hayes, Chapters 4, 7, and 8

September 12: Core Scriptural Values

Hayes, Chapter 1

Handbook, pp. 121-48

September 17: Core Scriptural Values

Handbook, pp. 148-81

September 19: Core Scriptural Values

Handbook, pp. 181-212

September 24: Values as Part of a Community Endeavor

DN, Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 15

September 26: Classical Ethical Traditions

Bonevac, pp. 1-55

October 1: Medical Ethics: Basic Issues/A Right to Health Care?

DN, Chapter 6-8

Readings on Christian medical ethics TBA

Other readings TBA

Medical Ethics: Abortion

October 3, 8

Bonevac, pp. 313-58, 253-312

Hays, Chapter 18

Wogaman, Readings in Christian Ethics, pp. 27-8, 253-5, 307-10 (on library reserve)

DN, Chapters 27-28

Handout

October 10: Medical Issues: Euthanasia

Bonevac, pp. 359-87

DN, Chapters 25-26

October 15: MID-TERM EXAMINATION DUE

October 15, 24: Peace and War

Handouts

Hays, Chapter 14

Wogaman, Christian Ethics, pp. 10-12, 57-58, 91-92, 251-52, 274-5 (on library reserve)

Wogaman, Readings in Christian Ethics, pp. 142-3, 151-2, 157-60, 197-200, 247-8, 255-7, 301-03, 373-6 (on library reserve)

October 17, 22: Break

October 24: Capital Punishment

Bonevac, pp. 388-415

DN, Chapter 24
Handouts

October 29: Racial Equality: Integration, Diversity, and Affirmative Action
Bonevac, pp. 497-557

October 31, November 5: Gender and Equity
Essay TBA
Lucinda Vardey, "Awakening the Great Mother," Chapter 7 in God in All Worlds
(on reserve)
Handout

November 7: Sexual Orientation
Handouts: "Gay Orthodox Underground"; New Testament and Homosexuality"
Choon Leong-Seow, "Textual Orientation," chapter 2 in R.L. Brawley, Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality (on reserve)

November 12: Jewish Views of Sexuality
DN, Chapters 17-18
Handouts

November 14: Marriage, Family Life, and Divorce
DN, Chapter 20
Hays, Chapter 15

November 19: Capitalism and Economic Justice: The Problem of Poverty
Bonevac, pp. 462-96
DN, Chapter 23

November 21: Capitalism and Economic Justice: Honesty and Integrity in Business
Readings TBA
Handout

November 26, 28: BREAK

December 3: The Environment and the Global Context: Ecology
Bonevac, pp. 107-38
DN, Chapter 22
Handout

December 5: The Environment and The Global Context: Animal Rights
Handout

December 9, 11: Open: TERM PAPER DUE.

