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Evil and Religion

Instructor

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Institution

DePaul University

The crowd tends toward persecution.

- René Girard

So here we are, in a marvelous group of brilliant and intelligent people, blithely talking about evil. . . . This is why our country is in such trouble: we have not dealt with it as thinkers. At some point, the thinker must think.

- Maya Angelou

In the Holocaust, not all the victims were Jews; but all the Jews were victims, and all the killers were Christians.

- Elie Wiesel

Please understand, it is not God that I do not accept, but the world he has created. I do not accept God's world and I refuse to accept it.

- Ivan Karamazov

All things work together for good to them that love God.

- St. Paul, Romans 8:28

Description and Objectives

This course invites you to continue the examination of the nature and function of religion in human life, begun in Religious Studies 100, by entering into a study of some of the most significant ways in which men and women--primarily but not exclusively Jewish and Christian--have thought about, and lived in relation to what they consider to be "evil." We will consider evil under three (usually overlapping) aspects: (1) *personal*, which refers to particular actions by particular individuals and groups; (2) *systemic*, which refers to cultural systems and social structures in which persons, often unwittingly, participate; and (3) *natural*, which refers to a whole host of "bad things," ranging from diseases to natural disasters, that so often happen to "good people." We will consider both *theoretical* and *practical* interpretations regarding the "sources" of evil, and the possibility of creative response.

Throughout the quarter, we will consider a variety of materials in which these issues are explored. We will grapple with interpretations of evil from the humanities and social sciences, from Jewish, Christian and Buddhist religious reflection, from anthropology and from the study of mythology.

Perhaps most importantly, this course asks you to become *an active learner*, critically appropriating and personally responding to the ideas at hand. Such a process is perhaps best described as *conversation*, and thus I invite you to engage in a quarter-long, written and oral conversation with the ideas introduced in this course. A good deal of writing will be required, since this allows you to grasp and interpret the "material" of the course in a most explicit, deliberate, and self-conscious manner.

Have you ever had a real conversation? I don't mean the kind where you do all the talking, or where you can't get a word in edgewise. I don't mean the kind where you're being sold something, or trying to sell. I mean the kind where you really "get lost" in the discussion itself--in the exchange of ideas, the exploring of possibilities--only to then "find yourself" seeing things differently. You've grown. Try to think of your classes here at DePaul as opportunities for conversation--with teachers, with students, and with the written and non-written materials you will be asked to interpret. In this course, the materials and members of the class will be "speaking" to you. They will be asking questions, making claims, making connections, suggesting a way of being in the world. I hope, of course, that you will comprehend what they say, and I will do my best to help you. But that isn't enough. In any other real conversation, didn't you do more than just listen passively and understand? Didn't you respond in some way? Didn't you ask questions, raise objections, push ideas in different directions, or relate your conversation partner's viewpoint to what you already knew or had experienced? I'd like to see you do that here. I'd like to see you engage in a quarter-long, written and oral conversation with the ideas introduced in this class.

Required Texts

(1) *Facing Evil: Light at the Core of Darkness*, ed. Paul Woodruff and Harry A. Wilmer. Open Court Press, 1988.

(2) Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Uprising and the Future*. Orbis Books, 1989.

(3) Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*. Blackwell, 1986.

(4) René Girard, *The Scapegoat*. Johns Hopkins, 1989.

All items are available in the Lincoln Park Campus Bookstore. They are also on Reserve in the Lincoln Park Campus Library.

Criteria for Evaluation

In evaluating the quality of your work (both oral and written) in this course, I will ask the following questions:

(1) Does the work show **accurate knowledge** of the texts read and themes discussed in the course? Are the important facts presented correctly?

(2) Does the work show good **comprehension** of the material, clearly explaining the ideas in your own words?

(3) Is the work as **complete** and in-depth as is reasonable, given any restrictions on time or length?

(4) Does the work provide adequate **support** for its statements, drawing on evidence such as detailed examples or particular facts drawn from the class materials?

(5) Does the work **analyze** the material well, breaking it down into its parts and clearly explaining the relationships between the parts?

(6) Does the work **evaluate** the material, assessing its usefulness, meaningfulness or truth, by providing a reasoned judgment based on clearly formulated criteria?

(7) Does the work develop a **creative** position of its own, combining ideas in an interesting manner to present your ideas?

In assigning letter grades for your work, I will decide whether, based on these criteria, the work is (A) excellent, (B) very good, (C) satisfactory, (D) poor, or (F) failing to meet even a minimum standard of achievement. I will also use plus/minus designations, in the manner described in the current undergraduate *Bulletin*. **It is essential that you do good work in meeting the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th criteria listed above. Success in meeting the 5th, 6th and 7th criteria distinguishes excellent from satisfactory work.**

Means of Evaluation

There's really one task, as already noted: to enter into serious conversation with the ideas introduced in this class. But how shall we structure this? Your work will have several *integrated components*.

(1) ATTENDANCE:

(a) Regular attendance is mandatory, since without it you would be unable to meet the objectives and requirements of the course. Therefore, three unexcused absences will lower your final grade by one letter, four by two letters, etc. Absences will be excused only for serious, documented reasons, and arrangements for excused absences should, whenever possible, be made *before* the absence.

(b) Lateness is disruptive of the classroom process, and it shows a lack of courtesy toward the other members of the class. Punctual attendance is one clear way of showing your seriousness about the course. Two latenesses of more than ten minutes constitutes one unexcused absence.

(2) CLASS PARTICIPATION:

(a) Reader's Notebook. *Carefully* read the assigned texts *before* coming to class. Write things down while you are actually in the process of reading. For example, you may want to write down:

(1) passages, quotations, turns of phrase that appeal to you;

(2) questions you wish you could ask the author;

(3) problems you have in understanding a difficult passage;

(4) questions or ideas you would like to discuss with me or with other members of the class;

(5) what you are thinking about as you read a given passage (what personal memories, analogies, etc. the text evokes);

(6) connections you see between this text and other materials we have considered in this class, or between this text and materials you have studied in other classes; and

(7) critical opinions (what you think of the writer or the text).

Make entries in a spiral notebook, which is to be used only for this purpose. Date and label each entry in this ongoing, developing project we will call your "Reader's Notebook." You should write at least one side of a page for each session; more would be great. Remember, your Reader's Notebook entries should be completed BEFORE each class, kept together in a spiral notebook, and brought, as a collection, to EVERY SESSION. They should serve as the basis for your discussion in class each day and, if you do them well, they will be extremely helpful in writing the essays required for this class. Feel free to add to your entries during or after class--just label such revisions or additions appropriately in your Reader's Notebook (for instance: "Further thoughts on Maya Angelou based on the April 1 class"). If you miss a class, you are still responsible for completing all entries. Beginning April 8, and continuing on most Thursdays throughout the quarter, I will collect your Reader's Notebooks (the whole collection). I will not grade them, but will use them to monitor your progress and to make a few comments. If you miss class on a day I collect the notebooks, simply turn it in at the next class session. *If you fail to do so, or if you are in class on the day I collect the notebooks, but yours is not complete and up to date, here's what will happen:* The first time, there will be no penalty. The second time, your participation grade will be lowered one letter; the third time, two letters, etc.

(b) Verbal Interaction. I expect and appreciate regular attendance and completion of the Reader's Notebook entries, but these do not substitute for active, vocal participation in our classroom conversations.

I know that, for some persons, speaking in front of others is very difficult. However, this is one of the things I'm supposed to be working on with you folks. De Paul courses develop communication skills! So let's all work to create a classroom climate where opinions are really respected, where people feel comfortable asking questions and offering their ideas. A conversation is not a competition; it is an exploration of possibilities in the hopeful search for truth. I believe that, if you risk entering into serious consideration of the materials of this course, you will have something to say, even if the subject matter seems foreign to you, and even if, at times, all you can say is "what on earth does it mean when it says _____?" That too is participation.

Class participation will count for 20% of your final grade for the course.

(3) ESSAYS:

You will be required to write three essays, each of which will allow you to reflect, at greater length and in the light of subsequent readings and class discussions, on themes or issues discussed in our course. In assigning each Essay, I will provide you with specific topics to choose from, each of which will be designed in the hope of allowing you to show competence in all seven items listed under "Criteria For Evaluation" in part C of this Syllabus. Each Essay is to be 4-6 pages in length, typed or word processed. Essays with five or more errors in spelling or grammar will be returned without a grade, and you will be expected to correct all mistakes and resubmit the essay within one week. If you need assistance, contact DePaul's Writing Center (McGaw 150, extension 8435).

The first essay will count for 20% of the final grade for the course. The second and third essays will each count for 30% of the final grade. You must complete all three essays in order to receive a passing grade for this course.

FIRST ESSAY ASSIGNED: APRIL 13

FIRST ESSAY DUE: APRIL 20

SECOND ESSAY ASSIGNED: MAY 11

SECOND ESSAY DUE: MAY 18

FINAL ESSAY ASSIGNED: JUNE 3

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism, like other forms of academic dishonesty, is always a serious matter. This course adheres to the University's policies on plagiarism as stated in the current Bulletin/Student Handbook. Consult the manual, "Writing in the Liberal Studies," for instructions about proper citation or acknowledgement of the work of others in class assignments.

Schedule of Topics, Readings and Due Dates

TUES MAR 30: Introduction and Syllabus. Films, *Night and Fog* & *Weapons of the Spirit* (excerpts).

Exploring Experiences of Evil

THURS APR 1: *Facing Evil*, pages 139-145 (Schwartz), 21-45 (Angelou) & 209-226 (Proctor). Film, *Facing Evil* (excerpts).

TUES APR 6: *Facing Evil*, pages 119-137 (Hallie), 47-66 (Russell) & 71-81 (May). Film, *Facing Evil* (excerpts).

THURS APR 8: *Facing Evil*, pages 17-19 (Carpenter), 177-181 (Al Huang) & 189-207 (Peck). Film, *Facing Evil* (excerpts).

Analyzing Theodicies

TUES APR 13: Surin, pages 38-69 (The Possibility of Theodicy).

FIRST ESSAY ASSIGNED

THURS APR 15: Surin, pages 70-111 (Theodicies with a "Theoretical" Emphasis).

TUES APR 20: FIRST ESSAY DUE. Film, *Shoah* (excerpts).

THURS APR 22: Surin, pages 112-141 (Theodicies with a "Practical" Emphasis).

TUES APR 27: Surin, pages 142-164 (Taking Suffering Seriously, Salvation Incarnate).

A Post-Holocaust Jewish Theology of Liberation

THURS APR 29: Ellis, pages 1-24 [+ 137-142] (A Shattered Witness).

TUES MAY 4: Ellis, pages 25-65 [+ 142-148] (The Cost of Empowerment; Movements of Jewish Renewal).

THURS MAY 6: Ellis, pages 66-109 [+ 148-153] (Liberation Struggles and the Jewish Community; Toward a Reconstruction of Jewish Life).

TUES MAY 11: Ellis, pages 110-136 [+ 153-159] (From Holocaust to Solidarity; The Palestinian Uprising and the Future of the Jewish People).

SECOND ESSAY ASSIGNED

A Christian Theory of Violence, Culture and Salvation

THURS MAY 13: Girard, pages 1-23 (Guillaume de Machaut and the Jews; Stereotypes of Persecution).

TUES MAY 18: SECOND ESSAY DUE.

THURS MAY 20: Girard, pages 57-65, 88-99 (Teotihuacan; Crimes of the Gods; The Science of Myths).

TUES MAY 25: Girard, pages 100-148 (Key Words of the Gospel Passion; That Only One Man Should Die; The Beheading of St. John the Baptist).

THURS MAY 27: Girard, pages 149-183 (Peter's Denial; The Demons of Gerasa).

TUES JUNE 1: Girard, pages 184-212 (Satan Divided Against Himself; History and the Paraclete).

THURS JUNE 3: Concluding discussion.

FINAL ESSAY ASSIGNED.

FINAL ESSAY DUE NO LATER THAN NOON ON FRIDAY, JUNE 11. IT SHOULD BE TURNED IN AT MY OFFICE--SAC 447.

Select a location 

http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/evil_and_religion-carlson.html

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