

**MORL 422
Christian Social Ethics
Spring 2005**

**Dr. Daniel Finn
Office: Simon 248
Office Hours:
1:00-2:20 PM - Mon, Wed, & Fri, and
many other times, by appointment or
chance**

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is a course in Christian social ethics. Social ethics moves beyond the question of individual decision about action to issues of communal decision about institutional structures. Thus it often bears upon the appropriate decisions of government. For example, where personal ethics would strive to enable the individual to make a personally responsible decision about truth-telling or marriage or the taking of life, social ethics would ask, among many other things, how our laws and other institutions ought to deal with marriage, divorce, murder, war, or abortion, and whether there ought to be laws at all about these critical moral issues. (Recall that for all the importance of truth-telling, we have laws to penalize the practice of lying only in the most formal situations—under oath, in contracts, or in public slander.) In order to be able to address contemporary institutional questions from a Christian perspective, we will spend most of our time together considering texts from the history of Christianity that address the social, economic, and political questions of their day. What these texts meant in their day and what they imply for our life today will remain central to our concerns.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

There are four principal objectives of this course.

1. The first is to become more familiar with the historical sources upon which Christian social ethics depends. During the first half of the course, we will focus on sources in the history of Christian theology up through the Reformation. The second half of the course will largely review the treatments written during the last century. As with every academic course in theology, we will have to depend on many dimensions of Christian theology which will not be examined here, for example, Christology, ecclesiology, and fundamental moral theology.

2. The second objective is to better understand the method of social ethics. A central issue here is the role and significance of earlier Christian teaching on social issues. What authority should these earlier texts have? On the one hand, many arose in social settings far different from our own and thus a literal transplantation of their judgments would constitute a “fundamentalist” mistake. On the other hand, there are indeed basic themes and concerns that are both constitutive of the Christian tradition and authoritative in the lives of Christians today. We will investigate how one “does” social ethics, both descriptively and prescriptively.

3. The third objective is to come to understand better the pastoral relevance of Catholic social thought. This rich lode of Christian wisdom is “the best-kept secret” in the Church. In many parishes it rarely appears in Sunday homilies, even though, according to the 1971 Synod, such concerns are “constitutive of the Gospel.”

4. The fourth objective is a more general one, shared in all courses in the School of Theology: to assist each student in learning better how to approach, analyze, and criticize texts, whether written in our own era or centuries ago.

Required Books

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1967.

O'Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, Orbis Books, 1992.

Booklet of readings, spiral bound, available in the Bookstore.

In-Class Discussions

Social scientists who study the process of teaching and learning have demonstrated many times over that the key to good learning is an active learner. This is the central insight of the classic “graduate seminar” occurring in one form or another within universities since the Middle Ages. The method dates back at least as far as Socrates’ dialogues. This sounds counterintuitive to some students, who have a tendency to believe that the essence of education is the receipt of information from the teacher. While reading and hearing such information is an undoubtedly essential portion of education, it represents only a first step. Far more important is the integration of these ideas into the learner’s larger world view, without which they remain only pieces of paper in a file drawer rather than become useful tools to answer real questions that will occur in the future.

As a result, this course will depend heavily upon a discussion among its members about the issues presented in the readings.

Pastoral Relevance

Because this course is a heavily “academic” one, focusing on the history of Christian thinking about social issues, it will be helpful to organize a process for the identification of pastoral issues each day. To do this, each day two students will be asked to take on separate roles. The first will be responsible for identifying some intra-ecclesial issue to which the reading for the day is particularly relevant. In doing so, the student may wish to think about his or her own experience as a leader in a parish, as someone who will someday be a leader in a parish, or even as someone who grew up within a Christian community. The second person will be responsible for identifying an extra-ecclesial pastoral application suggested by the day’s reading. This may well be a sort of “news of the day,” identifying how something in the text seems to speak to a contemporary issue important in the world today outside the Church.

Each day, class will begin with the reports of these two people and a very brief discussion of these two aspects of pastoral relevance of the reading. When attention turns to the readings themselves, it is hoped that these two applications will become part of the conversation and help us remain rooted in Christian experience today while studying documents from earlier eras.

Seminar Leadership

Each day, one student will be responsible for beginning our discussion of the reading. This person should provide a 10-15 line outline of the major points made by the author and 2-3 questions for discussion.

Research Paper

In order to ensure that each student has the experience of wrestling with appropriate sources and of sorting through the methodological questions involved in social ethics, a research paper will be required. The paper should focus on a single issue within social ethics, making use of the historical sources in Christian ethics and examine developments that have occurred on this issue within the tradition. Possible topics include: poverty, wealth, violence, war, nuclear warfare, unions, private property, capitalism, socialism, the environment, the status of women, or other topics. In each case, the focus will be not simply on a personal ethical decision but upon the social ethical analysis of communal life. Approximate length: 12-15 pages.

Examinations

There will be one test during the semester, in mid-March.

Evaluation

The test will count for approximately 35% of the final grade, the research paper 35%, and class participation, including performance in the three daily roles, approximately 30%.

Ernst Troeltsch	<i>The Protestant Reformation: Social Teachings of the Christian Churches</i> “Protestantism: A New Sociological Type” “The Lutheran Ethic & Economic Questions” “Calvinism & Lutheranism Contrasted” “The Economic Ethic of Calvinism”	Thurs, 2/10
Leo XIII and Pius XI	<i>Rerum Novarum</i> , section #1-4, 7-8, 11-12, 15-27, 31-38, 41-42. <i>Quadregesimo Anno</i> , section #1-14, 41-69, 76-125, 136-137.	Tues, 2/15
John A. Ryan & Virgil Michel & The Catholic Worker	Ryan: <i>Distributive Justice</i> , “Canons of Distributive Justice” and “A Living Wage.” Michel: “The Common Good” The Catholic Worker: “The Economy of Love”	Tues, 2/22
Albino Barrera & Reinhold Niebuhr	“The Universal Access Principle:” pp. 204b-218b <i>Interpretation of Christian Ethics</i> , pp. 84-102	Thurs, 2/24
John XXIII	<i>Mater et Magistra</i> : #1-9, and 51-177 <i>Pacem in Terris</i> : #1-38, 46-66, and 80-129	Tues, 3/1
Vatican II	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> : Sections #1-6, 23-32, 35-36, 42-45, 53, 57-62, 63-72, 73-76, 84-87	Thurs, 3/3
Paul VI and Gustavo Gutierrez	<i>Populorum Progressio</i> : #6-34, 44-50, 56-87 Gutierrez: <i>Liberation Theology</i> , chapters 1 & 2	Tues, 3/8
Joseph Ratzinger & Robert M. Brown	Ratzinger: Two Instructions on Liberation Theology 1984: Sect. I, para #1-7; IV, 12-15; VI, 7 through IX, 5; IX, 13 through X, 5; XI, 6-9 and 17-18, 1986: Para #25-31, 66-70, 73-88 Brown: “What Every North American Should Know About Liberation Theology”	Thurs, 3/10
John Paul II	<i>Laborem Exercens</i> : Para #4-9, 11-20, 24-25	Tues, 3/15
Test		Thurs, 3/17
Maria Riley & Nancy Sylvester	<i>Trouble and Beauty: A Feminist Critique of Catholic Social Thought</i>	Tues, 3/29
US Bishops	<i>The Challenge of Peace</i> Day 1: Para. #5-27 & 71-123 & 142-177 Day 2: Para. #178-198 & 234-244, 274-336	Thurs, 3/31 Tues, 4/5

Canadian Bishops & US Bishops	Canadian Bishops: <i>Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis</i> U.S. Bishops: <i>Economic Justice for All</i> Day 1: Para #61-169 Day 2: #170-215, 251-365	Thurs, 4/7 Tues, 4/12
Research Day	No Class	Thurs, 4/14
John Paul II	<i>Centesimus Annus</i> : Day 1: Section #15, 19-20, 26, 30-41	Tues, 4/19
Presentations	In-class presentations of research	Thurs, 4/21
John Paul II	Day 2: #42-48, 52-62	Tues, 4/26
Dennis Jacobson	“Power in Church-based Community Organizations” Research Papers Due	Thurs, 4/28