

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTION

Term: **Fall 2009**
Instructor: Dr. Michel R. Barnes
Course #: THEO 2310
Sections: 104 and 105
Course Title: Exploration in Christian Theology

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”? “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 109 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

* This is reading “secondary sources.”

** This is reading “primary sources.”

*** For our purposes, film is a text.

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and/or enthusiasm. (THEO 109 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.

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 “Battle” and “Community” Scrolls of Qumran, Gospel of John, the Didache, writings of St. Augustine, etc.), in classical works of philosophy (Plato, Galen), in ancient and modern works of fiction (e.g., “Medea” and Elie Wiesel’s Night), in non-fiction (Michael Kelly’s Martyr’s Day, letters of D. Bonhoeffer), and works of film (Ingmar Bergman’s *Virgin Spring*, Chris Carter’s *Millennium*), and graphic novel (“Hello, Billy”.) 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. (This is not a course that assumes that you are good.)

Class preparation will require the reading of assigned primary and secondary sources. There will be emphasis on participation in in-class discussion.

Required Texts (at BookMarq)

the Bible

Euripides, *Medea*

Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina

Robert Heinlein, Starship Troopers

Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus

Elie Wiesel, Night

Other readings will be on reserve on D2L.

You will be required to buy a copy of the graphic novel, “Hello, Billy” which I will make available at a discounted price.