

LIBERATION: COMMON HOPE IN A COMPLEX WORLD

A Senior University course offered by Tom Wilkens, Fall 2010

Class Session 1

- Reading assignment: Foreword and Preface from the course text, *Un-American Activities: Countercultural Themes in Christianity* by Tom Wilkens and Kim Wilkens (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 2009)
- Some preliminary comments:
 - Introduction to the course format and procedures
 - Introduction to the course theme
 - Introduction to the course text
- Some questions and issues for discussion:
 - What are some differences between *modernism* and *postmodernism*, and why should anyone care? (More on postmodernism in chapters 6, 7, 21, 22 and 30; we'll focus on it in Class Session 5.)
 - What is the distinction between *exegesis* and *hermeneutics*, and why might it make a difference in understanding biblical literature?
 - Describe as well as you can these three approaches to the Bible: the approach of *modernism*, of *postmodernism*, and of *fundamentalism*. Which of them comes closest to your approach?
 - Do you find the perspective on life in the book – namely, life as *pilgrimage* – helpful and insight-producing or a useless artifice?
 - How well or inadequately do we communicate with our adult children about things that really matter?
 - Can Third World (developing-world) perspectives inform and assist First World (developed-world) people? If so, how? If not, why not?

Class Session 2

- Reading assignment: Course text, chapters 1–6 (pp. 1-64)
- Some preliminary comments:
 - Liberation theologies in a Latin American context
 - Liberation theologies in a North American milieu.

- Some questions and issues for discussion:

Chapter 1 – Respond to Tom’s brief comments on black theology. Give your own view on the relation between Barack Obama and Jeremiah Wright. Finally, where do you fit on Kim’s scale: secular, soft secular, or Christian?

Chapter 2 – When, where, and how do the poor register on middle class American radar screens? Use yourself as an example.

Chapter 3 – How would you respond to Carmen?

Chapter 4 – US foreign policy had a lot to do with the oppression and suffering of Central American people during the 1980s. Have we improved since then? Does the synagogue, church or mosque have a role to play in these matters?

Chapter 5 – For what did your educational experience prepare you? Did it include awareness of, sensitivity to, and concern for the developing world and the poor of the earth – wherever they are? Should it have done that? Finally, respond to Kim’s query: Where is your Antioch?

Chapter 6 – Do you resonate with any of the ideas about God in this chapter? Which ones, and why? Which notions about God do you find disturbing or objectionable, and why?

Class Session 3

- Reading assignment: Course text, chapters 7–12 (pp. 65-133)

- Some preliminary comments:

Are conservative (emphasis on *orthodoxy*) and progressive perspectives (emphasis on *orthopraxy*; especially true of liberation theologies) complementary or mutually exclusive?

What about developed-world and developing-world perspectives and theologies?

- Some questions and issues for discussion:

Chapter 7 – What role do/should denominations (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have them) play in the lives of religious people and communities? What do you think of the way that Kim handles the issue?

Chapter 8 – What roles do/should culture and ethnicity have in the lives of religious people and communities? Comment on Kim’s understanding of what true religion is and how it needs to function.

Chapter 9 – How well or poorly have the major western religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) handled matters relating to human sexuality? More specifically, how are Christians handling the issue of homosexuality?

Chapter 10 – Specify what your “family values” are. Where in the world did yours come from (“mom and dad” is not a sufficient response)?

Chapter 11 – Is there an appropriate and positive role for guilt in life, or is guilt simply a control mechanism by parents and other power people? Defend your answer. Evaluate Kim’s response. In what way or ways does hope play a role in your life and liberation?

Chapter 12 – For those of you who attended a church-related college or university, comment on the positives and negatives of education that takes place in that context. For those of you who did not, what in Tom’s description of it did you find surprising, positive, or negative? Should college and university be liberating experiences? Was it for you? What, if any, are the differences between education and training? (You may wish to review chapter 5 for this discussion.)

Class Session 4

- Reading assignment: Course text, chapters 13–18 (pp. 135-190)
- Some preliminary comments:

The story of Oscar Romero and his version of liberation theology – a theology of accompaniment.

You may wish to rent and view the 1989 film titled “Romero.”

- Some questions and issues for discussion:

Chapter 13 – Which of the two homilies more closely represents your view of faith and life? Explain why. Do you resonate with Kim’s criticism of Tom’s approach?

Chapter 14 – Which of the two “summer saints” do you find to be a better model for life, and why?

Chapter 15 – Comment on the balance between law, limits and structure, on the one hand, and liberation, freedom and creativity, on the other, that Tom recommends.

Chapter 16 – Tom argues that there are some self-imposed limits on God’s power and freedom. What do you think of his case? Are these limits necessary for human liberation and freedom? Why, or why not? (You may wish to review chapter 6.)

Chapter 17 – Share some ways in which retirement has been a liberating experience for you. Are there ways in which it has not been liberating?

Chapter 18 – What role, if any, does volunteer service play in a liberated and liberating life?

Class Session 5

- Reading assignment: Course text, chapters 19–24 (pp. 191-257)

- Some preliminary comments:

Some variations on the theme of postmodernism

- Some questions and issues for discussion:

Chapter 19 – In this chapter, Kim gives her take on the role of doubt in the life of faith (Tom did that in chapter 11). What do you think, and why?

Chapter 20 – In what way or ways should religion comfort the afflicted (oppressed) and afflict the comfortable (oppressors)?

Chapter 21 – Respond to Kim’s analysis and ownership of postmodernism. Do modern people need liberation from modernism with the help of postmodern people sharing their postmodern perspectives and ideas?

Chapter 22 – Are there definitive answers to questions about suffering or simply liberating coping mechanisms to help deal with the oppressive reality of suffering? Defend your answer.

Chapter 23 – Kim wrote, “I think becoming a citizen of the world starts with our feet.” (page 245) If she is correct, what are the implications for our lives? If she is incorrect, what other ways might there be for us to become global citizens?

Chapter 24 – Many American Christians do not believe that Christianity has a political agenda, that Christians (and religious people generally) are obliged to be advocates – even activists – for peace and justice. What do you think, and why?

Class Session 6

- Reading assignment: Course text, chapters 25–30; Afterword (pp. 259-331)

- Some preliminary comments:

Quo vadis? Where is your pilgrimage leading you today?

- Some questions and issues for discussion:

Chapter 25 – Would you label yourself as a “believer” or a “seeker”? Explain what that means in your case.

Chapter 26 – Do you accept the idea of “the mothering vocation of God”? Why, or why not? Has the feminist movement had a liberating or a limiting impact on Christianity?

Chapter 27 – What responsibilities, if any, do religious communities have with respect to the symptoms of suffering? What about the systems that produce suffering?

Chapter 28 – List positive and negative influences of American Civil Religion on American and global cultures. Do the positives outweigh the negatives, or the other way around?

Chapter 29 – Most of us think of forgiveness in personal terms. Is it appropriate also to think of it in social and political terms? Why, or why not?

Chapter 30 – What do you think of the Emerging Church (review chapters 7, 12, 21, and 24)? Share experiences you might have had with the Emerging Church. Finally, the big question: where do we go from here? More specifically, what struggles for liberation should we engage in today?

Afterword – Why is it often so difficult for us to respect another person’s journey of faith and life?