

Fall 2016

CE-4900

**Introducing Thea/ological Ethics:  
“Work Our Souls Must Have”**

Emilie M. Townes described ethics as “an art of doing the work our souls must have.” This course introduces diverse methods of moral decision-making to religious leaders. Using on-line tools and live web-based video sessions, students will engage concepts and tools related to the opportunities and challenges of prophetic moral leadership in congregations, organizations, and society. The class gathers weekly to build moral community, reflect on key multi-religious sources of ethics, and exercise their skills in applying concepts to real-life situations and providing ethical guidance to individuals and communities. Readings, multimedia resources, and assignments educate to counter systemic oppression and promote diverse forms of scholar-activism and leadership. Serving as a foundational course in ethics, students will be given the opportunity to tailor course requirements to fit their particular tradition.

Course Website: Moodle.gtu.edu

Meets Tuesdays, 2:10-5:00pm on Zoom and in the Reading Room, Starr King School for the Ministry.

**I. Faculty Details**

Instructor: Megan Dowdell, MA, PhD(c)

E-mail: mdowdell@sksm.edu

Phone: 978-XXX-XXXX

Office Hours: You may request a 15-minute appointment to discuss course concepts and assignments.

E-mail Communication: Questions and appointment requests by e-mail are welcomed. E-mails sent after 6pm Pacific or on the weekends may not receive an immediate response. The instructor does not accept text messages from students, except when experiencing technical difficulties in the live session. Subject lines of e-mail messages should clearly indicate whether you have a question or request for appointment. Please do not hesitate to contact fellow students for assistance as well.

**II. Student Learning Outcomes**

At the close of the course and successful completion of all course requirements, students will be able to:

- Understand the origins and major ethical methods of contemporary thea/ological ethics.
- Develop a methodological toolbox to deepen knowledge of current social, political, religious, and cultural problems in ethics;

- Identity counter-oppressive tools for making ethical decisions as a religious leader;
- Apply ethical decision-making tools to cases of professional clergy ethics;
- Integrate knowledge from the field of thea/ological ethics into vocational discernment and sense of professional identity.

### **III. Educating to Counter Oppressions**

In addition to providing a valuable foundation in thea/ological ethics for graduate students preparing for ministry and religious leadership, this seminar seeks to advance the values expressed in the statement on Educating to Counter Oppressions (ECO) that is central to Starr King School for the Ministry's educational design. Students should familiarize themselves with these priorities and reflect on them as they critically engage sources of learning and the learning community developed through the course. Sources for learning and discussion topics center the perspectives of historically marginalized scholars and communities, beginning often with womanist theo-ethical scholars.

### **IV. Sources for Learning**

We enter the study of ethics through multiple doorways. Sources for learning include important works of contemporary thea/ological ethics that respond to key problems facing faith communities and religious leaders today, as well as historical texts that provide important contextual information for ethical decision-making. Students pursuing ministerial formation will have the opportunity engage texts relevant to their particular theological tradition. Other sources include articles and chapters, case studies, and web publications.

#### **a. Required Books:**

Available at Amazon.com and other retailers:

Traci West. *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. ISBN: 066422959X (\$16.65 on Amazon.com)

Emilie M. Townes. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. ISBN: 1403972737 (\$31.66 on Amazon.com)

#### **b. Additional Required Resources:**

The instructor will supplement the required course books by assigning methodological, substantive, and theoretical contributions to the field of thea/ological ethics, including but not limited to articles, blogs, films, and clips available on the internet. A list of films for the film review assignment will be provided.

#### **c. Independent Research:**

Students are expected to independently research topics relevant to the course, using the GTU electronic and print holdings and subscriptions as well as popular U.S. and global media available on the Internet. Students should come to the course with a working knowledge of the GTU's resources and how to use them. Additionally, web searches for audio and visual material will be important for the successful completion of the final project.

### **e. Embodied Knowledge**

The last (or in some ways, the first!) source of learning: the personal, lifelong experience of having/being a social being in relationship with others and the social world. Embodied experience is a form of expertise in itself and ought not to be discounted. As students are confronted with multiple forms of knowledge and a variety of views on important issues related to countering oppressions, personal histories (our own and through narratives and literature) can offer pause and help one to think critically in dialogue with scholarly, professional, and sacred sources. Students are expected to approach texts and resources with the goals of interpretation, analysis, and response, while engaging embodied experience as a valuable component of learning; *however*, personal sharing (anecdotes, stories, and raw opinions) is no substitute for serious study and engagement. Everyone will be reminded, gently and often, to *bring it back to the texts and the case*.

## **V. Course Expectations**

The course is designed as an interactive seminar jointly focused on theory and method in ethics.

1. **Participation**: Each student is expected to engage each week of the semester in the course environment on Moodle and in the weekly, live sessions. If you are ill or otherwise miss material, it is your responsibility to review what has been missed and stay up-to-date. Student involvement and leadership in course discussions is essential. Plan to engage the material and each other thoughtfully and consistently.
2. **Reading and Note-taking**: Each student is expected to read all required reading in full, and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts and other resources that are indicated in each week on Moodle and in the live seminar. Good notes will help you analyze, evaluate, and connect readings from week to week.
3. **Leadership**: Beginning in Week 3, at least two students will be assigned as critical reviewers for class meetings (marked with an asterisk in course schedule). Student reviewers will create a brief 1-2 page review of the origins, key ideas, and tools of each of one of the main readings in each week. A template for the posting and the discussion will be provided.
4. **Assignments**: Each student is required to complete all assignments prior to the assigned deadline and according to the guidelines provided. Unless otherwise stated, all written assignments must be in 12-point font, double-spaced, include 1" margins, and adhere to assigned page limits. All references should use consistent citation formats and include a bibliography. Grammar, spelling, clarity, and organization are important.

- a. **Critical Reviews:** See item 3 above. Students will also have the opportunity to provide feedback and additional information to critical reviews. These reviews serve as “study guides” for further refinement and application in other parts of the course.
- b. **Case Analysis Reports:** Students will engage cases related to key problems in religious ethics and professional ethics for ministry throughout the semester. Using a case analysis process, students will interpret and engage each other in an assessment of options for ethical action and sources of moral wisdom. It will require students to effectively marshal lessons from earlier discussions of the theoretical and methodological literature. Students will write up a concise report (1-2 pages) of the case analysis process and outcome for a assigned weeks.
- c. **Film Review:** Students will select from a list of films featuring relevant ethical issues to review and create a PowerPoint presentation to be shared with the class.
- d. **Final Paper:** Each student will approach an ethical question related to their academic interests or professional goals. Peer-editing is recommended in order to submit a polished 5-8-page final paper at the end of the semester. *Students interested in pursuing doctoral work or who are enrolled in the M.A. program will be provided the opportunity to write a more substantial paper (10-15 pages) in lieu of the film review.*

## VI. Course Schedule

Below is a *tentative* schedule of seminar weeks and topics. Each week centers on a question in ethics and how might we approach it.

Week 1: September 6

**Why Ethics?**

Week 2: September 13

**How do we make decisions?**

Week 3: September 20

**Does context matter for ethics?**

Week 4: September 27

**What is the role of experience and reason in our moral decision-making?**

Week 5: October 4

**What is the role of sacred text and religious tradition in our moral decision-making?**

Week 6: October 11

**Who is a moral person?**

Week 7: October 18

**How are evil and suffering produced and eradicated in society?**

Week 8: October 25

**Reading Week (no class)**

Week 9: November 1

**Are there special ethical considerations for religious professionals?**

Week 10: November 8

**How do we have ethical relationships and sex?**

Week 11: November 15

**What moral choices do we face as we approach death?**

Week 12: November 22

**Are war and violence morally justifiable?**

Week 13: November 29

**How should we care for the vulnerable in society?**

Week 14: December 6

**How do we become good stewards of the earth in today's world?**

Week 15: December 13

**How do we celebrate beauty in moral community?**