PHI 815-22: History of the Integration of Religion & Society

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Professor

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**Course Learning Journal**

The course has played a major role in this program and provided me with an understanding of how religion and society coincide in history. As the daughter of a pastor, I always knew religion was important; however, through this course, I gained a lot of insights into the influence of religion on societies, justice systems, and rehabilitation. The relationship between religion, society, and justice goes hand in hand. From the spiritual realm, because of sin, justice demanded that we should die, but God’s love for us paid the price. As a result, the gap between human imperfection and divine grace was connected, reminding us that true justice is found in love, mercy, and the compassion we extend to one another in society, including “the least of these.”

This course also confirmed that religion, society, and justice are intertwined and must work together to bring change. Religious organizations are also part of rehabilitation initiatives in mentorship, restorative justice, and support systems for justice-involved individuals. At the root of our spiritual beliefs lie grace, mercy, redemption, and responsibility, all of which offer an example of justice that is both punitive and redemptive.

In my professional capacity, justice should never solely focus on retribution. It should, however, also include restoration, healing, and transformation. When faith, society, and justice are connected, we move towards the finish line of redemption, which my faith stands firmly on and constantly reminds me that we are to treat every human being with dignity, grace, and a chance to rebuild their lives after failing.

There is no way to divide history and society. Religion has also been a driving force behind the creation of laws, ethics, and social movements. From the early church's demand for the poor to faith leaders spearheading civil rights movements, history instructs us that faith has never lost the ability to be a redemptive force. This course has challenged me to think about how biblical notions of justice, mentorship, and redemption intersect with contemporary social issues, particularly those surrounding justice-involved youth.

If we are going to be change agents in society, then we must begin by understanding who we are. Knowing ourselves is critical as we walk the leadership journey so we are secure in our values and empowered to serve others well. Being willing to look at ourselves, confront bias, and develop spiritually is necessary to build transformational change. Leadership is less about leading and more about embodying the virtues of integrity, compassion, and faith. Understanding the historical conversation between faith and society allows us to cross divides, speak up for justice, and stand with those who need us most.

As an adult learner, I am thankful for the flexibility and safe space of the OGS program; however, in the spirit of total transparency, I feel that this course has been the most challenging thus far, not just due to many more resources but also to personal matters that hit me at once. The last few weeks have been hard; if ever there was a time I thought that I should give up altogether—mainly school and work—it is now. I had a setback associated with my kidney transplant process; in addition to holding leadership positions, professionally, and with the flu and stomach virus impacting our facility very severely, I have been made to work around the clock over the past few weeks; thus, my professional hat has been more than ever before, and with almost 20+ juveniles in custody at once, most of whom have severe mental and medical issues, my life has been “lifing” as we modernly say. Despite the setbacks, this course pushed me to expand my knowledge of the role of faith in justice and rehabilitation. Discussions and reading have caused me to appreciate biblical principles of justice more and more, as found in Micah 6:8. Thankfully, things are slowly getting a little better. After many tears, reflection, and prayer, I am determined to hang in there. I will not quit!

One of the sources that connected to me was the religion and social change webinar. It was great seeing four powerful women breaking ground to discuss social change and religion's role. They were women of diverse cultures and shared how religion is a power in the world. One of the women, Ruth Messinger, noted that all religions tend to affirm the status quo. This statement stood out to me, as it made me realize how religious communities will often voice opinions on things that most directly affect their congregations and yet ignore greater injustices that may not necessarily be perceived as being immediately relevant to them. However, real justice asks us to consider beyond our experience and advocate for all individuals, not just those connected to us and with whom we are most familiar.

Religion could be a force for change, but only if faith communities act proactively amid crisis, engaging their members while working to collaborate with people from other religions. I always say that God created us all differently, and the difference is what we all need to embrace each other. As long as we can celebrate and learn about one another's differences, we are being honest to the truth that we are all being created in God's image. Collaboration among various faiths and religious inclusion will help us find solutions to today's problems, such as racial injustice, poverty, and humanitarian crises. One thing is certain: We are stronger when working together.

As a justice professional, I had to pause, breathe, and think about the role of faith-based approaches in rehabilitating justice-involved youth. Through this course, I have been reminded of the importance of faith and justice reform. Having lost one of my boys a few days ago after he shot someone and though this has been the most challenging time in my career, the biblical models of mentoring, such as Jesus' discipleship and the conversion of Paul, have motivated me to be more restorative and empathetic in my leadership. I will always strive not to judge and, instead, take time to pull back layers centered on why the offense occurred and how we can grow from this. In the end, my goal is always to offer hope, help, and healing.

I live in what is known as the *"Bible Belt,"* where the dominant belief among residents is Christianity. Religion is important to the culture. It influenced values, traditions, and life in the community. However, while Christianity is dominant, it also needs to be understood that faith should never divide us but instead offer a weapon of love, understanding, and responsibility for others—especially those often overlooked by society. True faith commands us to bring grace out of the comfortable, to look beyond the stereotype, and to love the humanness in each human being.

It is also vital for us to place humanity at the foundation of our faith. We have to be intentional in seeing human beings as God created them. Jesus did not limit himself to engaging only with like-minded persons; he welcomed them all: the outcasts, the downtrodden, and the ones society rejected. Since we are to mimic Christ, we also must do as he does. Before working with young offenders, I called them "bad kids." I knew their acts, rap sheets, and bad decisions—but I did not know them. Not until perhaps five years into my career did my whole view change.

One of the young men, a habitual offender, came by to tell our staff about what was going on in his life. He graduated from high school, got a job, attended college, and was doing well. He was a young man who had spent most of his young teen life in our facility, someone whom most people, including his own family, had once considered to be a lost cause. As he ended his conversation with us, I asked if there was anything else he had to say. He stood before me, his cheeks streaming with tears, and said: "People saw me, but they really didn't see me."

People noticed he was present but never took the initiative to learn about his struggles, history, or potential. That opened my eyes and reminded me of how important it is to look at people—not necessarily their mistakes, but their humanity, their hurt, and their capacity for change and growth.

In the center of our faith, we need to see everyone initially in humanity. Every human being, regardless of background, is worth listening to, viewing, and given a second opportunity to atone. If we live our faith, we need to deliberate about demolishing walls, extending grace, and lifting up the people that society discards. This is at the core of faith in action—loving other humans not for who we might hope they can become but for who they are: human beings created in God's image, full of the capacity to learn, to mature, and to be transformed.

My biggest concern is the continued struggle to ensure detained youth receive adequate guidance and resources. Following the pandemic, society has gotten so lazy! It is hard for these kids to find mentors, as many say they lack time. The historical context presented in this course and much of my research on key individuals such as Jane Addams and organizations such as the Prison Fellowship have led me to advocate for faith-based mentorship programs within the juvenile justice system. How can I further apply these biblical principles in current practice? How can I motivate communities of faith to become more engaged in mentorship for justice-involved youth? What sponsorships are available for possible incentives to those who mentor? What communication strategies can I use to connect with non-Christian persons or groups that might express interest in mentoring? These are questions that I continually pursue. Also, I really need to narrow down my topic, question of focus, and resources, etc. I emailed you weeks back but have not received anything. I know I have had a lot going on, and you might have as well, but please let me know your availability. Email: lakeishabryant2@gmail.com

Despite all obstacles, this course has encouraged my professional, religious, and academic goals. I am committed to seeing people through God's eyes, remembering the call of Christ to serve the least of these, as found in Matthew 25:40. This class has also reignited my passion for fighting hard for all justice-involved youth so that they will not only be treated fairly but also be given mercy and mentorship that can bring about real reform.