

Spirituality and Political Commitment
TH A-461-01 / TH A-569-01
Saint Louis University, Spring, 2005
Tues/Thurs (12:45-2:00 pm)

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I. Course Description/Learning Outcomes/skill Set Acquisition: An advanced undergraduate course open to M.A. students. Paradox is one of the grandest ideas worthy of the human mind and in this course we will bend our minds/bodies on a classic paradox--that of yin and yang, contemplation and action, one's inner life with God and outer life in the world, right and left sides of the brain. Out of this tension, change, liberation, and growth can emerge.

Addicted as American culture is to control, success, and fear of change, the course will explore alternatives to dominant cultural values--asking about the powers inherent in the practice of silence, in emptiness and vulnerability as a starting point for action, in community-based resistance, in the quest for "power with" as opposed to "power over," in the conviction that small is beautiful, in the embrace of pain and the celebration of wildness. Such themes will be rooted in the biblical work of Walter Brueggemann, Jean Vanier's experience with the severely handicapped, Sharon Welch's use of feminist and African-American traditions, liberation thinkers from Gustavo Gutierrez to Leonardo Boff, and storytellers from the Desert Fathers to Clarissa Pinkola Estes.

We will study all this, first in terms of change theory, a biblical theology of the marginal, and various approaches to the practice of meditation; and secondly, in terms of the lives of people in the last century in whom the paradox of silence and action has come alive. Biography, therefore, will be a major concern, focusing on the experience of M.K. Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjold, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, and others.

Class presentations will draw upon contemporary systems theory, Laingian psychoanalysis, and concepts from Zen Buddhism, as well as exercises in meditation, storytelling, films, simulations, and discussion. A highly experimental course, it seeks to involve the student personally in his/her own reflection on the relation of spirituality to socio-political change.

Skills to be acquired through the course include critical thinking, critical and reflective writing, analysis of alternative faith traditions, and better skills in communication (through public speaking and computer technology).

II. Course Requirements: Note that these are negotiable, depending upon special interests that students may bring to the class.

A. Readings and Regular Class Participation:

- Louis Fischer, ed., The Essential Gandhi
- Leonardo Boff, Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor
- Wayne Muller, Sabbath
- Marie Dennis, Renny Golden, and Scott Wright, eds., Oscar Romero
- A Collection of Supplementary Readings is available on E-Reserve through the Pius Library Homepage. [Under "electronic Resources: click on "Electronic Reserves." Then click on the instructor, "lane, Belden." Click on the name of the course "Spirituality and Political

Commitment” and type in the password, “Spirituality.” A hard copy of the readings is also available in the Reserve Room on the 2nd floor of the Library.]

B. A Book Review/Reflection Paper (7 pages) dealing with the following issues raised in Wayne Muller's Sabbath, reflecting on how this book might help in your own quest for a disciplined balance of action and contemplation in your life.

- The practice of “Sabbath” as a commandment, not simply a life-style option.
 - The tendency for Americans to experience Sabbath only in illness or collapse.
 - The notion that perfection is found in a repetition of practice (whether in swimming, making love, or giving oneself to contemplation).
 - Specific exercises from the book that you have found most helpful and reflections on how you might apply this book to your own experience.
- The paper is due on February 22nd and will count 25% of the course grade.

C. Participation in a Small-Group Project that leads to a class presentation (and discussion) on a particular issue pertinent to the course. These will include the Practice of Meditation Exercises (such as Japanese Tea Ceremony) on March 17, Lead Contamination and the Doe Run Company on March 31, Toxic Waste Dumps and Urban Poverty in East Saint Louis on April 14, and Civil Disobedience at the School of the Americas on April 21. This project will count 25% of the course grade.

D. A Research Paper dealing with a topic relevant to the course. This should be no more than 8 pages (including notes) and will be due on April 7th. Suggested topics might include:

- A study of another contemplative/activist figure different from what we studied in class, such as the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Naht Hanh, or Rigoberta Menchu Tum (Guatemalan human rights activist), or Kathy Kelly of Voices in the Wilderness (working in Iraq), or Desmond Tutu (Bishop of Johannesburg, South Africa), or Mev Puleo (a SLU grad whose work in Latin America has inspired many on this campus),
 - An analysis of a Catholic Social Encyclical (such as *Pacem in Terris* or *Gaudium et Spes*), the documents of the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin or Puebla in the 1960s and 70s, or the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Guatemala on “The Cry for Land” (1988)
 - A reflection on a theological topic of relevance to the course, such as the role of Mary as “Mother of God, Mother of the Poor” or a biblical study of violence (following the work of Rene Girard).
 - A study of an organization like Pax Christi, Richard Rohr’s Center for Action and Contemplation, Doctors without Borders or Amnesty International (both winners of the Nobel Peace Prize).
- This paper will count 25% of the course grade.

E. A short take-home Mid-Term Exam and short take-home Final Exam will be handed out well in advance of the times they are due. The Mid-Term will be due on March 3rd and the Final on May 3rd. These exams will invite reflection on the course readings and class presentations by the professor. Together they will count 25% of the course grade.

F. A Personal Discipline of action and contemplation in your own life over the semester. This will involve a weekly commitment of an hour a week to each exercise. For example you might

take ten minutes a day for silence/prayer, or an hour every weekend. You could commit to volunteer work at a homeless shelter or tutoring children through Mentor St. Louis or spend a Saturday helping to winterize homes in connection with Campus Ministry. As part of the final exam, you will be asked to reflect on these experiences.

III. Attendance, Grading Procedures, and Non-Tolerance of Academic Dishonesty: Regular attendance in class is expected. More than three unexcused absences during the semester will influence the grade, especially in marginal situations. Each three additional unexcused absences beyond this will result in the reduction of the grade by a full letter.

--The grading scale for the course will be as follows: A = 93-100; B = 84-92; C = 72-83; D = 60-71; F = 0-59. An "A" grade signifies the highest degree of achievement and intellectual initiative. A "B+" indicates above average, approaching high achievement. A "B" suggests above average work. A "C" distinguishes average achievement, with a "C+" being somewhat better. A "D" is inferior, but passing.

--Requests for a grade of "Incomplete" can only be honored in cases of unusual sickness or family emergency. Students with particular disabilities should feel free to request special needs with regard to testing, hearing, etc.

No form of academic dishonesty (i.e., cheating) will be tolerated in courses at Saint Louis University. Cheating includes the giving of information about or for a quiz, exam or paper to someone in another section of this course during this, or any future, academic term. Academic dishonesty can also involve the receiving of information from someone in another section of this course from the current, or any previous semester. Cheating can also include inappropriate borrowing from materials in print or on the Web without adequate citation and credit (including the use of quotation marks) for words or ideas not your own. At the Instructor's discretion, students caught cheating will receive a zero for the specific assignment, and may also be given a grade of "F" for the course or be dropped from the course.

Please note: if you have special needs stemming from a physical or learning disability, please contact the instructor as soon as possible and not later than two weeks before the first exam or assignment is due. Any student who feels that he/she may need academic accommodations in order to meet the requirements of this course—as outlined in the syllabus, due to presence of a disability, should contact the Office of Disabilities Services in the Academic Resources Center (3840 Lindell), Room 130. Please telephone the office at 314.977.2930, or visit Room 131 in the Academic Resources Center, 3840 Lindell Blvd. Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries.

IV. Course Syllabus:

Jan. 11: Introduction: Action/Contemplation Synthesis (Begin reading The Essential Gandhi)

13: Gandhi: From South Africa to India (video excerpt)

18: Impasse Situations and Creative Frustration

20: The Principle of Second Order Change: Reframing One's World (Brain Studies)

25: Gandhi's Paradoxical Politics: Reprise (Read: Lane's "Spirituality and Political

- Commitment" article in America, March 14, 1981)
- 27: The End is the Place to Begin: Sharon Welch's Feminist Ethic of Risk / Jean Vanier on the Spirituality of l'Arche (Read chapter one of Sharon Welch's A Feminist Ethic of Risk)
- Feb. 1: The Spirituality and Politics of Holy Folly (Reclaiming Wildness)
 3: Prayer as Desire and Discipline (Begin reading Wayne Mueller's Sabbath)
- 8: Learning Silence: Exercises in Meditation (Chanting, Use of a Mantra, Tai Chi)
 (Read: Thomas Merton's "Rain and the Rhinoceros" from Raids on the Unspeakable)
- 10: Prayer in Extremis: Contemplative Prayer and Lament Prayer
- 15: The Desert Christians on Loss, Emptiness, and Freedom (Read: Lane, "Attentiveness, Indifference and Love: The Countercultural Spirituality of the Desert Christians")
- 17: The Hebrew Prophetic Tradition (Reading from Walter Brueggemann's The Prophetic Imagination)
- 22: Wisdom, Prophecy and Ritual in Biblical Theology (Paper on Sabbath Due)
- 24: Liberation Theology: Seeking a Basis for Non-Violent Action (Read: Excerpt from Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation)
- Mar. 1: From Suffering to Consciousness to Language (Dorothee Sölle)
 3: The Nature of Violence and Human Aggression (Excerpts from "Bowling for Columbine" and "Faces of the Enemy") (Readings in Gil Bailie's Violence Unveiled)
 (Mid-Term Exams Due)
- 8-10: Spring Break (no classes, but opportunities for Spring Break trips through Campus Ministry)
- 15: Dag Hammarskjöld: The Mystic as International Statesman
- 17: Small Group Presentation: Mediation Exercises such as Zen Tea Ceremony, Use of Rosary, Fasting, etc.
- 22: Oscar Romero: Remembering the 25th Anniversary of his Death (Martyrdom and Hope)
- 24: Holy Thursday (No Classes)
- 29: Martin Luther King: Rethinking the Dream (video) (Read: King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of MLK)
- 31: Small Group Presentation: Lead Contamination and the Doe Run Company
 (Begin Reading Leonardo Boff, Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor)
- 5: Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The German Church Struggle and Apocalyptic Evil (film excerpt)
 (Read: "What is Meant by 'Telling the Truth' in Bonhoeffer's Ethics)
- 7: Abbreviated Class: Planning for Backpacking Trip (Research Papers Due)
- Apr. 8-9: Class Camping Trip (Time for silence and solitude; connection with the earth)

- 12: The Just War Theory (From Augustine to the Present)
- 14: Small Group Presentation: Toxic Waste Dumps and Urban Poverty in East St. Louis
- 19: Thomas Merton: The Monk as Social Prophet
- 21: Small Group Presentation: Civil Disobedience and the School of the Americas
- 26: Dorothy Day and Simone Weil (Women and Justice) (Read: Excerpts from The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day)
- 28: Ecological Justice with Cesar Chavez, Helder Camara, and Chico Mendez
(Concluding reflections and celebrations)

May 3: Final Exam Due