

R473/571 Problems in Social Ethics/Studies in Religious Ethics  
Department of Religious Studies  
Indiana University  
Spring 2010  
Tues-Thurs 11:15-12:30

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Office Hrs: W: 3-5pm

Topic: **Contemporary Religious Ethics**

### **Description**

Religious Ethics is a relatively new sub-specialty that examines how religion, broadly construed, generates, justifies, and applies ethical norms to assess the character and conduct of individuals and institutions. The “examination” to which I refer can be descriptive, evaluative, or conceptual: religious ethicists sometimes describe how religious traditions generate ethical norms, sometimes evaluate those norms, and sometimes clarify basic conceptual terms according to which those norms might be rendered more coherent or better understood. As an academic discipline, moreover, religious ethics encompasses how scholars assess the work of their colleagues in the academy. This course will survey the rise and development of religious ethics as a subfield in religious studies, starting in the early 1970s and proceeding into the present. We will carry out close readings of recent works that have shaped and moved this subfield. Readings will draw from the work of Gene Outka, John P. Reeder, Jr., James Childress, David Little and Sumner Twiss, James Gustafson, Jeffrey Stout, Robin Lovin, Stanley Hauerwas, Robert Gibbs, Saba Mahmood, John Kelsay, Aaron Stalnaker, and Lisa Sideris. Each of these authors has developed arguments and paradigms of inquiry that have contributed to the formulation of basic questions, sources, and methodologies in religious ethics. We will focus on their sources, their understanding (either implicit or explicit) of religion in relation to ethics, their methodologies, and their aims. Along the way, we’ll explore how normative inquiry is moving across the overlapping domains of religion, culture, politics, and science.

### **Format**

Class meets twice a week in a seminar format. Before the first session on each author, I will send out questions that will serve to guide our seminar discussions. For the second session on an author, two R473 students will begin class by addressing any two of the focal questions below. Students are to communicate with each other in advance to ensure that they do not address the same questions. The questions are:

- What central ideas and methods characterize your author’s work? What would you say are the distinctive marks of the author’s methods and core claims?
- What merits and weaknesses of your author’s work can you identify and defend?
- How would you compare your author’s work with at least one other author, either by way of similarity or contrast? What makes for the resemblances and differences that you identify? Why are these important?
- What features of moral experience are opened up by the work you are discussing?
- In what respects, if any, is this author’s work classifiable as a “religious ethic?”

### **Grading**

Students in **R473** are required to “launch” two discussions by addressing two of focal questions above and to be active participants in all seminars (20%). Each “launch” should be 7-10 minutes long. R473

students are also required to submit three critical papers. These papers are to address the work of authors whom you are not assigned for the “discussion launch.” The critical papers are due the Monday before the class to which they are assigned. Those papers should be 3 pages, single-spaced, and should critically assess the reading assignment. These papers are worth 45% of the final grade. Summary papers are not acceptable and will be returned for revision. A concluding focus paper, worth 25%, is also required. That paper should make a more extended assessment of a particular line of argument to which we’ve addressed our attention over the course of the semester. ***The focus paper is due Monday, May 3 at 5:00pm.***

Students in **R571** are required to submit three brief critical papers (45%), launch one discussion session (15%) in an R571 meeting, and submit one 15-20 page research paper (35%). On the brief, critical paper, see above re: R473. The research paper should be on a topic approved by and developed in consultation with me. We will meet 5 additional times to focus in a more concentrated way on five of the course’s authors: Outka, Gustafson, Little and Twiss, Mahmood, Lovin. Dates and times for our additional meetings TBA.

All students should comb entries in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, and should explore entries on religion and ethics in the *Journal of Religion*, the *Journal of Religious Studies*, *Soundings*, *Ethics*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Theological Studies*, and *Philosophy East and West*. During the concluding week of the semester, all of you will be required to share your impressions of the journals that you’ve explored (5%).

All papers should be submitted to me via an email attachment in Word. Please put your name in the subject heading of the email, along with information about the paper, e.g., Miller on Outka.

### **Office Hours and Attendance Policy**

Each undergraduate student is required to make at least one office visit before Spring Break. That way I can get to know you and your interests, and answer questions that you have about course material. This requirement counts for 5%. My office hours are posted at the top of the first page of this syllabus.

Attendance policy: Only excused, documented absences are acceptable. If you have 3 or more unexcused absences, you cannot score higher than a B in this class; 5 or more, no higher than a C; 7 or more, no higher than a D; 9 or more, no higher than an F. I take regular attendance.

Summary:

**R473:**

Discussion Launch: 20%

Critical Papers: 45%

Final Paper: 25%

Journal Discussion: 5%

Office Visit: 5%

**R571:**

Discussion Launch: 15%

Critical Papers: 45%

Final Paper: 35%

Journal Discussion: 5%

### **Texts**

Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*

James F. Childress, *Who Decides? Paternalism in Health Care*

John P. Reeder, Jr., *Killing and Saving: Abortion, Hunger, and War*  
 David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*  
 James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1  
 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*  
 Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibility*  
 Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*  
 Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine*  
 John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*  
 Saba Mahmood, *Politics and Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*  
 Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*  
 Robin Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*

## Calendar

*N.B. Chapters or articles in parentheses are required for grad students, recommended for undergrads.*

### Wk 1

Jan 12 Introduction

Jan 14 Gustafson, "A Retrospective Interpretation of American Religious Ethics, 1948-1998"; Reeder, "What is a Religious Ethic?"; (Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics in America: A Report on a Book I will not Write," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25.3 [Special Supplement, 1998]). Accessible via Full-text journals on IUB Libraries link. Also: William Schweiker, "On Religious Ethics," for the *Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, accessible via PDF on Oncourse.

### Wk 2

Jan 19 Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, chaps. Introduction, chaps. 1, (2), 3

Jan 21 Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, chaps. 5, 6, 8

### Wk 3

Jan 26 Childress, *Who Should Decide?* chaps. 1-3, 5

Jan 28 no class; out of town for a symposium

### Wk 4

Feb 2 Reeder, *Killing and Saving*, chaps. 1-2

Feb 4 Reeder, *Killing and Saving*, chap. 3

### Wk 5

Feb 9 Little and Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics*, chaps. 1-3 (e-reserves)

Feb 11 Little and Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics*: chap. 7 (e-reserves)

### Wk 6

Feb 16 Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1, chaps. 1-2, (4)

Feb 18 Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1, chaps. 7

### Wk 7

Feb 23 Hauerwas, *A Peaceable Kingdom*, chaps. 1-4 (e-reserves)

Feb 25 Gibbs, *Why Ethics?* TBA

### Wk 8

Mar 2 Gibbs, *Why Ethics?* TBA

Mar 4 no class, out of town for annual conference

**Wk 9**

Mar 9 Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, chaps. Introduction, chaps. 3, 5

Mar 11 Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, chaps. 9, 10, (12), Conclusion

*Spring break:* March 13-20

**Wk 10**

Mar 23 Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*, Introduction, chaps. 1, 2, 5

Mar 25 Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*, chaps. 8-9

**Wk 11**

Mar 30 Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, introduction, chaps. 1-2

Apr 1 Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, chaps. 3-4

**Wk 12**

Apr 6 Mahmood, *Politics and Piety*, chaps. TBA

Apr 8 Mahmood, *Politics and Piety*, chaps.

**Wk 13**

Apr 13 Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*, chaps. 1, 2, (3)

Apr 15 Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*, chaps. 5, 6

**Wk 14**

Apr 20 Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, Introduction, chap. 1

Apr 22 Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, chaps. 3, (5), 6

**Wk 15**

Apr 27 Journal discussion

Apr 29 Journal discussion

**Monday, May 3, 5:00pm: Final papers due.**