

Introduction to Christian Ethics

Fall 2021

W/F 10:00 – 11:20 AM

Professor Scott C. Williamson

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Office hours: W/F after class

Zoom link: <https://zoom.us/j/5028942284>

Course rubric: [Ethical Reasoning Rubric.pdf](#)

Course Description:

“How do we work through moral issues?” Steve Wilkens’ question draws us into an exploration of ethical systems, which specify the process of how we work through moral issues. Wilkens’ thesis is that ethical theory is an inescapable part of our world. “We all think theoretically in this arena of life; we just do not always know that we do it.” Any confusion we have about thinking ethically is certainly understandable. Wilkens writes: “most disciplines deal with *is* questions, but when we use the discipline of ethics to untangle moral dilemmas, we ask *ought* questions.” Ethical systems help us to answer these ought questions by providing foundations for our ethical perspectives.

“How does the Christian stance come into conversation with other ways of thinking through moral issues?” Robin Lovin describes the Christian stance as “an approach to moral problems that begins from a set of beliefs that are generally shared among Christians, including beliefs about God and about how God’s presence in Jesus of Nazareth reshapes human lives and indicates the direction of human history.” This approach comes into conversation with other ethical systems. All ethical systems orient persons to the three primary ways of arriving at a moral decision: (1) you can use reason to set *goals* and determine what actions are most likely to achieve these goals; (2) you can think about what your *duty* is and reflect on what you must do to fulfil your duty; and (3) you can determine what kind of person you should be and how to acquire the personal characteristics or *virtues* that empower you to be that kind of person. Christianity contributes distinct understandings of goals, duties, and virtues that are at times in harmony with other ethical systems and are often at odds with them.

“How can we construct an ethical stance that is not male-centered and that does not repeat the traditional, male-dominated modes of doing ethics?” In the reader she has edited on feminist theological ethics, Lois Daly and the other volume contributors, “attempt to envision a different world, one in which patterns of domination and subordination, of

hierarchy, of injustice are replaced by reciprocity, coalition, and justice.” Though there are any number of feminisms (and not one universalizable feminism), feminists, womanists, *mujeristas* and *minjung* theologians and ethicists are all involved in the work of unmasking universalizing assumptions and self-consciously “asserting the value of their own particularity.” Further, they argue that social location matters in working through moral issues not only for how the tasks of ethics are construed, but also for “which authorities are honored, which resources are chosen, and how those resources are used.”

“How do we love our neighbors who suffer on the margins of society?” Miquel A. De La Torre’s question draws us into the necessity of praxis—what we *do*—because, in the words of Brazilian theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, “love is praxis, not theory (1984).” Neighbor-love working to establish justice-based relationships is at the heart of both Christian ethics and De La Torre’s project to do Christian ethics from the margins. De La Torre writes, “For Christian ethics to be relevant, the faith community’s struggles with oppressive living conditions must be engaged, always with the goal of dismantling the mechanism responsible for creating the inhumanity faced within marginalized spaces.” This course introduces students to the study of liberationist Christian ethics so that they might participate in a Christian response to injustice that dismantles oppressive structures and builds justice-based relationships constitutive of neighbor-love.

Utilizing a case method approach, students will demonstrate how they work through a moral issue in student presentations that respond to case studies in De La Torre. Case methodology is a helpful way to practice thinking ethically. Case studies capture past occurrences of ethical problems and case teaching invites critical reflection on what is right, good, and just, so that students can gain experience and confidence making ethical decisions. The contentious moral disputes from which case studies will be drawn include war, environment, poverty, healthcare, and the U.S. legal system. In conversation with the course rubric (found here: [Ethical Reasoning Rubric.pdf](#)), course resources and outside research, students will deliver a 15 to 20-minute ethical reflection on a case they have selected or developed.

Student learning outcomes (SLOs)

MDIV SLO’s

- **SLO 3:** Students will be able to think theologically and ethically in relation to particular traditions and contemporary needs.
- **SLO 4:** Students will demonstrate the ability to reflect critically and self-critically on relationships between Christian faith and various forms of systemic injustice.

MA(R) SLO’s

- **SLO 4:** Students will be able to think theologically, strategically, imaginatively, and contextually about ethical issues.

Course Objectives:

By the conclusion of the course, students will show proficiency in the following elements of ethical reasoning:

- Ethical self-awareness
- Understanding different ethical perspectives and systems
- Ethical issue recognition
- Application of ethical perspectives and concepts
- Evaluation of different ethical perspectives and concepts

Course Requirements for MDIV Students:

- **Preparation and Participation:** Students will submit a 150 to 200-word reflection on some aspect of your engagement with the reading for each class between September 15 and November 19 (18 reflections out of 20).
 - Additionally, please submit two reflections on any of the five selected case studies in De La Torre for which you are not presenting. Case studies include: global poverty (chapter 5); war (chapter 6); environment (chapter 7); national poverty (chapter 9); and life and death (chapter 11). These reflections are due on the date that the material is listed in the syllabus (2 reflections, for **a total of 20 reflections**).
 - All reflections are due no later than 1-hour prior to the start of class. Late reflections will not be accepted and will receive 0 points. Acceptable reflections summarize what you have read and will receive 1-point. Excellent reflections interrogate what you have read and will receive 2-points. Regular attendance, timely reading, 150 to 200-word reflections, and thoughtful participation in class discussions are crucial to student learning. (20 reflections, **40 points**)
- **Student Presentation on Case Study:** Students will give a 15 to 20-minute oral presentation in class that demonstrates how they work through a moral issue taken from the selected case studies in De La Torre. The presentation should engage the course rubric, course resources, current events, and outside research. The course rubric can be found here: [Ethical Reasoning Rubric.pdf](#) (**20 points**)
- **Paper on Case Study:** *How can Christians love their neighbors who live in marginalized spaces and suffer from (the issue of your case study)?* De la Torre writes, “ethics done on the margins is and must remain a contextual ethics that seek to see

the liberating work of God through the eyes of those made poor, those victimized, and those made to suffer because they belong to the “wrong” gender, race, orientation, or economic class.” In this essay students will write a provisional answer to the question following the process of the hermeneutical circle, and in accordance with the elements of the ethical reasoning rubric (found here: [Ethical Reasoning Rubric.pdf](#)). This paper should be approximately 2,500 words, or 10-pages in length, double-spaced. Due December 13 @ 12:00 PM. **(40 points)**

Course Requirements for MA(R) and MAMFT Students:

In addition to the requirements above for preparation and participation:

- MA(R) Students are permitted to work on a research project in conjunction with the Research Methods course in lieu of writing the paper outlined above. Additionally, MA(R) students are required to write a case study for the class based on their research and present that case study in class.
- MAMFT students are permitted to submit, with the approval of the instructor, a total of ten pages of writing on an ethical issue or issues in the practice of therapy, in lieu of the paper outlined above. A student presentation on the selected issue(s) is required.

Accommodation for Non-Christian Students:

- Non-Christian students are permitted to write the paper outlined above from the context of the religious, spiritual, indigenous, or humanist tradition(s) that they hold. A student presentation is required.

Required Texts:

Daly, Lois K. ***Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader***. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

De La Torre, Miguel A. ***Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins***. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017.

Lovin, Robin W. ***An Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues***. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2nd edition, 2011.

Wiilkens, Steve. ***Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics: An Introduction to Theories of Right and Wrong***. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2nd edition, 2011.

Class schedule:

September 10: Introduction to the course and to the guiding questions that we will address throughout the semester: “How do we work through moral issues?” What is the Christian *stance*? What constructive work are feminists, womanists, mujeristas, and minjung theologians doing when they do ethics? What does it mean to do Christian ethics from the margins?

Part I: Exploring Ethical Systems

September 15: *Cultural Relativism and Ethical Egoism*
Assignment: Read Wilkens chapters 1-3; submit reflection

September 17: *Behaviorism and Evolutionary Ethics*
Assignment: Read Wilkens chapters 4 & 5; submit reflection

September 22: *Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics*
Assignment: Read Wilkens chapters 6 & 7; submit reflection

September 24: *Virtue Ethics and Narrative Ethics*
Assignment: Read Wilkens chapter 8 & 9; submit reflection

September 29: *Natural Law, Situation, and Divine Command Ethics*
Assignment: Read Wilkens chapters 10-12; submit reflection

Part II: Christian Ethics

October 1: *Christian Life*
Assignment: Read Lovin chapters 1 & 2; submit reflection

October 6: *The Christian Stance*
Assignment: Read Lovin chapter 3; submit reflection

October 8: *Goals*
Assignment: Read Lovin chapters 4 & 5; submit reflection

October 13: *Duties*
Assignment: Read Lovin chapters 6 & 7; submit reflection

October 15: *Virtues*
Assignment: Read Lovin chapters 8 & 9; submit reflection

October 20 & 22: ***No Class: Research and Study Week***
PART III: FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

October 27: *Assumptions*
 Assignment: Read Daly chapters 1 & 2; submit reflection

October 29: *Womanist Theological Ethics*
 Assignment: Read Daly chapters 3 & 4; submit reflection

November 3: *Mujerista Theological Ethics*
 Assignment: Read Daly chapters 6 & 7; submit reflection

November 5: *Minjung Theology*
 Assignment: Read [Minjung Theology A Korean Contextual The.pdf](#); submit reflection

November 10: *Taking on Heterosexist Traditions*
 Assignment: Read Daly chapters 12 & 15; submit reflection

November 12: *Exploring Sex, Power, and Embodiment*
 Assignment: Read Daly chapters 17 & 18; submit reflection

Part IV: CHRISTIAN ETHICS FROM THE MARGINS

November 17: *Ethical Theory*
 Assignment: Read De La Torre chapters 1 & 2; submit reflection

November 19: *The Hermeneutical Circle*
 Assignment: Read De La Torre chapter 3 and “Using Case Studies in Ethics from the Margins” in chapter 4; submit reflection

November 24: CLASS CANCELLED
 Assignment: Prepare for your presentation

November 26: NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK

Part V: STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

Note: Please submit 2 reflections for this part of the class

December 1: *War*
 Assignment: Read De La Torre chapter 6

December 3: *Environment*

Assignment: Read De La Torre chapter 7

December 7:

Poverty

Assignment: Read De La Torre chapter 5 or chapter 9

December 10:

Life and Death: Healthcare and the Legal System

Assignment: Read De La Torre chapter 11

(December 13:

PAPER DUE @ 12:00 PM)

Policy Statements

1. Use of Inclusive Language

In accordance with seminary policy, students are to use inclusive language in class discussions and in written and oral communication by using language representative of the whole human community in respect to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and physical and intellectual capacities. Direct quotations from theological texts and translations of the Bible do not have to be altered to conform to this policy. In your own writing, however, when referring to God, you are encouraged to use a variety of images and metaphors, reflecting the richness of the Bible's images for God. See for further assistance, <http://www.lpts.edu/academics/academic-resources/academic-forms/guides-policies-and-handbooks/inclusive-and-expansive-language>.

2. Academic Honesty

All work turned in to the instructors is expected to be the work of the student whose name appears on the assignment. Any borrowing of the ideas or the words of others must be acknowledged by quotation marks (where appropriate) and by citation of author and source. Use of another's language or ideas from online resources is included in this policy and must be attributed to author and source of the work being cited. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism and may result in failure of the course. Two occurrences of plagiarism may result in dismissal from the Seminary. Students unfamiliar with issues related to academic honesty can find help from the staff in the Academic Support Center. For the Seminary policy, see The Code of Student Conduct, 6.11; the Student Handbook, p. 19.

3. Special Accommodations

Students requiring accommodations for a documented physical or learning disability should be in contact with the Director of the Academic Support Center during the first two weeks of a semester (or before the semester begins) and should speak with the instructor as soon as possible to arrange appropriate adjustments. Students with environmental or other sensitivities that may affect their learning are also encouraged to speak with the instructor.

4. Citation Policy

Citations in your papers should follow Seminary standards, which are based on these guides:

American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 6th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010.

Turabian, Kate L., Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*. 8th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

The Chicago Manual of Style. 16th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Copies of these guides are available at the library and in the Academic Support Center.

5. Attendance Policy

Perfect or near-perfect attendance at Zoom sessions is expected, and roll will be taken. Ordinarily, you must be present for at least 75% (= 60 minutes) of the class session in order to be counted as “present.” In case of illness or emergency, students are asked to notify the instructor of their planned absence from class prior to the session. Whether excused or unexcused, more than two absences will affect the student’s grade, and more than four absences may result in a failing grade in the course. Note that to earn full credit for “attendance” you will need to be engaged in the discussions and adhere to standards of professionalism for digital meetings as outlined in the section “Etiquette for Digital Meetings,” immediately below.

6. Etiquette for Digital Meetings

- *Timeliness*: Plan to sign on to the meeting at least a couple of minutes before the scheduled start-time.
- *Audio*: Please mute your microphone unless you are speaking or about to speak. If the discussion gets lively, virtually raise your hand to be recognized by the moderator before speaking or use the “chat” function.
- *On-screen presence*: • **Keep your camera turned on** unless you must step away for a moment. • Close the door, turn off your phone, Twitter alerts, etc. Do not multitask. • If you use a virtual background, test it first to make sure it is not distracting. • Do not eat, walk around, or move in other distracting ways. (Sipping a beverage is fine.)