

Steven G. Smith
Christian Center 11 smithsg
Home phone 601-354 2290

Religion 2010
ETHICS AND RELIGION
Fall 2006

The terms "morals" and "ethics" get mixed together a lot, but it's useful to make a clear distinction: let's say that our direct apprehension of good and bad, right and wrong, is "moral," and our customary practice in accordance with this sense of things is our "morality," while "ethics" reflects on morality critically and systematizes it into general truths or rules, trying to solve the problems morality raises. This means that in the classroom, or indeed in any open rational discussion, "morality" always turns into "ethics." Still, ethics always depends on morality. If people didn't already have moral attitudes and patterns of conduct, how could an ethical conclusion ever be convincing?

Let's say further that "religion" refers not just to one religion, like Christianity or Hinduism, but rather to recognizably similar basic situations, experiences, practices, and beliefs that appear in all the traditions we recognize as "religions." We hope to learn more about what all this consists of, but at least we know at the start that we have rich resources for study in the existing religious traditions.

In this course we'll be studying religious backgrounds of the moral life, talking this out reflectively and systematically, discerning guiding principles and applying them to difficult moral issues of our time hence, "Ethics and Religion."

Because we will be examining our own moral and religious commitments, this course has serious life-changing potential and I want to encourage you in all possible ways to take advantage of this opportunity for personal growth, not to treat the course purely as an academic cultural study. You will articulate your beliefs and your new insights in a personal journal and in communications with partners. You will have challenging realtime give-and-take with other moral thinkers both inside and outside the classroom, learning more about how to be a fellow-agent in a moral community. Don't expect instant and total enlightenment, but do expect some dawns of awareness.

Reading will be assigned in these five books available for purchase in the bookstore, plus the Bible, plus handouts:

The Bhagavad-Gita, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller

Regina Wolfe & Christine Gudorf, eds., *Ethics and World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies*

Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (2nd ed.)

John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust*

Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth*

Grading will be based on short writings (20%), a take-home midterm exam (15%), a 3,000 word moral problem investigation (30%), a take-home final exam (25%), and class participation (10%).

SCHEDULE (subject to revision by announcement in class)

Note: we will also screen one or more movies at times TBA.

Aug. 29 Introduction to class

Aug. 31 Dimensions of ethics; the religious background of morality and ethics

Sept. 5 Ethical development in religious traditions: Hindu disciplines in the Bhagavad Gita. Read handout and Gita teachings 1-4

Sept. 7 Gita, cont. Read rest of Gita

Sept. 12 Discussion of our Gita studies

Sept. 14 Ethical development in religious traditions: the covenants in Jewish and Christian scriptures. Read assignments in Hebrew Bible

Sept. 19 Jewish and Christian scriptures cont. Read assignments in New Testament. Discussion of our biblical studies

Sept. 21 Cross-cultural case studies: Wolfe & Gudorf, Chapter 1 [female circumcision in Africa]

Sept. 28 Wolfe & Gudorf, Chapter 8 [abortion in China]

Sept. 30 Wolfe & Gudorf, Chapter 11 [economic development/environmental protection/Native American culture]

Oct. 3 Wolfe & Gudorf, Chapter 16 [organ donation for profit]

Oct. 5 Wolfe & Gudorf, Chapter 18 [AIDS]

Oct. 10 Peters, theology & procreation: Chapters 1-2

Oct. 12 Peters, Chapter 5 [patenting life forms]

Oct. 17 Peters, Chapters 6-8 [germline intervention/cloning/stem cells]

Oct. 19 Peters, Chapter 9

MIDTERM EXAM DUE OCT. 20

Oct. 24 SPRING BREAK

Oct. 26 Just war theory. Yoder, Chapters 1-4

Oct. 31 Yoder, Chapters 5-6

Nov. 2 Islamic war ethics. Contemporary jihadism [handout]

Nov. 7 Gandhi & satyagraha. Read Gandhi selections VIEW THIS WEEK: Gandhi

Nov. 9 Gandhi cont.

Nov. 14 Gandhi cont.

Nov. 16 Other applications of satyagraha (handout)

Nov. 21 (cont.)

Nov. 23 THANKSGIVING

Nov. 28 Class project (TBA)

Nov. 30 (cont.)

MORAL PROBLEM INVESTIGATION DUE DEC. 1

Dec. 5 (cont.)

Dec. 7 Conclusion.

FINAL EXAM AND ALL REMAINING COURSEWORK DUE DEC. 15

THE JOURNAL

I ask you to keep a personal journal of your thoughts throughout the course. There will be intervals in class to write in it along with any other times that are available to you. The journal itself is private, but you will be invited to draw on it in communicating your thoughts to others.

When you highlight or make notes on your reading, and when you write in your journal, you will be reacting to moral appeals. In listening to moral appeals I suggest you be especially attentive to bells going off in your mind. Two kinds of bells to listen for are: (1) warning bells, by which I mean signals that something has gone wrong in moral feeling or arguing, and (2) dinner bells, if that's not too goofy an image, by which I mean signals of what is truly sustaining (to the hungry, how sweet the sound of the dinner bell!). Keep trying to say what's wrong and what's right in the moral appeals of our world; and keep testing your conclusions. Of course, your negative and positive assessments of moral appeals will always be provisional. Your views may change. I hope they broaden and deepen.

THE CORRESPONDENCE

Once a week, most weeks, you will exchange written communiqués with another class member about your negative and positive insights (the warning bells and dinner bells) in that segment of the course. Here what is interesting is not only what you are picking up in the way of course content, but how you express your judgments to another agent who you can not assume is coming from the same place you are. I'm inviting you to notice how your own toolkit of moral and religious expressions works, and how someone else's works also. I'm inviting you to find out how two people can advance moral analysis together as a team, not necessarily by agreeing.

I'll assign the teams after consultation. (We'll redo the assignments at mid-semester.) I'll want to see copies of all correspondence each week. The easiest way to handle it is entirely by e-mail, copying me on everything. Deadlines will be announced in class.

Your weekly communiqué ought to be at least the equivalent of a typed page, i.e. two or three substantial paragraphs. There's no upper limit, but don't get too carried away.

GUIDELINES FOR THE MORAL PROBLEM INVESTIGATION (A RELIGIOUSLY ATTUNED ETHICAL ANALYSIS)

1. Definition of the problem. By the end of your introductory paragraph, the reader should know what moral issue you are addressing in your paper. It should be an issue that you care about and that is worth everyone's wrestling with. By the end of your second paragraph, if not the first, the reader should begin to see how the religious background of the issue is significant and possibly contentious also.

2. Explanation of the problem. Now you get into the aspects of the problem that your readers probably need instruction on. You need to help us understand what makes this a hard problem and what crucial considerations need to be weighed by anyone who wants to think responsibly

about it. You especially want to do justice to different ways of framing the problem (for example, abortion rights advocates frame the problem of abortion in terms of reproductive freedom for women while abortion rights opponents frame the problem in terms of the sanctity of human life). And since in this course we are studying the relevance of different general moral and religious perspectives to particular moral problems, you want to bring in these dimensions as well. (Obviously you have to use your judgment to concentrate on the general moral and religious issues that seem most relevant to your problem.)

3. The real world component. In this section of your paper you will distill the highlights of your encounter with someone outside the class who is practically engaged in the problem (in the case of abortion, someone who does abortion counseling, for example). You will learn how that person relates his or her own moral judgments to his or her actions in this area. You will explain how that person's ideas and rhetoric relate to the more academic considerations you've introduced in your study.

4. Your recommendation. Don't worry: you don't have to solve all the problems in your area. But you've written an ethical analysis paper and this paper should shed some specific new light on the problem for your audience.

Remember to be reasonable. Don't dogmatize, and don't simply state an opinion.

SOME COURSE RULES

1. Class Attendance. Being in class, being engaged with the work of the class, and behaving courteously are all expected. One discourtesy to avoid is coming into class late. Better late than never, definitely; but lateness counts as half an absence.

One percent of the course grade will be lost for each absence from class for any reason, beginning with the third absence. (For example, someone who missed class 7 times would thereby lose 5% of the course grade, or half a letter grade.) The reason for this: our in class work is a crucial and irreplaceable part of the substance of the course.

2. Late papers. Written assignments turned in late will lose a letter grade or equivalent. Homework may not be turned in more than one week after its due date. No work of any kind will be accepted after the last day of final examinations. Exceptions to this policy will only be granted to the victims of unforeseeable and uncontrollable circumstances.

3. As a general rule, no e-mail submissions. Unless the instructor allows it under specified circumstances (as with the weekly communiqués), e-mail submissions of assigned writing are not accepted.

4. Plagiarism. Using the words or ideas of others without acknowledgment that is, passing them off as your own is a fraudulent practice called plagiarism. Plagiarized work will receive no credit and will be referred to the college Honor Council.

5. Incompletes. An "Incomplete" grade for the course will only be given to students who, due to unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances, find themselves unable to complete course requirements during the term and can reasonably be expected to complete them within a few weeks after the term's end. The "Incomplete" must be requested and appropriately justified before the end of final examinations.

6. Disabilities. Students with documented disabilities should discuss their needs with the instructor at the beginning of the semester.