

Contemporary Religious Ethics II: Identity and Difference
RETH 30803
Winter 2021
REMOTE
M/W 4:10-5:30pm

Professor Richard B. Miller
Office: Swift 202
Office Hours: M: 1:50-3:10p,
T: 2:40-4:00p
Sign up with Julia Woods at
jlwoods1@uchicago.edu and include
windows of available time.
Office phone: 773-702-7252
My email: rmb1@uchicago.edu

Description

This is the second of my three-quarter sequence of courses examining pioneering work in field of contemporary religious ethics. This quarter's readings, drawing from work published between 1990-2010, take up theories of bodily identity and subject formation; cross-cultural comparison; relationships between human and non-human animals; religion, ethics, and global conflict; race, gender, and politics; religion and democratic practice; and challenges and opportunities that encountering the Other poses for ethical responsibility and coexistence in political life. Hence the title of this cycle: Identity and Difference (1990-2010). Various second-order ideas will be examined as well, e.g., moral bricolage, moral witness, "thinking like a mountain," fusion of horizons, bridge concepts, Shari'a reasoning, grassroots democracy, and performativity. Authors include William F. May, William LaFleur, Cornel West, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler, Avishai Margalit, Lisa Sideris, Aaron Stalnaker, John Kelsay, and Jeffrey Stout. Over the arc of the quarter we will examine how normative inquiry moves across overlapping domains of religion, culture, politics, and science.

The schedule of readings is arranged roughly in chronological order, but adjusted in places for thematic reasons. Much of the reading during the first quarter focused on matters of theory and method. Readings for this quarter focus more on normative resources within religious traditions or on specific ethical questions. There are no prerequisites.

Format

Class meets twice a week in a lecture and discussion format. As you read through the assignments, concentrate on these questions:

- What central ideas and methods characterize each author's work? What would you say are the distinctive marks of each author's methods and core claims?
- What merits and weaknesses of each author's work can you identify? Explain.
- How would you compare one author's work with at least one other author, either by way of similarity or contrast? What resemblances and differences can you identify? What concepts shape your comparison? Why are these comparisons important?
- What features of moral experience and moral reasoning are opened up by each work on the syllabus?
- In what respects, if any, is each author's work classifiable as a "religious ethic?" Explain.
- Would you say that the work under review contributes more directly to the *study of religion* or to work in *the field of ethics*? Why?

- What assumptions about the concepts of *religion* and/or *ethics* are made by the authors in our course?

Texts

William F. May, *The Patient's Ordeal* (1991)
 William LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (1992)
 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (1992, 2017)
 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (1994)
 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999)
 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (2002)
 Lisa H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (2003)
 Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (2006)
 John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (2009)
 Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (2010)

Students who did not enroll in the Autumn quarter should read the following four articles/chapters early in the quarter; the Gustafson essay should be read before the first class:

- James M. Gustafson, "A Retrospective Interpretation of American Religious Ethics, 1948-1998"
- Michael Walzer, "Moral Minimalism"
- John P. Reeder, Jr., "What Is a Religious Ethic?"
- William Schweiker, "On Religious Ethics"

All of these are on Canvas\Files.

Requirements

1. **Regular attendance and participation:** 10%
2. **Two Critical Papers:** 30% each. 2-4pp., 12pt font, single-spaced. Papers should take up a central question, problem, concept, or thesis from one or more of the readings and subject it to critical scrutiny.

The first Critical Paper is to engage materials from Weeks 1-4; the second Critical Paper is to engage materials from Weeks 5-8. The second Critical Paper will require you to engage a select sample of work in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* and put it in critical conversation with themes and issues in the course. One aim of the second assignment is to familiarize you with that scholarly publication venue. The Critical Papers are due on **Feb. 5** and **Feb. 26**.

It is important, of course, to cite sentences or passages from the work(s) under consideration. Do so economically, as a way of focusing your discussion. When quoting, provide page references in parentheses, in an abbreviated way, e.g., (LL, 14). Attach a bibliography that provides the full publication information of your sources. You will find tips for writing your papers on Canvas>Files.

Summary or expository papers are not acceptable and will be returned for revision. Late papers are docked 1/3 grade for each day, starting when the paper is due.

3. **Final Exam**, comprehensive: 30%. **March 15, time TBD.**

Calendar

Wk 1

Jan 11 May, *The Patient's Ordeal*, Introduction, chaps. 1, 2
Jan 13 May, *The Patient's Ordeal*, chaps. 4, 5, 6

Wk 2

Jan 18 LaFleur, *Liquid Life*, Preface, Parts 1, 2
Jan 20 LaFleur, *Liquid Life*, Part 3, Appendix

Wk 3

Jan 25 West, *Race Matters*, 25th anniversary ed. (2017)
Jan 27 Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, pp. 25-73

Wk 4

Feb 1 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, prefaces to 1990 and 1999 eds., chaps. 1, 2
Feb 3 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, chap. 3, Conclusion.

Friday, Feb. 5: First critical paper due via email as a Word attachment at 5pm

Wk 5

Feb 8 Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Introduction, chaps. 1-3
Feb 10 Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, chaps. 4-6

Wk 6

Feb 15 Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*, chaps. 1, 2, 3
Feb 17 Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*, chaps. 5, 6

Wk 7

Feb 22 Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*, Introduction, chaps. 1, 2, 5
Feb 24 Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*, Introduction, chaps. 8, 9

Friday, Feb. 26: Second critical paper due via email as a Word attachment at 5pm

Wk 8

Mar 1 Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, Introduction, chaps. 1, 2
Mar 3 Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, Introduction, chaps. 3, 4

Wk 9

Mar 8 Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, Preface and chaps. 1-10
Mar 10 Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, chaps. 11-20

Final exam: Monday March 15, Comprehensive, Time TBD.