

Religion, Ethics, and Modern Moral Issues

Scott C. Williamson

TH3113

January 3-24, 2012

9:00-11:30

Schlegel Hall 122

(Office: Schlegel 306; ext. 284)

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 an era marked by multiplicity, and 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 one contemporary social issue. The issue we will analyze this term is American world leadership.

Objectives:

1. Historical dialogue. Students will describe the social, historical and philosophical forces that occasion and frame the moral issue 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. More specifically, you should demonstrate your familiarity with the “three tasks of theological ethics,” as well as showcase your critical reading, moral imagination, and disciplined creativity. Lastly, you are expected to offer constructive feedback to your classmates who will give an oral report on their research. (10%)
2. Research Essay. Students will submit a 10 to 12 page, double-spaced position paper on some aspect of the topic under review. A working draft of the paper is due **Thursday, January 19th** and should be emailed to the entire class. The final paper is due on Friday, January 27th and should be emailed to the professor. (70%)
3. Oral Reports. Students will give a 10-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). Reports will be given on January 20, 23, and 24. (20%)

Required texts (in order of use):

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (The University of Chicago Press, reprinted 2008, with an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich)
[Referred to as *Irony*]
2. David Ray Griffin et al., *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006)
[Referred to as *Empire*]
3. Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, editors, *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (Routledge, 2011)
[Referred to as *Polydoxy*]

Class Schedule:

- 1/3: Introduction to the course
Housekeeping details
Three Tasks of Theological Ethics
Reinhold Niebuhr, *Irony*
- Reading:
Irony, Introduction, Preface, chapters 1 & 2
- 1/4: **Reinhold Niebuhr, *Irony***
- Reading:
Irony, chapters 3, 4, & 5
- 1/5: **Reinhold Niebuhr, *Irony***
- Reading:
Irony, chapters 6, 7, & 8
- 1/6: **The American Empire**
- Reading:
Empire, Preface and Part I
- 1/9: **The American Empire**
- Reading:
Empire, Part II
- 1/10: **The American Empire**
- Reading:
Empire, Part III
- 1/11: **Polydoxy**
- Reading:
Polydoxy, 1, 2 & 3
- 1/12: **Polydoxy**
- Reading:
Polydoxy, 4, 5, & 7
- 1/13: **Polydoxy**
- Reading:
Polydoxy, 8, 9, & 13
- 1/16: No Class (Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday)
- 1/17: No Class (research and writing day)

- 1/18: No Class (research and writing day)
- 1/19: **Toward an ethic of *Just Engagement***
****Papers due 9am. Please email to the class.****
- 1/20: Oral reports
- 1/23: Oral reports
- 1/24: Oral reports—last day of class
- 1/27: ****Papers due 5pm****

Oral Report Schedule (tentative—depends on final registration)

This schedule has been determined randomly. It is your responsibility to exchange slots with a peer in the event that you are unable to keep your scheduled appointment.

1/20:

- 9am Faith Hatchett-Rowlett
- 9:30am Scott W. Woodburn
- 10am Erin N. Gill
- 10:30am Brian D. Hauser
- 11am Maureen L. Clark

1/23:

- 9am Kristin L. Belcher
- 9:30am Zachary C. McNulty
- 10am Martha Anne Lasher
- 10:30am Chandra A. Kearns
- 11am Toya Lynn Richards

1/24:

- 9am Aline Foster
- 9:30am Irene Ludji
- 10am Ronald O. Branson
- 10:30am Letcher E. Collins
- 11am Chandra G. Irvin