

Rel 370: Senior Seminar in Religion
“Christian Ethics: Disrupting the Status Quo”

Instructor: Kelly Denton-Borhaug; Office: Comen. 214; phone 610-625-7104

Fridays; 1:00-3:20; PPHAC 103

Office Hours: T/TR 2:30 – 4:00 pm; Wed. 2-3 pm; appointment

Course Description: The Senior Seminar in Religion is a writing/reading intensive, interdisciplinary course that draws on multiple themes and methods for religious study, and offers juniors and seniors who are majoring in Religion the opportunity for collaborative and in depth study, conversation, questioning and learning. This year’s senior seminar will focus on Christian ethics. We will study some introductory material that provides an entry to this discipline (especially for those members of the class who haven’t had much experience in this particular area), and then we will focus on two very different examples of this kind of work. First we will study a classic, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, by Reinhold Niebuhr; then we will delve into a contemporary example of “liberationist Christian ethics,” by Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*. Students will draw upon the methods and skills they learn throughout their study to interview a local religious leader about a troubling and intensive ethical issue the leader has faced, studied, thought about and attempted to address through his/her own religious ethical framework. Students will then analyze their interviewee in terms of everything they have learned and present their findings to their peers in class.

Course Objectives by semester’s end:

- 1) *Students will know basic elements, methods and skills that are used in Christian ethics, and be able to use them to analyze a contemporary practice of Christian ethics on the ground.*
- 2) *Our cross-cultural awareness and appreciation will grow.*
- 3) *Reading, writing, thinking, interpersonal and analytical skills all will be challenged.*

Required Course Books:

Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006

Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005

Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, first published in 1932 by Charles Scribner’s Sons – *please purchase or otherwise lay your hands on your own copy of this book! You will need it by Feb. 12!*

Additional articles, chapters and other material will be made available through Blackboard documents, Reeve’s library reserve, and/or as handouts.

Course Requirements:

- 1) *Careful advance reading, attendance and participation* in class and at extra-class events. A seminar course such as this requires the careful preparation and the active participation of every student. Read every assigned text carefully well in advance of class. Don’t use a highlighter to mark your text, but with pen or pencil write your reactions and questions in the margins and note the development of the author’s argument. Underline what you think are the key points, ideas and reflections, and come to class ready to discuss, share and raise questions. **Bring whatever text(s) we are**

reading with you to class every time! We will regularly use them and read aloud from them in our seminar! 10 % of total grade.

Religious holidays, serious illness and family emergency are the only accepted reasons for missing class. Students with more than one unexcused absences will lose at least a letter grade for participation (those students who need to miss classes because of religious observance will have the option to make up what they have missed – if you fall into this category, please inform me immediately!). *In case of excused absences, please contact me and let me know (in advance of class!).* In any event, you are responsible for every class session's material, notes and assignments.

- 2) Two papers as listed in the schedule of classes. Additional guidelines and expectations will be posted in Blackboard. Each paper is worth 25% of your total grade.
- 3) Final exam: in class on Apr. 16. Again, guidelines for study/preparation will be posted in Blackboard. We will take this exam in a computer lounge, and it will be open book and note. You will be asked to write one or two substantive essays in response to everything we have studied with relationship to West's ethics. Worth 20% of total grade.
- 4) Oral presentation of your interview findings and analysis, using the tools and methods you gain from study of Christian ethics. Worth 20% of total grade.

Preliminary guidelines to get you thinking about the interview project: Individually or in pairs, you will choose a local religious leader to interview in depth about a particular ethical issue he/she has faced (while this may be related to their own person, their ethical deliberation also should be intertwined with their religious leadership). The examples of such ethical work in West's book, Chapter Five, are your example for this project. FIRST: You will want to understand the particular issue in depth, and also engage in serious conversation with this leader regarding his/her own ethical method, resources, deliberation, praxis, struggle, and findings/outcomes. Note: Students will use HIRSB protocol for this project, and *may not* proceed with their interview before receiving approval. Students should plan on requesting at least one hour and up to two hours from this leader for this in depth conversation. You may need to have preliminary conversations with a number of leaders to determine whether they are willing to engage this with you. SECOND: You will analyze the findings from this interview with respect to everything that you have studied in this class. Deliberate on the ethical method, process, resources, and more utilized by this leader. What have you learned from this concrete example of "ethics on the ground?" How might this example of ethical deliberation and leadership be improved upon, that is, achieve greater ethical scope, depth, inclusivity and integrity? Your presentation in class will be to 1) very briefly describe the first step above; and 2) expound with much greater depth on your own intellectual/ethical analysis of the second step.

Additional notes: Students are responsible for adherence to Moravian College's Academic Honesty Policy, found in the Student Handbook. Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Mr. Joe Kempfer, Assistant Director of Learning Services for Disability Support, 1307 Main Street (extension 1510).

Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the office of Learning Services. Please be alert to any changes we may find we need to make to the syllabus along the way of our course.

Schedule of Classes:

Jan. 22 Introduction to class; some building blocks for Christian ethics

Jan. 29 Read: Robin Lovin, *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*, pp 9 – 79
(on library reserve: please make your own copy for reading, notations, and bring it with you to class)

Feb. 5 Read: Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, pp 19 – 78
(in Blackboard course documents: please download, and make your own copy for reading, notations, and bring it with you to class)

Feb. 12 Niebuhr: Introduction to his life and work; reading TBA
Due: 7 page paper: comparison/contrast on Lovin, Stassen, Gushee on fundamentals of Christian Ethics (details to be posted in Blackboard)

Feb. 19 Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Chapters One - Three

Feb. 26 Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Chapters Four -- Six

Mar. 5 Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Chapters Seven -- Ten

Mar. 12 (spring break)

Mar. 15 Note: This is not a regular class day, it is the Monday that you return from Spring Break! DUE:
8-10 page paper: Niebuhr and his ethic – please have it in my office door box by 4 pm today.

Mar. 19 West: *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, Preface through Chapter Two

Mar. 26 West: Chapter 3: Policy: Bible and Welfare Reform
Also read: Meredith L. Ralston, Chapter 2: "Criticisms of Welfare Services," Chapter 3: "The Women's Explanations for Their Experiences," *"Nobody Wants to Hear Our Truth": Homeless Women and Theories of the Welfare State*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.
Selection from Wally Lamb, Ed. *I'll Fly Away: Further Testimonies from the Women of York Prison*, Harper, 2007.

Apr. 2 Tanner, *An Economy of Grace*, Chapters One and Two, pp 1-85

Apr. 9 West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, Chapters Four and Five, pp 112-179

Apr. 16 In-class exam on West and Tanner

Note: We will take this writing-intensive essay exam in a computer lounge. The exam will be open book/note, and will provide you with an opportunity to hone exam essay writing in a controlled environment. You will have 2 hours, 15 minutes in which to complete your exam, print it and hand it in.

Apr. 23 Ethics and Religion on the Ground: Student Presentations

Apr. 30 Ethics and Religion on the Ground: Student Presentations