

## SCAR 3JJ3: Jesus, Justice and Contemporary Culture

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Fall 2020 (online)

### Course description

Perhaps the most important “founding” document for the meaning of justice (law, ethics, moral action) in the “western” world is a text from the Hebrew Bible called the “Decalogue” or the “Ten Commandments” or the “Ten Words of Freedom.” It’s the story of Moses going up a mountain (Sinai) into the divine presence to receive a revelation of the meaning of social justice or “how to live well” after you’ve been freed from slavery. Jesus is perhaps the most famous “interpreter” of the Decalogue and he does so as a kind of “second Moses” in his own “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5-7. It doesn’t really come off as a “commentary” or even an “interpretation” and we need to ask why? Why does it read more like a series of poetic sayings and challenging parables about love and justice, goodness and evil, violence and peace, slavery and freedom? Finally, a contemporary Polish filmmaker, Krzysztof Kieslowski produced a quite famous Polish TV series called “Decalogue” (available in the Criterion Collection): Ten (of course!) episodes of everyday human events loosely related to goodness and evil, slavery and freedom, violence and peace—the everyday meaning of love and justice in contemporary culture. This course will be structured on our shared reflection on the “Decalogue” (Moses), the “Sermon on the Mountain” (Jesus) and the 10 episodes of “Decalogue” (Kieslowski) to see what we might be able to learn about the meaning of justice and ethics in everyday human life.

Required course materials (all available on Avenue to Learn course website):

“Genesis” & “Exodus” in *The Five Books of Moses*, translated by Robert Alter  
“The Gospel According to Matthew” (New Revised Standard translation; I will also make available a film version by Pier Paolo Pasolini)  
“Decalogue,” TV film series by Krzysztof Kieslowski

\*supplementary, non-required readings may also be posted on Avenue for interested students

### Course Format

This course is scheduled for Tuesday evenings, 7-9 p.m. in an online format. Each week the Instructor will post some lecture materials to assist students in interpreting the assigned readings and films for the week. The professor will make an online video presentation every Tuesday at 7 p.m. that will be “captured” by Echo360 and put on Avenue for students to review on their own. Each week the professor will also respond to student questions and responses from the week prior. All course assignments will be posted on Avenue to learn and students will submit assignments to a drop box on the Avenue website.

### Course Evaluation

Participation                      30% (6 - 8 written reflection papers)

Assignment #1	35% (mid-term take-home essay)
Assignment #2	35% (final take-home essay)

## Requirements

- 1) Participation: Students are expected to prepare for class lectures by carefully and thoroughly reading/viewing all assigned materials. Each week students are invited to submit brief (ca. 300 words on one single-spaced page) written reflections (questions, problem passages/scenes, interpretations of central themes) to the assigned materials and the lecture. These are due by end of the day every Friday from Weeks 2-5 and 7-11, and students will be assessed on 6 - 8 responses. More detailed information will be given at the Introductory session and posted on Avenue.
- 2) Assignment #1: a take-home essay in which you will interpret two of the episodes in Kieslowski's "Decalogue" with reference to Jesus' "interpretation" of the "Ten Commandments/Words of Freedom" as discussed in the course materials up until the mid-term recess. The essay (ca. 1500-2000 words; 6-8 double-spaced typewritten pages) will be based on the lectures and assigned course materials and is due on October 7 (Week 7). Specific instructions will be provided on Avenue.
- 3) Assignment #2: a take-home essay in which you will interpret two of the episodes in Kieslowski's "Decalogue" with reference to Jesus' "interpretation" (as presented in Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount") of the assigned readings in Genesis and Exodus (the first two "Books of Moses) as discussed in the lectures and course materials after the mid-term recess. The essay (ca. 1500-2000 words; 6 - 8 double-spaced typewritten pages) is due on December 15, and more specific instructions will be provided on Avenue.

## Weekly schedule and assigned materials

Week 1: Introduction (Tuesday, Sept. 8 @ 7 p.m.)

Live online session (instructions/invitation/link will be sent to all students enrolled in the course) to go over the syllabus, the approach and general expectations of the course.

Week 2 (Sept. 15) What is Justice? Jesus & Moses: "Prophetic visions"

Readings—"Sermon on the Mount," Matthew 5-7 (instructor will provide a translation)  
"The Ten Commandments" in Exodus 20 (read the Alter translation from *Five Books of Moses*)

This week we'll try to situate the relationship between these two prophetic voices on the divine revelation of the meaning of justice. Why are they rooted in stories? What kind of stories are these and why do they still carry significance today? What is the relationship between justice and freedom? Justice and love? How do we get oriented?

\*\*It will be useful for you in general to read Exodus 1-20 & 31-34 (in the "Second Book of Moses") and all of the Gospel of Matthew (watch the Pasolini film version!) to get a sense of the narrative stories underlying these visions.

Week 3 (Sept. 22) “Creation & Temptation”: Who/What are the Gods that define “justice”?

Watch—“Decalogue One” (episode one of the Kieslowski series)

Read—Genesis 1-3 (First Book of Moses in the Alter translation)

“Temptations of Jesus” in Matthew 4

The revelation of justice to Moses is related to the story of creation of the world in Genesis—how and why? What is the “knowledge of good and evil” and how does this give rise to temptation? What are we tempted by, and how is this both an ethical and a religious problem? How does it relate to what human beings “worship” (literally, “attribute worth”) in the making of judgments regarding the “big” questions of life and death? How does it show up in Decalogue 1?

Week 4 (Sept. 29) “Who gets to Judge?” How do we “do” ethics and why does it matter?

Watch—Decalogue Two & Eight (episodes 2 & 8 of the Kieslowski series)

Read—Exodus 2-3: “ethics,” judgment and the divine “name”

“Beatitudes” in Matthew 5:1-20; “judge not” in Matthew 7:1-12

While we often praise “justice” we are often critical of being “judgy” (“you have no right to judge”). What is the complex relationship between justice and judgment? How can we understand this paradox, namely, we want to distinguish between “right and wrong” or “good and bad” or “just and unjust” and yet we shy away from becoming too definitive or too sure about it. What is the solution to this, where does it lie?

Week 5 (Oct. 6) “What’s in a look?” What is the meaning of love and (in)fideliy?

Watch—Decalogue Three and Four (episodes 3 & 4 of the Kieslowski series)

Read—Exodus 31-33, the “golden calf” and a revelation of God’s “back”

Matthew 5: 27-30 & 6: 1-23, “seeing” and “being seen”

What are the relationships between love/desire and justice? What are the connections between sexual lust or infidelity and improper “looking/seeing”? How is this related to the desire to “see” (or “be seen by”) God? How is this related to “worship” (often also used in intense erotic language with regard to our objects of desire)? Why is “keeping the Sabbath” so important for biblical ethics? How could this possibly be related to “law” and “social justice”? Are the personal and the political intimately tied together?

Week 6 Mid-term recess (Oct. 12-18)

Week 7 & 8 (Oct. 20 & 27) “Thou shalt not kill”: “Why is killing bad and Who gets to decide?”

Watch—Decalogue Five and Kieslowski’s “A Short Film about Killing”

Read—Genesis 4, “Cain and Abel”

Matthew 5:21-26, 38-48

What are the causes of lethal violence in our world, both personal and political? How do the words of Jesus relate these (even at the level of name-calling insults)? How is state-authorized killing different, and is there a relation to the intimate and personal here too? Why, and how might this be related to “abolition of capital punishment”? Is there any relevance here to Jesus’ radical teaching about “love of enemy”? I will also post a piece by Martin Luther King on non-violent resistance for consideration.

Week 8 (Nov. 3) “What’s love got to do with it?”: “Seeing and being seen, cont’d”

Watch—Decalogue Six and Kieslowski’s “A Short Film About Love”

Read—“David and Bathsheba” in 2 Samuel 11-13 (posted on Avenue)

Matthew 1:6—the story shows up in Jesus’ genealogy (he’s a “progeny”); Matthew 6

How is “seeing” related to desire and then beyond that to “power”? What are the complexities of “power” in relation to questions of love and justice? How could we possibly begin to sort these out, both for ourselves and in the larger social setting? Can love and justice ever join hands? Or are they fated to remain antagonistic forever? What is the difference between the power of love and the love of power? How are they related to our “vision”—and do we have any “power” over how we might choose to see or look at ourselves and others in the world? Is there any hope of freedom from slavery to our own compulsive desires so as to enter into liberating mutual reciprocities? What would this “look” like?

Week 9 (Nov. 9) Children/parents: What does it mean to grow up? “Fortunate Fall?”

Watch—Decalogue Seven (with echoes of One and Four)

Read—Genesis 16-22 (complicated family stories and tests)

Matthew 12:46-15:28

How much do our origin stories define us? What happens when our mythical or “fairy tale” ideals fall apart into broken pieces that leave us unsure of what to do? Who will we become when the scripts of our lives are no longer straightforward or sure? Are there ways of responding in both freedom and fidelity to these complexities? What does it mean to be a parent or a child, and to “sacrifice” our fantasies so as to inhabit our everyday fallen world that nevertheless requires our compassion, presence and willingness to go on a journey? What does this have to do with “justice”?

Week 10 (Nov. 17) How do we get what we want? “Divine Desire?”

Watch—Decalogue Nine (with echoes of Six)

Read—Matthew 6: 24-34

Soren Kierkegaard, “Christ the Prototype” (on Avenue)—supplementary

What is it we want when we experience desire or longing or jealousy for some thing or some one we are attracted to “having” in everyday life? How do we make distinctions between “good” and “bad” desires and do we really have any choice about it? How do we make decisions about how and when to act on our desires/longings? Are there examples/models for how to do this or

authorities (parents, politicians, lawcourts, professors, doctors, priests, etc.) that “tell” us what to desire or how to desire, or are we finally on our own? What does any of this have to do with “divine desire” and can one even talk about human desire in “divine” terms?

Week 11 (Nov. 24) “Everything Belongs to You” Divine Laughter and the “Golden Rule”

Watch—Decalogue Ten

Read—Matthew 7 & 22: 35-40 & 25

What kind of world would it be where everyone treated everyone else in the ways they themselves would want to be treated? Friends, family, enemies, strangers, rich, poor, healthy, sick, powerful, weak, male, female, Jew, Gentile, black/indigenous/Asian/white? What would this mean for our understanding of “justice”? How is the “entire” meaning of justice (legal and prophetic, social and personal, abstract and intimate) related to love of God and love of the other? How might this be related to a God of laughter rather than litigation, comedy beyond tragedy, loving reconciliation not destructive violence? Why might this only become visible at the limits of poetry and parable rather than the boundaries of policy and institutional ethical codes? Is such a vision “realistic” or is it a “fantasy” and how would we begin to be able to tell the difference?

Week 12 (Dec. 1): Conclusion: review and questions

This session will be devoted to thinking back over the course, its main themes and most pressing questions.

## University Policies:

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY** You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at <https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/> The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty: • plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which other credit has been obtained. • improper collaboration in group work. • copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

## **AUTHENTICITY / PLAGIARISM DETECTION**

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more details about McMaster’s use of Turnitin.com please go to [www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity](http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity).

## **COURSES WITH AN ON-LINE ELEMENT**

Some courses may use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this

disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

**CONDUCT EXPECTATIONS** As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities (the “Code”). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, whether in person or online. It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students’ access to these platforms.

#### **ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University’s Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities policy.

#### **REQUESTS FOR RELIEF FOR MISSED ACADEMIC TERM WORK**

McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work”.

#### **ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS, INDIGENOUS OR SPIRITUAL OBSERVANCES (RISO)**

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

## COPYRIGHT AND RECORDING

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, including lectures by University instructors.

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

## EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.