UNDERGRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTION

Term: Fall 2015
Instructor: Dr. Michel Barnes
Course #: THEO 2310
Section: 103
Course Title: Explorations in Christian Theology
Topic: “Good and Evil”

Description:

Each year this course studies a theme or themes in Christian theology. The theme we shall explore is good and evil, especially how evil is experienced, described and explained. The existence of good – good experiences, joy, virtue, the Good – does not seem to be something that needs to be explained. The good, by definition, should be; the good, by definition, is desired and desired to be. But the existence of evil -- painful experiences, sorrow, villainy and sin, the Evil one – is not uncommonly called “the problem of evil.” What, then, is the right way to understand evil? Can evil be “understood” or can it only be recognized? Where, exactly, do we find and experience evil? And – perhaps most importantly – what is the relationship between evil and good? Should we hope? Can we? Can good be good if it does not somehow dissolve evil? Is “Hell stronger than heaven”? Does “Fire burns hotter than love”?

The course is built around a series of “primary sources.” It is one of our second level Theology classes, hence the focus on “text.” This word, though, can be interpreted pretty broadly: these primary sources will include plays, novels, short stories, histories, movies, TV series, first-person reflections, biographies and autobiographies. THEO 2310 is a Historical Theology course, which means, among other things, that there is no focus on contemporary or “modern” texts. As one of the Department of Theology’s outcomes states, we want you to be able to interpret theological texts and frameworks in their historical context. What does this mean? In the course of the class and discussion on the texts, emphasis will be on understanding what our various authors meant in their time periods; this is not to say that, Augustine, say, isn’t relevant today – but in order to understand what he says about, for example, our evil nature, we need to know the kind of evil he was dealing with, both internally and externally. We will not read much from scholars who talk about evil out there; we will read authors who write about evil there in front of them (and thereby in front of the reader: these are texts that make you think deep and long about your own stance vis-à-vis the question of why evil exists, that help you clarify your own positions in terms of what constitutes justice in the contemporary world.) If you took a course on Shakespeare you might either read about Shakespeare and what he wrote” – or you might read mostly Shakespeare.” This course is like a course on Shakespeare in which you mostly read Shakespeare. This course involves a lot – a lot – of reading.”* It is not a good course for people who don’t like to read, or who try to avoid reading. It probably is not a good course to take for people who read painfully, poorly or slowly. Your grade will come largely from your reading skills and/or enthusiasm. (THEO 2310 is big on “reading for comprehension.”)

Basically, this course will seem like a mixture of Theology, Philosophy, History and Lit., with a bit of Cinema Studies thrown in.

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* This is reading “secondary sources.”
** This is reading “primary sources.”
*** For our purposes, film is a text.
This course, then, is a study of some theological understandings of evil, with special emphasis on three themes: (1) theologies of dualism (2) the problem of passion; and (3) the idea of “sinful consciousness” (and associated doctrines of Original Sin and grace). These themes will be explored in religious writings (e.g., Genesis, the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran, Gospel of John, the writings of St. Augustine, etc.), in classical works of philosophy (Plato, Seneca), in ancient and modern works of fiction (e.g., “Medea” and Elie Wiesel’s Night), in non-fiction (the letters of D. Bonhoffer; chapters from Martin Amis, Koba the Dread and Robert Conquest, Harvest of Sorrow), graphic novels (“Dear Billy”), and works of film (Ingmar Bergman’s Virgin Spring, Chris Carter’s Millennium). Some of these depictions of evil are graphic and the course is not suggested for the squeamish (as you will see from the very first “text”). Above all I am concerned in this course with not diminishing the reality of evil, with not watering down or explaining away the full experience of evil. This is not a polite course about evil and good. Please note that I am not attempting to offer a “global” view of Good and Evil: I’m looking at Good and Evil in “western” texts. This course is not about notions of Good and Evil in cultures that don’t define you.

Trigger warning: this course includes depictions -- in literature, film, tv, graphic arts and history -- of a variety of a forms of evil, many of which involve acts of violence and cruelty. Consider the entire class marked with a Trigger Warning for content with emotional, physical, institutional, and sexual violence.

Class preparation will require the reading of assigned primary and secondary sources. There will be emphasis on participation in in-class discussion. There will be a “worksheet” due almost every class (which replaces the work you would have done in another class writing a paper.) Worksheets are a lot of work. Bring the reading to class! (Duh!) Computers are not allowed in class except by specific permission by the Instructor.