

# Course Syllabus

**TRT3913 – Orthodox Life I: Eastern Christian Understanding of Ethics and the Person**

**Trinity College**

**Toronto School of Theology**

**Winter/Spring (January to April) 2023**

## ***Instructor Information***

---

Instructor: Fr Geoffrey Ready  
Office Location: Larkin Building, Office 317  
Telephone: (647) 567-8955  
E-mail: [geoffrey.ready@utoronto.ca](mailto:geoffrey.ready@utoronto.ca)  
Office Hours: By appointment

## ***Course Identification***

---

Course Number: TRT3913  
Course Name: Orthodox Life I: Eastern Christian Understanding of Ethics and the Person  
Course Location: Larkin Building, Room 340 (*with synchronous and asynchronous online options*)  
Class Times: Wednesdays 7pm to 9pm  
Prerequisites: None

## ***Course Description***

---

Orthodox Christian thought has always been deeply concerned with ethical-social issues emerging from the church's daily encounter with life and culture, but grounds solutions to these issues in the living tradition of the church, not 'progress.' This course begins with a look at different philosophical, religious, and social approaches to ethics — including those that have for too long confused and corrupted Christian thought — and builds in their place a properly traditional Christian understanding of ethics as living towards the fullness of God's kingdom. Using this traditional toolkit, a range of case studies touching on personal identity, values and decision-making will be undertaken, including broaching contemporary discussions of sexuality, gender, race, bioethical and life issues, and disability.

Students will be evaluated on their ongoing class participation, a seminar case study, and a final response paper.

## ***Expanded Course Description***

---

*The following introductory essay to this course was written by Professor Richard Schneider, founder of the Orthodox Christian Studies programme at Trinity College and the first instructor of this course. Prof Schneider reposed in the Lord in November 2022. Memory eternal!*

Eastern Orthodox Christian theology is all too often thought of as having its primary concern for formal issues: dogmatics and doctrine, liturgy, iconography, and so on. But in fact, Orthodox Christian theology has only one primary purpose — the divinisation of life itself — and the Orthodox Christian world-

outlook embraces all those formal fields, not merely as intellectual resources for illuminating the truth, but rather as necessary knowledge-framing and making possible the life of every human being on their path to God. In this understanding, the primary reason for the gift of life — life which is the eschaton of creation — is so all that lives within the framework of creation can reveal, witness, incorporate within itself, the holy.

This understanding is not to be perceived or grasped as an abstraction, a concept. It is not an idea found by intellection, nor is it a transcendental inner state of another-worldly kind. The holy life is a life of praxis, lived in the world, in every human person's own time, own circumstances, own society with its conditions and circumstances. For this reason, holiness cannot be defined or described by any single set of precepts or rules of behaviour; it consists entirely in a dialogue between God-who-is-holy and persons — persons fully in the ecclesia and persons without, for every person is called to holiness — whose life must be carried on in their own world and time. Each holy person attends to their own holy dialogue with God and extends it outward into behaviour and relationships and decisions and management which witness that holiness in the contemporary world. Christians are not called to "leave the world" or this present life; they are called to be saints *within* it. They are not called out of their culture; they are called to bless it. This is true for all: whether laity or clergy or monks, all live in the world, and everyone's life is a process of discovery of the true divine *oikonomia* which makes possible life-saving decisions within the frame of God's plan for salvation (Ephesians 1:9-10). All Christians, even monastics, are expected to approach life in the world with decisiveness, "discerning the spirits" (1 John 4:1, *cf.* 1 Corinthians 12:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-2) and acting as good stewards of creation and as saintly icons of morals and faith.

However, this very commitment to finding and revealing holiness in life carries within itself the seeds of a fundamental challenge: the holy life can only be experienced through encounter, engagement with the world as it is. Holiness may need to make judgements and value-based decisions about what is "real" in the world, but it can never deny that the world is real; the engagement of holy persons is carried on within society and the world-environment. But life experience has always recognised life-in-the-world as "messy" and complex, requiring constant judgement and decision, often from a position of competing social goods or values. Life-in-the-world moves ever onward through the unpredictable turnings of war and peace, economic fluctuation, cultural shifts in values, births and deaths, illnesses and aging, elections, population movements and demographic shifts, coups-d'état and revolutions, environmental changes, shifts in scientific knowledge and philosophical discoveries, civil court decisions about "rights," and even falling in love. Is Orthodox tradition, as learned through Christian living — and as examined and reviewed in a graduate Orthodox Christian studies programme — a sound and effective basis upon which to ground the constant judgement and decision-making which life-in-the-world requires? Is the dialogue with God which Eastern Christian theology provides sufficient to cope with the challenge of life-in-the-world, or must a holy person incorporate into the dialogue something of the truths and values of the world? Can we evaluate bioethics without a knowledge of science? Can we evaluate "spiritual growth" without an understanding of psychology? Can we love our neighbours if we understand nothing of their culture? Praxis is the conduct of a life through making decisions; does Orthodox knowledge and faith provide a sound basis for wise — and holy — deciding? What is the true relationship between what God needs of us and what social need places four-square before our eyes?

These questions are perennial, facing everyone who has ever tried to live in the world while walking with God. But our own time and our own place have made this situation even more difficult, for everyone but especially for Orthodox Christians with their strong appeal to tradition. The 20th and 21st centuries have thrust into the centre of "reality" many issues of existentialism, pluralism of ethical values, relativity of cultures, and so on, all playing out against dramatic shifts in environment, biotechnology, religious pluralism, overcoming of old prejudices, and so on, all of which together

dramatically shift the ground from under the feet of confident certitude — in fact, even challenging the possibility of certitude itself. And the social and legal environment of Canadian and US culture and “secular” democracy, grounded in notions of rights, toleration, and separation of religion from the state, makes the grasp of proper decisions and the application of religious truths to the social dynamic even harder to sort out.

Students in this course — together with its companion course, **Orthodox Life II: Eastern Christian Understanding of Ethics, Society, and the World**, offered in alternate years — will have an opportunity, through discussions of many concrete issues of our times, to evaluate these profound issues of the problems of living in a social world and the deeper issue of what applicability their Orthodox Christian knowledge has in providing a foundation for meaningful solutions to those life problems, and by what methods this knowledge might be made to work in ways that are respectful of the realities of the world.

In **Orthodox Life I** the course follows an opening overview of the dilemma of ethical decision-making with a set of problems which touch on personal self-recognition. In **Orthodox Life II** this will be followed by consideration of problems which stem from persons’ need to live in greater society and in socio-political relationships. The central issue in both cases is the same: How can meaningful solutions be found for these key life problems which are at once practically useful and provide a true Christian witness? Scripture tells Orthodox Christians that there can be no compromise with the world; Orthodox praxis tells them that every life-decision engages *oikonomia* — merciful understanding of the problems of life in a way which keeps strict faith with holy tradition and also seeks a humanly possible, anthropology-respecting, solution to a problem. For Orthodox Christians, *oikonomia* plays a major role in preaching, in ethics, in the correction of sinners, even in canon law; yet the parameters of “economic” judgement have yet to receive an adequate definition. Indeed, as said above, in the 21st century a single-valued definition may no longer even be possible — so how is an “economic” decision to be reached?

## **Course Resources**

---

### **Book for Purchase**

The following required book is not available online through the University of Toronto library and thus must be purchased. Print and ebook versions are readily available from any good bookseller.

- Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Baker Academic, 2018)

### **Required Course Readings**

All other required readings – articles and book extracts – will be provided via the course portal, which students can choose to view online or download and print.

### **Course Website(s)**

- Quercus: <https://q.utoronto.ca/>

This course uses Quercus for its course website. To access it, go to the UofT Quercus login page at <https://q.utoronto.ca/> and login using your UTORid and password. Once you have logged in to Quercus using your UTORid and password, look for the **My Courses** module, where you’ll find the link to the website for all your Quercus-based courses. (Your course registration with ACORN gives you access to the course website in Quercus.) Information for students about using Quercus can be found at: <https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10701>.

## ***Course Learning Objectives/Outcomes***

---

Students successfully completing this course will be able to demonstrate the following learning outcomes.

### **(A) IN RESPECT OF GENERAL ACADEMIC SKILLS**

- to work with both primary and secondary sources and to gather, analyse and prepare materials for reflection and engaged class discussion
- to prepare and deliver a seminar presentation
- to write a critical book review

### **(B) IN RESPECT OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONTENT OF ONE OR MORE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES**

- analyse a wide range of contemporary social issues using factual data and knowledge from current analyses – scientific, social-scientific, journalistic, and so on – by exploring underlying principles and comparing them with Orthodox Christian theological principles and values acquired through prerequisite studies
- summarise with informed depth and precision current Orthodox stances and views on a variety of key contemporary ethical problems and issues, with reference to some of the best recent Orthodox scholarship
- construct a pastoral methodology for their own ministry in their world that fully expresses all the wisdom of Orthodox tradition without ‘compromising’ with the world, but seeks authentic solutions to living in the world and helping others to do so richly
- describe the views on these issues brought forward by other Christian partners in ecumenical dialogue, and also by the current dialogue within society in general, and assess what Orthodox could learn from these dialogues
- recommend an Orthodox Christian approach to ecumenical dialogue on these topics that is informed, thoughtful, and respectful, yet faithful to the norms of Tradition

### **(C) IN RESPECT OF PERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

- to manage his or her own learning
- to demonstrate behaviour consistent with academic integrity and social responsibility

### **(D) IN RESPECT OF MINISTERIAL AND PUBLIC LEADERSHIP**

- to demonstrate qualities and skills necessary for ministry, further study, and community involvement
- to exercise initiative, personal responsibility, and accountability in both personal and group contexts
- to work effectively with others

## ***Evaluation***

---

### **Requirements**

The final grade for the course will be based on the following areas:

- **Class participation (20%):** this is a seminar-based course, and students are expected to read all required texts thoroughly and participate actively in discussions, including responding to seminars led by their peers. Students will be assigned a grade based upon their preparedness for and participation in these sessions.
- **Seminar case study (40%):** working within a small group or individually within a series of coordinated presentations, students will lead one of the classes from weeks 5 through 12 on an assigned case study relating to the themes of that week. Seminar signup will take place after the first class. In each of these eight weeks, after the instructor's introductory lecture and class discussion (30 to 45 minutes), the case study presentation and discussion will take up the remainder of the class (so up to 1.5 hours – most of which should be class discussion). The seminar leaders will be responsible for choosing and assigning specific readings (approximately 40 pages in total) from the suggested bibliography at least two weeks in advance of the class; the instructor may then if necessary complement these readings for balance. Further guidance on a good seminar case study will be provided in the early weeks of the course.  
**This assignment is to be completed in an assigned week from weeks 5 through 12.**
- **Seminar response paper (40%):** students will write a maximum 2,500-word academic paper responding to one of the other seminar case studies presented during the course, drawing on all the reading materials assigned, as well as other materials from the suggested bibliography and content gleaned from further independent research. Papers must adhere strictly to academic essay standards good practice, with a strong thesis, coherent argument, judicious citations, and proper (Turabian) format.  
**Due date: 14 April.**

## Grading System

Letter Grade	Numerical Equivalents	Grade Point	Grasp of Subject Matter	Other qualities expected of students
<b>A RANGE: Excellent: Student shows original thinking, analytic and synthetic ability, critical evaluations, and broad knowledge base.</b>				
A+	90-100	4.0	Profound and Creative	Strong evidence of original thought, of analytic and synthetic ability; sound and penetrating critical evaluations which identify assumptions of those they study as well as their own; mastery of an extensive knowledge base
A	85-89	4.0	Outstanding	
A-	80-84	3.7	Excellent	Clear evidence of original thinking, of analytic and synthetic ability; sound critical evaluations; broad knowledge base
<b>B RANGE: Good: Student shows critical capacity and analytic ability, understanding of relevant issues, familiarity with the literature.</b>				
B+	77-79	3.3	Very Good	Good critical capacity and analytic ability; reasonable understanding of relevant issues; good familiarity with the literature
B	73-76	3.0	Good	
B-	70-72	2.7	Satisfactory at a post-baccalaureate level.	Adequate critical capacity and analytic ability; some understanding of relevant issues; some familiarity with the literature
FZ	0-69	0	Failure	Failure to meet the above criteria

Please see the appropriate handbook for more details about the grading scale and non-numerical grades (e.g. SDF, INC, etc).

**Late work.** Basic Degree students are expected to hand in assignments by the date given in the course outline. A 2% per day penalty applies (up to a maximum of 20%) for late work. This penalty is not applied to students with medical or compassionate difficulties; students facing such difficulties are kindly requested to consult with their faculty adviser or basic degree director, who should make a recommendation on the matter to the instructor. The absolute deadline for the course is the examination day scheduled for the course. Students who for exceptional reasons (e.g., a death in the family or a serious illness) are unable to complete work by this date may request an extension (SDF = “standing deferred”) beyond the term. An SDF must be requested from the registrar’s office in the student’s college of registration no later than the last day of classes in which the course is taken. The SDF, when approved, will have a mutually agreed upon deadline that does not extend beyond the conclusion of the following term. If a student has not completed work but has not been granted an SDF, a final mark will be submitted calculating a zero for work not submitted.

**Course grades.** Consistently with the policy of the University of Toronto, course grades submitted by an instructor are reviewed by a committee of the instructor’s college before being posted. Course

grades may be adjusted where they do not comply with University grading policy (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/grading.htm>) or college grading policy.

## **Policies**

---

**Accessibility.** Students with a disability or health consideration, whether temporary or permanent, are entitled to accommodation. Students in conjoint degree programs must register at the University of Toronto's Accessibility Services offices; information is available at <http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca/>. The sooner a student seeks accommodation, the quicker we can assist.

**Plagiarism.** Students submitting written material in courses are expected to provide full documentation for sources of both words and ideas in footnotes or endnotes. Direct quotations should be placed within quotation marks. (If small changes are made in the quotation, they should be indicated by appropriate punctuation such as brackets and ellipses, but the quotation still counts as a direct quotation.) Failure to document borrowed material constitutes plagiarism, which is a serious breach of academic, professional, and Christian ethics. An instructor who discovers evidence of student plagiarism is not permitted to deal with the situation individually but is required to report it to his or her head of college or delegate according to the TST *Basic Degree Handbook* and the Graduate program Handbooks (linked from <http://www.tst.edu/academic/resources-forms/handbooks> and the University of Toronto *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* <http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=4871>). A student who plagiarizes in this course will be assumed to have read the document "Avoidance of plagiarism in theological writing" published by the Graham Library of Trinity and Wycliffe Colleges [http://www.trinity.utoronto.ca/Library\\_Archives/Theological\\_Resources/Tools/Guides/plag.htm](http://www.trinity.utoronto.ca/Library_Archives/Theological_Resources/Tools/Guides/plag.htm).

**Other academic offences.** TST students come under the jurisdiction of the University of Toronto *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* <http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>.

**Back-up copies.** Please make back-up copies of essays before handing them in.

**Obligation to check email.** At times, the course instructor may decide to send out important course information by email. To that end, all students in conjoint programs are required to have a valid utoronto email address. Students must have set up their utoronto email address which is entered in the ACORN system. Information is available at [www.utorid.utoronto.ca](http://www.utorid.utoronto.ca). The course instructor will not be able to help you with this. 416-978-HELP and the Help Desk at the Information Commons can answer questions you may have about your UTORid and password. *Students should check utoronto email regularly* for messages about the course. **Forwarding** your utoronto.ca email to a Hotmail, Gmail, Yahoo or other type of email account is not advisable. In some cases, messages from utoronto.ca addresses sent to Hotmail, Gmail or Yahoo accounts are filtered as junk mail, which means that emails from your course instructor may end up in your spam or junk mail folder. Students in non-conjoint programs should contact the Registrar of their college of registration.

**Email communication with the course instructor.** The instructor aims to respond to email communications from students in a timely manner. *All email communications from students in conjoint programs should be sent from a utoronto email address.* Email communications from other email addresses are not secure, and also the instructor cannot readily identify them as being legitimate emails from students. The instructor is not obliged to respond to email from non-utoronto addresses for students in conjoint programs. Students in non-conjoint programs should only use the email address they have provided to their college of registration.

**Anti-harassment policy.** As we all adjust to online classes and lectures, and increasingly participate in virtual learning environments, students are reminded of the expectation that we all demonstrate respect for one another. As outlined in the Student Code of Conduct, the University of Toronto does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities especially when based on

grounds protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The University of Toronto recognizes its commitment to human rights, equity and inclusion and acknowledges the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has on various parts of our community. COVID-19 is not isolated to people of any particular ethnic origin, place of origin or race. Equity, diversity and respect must remain integral as we continue to transition during these challenging times. The institution will monitor and address discriminatory comments or behaviour including on U of T's online platforms and classrooms.

In accordance with the Ontario Human Rights Code, no person shall engage in a course of vexatious conduct that is directed at one or more specific individuals, and that is based on the race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age marital status, family status or disability. This includes:

- Racial slurs or "jokes"
- Insults due to racial identity
- Online posts of cartoons or pictures, in a workplace or school that degrade persons of a particular racial group
- Name-calling due to race, colour, citizenship, place of origin, ancestry, ethnic background or creed
- Pseudonyms or handles that are inappropriate about ancestry, colour, citizenship, ethnicity, place of origin, race, or religion.

The University of Toronto's Equity Offices remain available to students to provide support on equity issues that arise as a result of COVID-19. Students are encouraged to support one another and the University's commitment to human rights and our values of diversity, inclusion, and respect in managing any inappropriate comments or disruptive behaviours. If you experience or witness inappropriate comments or behaviours in your classes, you are encouraged to contact your instructor. If you can, take and share a screenshot of the inappropriate content with your instructor so they can follow-up with you and address the conduct.



## ***Course Schedule***

---

### **Week 1 – Introduction to the Course and Ethics**

- Course overview, syllabus, resources, expectations
- Universal ethics of modernity:
  - deontological: religious, natural law, rational (categorical imperative)
  - consequential: utilitarian, situational
- Subversive ethics of postmodernity
- Ecclesial ethics — a postmodern retrieval of the premodern approach

### **Week 2 – Narrative Theology and Ecclesial/Teleological Ethics**

- The narrative turn of postcritical theology and retrieval of virtue
- Teleology's relativisation (contextualisation) of other ethical models
- Ethics as theology
- Theology as narrative
- Narrative as drama
- Drama as improvisation
- Forming habits

### **Week 3 – Teleological Ethics as Improvised Drama**

- Ethics as improvisation:
  - Assessing status
  - Accepting and blocking
  - Questioning givens
  - Incorporating gifts
  - Reincorporating the lost

### **Week 4 – Ecclesial Discernment within Living Tradition**

- Scripture and discernment: enacted narrative, improvisation and a Midrashic hermeneutic
- Welcoming of the gentiles as an act of ecclesial discernment within living tradition
- Historical case study: slavery and civil rights

### **Week 5 – Human Life, Personhood, Transformation, and Flourishing (Theosis)**

- Meaning of human life and personhood
- Growth, development, transformation in human life
- The telos of human flourishing: *theosis*
- Means of human enhancement and perfectibility
- Challenges brought by scientific advancement: genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, cloning
- Case study: transhumanism

### **Week 6 – Bioethics of Life, Health and Wellbeing, Ageing, and Death**

- Meaning of life (βίος and ζωή)
- Defining life's beginning and end
- Personhood in relation to life
- Health, fitness, and wellbeing as goals (*teloi*)
- Hygiene and appearance
- Ageing
- "A Christian ending to our life"
- Abortion
- Case study: assisted suicide (MAiD = "Medical Assistance in Dying")

### **Week 7 – Image and Worth: Wholeness, Ableness and Disability**

- Wholeness, personhood, and flourishing (*theosis*)
- Disabilities — physical and mental
- Image of God misconstrued as human capacity
- Human value as God's loving gift
- Case study: ableism and disability rights

### **Week 8 – Constituents of Personal Identity: Race, Ethnicity, Trauma, and Socio-economic Class**

- Personhood and "identity"
- Baptism and Christian identity
- Race and self-identity
- Ethnicity, culture, history, and the construction of the self
- Trauma (both conscious and unconscious) and the disruption of identity
- Class, power, and inequality: social status and personhood
- Case study: racism and anti-racism

### **Week 9 – Constituents of Personal Identity: Sex, Gender, and Gender Roles**

- Classical framing of male and female sexual identity
- Development of gender
- Gender roles and stereotypes
- Sexual / gender essentialism
- Feminism, women's emancipation and equality of the sexes
- Case study: the role and ordination of women in the church

### **Week 10 – Constituents of Personal Identity: Biological Sex, Gender Identification and Expression**

- Biological sex versus gender as identification
- Gender expressions
- Multiplicity / spectrum of gender identity and expression
- Feminism and transgender theory
- Case study: transgenderism

### **Week 11 – Two Paths to Human Flourishing (Theosis): Monasticism and Marriage**

- Two paths, one goal: self-sacrificial love
- Monasticism as proleptic eschatological life and model
- Marriage as eschatological sign
- Divine and human *eros*
- *Eros*, sexuality, and asceticism
- Case study: marriage, sex, and procreation

**Week 12 – Other Paths to Flourishing (Theosis): Friendship and Diverse Shapes of Family Life**

- Alternatives to monasticism and marriage as paths to self-sacrificial love *theosis*
- Friendship (*philia*) — its meaning, disappearance, and potential recovery today
- Diverse shapes of family life within the church: single, widowed, divorced
- Relativisation of family in the church
- Sexual orientation and personal identity
- Case study: same-sex partnerships and marriage

**Please note that this syllabus is subject to change in accordance with the regulations in the TST *Basic Degree Handbook*.**