

Religion, Ethics, and Modern Moral Issues

Scott C. Williamson

January Term 2011

January 3-24
12:30-3:00
Schlegel Hall 120

Course description:

Many critics of Western culture argue that we in the West have lost our moral compass. Deluged by volatile social issues, we lack a common moral system necessary for adjudication. We are seemingly rudderless on the turbulent seas of moral quandary, guided by only contextual and competing moral commitments. How can Christians respond faithfully and persuasively to public disputes in a national culture marked by nonfoundationalism? The goals of this course include: 1) to investigate the resources of Christianity for brokering social justice in a broken world; and 2) to apply these resources to three contemporary social issues. The issues we will analyze this term include: undocumented immigration, consumerism, and healthcare reform.

Objectives:

1. Historical dialogue. Students will describe the social, historical and philosophical forces that occasion and frame the respective moral disputes that we will investigate.
2. Theological/Ethical Reflection. Students will analyze the internal logic of the positions that we will read, paying particular attention to moral and theological claims and assumptions.
3. Critical commentary. Students will evaluate the merits and limitations of the positions that we will read as strategies of social justice, and develop a constructive theological and ethical response to the dilemma.

Requirements:

1. Preparation and participation. Students are expected to read the assigned material carefully, attend class regularly and, as the opportunity presents itself, participate in the on-going class discussion thoughtfully. Your participation should be informed, reflecting your engagement of the materials under review.
2. Research Essay. Students will submit a 12 to 15 page, double-spaced position paper on one of the topics under review. Alternatively, students can choose to fulfill this requirement by researching and writing sermons, or an opinion piece for a newspaper, for example, totaling 12-15 pages. Paper is due Monday, January 31st at 5pm (60%)
3. Small Group Class facilitation. Students will work with a small group to introduce the recommended reading material for one of the three moral issues under review. Assuming that course participants might not have read the recommended readings, the small group will divide these readings and introduce them for the three days that their issue will be discussed. This introduction can include, but is not limited to: outlining central ideas, perspectives and insights in the reading material; sharing additional historical or social background; raising critical questions; challenging the author's philosophical premises, logical integrity, conclusions, or constructive proposals; and, illuminating the promise of the author's position. Students should plan for a 10 minute introduction per reading or group of related readings. Small groups can decide not to present some readings in order to focus more closely on other readings. (15%)
4. Oral Reports. Students will give a 15 minute oral report on the research and writing that they are completing. The purpose of the report is to illuminate faithful responses to the issue that affirm theological particularity and ethical sensitivity without limiting the truth of Christian claims to "ghettoes of meaning that insiders alone may appreciate and outsiders cannot fathom" (John Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, 102). Students are welcome to present in pairs or small groups so long as the material that is presented is original. The class facilitation small groups can be a helpful resource for these reports. (25%)

Required texts (in order of use):

- (1) Ben Daniel, *Neighbor: Christian Encounters with "Illegal" Immigration*
- (2) The Worldwatch Institute, *Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability* (2010 State of the World Report)
- (3) Kip Sullivan, *The Health Care Mess: How We Got Into It and How We'll Get Out of It*

Recommended Readings on CAMS:

1. Ethical Theory

A Short Primer on Ethical Theory, William Hawk and Gerald Schlabach

Introduction to Ethical Theory, Deborah Heikes

Ethical Theories Compared, Rosalind Hursthouse

2. Undocumented Immigration (readings for 1/6 to 1/10)

"A Shifting Tide: Recent Trends in the Illegal Immigrant Population, Center for Immigration Studies

History of the 1965 Immigration Bill, Center for Immigration Studies

Immigration Policy in the U.S., Congressional Budget Office Report

Immigration and Christian Ethics, The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

"The Bible as Ultimate Immigration Handbook", Joan Maruskin

Ethics of Immigration Policy, John Rohe, editor

"Evangelical Leaders Unite on Just Assimilation Immigration Policy", Liberty Counsel

"A Moral and Just Response to the Immigration Crisis", Richard Land

"Immigration Policy Requires Biblical Response", Richard Land

"An Evangelical View of Immigration Reform", The Hill's Congress Blog

3. Consumerism (readings for 1/11 to 1/13)

Defining Consumer Culture

Consumerism: A Special Report, GlobeScan Incorporated

Consumerism, The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

Consumerism Study Guide, The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

Consumerism, Economism, and Christian Faith, John B. Cobb, Jr

A Catholic Framework for Economic Life, U.S. Catholic Bishops (1996)

Consumerism and Consumption, Nancy F. Koehn

The Structure of Hip Consumerism, Joseph Heath

Spent: America After Consumerism, Amitai Etzioni, The New Republic

Widespread Sustainable Consumerism is More Vital than taking Individual Actions, Caroline Savery

Finding Balance Between Consumerism and Conservationism, Joel Bittle

Why Religion Isn't Green, Stephen Ellingson

Two Cheers for Materialism, James Twitchell

When Enough Is Enough, William T. Cavanaugh, Sojourners

Abundance for All: An Economy of Abundance, James K. Smith

Gaia's Right, Mark Steyn

Is Consumerism Harmful? Acton Institute, Religion and Liberty

Long Live American Materialism, The Economist

Materialism is Bad for You, Studies Say The New York Times

4. Health Care (readings for 1/14 to 1/19)

Consumerism in Health Care, Grace-Marie Turner

CastroCare in Crisis: lessons of 'Single-Payer' Health Care, John Graham

The Health Care Divide: Unfair Financial Burdens, Gail Shearer, Consumers Union

The Young Invincibles, David Amsden, New York Magazine

Ranks of the Underinsured Are Rising, Study Finds, Reed Abelson, NY Times

The National Individual Health Insurance Mandate, Lawrence O. Gostin, The Hastings Center Report

The Right to a Decent Minimum of Health Care, Allen E. Buchanan, Philosophy and Public Affairs

Miller Center Health Care Debate <http://millercenter.org/public/debates/healthcare>

The Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts, Wilkinson and Marmut, WHO

When are Health Inequalities a Political Problem? Signild Vallgarda

Life at the Top in America Isn't Just Better, It's Longer, Janny Scott, NY Times

The Overtreated American, Shannon Brownless, The Atlantic

Single Payer Meets Managed Competition, David DeGrazia

Class Schedule:

- 1/3: Introduction to the course
Housekeeping details:
1. Assign class participants to a small group
2. Meet with small groups for initial planning:
a. recommended reading facilitation
b. oral reports on 1/20, 1/21, or 1/24
c. research and writing assistance
Overview of ethics as a discipline
Reading:
* "Introduction to Ethical Theories," Heikes (CAMS)
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 1 (pages 1-11)
- 1/4: Ethics methodology
Reading:
* "Ethical Theories Compared," Rosalind Hursthouse (CAMS)
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 2 (pages 12-39)
- 1/5: Nonfoundationalism (no course reading)
Reading:
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 3 (pages 42-55)
- 1/6: Undocumented immigration
Neighbor, part 1 (pages 3-57)
* CAMS
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 4 (pages 57-91)
- 1/7: Undocumented immigration
Neighbor, part 2 (pages 61-83)
* CAMS
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 5 (pages 95-118)
- 1/10: Undocumented immigration
Neighbor, part 3 (pages 87-145)
* CAMS
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 6 (pages 121-156)
- 1/11: Consumerism
Transforming Cultures, pages 3-68
* CAMS
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 7 (pages 160-196)
- 1/12: Consumerism
Transforming Cultures, pages 69-132
* CAMS
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 8 (pages 200-214)
- 1/13: Consumerism
Transforming Cultures, pages 133-190
* CAMS
** *Health Care Mess*, chapter 9 (pages 215-256)
- 1/14: **Required Attendance at Lunch Hour Presentation on Health Care**
Health care (discuss chapters 1-4 of *Mess*)
Health Care Mess, chapter 10 (pages 260-303)
* CAMS

1/17: **No Class (Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday)**

1/18: Health care (discuss chapters 5-8 of *Mess*)
Health Care Mess, chapter 11 (pages 307-345)
*CAMS

1/19: Health care (discuss chapters 9-12 of *Mess*)
Health Care Mess, chapter 12 (pages 347-351)
*CAMS

1/20: **Oral reports on undocumented immigration**

1/21: **Oral reports on consumerism**

1/24: **Last day of class ---oral reports on health care**

1/31: **Paper due no later than 5pm**

*recommended reading

** suggested reading for an upcoming class