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CHRISTIAN ETHICS
ETH500D
Spring 2026

Thursdays 2:00pm to 5:00pm Pacific
19 January to 10 April 2026

We respectfully acknowledge that Vancouver School of Theology at the University of British Columbia is on the land and unceded territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) People. Where other UBC's campuses reside, we acknowledge that we gather on the land of the Syilx (Okanagan), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

WHAT IS THIS COURSE ABOUT?

This course explores Christian ethics through the reordering of fear, following Edward Knippers' *Fear Naught, But God: A Morality Play in Block Prints* (2008) where the fear of God is not terror, but reverent awe before divine holiness that frees us from servile fear of shame, power, cruelty, or death. Beginning with the contested possibility of Christian ethics itself, the course moves into a dramatic sequence of confrontations where rightly ordered fear liberates moral agency toward faith, hope, love—and ultimately, doxological courage.

COURSE OVERVIEW

What Christian ethics is (and is not) becomes clearer when ethics is done listeningly — attending to doctrine faithfully, to Scripture reverently, to the world watchfully, and to concrete human lives caringly. Yet Christian ethics is often stereotyped and predictable, while reduced to moralism, to cultural ideology, or to vague humanitarian uplift. What is needed is not better technique, but rightly ordered fear. Such fear is not terror of an unpredictable power but an awareness before the reality of God's being—God's holiness, mercy, beauty, and lordship. Such fear is reverent awe, not superstition; the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111), not the end of freedom; and the collapse of illusion, not the interruption of joy. Accordingly, the fear of God is not terror but doxological awe and trembling joy which frees the human being from all rival terrors and illusions and for the vocation of becoming.

Christian ethics, then, is neither behavioural management nor a religious veneer for political projects. It is a form of attention. It is a listening to God's self-disclosure in Christ and a

posture practiced in and practicing faith, hope, and love. That is why the course begins not with dilemmas but with the very problem of Christian ethics: Ellul on its “impossibility,” Stringfellow on its vocational necessity, and Harkness and Hordern on its capacity to listen and persuade. Of course, only when the futility of self-grounded moral agency is exposed can the fear of the Lord become the beginning of wisdom.

From there, the course turns, as artist Edward Knippers does to a morality play not as allegory but as spiritual confrontation. Fear God, not shame. Fear God, not peril. Fear God, not power. Fear God, not temptation, or loss, or cruelty, or death. Each week will enact a discernment of what fear is actually operative and whether fear of the Lord might reorder desire, agency, and witness.

Such theological work, however, is never abstract. Christian ethics must be accountable to (God’s) lived existence: friendship and exclusion; bodies and buildings; money and power; prayer and longing; grief and injustice; joy and desire. From baptism to burial and even in the face of histories that refuse to stay buried ethics is worked out in the tensions of faith and flesh. And these tensions arise amid a world shaped by racial capitalism, state violence, and algorithmic capture. Ours is a world where virtue can be commodified, activism simulated, and theology conscripted to baptise empire.

And yet it is also a world in which holiness may still be lived, quietly, truthfully, and hopefully. The light of Christ does not blind, but enables us to see the neighbour and ourselves at last. This course, therefore, seeks not mastery but freedom from false fear, that ethics might become not avoidance, but praise—an act of doxological courage in the ambiguities of the present while stretched toward resurrection.

COURSE COMPETENCIES

By the end of the course, students should be able to demonstrate:

- **An account of what differentiates Christian ethics** from moralism, ideology, or generic humanitarian concern—and awareness of why this distinction matters for the church’s witness.
- **A mature theological understanding of the fear of God**, articulated not as terror but as doxological orientation and an ability to identify how ordered or disordered fear shapes moral imagination.
- **Discernment of the operative fear(s)** at work within particular ethical debates or cultural situations as well as an ability to name how these fears inform motivations, rhetoric, and moral posture as you **ability to bring careful, charitable, and critically engaged Christian ethical reflection/interpretation to bear on concrete realities** such as war, sexuality, grief, political cruelty, and finitude with attentiveness to both social and material dimensions.

COURSE TEXTS AND REQUIRED READINGS

Each text or assigned reading is either available through the VST/UBC Library System in physical or electronic format and/or made available on Populi.

COURSE TASKS OVERVIEW

Synchronous Basic Degree/Certificate Students

Weekly Required Task:

#1. Populi discussion posts — All

(Due prior to each class—preferably the day before)

Rotating/ Assigned (Group) Task:

#2. Seminar facilitation: reading précis and discussion facilitation — All

(Due as scheduled)

Required Research Task:

#3. Research Paper Proposal, Paper and Presentation — Degree Only

(Due 2 April 2026)

Asynchronous Basic Degree/Certificate Students

Weekly Required Task:

#1. Populi discussion posts — All

(Due prior to each class—preferably the day before)

Rotating/ Assigned (Group) Task:

#2. Seminar facilitation: reading précis and discussion facilitation — All

(Due as scheduled)

Required Research Task:

#3. Research Paper Proposal, Paper, and Video — Degree Only

(Due 2 April 2026)

COURSE TASKS IN DETAIL

Synchronous Basic Degree/ Certificate Students

Weekly Required Task:

Task #1 — Weekly Populi Discussion Posts (All)

(Formative Theological Engagement)

Each week you will post a brief (300–400 word) theological reflection engaging the assigned texts. These posts are not to be thought of as summaries, but as a space to practice discernment: to name the operative fears, desires, and theological claims at work in the reading, and to speak from within the posture of one learning to “fear naught, but God.”

You are expected to integrate doctrine, Scripture, and lived experience where possible with clarity and charity. Posts should end with a generous and thoughtful question for your peers—a question that opens the space for further conversations and contemplations rather than closing it. These are evaluated on theological attentiveness, posture, and integrative imagination, not on “right answers.”

Rotating/Assigned (Group) Task

Task #2 — Rotating/ Assigned Seminar Facilitation (All)

(Guiding Theological Ethical Discipleship)

Assigned students (groups) will be responsible for facilitating one class session during Part II of the course. The facilitator’s task is not to lecture or deliver expertise, but to guide the room into deeper seeing of the texts and issues being discussed and considered. Your role is to help the group discern what fears and desires are governing this conversation, how doctrine is operating (explicitly or not), and where the moral life of Christians might be better understood and doxological courage enacted.

Good facilitation makes truth more visible, not more managed. Yet you are expected to pose a clear framing question, name the theological tensions at stake, and invite the class into disciplined, charitable, and courageous engagement with the texts, the issues, and the people for whom the issue is not theoretical but actual. Evaluation will attend to your discernment, clarity of theological judgment, and the ethos you cultivate in the room.

Required Research Talk

Task #3 — Research Proposal, Conference Paper & Presentation (Degree Only)

(Constructive Theological Ethical Contribution)

This task invites you to bring everything together: doctrinal clarity, interpretive discernment, attention to fear and desire, and constructive theological ethical imagination. You will identify a concrete ethical issue, articulate the governing fear(s) and/or desire(s) driving its common framing, and offer a theological-ethically grounded response. The proposal (early in semester) will test whether your framing is theologically serious and researchable. The final conference paper (approx. 2000 words) and presentation must not only diagnose but also witness, while offering a response grounded in awe, wisdom, freedom, and joy, for example, rather than control, illusion, and fear (as terror). A course ‘conference’ will serve as the occasion to present your writings, creating a space for you to offer this work as a gift to the community of peers gathered. Evaluation focuses on integration, theological maturity, and constructive depth, not merely research competency.

Asynchronous Basic Degree/ Certificate Students

(Parallel structure — different modes with the same theological/formational intent)

Weekly Required Task:

Task #1 — Weekly Populi Discussion Posts (All)

(Formative Theological Engagement)

Same as synchronous expectations—but each post must also include a 2–3 sentence response to at least one peer that explicitly advances the theological discernment by naming what fear is governing that peer’s framing and inviting them deeper. Presence is measured through sustained conversational thinking, not frequency.

Rotating/Assigned (Group) Task

Task #2 — Guided Theological Issue Commentary (All)

(Formally Structured in Lieu of Seminar Facilitation)

Instead of leading a live session, asynchronous students will choose one of the week’s themes and prepare a 1,000–1,200 word written theological case commentary. This must:

- Articulate the governing fear(s) at play in the ethical issue under discussion
- Name the theological-ethical stakes
- Propose how a rightly ordered fear of God reorients the matter
- End with two serious seminar-level questions crafted to open—not resolve—the tension

This functions as a “facilitation on paper” and will be shared with peers.

Required Research Talk

Task #3 — Research Proposal & Final Paper — but Recorded Theological Briefing Instead of Live Conference Presentation (Degree Only)

Asynchronous students submit the same research proposal and final written paper. However, in place of a live presentation, they will record a 10–12 minute theological briefing addressed to an imagined community that must actually live with this question (congregation, hospital ethics board, neighbourhood council, etc.). The video should not summarise but bear theological witness—situating fear, reordering it, and offering grounded hope. This recording is shared on Populi.

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COURSE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

Attendance and Participation

Fundamentally, the responsibility to learn is yours. Accordingly, for learning to happen in any course, you must take an active role in the process so that you might nurture the competencies established and evaluated. The class policy, then, will be as follows: It is the responsibility of the student to read all required materials, to study notes carefully, and to participate regularly in course lectures, group discussions, and other learning activities.

Attendance is specified by VST requirements, which requires at least 80% attendance for this course. This means attending class on time with no more than 2 allowable absences for any reason.

If you have a documented disability that might interfere with your success in this course, I encourage you to discuss it with me after class and/or solicit the appropriate services provided by the school. See your Student Handbook or talk to the Dean.

AI, Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

All assignments should be your original work and should not be produced in part or in total with the assistance of artificial intelligence (for example, ChatGPT, Grammarly, or some other resource). Writing is thinking after all. Where these tools are used for grammar and editorial revision, please make explicit their usage.

“Plagiarism” means the representation of another’s work, either published or unpublished, as one’s own or assisting another in representing another’s work, published or unpublished, as his or her own:

- No student shall represent another person’s work, published or unpublished, as his or her own in any academic writing, such as an essay, thesis, research report, project, sermon, or assignment submitted in a course or a program of study, or represent as his or her own the work of another, whether the material so represented constitutes a part of the entirety of the work submitted.
- No student shall contribute any work to another student with the knowledge that the latter may submit the work in part or whole as his or her own. Receipt of payment or other forms of compensation for work contributed shall be cause for presumption that the student had such knowledge.
- No student shall submit in any course or program of study, without both the knowledge and approval of the person to whom it is submitted, all or a substantial portion of any academic writing, essay, thesis, research report, project, sermon, or assignment for which credit has previously been obtained or which has been or is being submitted in another course or program of study in the School or elsewhere.

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Late Papers and/or Assignments

Submission of assignments on time is a part of academic, professional, and pastoral competence and a part of every course at VST. All assignments in courses are due on the dates specified in the syllabus for each course.

Failure to submit an assignment on time will be noted in the narrative evaluation of an assignment, and may affect your final grade for the course. Two late assignments without legitimate excuse will result in a reduction of one letter grade for the course.

Submission of Assigned Tasks

Please Heed the Following Evaluation Submission Expectations: Submit all assignments electronically through Populi unless otherwise directed. All electronic written submissions must be typed; they should be double-spaced and completed using 12pt Times New Roman

(or default Microsoft Word font) as well as formatted and documented according to the Chicago Manual of Style or Turabian Citation Guide.

All electronic written attachments (not including weekly discussion threads) must be forwarded using either a Word.docx and ought to be saved using the following format: SURNAME_AssignmentName_DateSubmitted.docx
i.e., LERATHOLI_ShortPaper_February21.pdf

For asynchronous students, electronic video submissions should be uploaded to Populi using an approved video file format (i.e., .mov or mpeg4 formats)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

TO NURTURE THE (CHRISTIAN) MORAL IMAGINATION

Authored Books

Anscombe, G. E. M. — Intention
Athanasius, St. — On the Incarnation
Augustine, St. — City of God; On Free Choice of the Will
Augustine, Sarah — The Land Is Not Empty
Aquinas, Thomas — Summa Theologiae
Arendt, Hannah — The Human Condition
Baldwin, James — The Fire Next Time
Barth, Karl — Ethics; The Church Dogmatics
Banner, Michael — The Ethics of Everyday Life
Berdyayev, Nikolai — The Destiny of Man
Boff, Leonardo — Virtues
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich — Ethics
Brock, Brian — Singing the Ethos of God
Bulgakov, Sergei — The Lamb of God
Cahill, Lisa Sowle — Global Justice, Christology, and Christian Ethics
Camus, Albert — The Plague
Cannon, Katie Geneva — Black Womanist Ethics
Carter, J. Kameron — Race: A Theological Account
Chrysostom, St. John — On Wealth and Poverty
Clough, David — On Animals vol. 1 and 2
Cone, James H. — God of the Oppressed
Copeland, M. Shawn — Enfleshing Freedom
Dostoevsky, Fyodor — The Brothers Karamazov
Douglas, Kelly Brown — Stand Your Ground
Ellul, Jacques — To Will and To Do
Farmer, Paul — Pathologies of Power

Foot, Philippa — Natural Goodness
 Frye, Northrop — Anatomy of Criticism
 Grant, George — English Speaking Justice
 Guroian, Vigen — The Orthodox Reality
 Gutiérrez, Gustavo — A Theology of Liberation
 Harakas, Stanley — Wholeness of Faith and Life
 Hauerwas, Stanley — A Community of Character
 Hays, Richard — The Moral Vision of the New Testament
 Heschel, Abraham Joshua — The Prophets
 Illich, Ivan — Medical Nemesis
 Isasi-Díaz, Ada María — Mujerista Theology
 Jennings, Willie James — The Christian Imagination
 Kierkegaard, Søren — Fear and Trembling
 King, Thomas — The Truth About Stories
 Koyama, Kosuke — Water Buffalo Theology; Three Mile an Hour God
 Løgstrup, Knud — The Ethical Demand
 MacIntyre, Alasdair — After Virtue; Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity
 Marcel, Gabriel — The Mystery of Being; Homo Viator
 McClendon, James — Ethics (Vol 1 Systematic Theology)
 Midgley, Mary — The Ethical Primate Morrison, Toni — Beloved
 Moyse, Ashley — The Art of Living for the Technological Age
 Murdoch, Iris — The Sovereignty of Good
 Niebuhr, Richard — Christ and Culture
 Niebuhr, Reinhold — The Nature and Destiny of Man
 Nussbaum, Martha C. — The Fragility of Goodness
 O'Connor, Flannery — A Good Man Is Hard to Find
 O'Donovan, Oliver — Resurrection and Moral Order
 Pope Francis — Fratelli Tutti
 Phan, Peter C. — Christianity with an Asian Face
 Rauschenbusch, Walter — A Theology for the Social Gospel
 Robinson, Marilynne — Gilead
 Sölle, Dorothee — The Silent Cry; Creative Disobedience
 Solovyov, Vladimir — The Justification of the Good
 Taylor, Charles — Sources of the Self
 Thurman, Howard — Jesus and the Disinherited
 Townes, Emilie — Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil
 Volf, Miroslav — Exclusion and Embrace
 Weil, Simone — Oppression and Liberty
 Wells, Samuel — Improvisation Williams,
 Delores — Sisters in the Wilderness

Williams, Reggie — Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus
Williams, Rowan — Faith in the Public Square
Wink, Walter — The Powers that Be
Zournazi, Mary and Rowan Williams — Justice and Love

COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS SCHEDULE*†

*The syllabus outline remains tentative. A final version will be posted prior to our first meeting, but all material in the course syllabus is subject to change during the term (as needed or determined beneficial for learning outcomes). When and where changes occur, timely communication through oral and written communication will take place in class and through Populi, respectively.

The schedule and content of readings and course themes will be provided closer to the term and will be distributed to students through Populi.