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RELS 395.02: Religious Ethics and Modern Moral Problems

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Course Description and Objectives: This three-credit course examines the moral dimensions of select issues in contemporary life through the perspectives of three major religious traditions. After a brief review of ethics in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, the class will consider general issues of religion and morality in society and the particular issues of love, sexuality, heterosexual marriage, homosexuality, gay marriage, abortion and the status of the embryo in research, war and peace, terrorism, and capital punishment. Numerous cases and discussion questions will be used to highlight moral issues.

Learning Goals:
1. Develop a general understanding of the relation of religion to ethical issues;
2. Learn the positions of select thinkers from certain major religious traditions in relation to the moral dimensions of controversial ethical issues, how they reach their conclusions, and how their theological and philosophical convictions influence their moral arguments;
3. Advance skills in critical thinking and writing in ethics through the consideration of ethical issues and cases

Prerequisites: None, but lower-level courses in ethics or religious traditions are helpful

Requirements
1. Mid-term examination, Oct. 25 (30 percent of grade)
2. Two short (app. 1,00 words) papers, due Oct. 13 and Dec. 1 (each 10 percent of grade)
3. Participation in class discussions (20 percent of grade)
4. Final examination, Dec. 13 (30 percent of grade)

- Examinations will likely be a combination of a choice among short answer questions and a longer essay and/or case analysis. The final examination will not be comprehensive but may be longer than the mid-term. Exams must be taken at scheduled times unless prior permission of the instructor is obtained, otherwise the exam receives a failing grade.
- Two papers are required. The first paper should analyze central arguments of a particular text in class. The paper will describe the author’s position on a particular point and offer an analysis of the position’s strengths and weakness. The second paper should put forward your position on an issue in an op-ed style. The paper should be written as if it were to be sent to a religious or secular publication with an educated readership. The papers need not utilize outside sources. Students are encouraged to discuss papers with the instructor in advance. Unless an extension is granted, late papers are immediately penalized one grade, and thereafter at a graduated rate, amounting to an additional letter grade per five days.
- Class participation is central to achieving the learning goals for this course. Participation involves attendance, participating actively with group discussions, and being well prepared for discussions.
- Students taking the course with the C/NCR option are required to achieve at least the equivalent of a D- to pass.
Topics and Reading Assignments

Introduction: Religion and Moral Reasoning

Aug. 30   Course Introduction

Sept. 1   Ethics

Sept. 6   Religion and Ethics: Film Study
          “Crimes and Misdemeanors,” part 1

Sept. 8   Religion and Ethics: Film Study
          “Crimes and Misdemeanors,” part 2

Sept. 13  Religion and Ethics: Conceptual Issues
          Genesis 22:1-17
          Mouw, “Moral Justification”

Judaism and Moral Reasoning

Sept. 15  Historical Context; The Character of Jewish Ethics
          Chaim W. Reines, “The Self and the Other in Rabbinic Ethics”
          Menachem Marc Kellner, “The Structure of Jewish Ethics”
          Genesis, chapters 1-4
          The Decalogue: Exodus 20:1-17

Christianity and Moral Reasoning

Sept. 20  Historical Context; The Character of Christian Ethics
          Preston, “Christian Ethics” (electronic reserve)
          Hauerwas, “A Qualified Ethic”

Sept. 22  Christian Life; Sources for Religious Ethics
          Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5:1-11,17-48; Galations 2:15-21
          Niebuhr, “The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal”
          Cone, “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence”

Buddhism and Moral Reasoning

Sept. 27  Historical Context: The Character of Buddhist Ethics
          An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, Chapters 1 & 2

Sept. 29  Buddhist Life
“The Quarrel at Kosambī,” *The Life of the Buddha*

### Religion and American Public Life

**Oct. 4**

*The Broader Context*
- Carter, “God as a Hobby”
- Lovin, “Religion and American Public Life”
- Stambaugh, “One Nation Under Whom?”

**Oct. 6**

*Religion and Politics Today*
- Cuomo, “Religious Belief and Public Morality”
- Nolan, “Vatican Again Ties Religion, Politics”

### Love, Friendship, and Sexual Relations

**Oct. 11**

*Divine Love: Agape*
- Kierkegaard, “Thou Shalt Love”

**Oct. 13**

*Friendship: Philia*
- Meilaender, “Friendship as a Reciprocal Love”

**First Paper Due**

**Oct. 18**

*Sexual Relations: Eros*
- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Questions 153, 2nd & 3rd article
- May, “Four Mischievous Theories of Sex”
- Nelson, “The Liberal Approach to Sexual Ethics”
- Harvey, “The Third Precept: Avoiding Sexual Misconduct”

**Oct. 20**

*Issues in Sexual Ethics*
- Borowitz, “When Is It Moral to Have Intercourse?”

**Oct. 25**

*Mid-term Examination*

### Marriage, Homosexuality, and Gay Marriage

**Oct. 27**

*Marriage*
- Brownings: “The Church and the Family Crisis”
- Torodes: “Make Love and Babies”
- Borowitz, “Reading the Jewish Tradition on Marital Sexuality”

**Nov. 1**

*Homosexual Relations*
- Muehl, “Some Words of Caution”
- Matt, “Sin, Crime, Sickness, or Alternative Lifestyle?”
- Valente, “A New Direction”

**Nov. 3**

*Homosexual Marriage*
- Sullivan, “The Conservative Case”
- Wilson, “Against Homosexual Marriage”
Abortion and Embryos in Research

Nov. 8  
*Empirical and Philosophical Issues*  
Little, “The Morality of Abortion”

Nov. 10  
*Religious Perspectives*  
Harvey, Chapter 8, “Abortion and Contraception, pp. 311-26  
Rosner, “The Jewish Attitude Toward Abortion  
Harrison: “Free Choice: A Feminist Perspective”  
Hauerwas: “Abortion: Once Again”

Nov. 15  
*The Embryo in Research*  
Meilaender, “The Point of a Ban”

War, Peace, and Terrorism

Nov. 17  
*The Just War Tradition*  
Childress, “Just War Criteria”  
Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist”

Nov. 22  
*The Case of Iraq*  
Elshtain, “A Just War?”  
Carter, “Just War — or a Just War?”

Nov. 24  
*Thanksgiving Holiday*

Nov. 29  
*Pacifism*  
Hauerwas, “The Nonresistant Church”  
Harvey, Chapter 6, “War and Peace,” pp. 239-53  
King, “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience”

Dec. 1  
*Terrorism*  
Barber, “The War of All against All” (electronic reserve)  
**Second Paper Due**

Capital Punishment

Dec. 6  
*Philosophical Considerations*  
Jeffrey H. Reiman, “Justice, Civilization, and the Death Penalty”  
Ernest van den Haag, “The Ultimate Punishment: A Defense”

Dec. 8  
*Religious Positions*  
Aquinas, “Whether it is Lawful to Kill Sinners”  
Yoder, “The Christian and Capital Punishment”  
U.S. Bishop’s Statement on Capital Punishment”

Final Exam

Dec. 13  
10:10 a.m.-12:10 p.m.