

## **RELIGION 341: CONSCIENCE AND ITS CRITICS**

Instructor: John Barbour

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Office Hours: MWF, 2:30-3:30  
(sometimes on Monday, till 3:15)

### **I. Course description:**

This course examines traditional and recent Christian views of conscience, as well as alternative views and criticisms from various normative perspectives. We will consider how philosophers have understood the role of conscience in moral life, how psychologists have interpreted conscience, and how issues of conscience can arise in politics. The course addresses the criticism of feminist thinkers that traditional ideas of conscience reflect a male bias. In addition to theoretical views of conscience, we will explore how several novels dramatize characters struggling with conscience.

Conscience is the term traditionally used for the agency and activity of moral self-assessment. Christian thinkers have sometimes understood conscience to be the voice of God instructing a person, although they have also been aware of the possibility of self-deception, rationalization, and wishful thinking. Right action and truthful self-understanding depend on a person's conscience. The "critics of conscience" in the course reflect various alternative normative perspectives, offering both descriptive and prescriptive accounts of conscience that contrast with the Christian view. For instance, these alternative views trace the origins and functioning of conscience not to God but to some human influence such as a child's interaction with parents, a person's conditioning by social environment, or the struggle for power between social groups. Literary texts and movies also explore difficulties in the traditional Christian conception of conscience, for instance the phenomenon of self-deception and the destructive effects of a guilty conscience.

Modern theologians have tried to respond to these critics of conscience, revising the traditional understanding in their light. How well do they do this? How should conscience be understood today?

The basic goal of this course is to understand the role of conscience in ethical reflection, both from the perspectives of several normative theories and in terms of how literary texts explore particular practical situations raising issues of conscience.

### **II. Required books:**

Robert Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons*

Albert Camus, *The Fall*

E. M. Forster, *Howard's End*

Herant Katchadourian, *Guilt; The Bite of Conscience*

Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird  
F. Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals  
Shakespeare, Hamlet

\* = readings on course site on Moodle

### III. Requirements for the Course.

1. Close reading of assigned texts. Please bring your book to class.
2. Attendance and participation in class discussions. These affect your grade (20%):  
A: Regular attendance; frequent contributions to discussion; contributions reveal a clear comprehension of the readings and issues being discussed; contributions are insightful and advance or deepen our conversations; efforts to help the class work well together as a group.  
B: Regular attendance; steady and solid contributions to discussion in terms of the above criteria.  
C or below: Erratic attendance; infrequent contributions to discussion; lack of preparation.
3. Two essays, approx. 3-4 and 4-6 pages. Topics will be suggested. (20% and 30%)
4. A final examination, which will be a take-home essay asking you to integrate your readings and thinking about conscience throughout the course. (30%)

### IV. Class Schedule

2/10 Introduction to the course. Conscience in Greek thought and the Hebrew Bible

1. The Christian tradition

2/12 Paul: I Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 2:12-16, 5-9:5, 13:1-5  
Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West"\*

2/14 Augustine, Confessions, Bk 8, chap. 5-12 and book 10, chap. 30-41. You can find this on-line or borrow the book. (Print out paper copy.)

2/17 Luther, "Commentary on Galatians" (focus on 100-109, 130-31, 139-41, 148-53, 158-65)\*

2/19 & 2/21 A dramatic case of conscience: Shakespeare, Hamlet

2/24 18<sup>th</sup> century essays: (all on Moodle)\*  
Bishop Butler, "Upon Self-deceit"  
Samuel Johnson, "Self-deception"  
Immanuel Kant, "Conscience"

2/26 Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener"

You can find this on-line at: <http://www.bartleby.com/129/> and elsewhere. Please print.

2. Nietzsche's critique of conscience

2/28, 3/3, 3/5 F. Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals  
(in third part, only sections 1, 13-15, 20, 27, 28 and pp. 312-13)

3/10 **First paper due:** the Christian understanding of conscience.

3. Secular conscience and liberal guilt

3/7, 10, 12, 14 E. M. Forster, Howard's End

4. Psychological perspectives on Conscience

3/17 Freud, handout on the superego  
Karen Horney, "The Concept of the Superego" from New Ways in Psychoanalysis\*  
John Glaser, "Conscience and Superego: A key distinction"\*

3/19 Katchadourian, Guilt, chapters 1-2

3/21 Guilt, chap 3-4  
**Revision of first paper due**

Spring Break: practice letting go of your guilt or cultivating it!

3/31 Guilt, ch 5

4/2 Guilt, ch. 6-7

5. A literary case of conscience

4/4, 7, 9, 11, 14 Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird  
William Spohn, "Conscience and Moral Development" \*  
Sidney Callahan, "Conscience and Gender" \*  
Judith Martin "The Oldest Virtue"\*

6. Conscience from other normative perspectives.

4/16, 18 Conscience in World Religions:  
Katchadourian, Guilt, chap 8-9

- 4/21            Some philosophers on conscience  
Guilt, chapter 10 and epilogue
7. Theological Perspectives on conscience
- 4/23,25        Protestant views (and a Jewish perspective)  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Structure of Responsible Life”\*  
John MacQuarrie, “The Struggle of Conscience for Authentic Selfhood”\*  
Martin Buber: “Guilt and Guilt Feelings”\*  
H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, chap. 1-2\*
- 4/28            **Second paper** due: a critique of conscience
- 4/28            Catholic views: church documents.  
Curran, Conscience, part II, pp. 65-109\*
- 4/30            Catholic theologians: recent thinking  
Curran, part I, pp. 3-62\*
- 5/5             Catholics on conscience:  
in Curran, essays by Harrigan and Patrick, pp 175-94\*
8. Two literary views of Christian conscience by agnostics
- 5/5,7          Camus, The Fall
- 5/9,12         Bolt, A Man for All Seasons
- 5/14          Last class. Hand out questions for final take-home exam.
- 5/19 (11a.m.)        **Final examination** due

**Links** to useful information:

On academic integrity at St. Olaf College:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/integrity.html>

On the honor system:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/honor.html>

On disability services for students:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/services/asc/sds.html>