

# Introduction to Christian Ethics

REL 217 • Fall 2023

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:00 pm – 2:20 pm  
Institution Hall 105

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## Overview of the Course

It is almost universally agreed that Christians have ethical obligations. What that looks like in practice, however, is hotly contested. This course invites students to reflect on the methods and justifications that are employed in ethical reflection in the classroom, the pastor's study, the boardroom, the statehouse, and the home. We will integrate more abstract moral theological debates with ongoing issues in the church and society. Students will not only be asked to become moral theologians in their own right, but also to practice inviting others into the task of moral theology.

## Objectives for the Course

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

- explain deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethical approaches
- integrate religious thinking with non-religious theory, and apply both to contemporary issues
- develop pastoral and/or leadership materials appropriate to students' vocational futures

## Weekly procedure

Students shall have the readings completed for the date on which they are discussed, according to the schedule in this syllabus. Additionally, each student must contribute to a collaborative study chart on Google Docs. Charts will look like this:

Author, Text	1-2 thesis statements (direct quotes; include page #s)	author's aims (in your own words, 3-5 sentences)	3-5+ key words/phrases (w/pg#)	lingering questions (clarifying or critical)
Gushee & Sassen, "Authority and Scripture"	▪	▪	▪	▪
Wheeler, "Teaching about Moral Issues"	▪	▪	▪	▪

Students will be required to fill in 1-2 cells of the collaborative study chart each week, on a first come, first served basis—so you'll want to make your contributions early if you'd like to have your pick of the cells! Your contributions are due by **midnight the night before class**. Please include your initials at the end of the cell you've contributed like this: (MN).

The process of drafting these charts provides students with three valuable opportunities. First, students will be able to absorb the essence of the text by being responsible for outlining and responding to it. Second, students will learn to get in the habit of finding these four key elements of texts as they are reading. Third, students will have at their fingertips, by the end of the semester, an index of all of the texts that were read for the class.

Furthermore, students will participate in discussions of approximately twelve people, led by one of their classmates. Three roles will be involved in this discussion. **Aides** will be responsible for supporting the class's reading and discussion of the texts, drawing especially on the collaborative charts students develop together. **Clerks** will keep minutes of the discussion to be circulated no later than four days after the discussion. **Moderators** will ensure that the discussion proceeds in an orderly fashion. Students will serve in each of these roles twice.

## Essays & exams

Three projects will be required of each student. The first will be a **speech or sermon** that thoughtfully engages a present-day ethical issue. It can be any issue that you would like to speak to, but it must be one that churches and non-profits are

struggling with at present. It must engage a Biblical text *and* two other sources of authority discussed in the second class session. The address can be submitted in the form of a 4-6 page (double spaced) manuscript *or* a 10-12 minute video. It must be turned in with a two-page reflection on which sources of authority were drawn on to substantiate claims, and the ways the address invites its addressees to engage in the task of moral theology.

The second project will be similar but take a different format. For this project, students will submit a 1000-1200 word written piece that would suffice as *either* an **op-ed to be printed in a local newspaper or a pastoral newsletter for a church**. It also must address a contemporary issue, but it must be a different issue than is discussed in the sermon project. It also must be turned in alongside a two-page reflection on the sources of authority used, and the degree to which the writing invites readers to engage in the task of moral theology.

These two projects may be done in the order that students would prefer, but the first must be turned in by October 18, and the second must be turned in by November 29.

Third, students must develop a **small group study** for a church that invites reflection on a contemporary ethical issue. The study design should include readings, discussion lists, and written prayers for a six week program of approximately one hour each. The study can be on one of the issues discussed in the sermon and writing projects turned in early in the semester. A one-paragraph proposal for the group study should be turned in early in November. The project will be due on Dean's Date.

Further details, as well as rubrics, will be available to students as the due dates for the projects approach.

Finally, each student will take **one quiz**. It will take place the week before Thanksgiving and will cover the material considered in the first nine weeks of the course. There is no study guide; students' charts should facilitate their review of the material. Further details will be offered nearer to the date of the quiz.

## Academic integrity & plagiarism

Plagiarism is theft. This institution, and this course's professor, take theft extremely seriously. Students who plagiarize will receive a failing grade on their assignment and, in most cases, a failing grade in the course. In addition, such students will be referred to the Academic Integrity Committee, as per to §6.3 in the University's student handbook, and will face further disciplinary action, including expulsion. We will discuss the issue more specifically in a later class session.

## A note about language

Scripture repeatedly attests to the power of words. Christians believe that the world was created with a word, and that the Savior who came into the world *was* the Word. Language is force. The words you choose matter. As such, I urge each student to reflect carefully in speaking and writing about God. This is of acute concern in the case of the gender pronouns used to refer to God. To be clear: by no means do I require one or another approach. I *do*, however, require thoughtfulness.

## Grading

It should be noted that it is not difficult to pass this course. At the same time, every student should not expect to ace it. Grading for the class shall be calculated as follows:

Assignment	Date	Points
Sermon project and reflection	10/18 or 11/29	200 points
Written project and reflection	10/18 or 11/29	200 points
Study proposal	11/8	50 points
Study project	Dean's Date	250 points
Quiz	11/15	100 points
Participation		100 points
Discussion leadership		50 points
Chart contributions		50 points
<b>Total</b>		<b>1000 points</b>

The grading scale is as follows:

Total Points	Grade
965+	A+
935-964	A
895-934	A-
865-894	B+
835-864	B
795-834	B-
765-794	C+
735-764	C
695-734	C-
665-694	D+
635-664	D
595-634	D-

## Reading assignments

### Required Texts

In this course, we will cover a lot of ground. As such, I have compiled the readings for you electronically.

As a note: the readings are listed in the order by which I recommend that you read the texts. You certainly are not required to read in a certain order, but I have tried to order the readings such that they build upon one another.

		Theme	Readings	Questions
Sep 13	Introduction	<b>Ethics in the world</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Day, “The Christian Case for Reparations”</li> <li>• Shellnut, “Engineered in His Image? Christians More Cautious About Gene Editing”</li> <li>• Camosy, “Why all Christians should go vegan”</li> <li>• Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, “Forward together, not one step back” (<i>Video</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do Christian leaders justify their claims? What sources of authority do they draw on?</li> <li>• What sources of authority do often draw on?</li> </ul>
Sep 15		<b>Substantiating claims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gushee &amp; Sassen, “Authority and Scripture”</li> <li>• Wheeler, “Teaching about Moral Issues”</li> </ul>	
Sep 20	Means vs. Ends	<b>Triage at Memorial Hospital</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radiolab, “Playing God” (<i>podcast</i>)</li> <li>• Wheeler, “The Minister as Ethicist”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> Fink, <i>Five Days at Memorial</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can Christians do good in the world?</li> <li>• What does desert look like in the case of resource scarcity?</li> <li>• How might we allocate resources in a way other than based on desert?</li> <li>• What have your communities taught you about this issue?</li> </ul>
Sep 22		<b>Utilitarianism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bykvist, “What is Utilitarianism?”</li> <li>• Thomson, “Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> Nielsen, “Against Moral Conservatism”	
Sep 27		<b>Deontology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie From Altruistic Motives”</li> <li>• Grisez, “Against Consequentialism”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> H. Richard Niebuhr, “Utilitarian Christianity”	
Sep 29		<b>Revisiting Triage: COVID-19</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miller, “Ethics for Pandemics” (<i>video</i>)</li> <li>• La Puma, “In a coronavirus crisis, who deserves a ventilator?”</li> </ul>	
Oct 4	Realism vs. Absolutism	<b>Dresden</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Williams, “Politics and Moral Character”</li> <li>• McElroy, “The Limits of Moral Norms: The Bombing of Dresden”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> Bess, “Bombing Civilian Populations”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even if they often don’t, do the ends <i>ever</i> justify the means?</li> <li>• Is there such a thing as a “moral tragedy”—when there is no right, or sinless, thing to do?</li> <li>• What kind of people do we want in charge of hard decisions?</li> </ul>
Oct 6		<b>Christian Realism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walzer, “The Problem of Dirty Hands”</li> <li>• Elshtain, “Reflections on the Problem of Dirty Hands”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> Lovin, <i>Christian Realism and the New Realities</i>	
Oct 11		<b>Moral Absolutism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grisez &amp; Shaw, “Persons, Means, and Ends”</li> <li>• Hauerwas, “Should War Be Eliminated? A Thought Experiment”</li> </ul>	
Oct 13		<b>Theft &amp; Need</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robert, <i>Breaking the Law when the Law Breaks Us</i> (ch 1 &amp; 2)</li> <li>• Kotva, “An Appeal for a Christian Virtue Ethic”</li> </ul>	
Oct 18	Intentions vs. Actions	<b>NGRI</b> → <i>first project due</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When ‘Not Guilty’ is a Life Sentence” (<i>podcast</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are our intentions or our actions most important?</li> <li>• How responsible should we be for things we do that are somewhat out of our control, like our social circumstances?</li> <li>• Is “moral luck” a problem?</li> </ul>
Oct 20		<b>Attributionism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility”</li> <li>• Williams, “Moral Luck”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”	
Nov 1		<b>Accountability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walker, “Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency”</li> <li>• Darley and Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho”</li> </ul> <i>Recommended reading:</i> Pickard, “Responsibility without Blame”	
Nov 3		<b>Implicit Bias</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saul, “Unconscious Influences and Women in Philosophy”</li> <li>• Brownstein, “Attributionism and Moral Responsibility for Implicit Bias”</li> </ul>	

Nov 8	Individual vs. Collective Responsibility	<b>Reparations in Germany</b> → <i>Proposal due</i>	•Nieman, "Sins of the Fathers"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can groups be held responsible for the performance of a wrong? How?</li> <li>• What makes a member of a group responsible for the wrong a group does?</li> <li>• What kind of groups can be held responsible?</li> </ul>
Nov 10		<b>Individual Sin and Responsibility</b>	•Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual"	
Nov 15		<b>Collective Sin and Responsibility</b> → <i>Quiz</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peter Henriot, "Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition"</li> <li><i>Recommended reading:</i> Nelson, <i>What's Wrong with Sin?</i></li> </ul>	
Nov 17		<b>Revisiting Germany: U.S. reparations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coates, "The Case for Reparations"</li> <li>• Kwon &amp; Thompson, "The Call to Repair"</li> </ul>	
Nov 29	Special vs. Equal Duties	<b>Immigration</b> → <i>second project due</i>	•Heyer, "Christian Anthropology and the De-humanization of immigrants"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there things we owe to particular communities that we don't owe to others?</li> <li>• Do special obligations violate human dignity?</li> <li>• What does love demand of Christians?</li> </ul>
Dec 1		<b>Moral equality</b>	•Outka, "Universal Love and Impartiality"	
Dec 6		<b>Special Obligations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pope, "'Equal Regard' versus 'Special Relations?'"</li> <li>• MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?"</li> <li><i>Recommended reading:</i> Outka and Pope, "Comment" and "The Author Replies"</li> </ul>	
Dec 8		<b>Reparations for colonialism</b>	•Ypi, Goodin, and Barry, "Associative Duties, Global Justice, and the Colonies"	
Dec 13	Review	<b>Project presentations</b>	•Finish your projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategies do your classmates use?</li> <li>• What sources of authority do they introduce?</li> </ul>
Dec 15		<b>Project presentations</b> → <i>Study project due on Dean's Date</i>	•Finish your projects	