Bangor Theological Seminary
Portland

ET 1502p: The View From Below: An Introduction to Christian Ethics

Fall 2012
Tuesdays, 1:00—4:00 p.m.

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Course description

This course assists students in acquiring greater skill and confidence in doing ethical reflection within the context of Christian life and ministry at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Christian community, as both context and resource for shaping moral character and conduct, is called to sustain a way of life with distinctive loyalties, values, and commitments.

Adopting the “view from below” and advocating justice as communal right relatedness, especially with those who are marginalized, provide the starting points for inquiry into Christian ethics as a practical discipline of the church.

Course outcomes

1. A student will become familiar with the language of ethics and the distinctiveness of Christian ethics.

2. A student will learn about ethical method (authority, sources, and norms) from several contemporary Christian ethicists while developing skills in constructive criticism.

3. A student will have an opportunity to “put it all together” by examining the theological/ethical debates about same-sex marriage.

Fit with Degree Program Goals

For M.A. candidates, this course will help students (1) acquire knowledge of the cultural, social, and ethical realities in which religion operates and (2) develop the ability to engage in critical and constructive theological reflection.
For M.Div. candidates, this course will help students (1) gain knowledge of the ecumenical Christian heritage and of the cultural, social, and ethical realities in which the churches live and respond, (2) develop the ability to act with moral sensitivity, compassion, and justice in diverse ministry settings, and (3) offer opportunity for developing a prophetic voice within a variety of social and cultural contexts.

**Required texts**

Birch, Bruce C., and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (ISBN, $21.00)


**Course requirements:**

1. **Class participation** (20%):

   Consistent attendance, timely completion of assigned readings, and constructive participation in discussions, including active listening.

2. **Four brief writing assignments** (50%):

   a. September 17: “Moral Formation: The shaping of ourselves as moral agents” (15%)

   b. October 1: “Spirituality and Ethics” (15%)

   c. November 27: “Denominational stance on marriage and same-sex couples” (15%)

   d. December 11: Course evaluation (5%)

3. **Constructive statement** (30%)

   “My theological/ethical perspective on marriage for same-sex couples in conversation with other perspectives” (8-10 pages). Due December 21.
Measures of evaluation

1. Your class preparation and participation are vital, both for your learning and the quality of our shared work. Participation should give evidence of engaged reading, attention to the topic at hand, and coherent presentation of your thoughts.

2. Dialogue is crucial for ethical action and reflection. Respectful listening and “hearing one another into speech” are as important as respectful speaking and taking a stand.

3. Writing is a significant mode of doing ethics. The assigned papers are designed as learning exercises to help you organize your research and reflection. In your writing, show accurate knowledge and understanding of the materials studied, an ability to synthesize and express what you have learned clearly and in well-organized form, and a willingness to be creatively engaged as a “constructive critic” who is developing – and claiming – his or her own public/ecclesiastical voice and accountability as an ethicist.

Written work will be evaluated in terms of (1) quality of research, (2) quality of argument, and (3) style, with attention to:

- Overall clarity of your thinking and expression.
- Your critical engagement with texts, including solid demonstration of your understanding of an author’s point of view and ability to evaluate it fairly.
- Your ability to state and give an accounting for your own position.

- Note: Late work will be penalized.

For information about grading, see the section on “Grading of Written Materials” in the BTS Student Guide 2011-2012, page 5 (of 44) on the BTS website, some of which is summarized as follows:

A: Work is excellent. It must be punctual and demonstrate full control of the assignment, the material, and the language. The writing has no English usage problems, the material is clearly and effectively organized and presented, and the writer speaks clearly and firmly from the page.

B: Work is very good. It should be punctual and directly address the assignment. The writing may show English usage problems, but the grammar, punctuation, and spelling are good. The material is well organized, but transitions may be abrupt and information may be thin.

C: Work is adequate. The assignment should be punctual and completed according to instructions. However, the writing may be awkward, unclear, and contain English usage problems. The material is only partially grasped.
D: The work is barely adequate. It may be late or not according to instructions. It is careless, not well organized, and the information is not under the control of the student.
F: Work is inadequate.

Schedule of topics and assignments

SECTION I: INTRODUCTING CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE “VIEW FROM BELOW”

#1. September 4 Introduction to this course and colleagues; expectations and requirements.

#2. September 11 Taking a Stand: Ethics as a Practical Discipline

Due today: Writing assignment #1: “Moral formation: The shaping of ourselves as moral agents”

In 3-5 pages, typed and double-spaced, discuss the process of moral formation in your life and various influences that have shaped and continue to shape you as a moral self. The following questions may be helpful prompts in your inquiry:

1. What encounters in your life have been of particular moral significance to you, and why?
2. How have specific factors, such as economics, race, physical and/or mental abilities, gender, sexual orientation, family situation, language/culture, or education shaped your moral sensibilities?
3. How has religion or church/synagogue shaped you? Name any other communities that have been particularly formative in your life.
4. Are there scripture texts/themes, such as compassion, forgiveness, exile, hospitality, holiness, or justice that have been important? How so?

Reading: Anthony Weston, A Practical Companion to Ethics

Case study: “Clare and the Unexpected Pregnancy”

#3. September 18 Charting the Moral Life

Reading: Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life, Introduction and Ch. 1-5 (pp. 9-99).

**Reading:**  Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

**Due today:**  Writing assignment #2: “Spirituality and Ethics”

In 3-5 pages, typed and double-spaced, discuss how spirituality/religion has affected you, positively and/or negatively, as a moral self. The following questions may be helpful prompts in your inquiry:

1. What do you find trustworthy in your search for religious meaning?
2. What and to whom do you pay attention to as authoritative?
3. When confronted by different understandings from your own, what do you turn to as touchstones for your sense of integrity and reality?
4. What gives you courage to act on your convictions?
5. What do other persons base their authority on?
6. In the face of a contentious issue, what do you “hold onto” and affirm?
7. How does external authority influence the ways you express your own authority and leadership?
8. Think of a time when you took a significant risk or unpopular stand. What encouraged you to use your power in service of what you believe?


**SECTION II: ETHICAL METHOD, SOURCES, AND NORMS**

#5. October 2  Ethical Method

Birch and Rasmussen, Ch. 6-7 (pp. 100-140).

**October 9: Research week (no class)**

**#6. October 16**  
**Moral Norms: Justice**


Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?*, Ch. 2 (“A Justice Lens”), pp. 36-55.

**#7. October 23**  
**Sources: Bible**

*Reading:* Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, Ch. 8-10, (pp. 141-202).


Walter Wink, “Homosexuality and the Bible” (15 pages).

**#8. October 30**  
**Sources: Tradition**


Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?* Ch. 3 (“Marriage Traditionalists”), pp. 56-77.

**#9. November 6**  
**Sources: Experience**


Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?* Ch. 4 (“Marriage Advocates”), pp. 78-98.


**SECTION III: PUTTING IT TOGETHER**

**#10. November 13:**  
**Diverse Theological Perspectives**

*Due today:* Writing assignment #3: “Denominational stance on marriage for same-sex couples.”

In 2-3 pages, typed and double-spaced, summarize your (or a) denomination’s stance on marriage and same-sex couples. Pay particular attention to tensions within this tradition about this topic and organized efforts to defend and/or oppose current denominational policy.


Tex Sample, “Homosexual Marriage,” *No Longer Silent* (4 pages)


**November 20: Thanksgiving Recess (no class)**
#11. November 27  Diverse Theological Perspectives

**Reading:** Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?* Ch. 5 (“Marriage Critics”) and Ch. 6 (“Contested Christian Teaching”), pp. 99-146.


#12. December 4  Diverse Theological Perspectives, continued

**Reading:** Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?* Ch. 7 (“Queer Notions”), pp. 147-68.


#13. December 11  Sharing our own perspectives; course evaluation

**In-class:** Oral presentations of your own theological-ethical perspective on marriage for same-sex couples – and insights about how to do Christian ethical inquiry.

**Due today:** Writing assignment #4: Course evaluation

As a way to review and assess our work together, in 1-2 pages share your reflections about three things:
a. Key learnings you’ve acquired in this course about ethical inquiry and its methods, sources, norms, and so forth.

b. Particular readings you’ve found helpful (or not), and why; and

c. Suggestions for improving this course – or, better, for engaging others in this process of ethical discernment and moral reflection from a theological perspective.