

McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE
CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN A COMPLEX WORLD
ET/TH 3XE3

Term: Summer 2019

Face-to-face Dates: May 25th, June 1st and June 8. (9am-4pm)

Instructor: Dr. Jason C. Robinson, BA, BRE, MA, MTS, MA, PH.D.

Email: jrobinson9040@gmail.com

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description:

Ethics is the study of right and wrong, the meaning of “the good life,” and how we ought to relate to one another as social creatures. This course introduces and critically assesses major ethical theories with the goal of enabling students to develop and apply an ethical perspective to their own lives in a complex world. The study of ethics is of immense importance in communal and congregational contexts for which one must discern and apply an understanding of what is good for everyone.

Expanded Course Description

This course emphasizes an applied ethics approach which asks students to think not only about the nature of goodness and what it means to be a good person, but about how to apply ethical ideals from a Christian perspective. What is a good life? How should we relate to others? How do we apply moral understanding (or knowledge) in the digital age?

A large part of thinking about ethics is learning to develop moral or ethical argumentation—to rationally fight for the credibility of one position over another. By doing so, one begins to develop the ability to navigate through competing claims of truth and practice—determining which possible actions are good and which are bad, healthy and unhealthy, Christian and other.

Specializations:

Church and Culture; Christian Thought and History; Christian Worldview; Pastoral Studies

Course Objectives:

Knowing

- By the end of this course students will possess greater knowledge of the biblical, theological, and philosophical foundations for Christian ethics.

Being

- By the end of this course students will be able to identify new ways in which to meaningfully develop Christian character and relationships with others—guided by ethical principles that are rooted in biblical and theological traditions.

Doing

- By the end of this course students will be able to apply Christian ethics to contemporary issues in life and ministry, and to formulate arguments for and against specific moral problems.

Required Text:

- Clark, David K and Robert V. Rakestraw. *Readings in Christian Ethics Volume 2: Issues and Applications*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007. ISBN: 9780801020568
- Long, D. Stephen. *Christian Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN: 9780199568864

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College’s book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, Ontario M9W 6H3: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

Course Requirements:

| Assignments | Worth | Due Date |
|---|--------------|--|
| Critical Analysis and Summary Notes/Journal | 20% | June 2 nd (day after class) by 11:59 pm. |
| Classroom Participation and Group Debates | 15% | No specific due date. During three scheduled face-to-face classes. |
| Sermon/Lesson | 25% | June 21 st |
| Major Paper—Specialization Based | 40% | July 5 th |

(1) Critical Analysis and Summary Notes/Journal

Students will read Stephen Long’s *Christian Ethics* and make notes that both summarize, critically assess, and begin to apply any two of the four chapters (only two chapters in total).

Instructions

- The assignment is to be 2000-3000 words (excluding references).
 - Make each of the following three categories account for roughly 1/3 of the paper each.
- Summary
Take note of major themes.
What are the main arguments/points of the chapter?
Are there controversial issues or claims made?
- Critical analysis
How are you own views being challenged or changed?
What new questions are you encountering and why are those important to you?
Do you find anything particularly difficult and/or enlightening (revealing)?
- Application
How might some of the new ideas learned apply to your own context (vocation, congregation, life circumstance) in a meaningful way?

(2) Sermon/Lesson

Write a 2000-3000 word (excluding references) sermon or lesson—designed for an adult only audience—in which you consider a major ethical/moral problem.

Instructions

- Examine any major ethical issue from our textbooks.
- Pick a topic that you believe is particularly relevant today.
- Explain why it is a problem and how there are different ways of interpreting it (different theological, cultural, and biblical traditions).
 - Try to briefly present two or three alternatives (interpretations) as space allows.
- Convince your hypothetical audience (congregation, students, etc.) that your interpretation and response is most appropriate, i.e., argue “why” they should believe your position is superior to the others.

(3) Classroom Participation and Group Debates

Students will engage in controversial debates during class meetings. Students will be randomly divided into groups and each group will be assigned a side to defend on a specific debate. The topics will be taken from case studies outlined at the end of each section our *Readings in Christian Ethics* text (see “For Further Reflection”). Students will be graded on contributions provided, rather than by physical attendance to class.

(4) Major Paper (3000-3700 words excluding references)

This is both a research and argumentation paper. It is expected that students will go beyond the lectures/notes by researching topics through scholarly materials. Each student will argue for a position (for or against something). In other words, merely describing an ethical problem as one might for an encyclopedia is insufficient. It is expected that students will fight for a position by being as persuasive as possible (i.e., giving reasons for “why” one should believe the author).

Instructions

- Your project must identify one major ethical issue **in relation to your specialization**. Students are given broad discretion on this matter.
- In the paper you will argue:
 - (1) Why that issue is an ethical problem in your specialization?
 - How, specifically, is “good” being challenged?
 - (2) Why is it difficult to resolve?
 - Are there historical, social, political, religious, theological reasons the problem remains unresolved?
 - (3) How might we begin to solve it?
 - Offer suggestions in terms of practical strategies toward resolution, e.g., education, funding, challenging social norms/stigmas, political lobbying.
- Be sure to write a paper on an issue that you “have not” previously worked upon.
- Avoid quotes unless essential to your argument, and then only if thoroughly examined and critiqued.

Essential elements that should be present in all papers:

- (a)** a sustained treatment of the major issues (rather than sporadic comments on minor issues),

(b) an argument for or against a specific view (including a counterargument to whatever position is taken),

(c) clear evidence of research (e.g., peer-reviewed books, journal articles, book reviews),

How much research? You need however much it takes to be thorough, i.e., deep/complete/meaningful. I would recommend a minimum of 6-8 academic sources just to get you thinking on a topic. You shouldn't be quoting from these (avoid quotes!) but there will be some great ideas you might use (paraphrase and then cited as sources used).

(d) some connection between the material researched and a contemporary problem or issue it addresses (e.g., potentially solves) within your specialization, and

(e) clear evidence of your own views and opinions being challenged (i.e., stating what you think, and then producing questions that challenge your views—in short, show that you are interacting with and thinking about the material sincerely).

- **Avoid most “common” online materials** (e.g., blogs, non-academic sites, anonymous websites). Good online material will be found, first and foremost, through a library's subscription to online content. There is a lot of good material online but you need to be discerning. Is it peer-reviewed? Is it written by an academic? Is it accepted by other academics?
- **Avoid using lecture notes.**

Policy Statements:

Late Penalties

Late assignments will receive 2% per day deductions.

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College. Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty ~ <http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as the following: NRSV (1989), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), TNIV (2005), and the Common English Bible (CEB 2011).

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a violation of the integrity of persons in the form of unsolicited, unwelcome, verbal or physical behaviour, which discriminates on the basis of gender about a person's body, attire, gender, marital status or economic status. Among faculty, staff, and students, sexual harassment of any kind will not be tolerated.

College Style for Submission of Written Work

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses <https://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/mdcstyleguide.pdf>
Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

Disclaimer

This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up until the first day of class.

Mini Biography

Jason C. Robinson, BA, BRE, MA, MA, MTS, Ph.D. (Guelph-McMaster-Laurier joint Ph.D. Programme)

Dr. Robinson has taught at several universities including Wilfrid Laurier University and York University. Robinson specializes in hermeneutics (theories of interpretation), 20th-century continental philosophy, philosophical theology, philosophy of religion, social and political thought, and ethics. His most recent book is in the philosophy of education, *Foundations of Education: A Social, Political, and Philosophical Approach*. Other areas of research interest include interdisciplinary studies, the nature of time, and aesthetics. His current project, a co-authored book with Stanley Porter, is forthcoming through Routledge, *Active Hermeneutics: Situating an Interdisciplinary Account of Understanding*.