

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Continuing Education Course
Springfield, Missouri
October 13-17, 2003

PHIM 640 ETHICS IN POST-CHRISTIAN AMERICA:
FROM STAR TREK TO THE SIMPSONS
(3 Credits)

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COURSE SYLLABUS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine the possibility of a Christian ethic within a post-Christian Western world. In order to approach this possibility, an understanding of both post-modernism proper and traditional Christian ethics must be gained. Hence, specific attention will be given to historical Western traditions of religious social ethical thought and the distinctives characterizing the post-modern/post-Christian era. This information will then be studied in light of questions that have dominated religious social ethical argument in the post-modern era, including:

- ◆ What is the legitimate role of the Christian community in relation to political/economic systems and institutions? Is the role of the Christian community to nurture “virtuous” people? Should the Christian community assist participants in clarifying political and social obligations? Should the Christian community actively seek to shape the political/economic practices of their society? Should Christian ethics, virtually by definition, take the side of the politically and economically oppressed against oligarchies?
- ◆ Do Christians have political/economic insights that are not available to persons who are not part of the Christian community?
- ◆ Can/should Christian rhetoric be “translated” into non-religious political rhetoric?
- ◆ Can there be any real communication among persons from radically different religious communities and cultures as they attempt to come to conclusions about social ethical issues? Can a religiously pluralist society agree on social ethical truths?
- ◆ To what extent is the Christian tradition a sponsor of Western liberalism? Of capitalism? Of democracy?
- ◆ In short, is Christianity still part of the discussion?

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To provide an understanding of the historical progression that has resulted in a Western post-modern society;
2. to engage in the discussion of a post-modern typology;
3. to investigate the relevancy of a truly Christian ethic within a pluralist society;
4. to appreciate the necessity of the community of God in the determination and obligation of ethical values in post-modern America; and
5. to formulate a “global language” in Christian ethics that can be heard in the global village.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.

Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Second Edition. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

Stout, Jeffrey. *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2001.

Compiled Readings.

COURSE FORMA

This course is divided into five sections: (1) America and Post-Modern Thinking. The remaining four sections will deal with possible answers to the dilemma of ethics in a post-modern society: (2) A Return to the Virtues?, (3) Speaking a New Language?, (4) Narrative and Community?, (5) How Shall We Then Live?

The first section will be utilized in giving an historical view and the progression of the post-modern era. Grenz’ *Primer on Postmodernism* will lead us on a journey that will give us an understanding of post-modernism qua post-modernism. This should help us to understand the philosophical/ethical underpinnings of people in both the church and the world. Two questions will arise from this discussion. First, “What should the people of God look like within this social context?,” and, “How should the Church of God function within this social context?”

In his *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that post-modern thought has discounted and consequently tossed foundational moral virtues overboard. So, MacIntyre believes that there must be a wholesale return to Aristotle's idea of the virtues as **the** foundational concept in being ethical and in creating ethical people. Can MacIntyre's view stand the test within the post-modern tenants of individualism, anti-foundationalism and diversity?

On the other hand, Jeffrey Stout believes that our moral heritage has not degenerated to the point of being totally lost; there are still virtuous people in the world so morality is still part of the post-modern experience. As a result, one must ask what commonalities we do have in our fragmented society, and how much must everyone agree upon to allow logical discourse. In determining the language of morality, an "eclectic bricolage" can allow for morality within diversity. Is this merely ethical relativism? If so, would this relativism be an answer to the post-modern need for individualism and autonomy? And, can Stout's view be understood as "Christian"?

Stanley Hauerwas asks the question, "Are we sure our values have changed, or is it their institutional settings?" Like Stout, Hauerwas asserts that the virtues have great value in both moral discourse and moral life. For Hauerwas, however, the key is found in the fundamental way in which the virtues are discussed and safeguarded; that are discussed via the narrative and are safeguarded by the church. Is the church strong enough, moral enough to promote "The Peaceable Kingdom"? And, is the narrative of scripture the kind of language that can be heard in society at large?

Finally, we will finish our course (so to speak) by asking what we have learned from Grenz, MacIntyre, Stout and Hauerwas that will help us understand what it means to be the people of God in a post-Christian/post-modern world.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Requirements for the course include prompt and regular attendance of **all** class sessions, participation and leadership in class discussions of assigned readings, a research paper, and submission of the final exam.

COURSE GRADE

The course grade will be determined by the quality of the student's research paper and the final exam.

The research paper will be comprised of no more than fifteen (15) pages with no less than ten (10) sources. This format will, of course, require you to be both concise and deliberate in your writing. The paper can be written on a topic of your choice that is concerned with post-modernism, Christian ethics or a combination of both areas. A few ideas are:

Luce Irigaray's (or any post-modern philosopher **not** discussed thoroughly in class) Contribution to Post-Modern Thinking

Lévi-Strauss' Search for Universals (!) in a Post-Modern World
"The Problem of Language" and its Effect on the Gospel
Teaching Morality in a Post-Modern Context
How the Church can Function as a (the?) Moral Authority

Grades for the paper will be the sum of the following criteria:

Content	60%
Organization	20%
Grammar & Spelling	20%

The final exam will be made up of at least two questions derived from the material developed in class. The grade will be determined by the following criteria:

1. the incorporation of significant concepts and content from the class lectures and reading assignments; and
2. clarity of thought and depth of interaction with the material.

Because the length of the exam may vary due to its subjective nature, no minimum page number is required. Allow the criteria itself to be the determiner of the length of your exam. The exam will be handed out on the last day the class meets. The exam will draw from both lecture and reading materials.

DUE DATE: Both the research paper and the exam will be due on **January 16, 2004.**

Submit all assignments to:

**AGTS Continuing Education
ATTN: Sheri Benvenuti
1435 N. Glenstone Avenue
Springfield, MO 65802**

NOTE: Work received after the semester due date specified in the syllabus will result in a change of grade fee (\$15.00) being charged, even when an extension has been granted by the instructor.

COURSE OUTLINE and SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS:

The following schedule is a **general** outline of the direction the course will take. We will allow the flow of discussion and interest in specific areas to determine any time adjustments to the schedule. The reading assignments, however, will be required in accordance with each section.

Post-Modern/Post-Christian America

Monday, October 13

Theme: Introducing the Class and Subject Area
Theme: Post-Modernity and the Dilemma for the Gospel

Reading: Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 1- 56; 123-160.

Viewing: Star Trek: The Next Generation, *Encounter at Fairpoint*

A Return to the Virtues?

Tuesday, October 14

Theme: Foundational or Anti-Foundational? Can the virtues function as a “core” ethical system within the post-modern framework?

Reading: MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6-35; 51-61; 181-263.

Viewing: The Simpsons, *Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment Pay It Forward*

Speaking a New Language ?

Wednesday, October 14

Theme: Can we legitimately claim that propositions in ethics are “true”? If so, how must they be communicated?

Reading: Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 1-81; 115-123; 243-292.

Viewing: *The Quarrel*

Narrative and Community?

Thursday, October 15

Theme: Is the Gospel story and the tradition of the Christian community strong enough to promote individual morality? Can/should the Church be the moral authority in America?

Reading: Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, ix-34; 96-151.

Viewing: *Waking Ned Devine*

How Shall We Then Live?

Friday, October 16

Theme: What have we learned this week? Is there a way in which the Church can be an affective moral authority in post/modern/Christian America?

Reading: Berry, "Human Nature and Political Argument."

Gustafson, "Context Versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics."

Dempster, "Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice."

Lovin, "Religion and American Public Life: Three Relationships."

Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 161-174.

Viewing: The Simpsons, *Itchy & Scratchy & Marge*.

Star Trek: The Next Generation: *Who Watches the Watchers?*