

ENGLISH 396/596: TRADITIONS OF GIVING AND SERVING IN AMERICAN LIFE

**Cr. 3**

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Selected readings in the nature and purpose of philanthropy and service in American Life. Texts will be drawn from the fields of literature, theology, social history, and philosophy that raise questions of ethics, stewardship and the common good.

*Course Description:*

English 396 is a three-credit course that satisfies a requirement for the English major and will be a component in the new major in non-profit management. In this course, we will read works that explore the varied ways that American writers and thinkers have portrayed and considered notions of charity and public service. We will also reflect on our personal reasons for using our gifts and talents to make a difference in the world and consider how our motivations reflect or diverge from these broader cultural trends. To accomplish this, we will examine intersecting and possibly conflicting theological and pragmatic rationales for giving and serving. In particular, we will examine how ideas of altruism, divine instruction, civic duty, and self-reliance are represented and debated in American culture. For example, what are we to make of Emerson's famous declaration in "Self-Reliance," "do not tell me [. . .] of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong." Is this the blanket denial of social responsibility that it appears to be? Emerson goes on to remark, "There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be." What is this class of people? How does "spiritual affinity" inform charity in American society? What traditions is Emerson evoking or denying?

To explore questions like these, we will also read a number of biblical and theological texts and examine how Christian thought informs American writers' embrace or denial of philanthropy and public service. Melville's narrator in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" denies the "old Adam of resentment [. . .] simply by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.'" Yet, almost in the same breath, he notes, "Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor." Melville's frank assessment of the convergence between divinely inspired altruism and self-interest points to a dilemma that many American writers have explored.

In addition to the readings, students will be required to write an analytical essay exploring a text in greater depth. They will also be asked to examine their own motivations concerning charity and service through a series of reading responses that will culminate in a reflective essay. Students will explore what inspires them to engage in philanthropy and public service and what obstacles or personal feelings prevent them from doing so, and put these observations into conversation with the texts and ideas that we have discussed. One of the goals of the course will be for students not only to be able to recognize the theological and cultural underpinnings

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of charitable appeals, but to articulate their own rationale that will motivate them to serve and will inform their future choices. If granted funding, the best of these essays will be collected and published on-line or in a small booklet (depending upon enrollment and the number of essays) tentatively titled "A Reason to Give: Valparaiso University Students Discuss Their Calls to Service." This can be of use in future courses, as well as in promotional materials for the university. It can also be presented to new VU students as a call from their peers to serve in their community.

We will highlight this connection to practice by arranging a panel discussion featuring guest speakers from local philanthropic, religious, and governmental organizations that engage in promoting charitable giving and volunteerism. Speakers will address motives for giving and the ways that organizations tailor their messages to appeal to the wide range of personal and cultural rationales that people use to support their philanthropic activities.

*Proposed List of Readings:*

Religion and Philanthropy:

Biblical Texts: Selections from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, Ecclesiastes, Deuteronomy, Epistles of Paul to the Romans.

Martin Luther: Selections from *The Treatise on Good Works*.

Robert Rosin: "Bringing Forth Fruit: Luther on Social Welfare" (1996).

John Winthrop: "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630).

William Penn: Selections from *Some Fruits of Solitude* (1693) and *More Fruits of Solitude* (1702).

Cotton Mather: Selections from *Bonifacius, or Essays to Do Good* (1710).

Herman Melville: "Bartleby, The Scrivener" (1853).

Civic Duty and Social Work:

William Bradford: Selections from *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630-50).

Benjamin Franklin: "On the Price of Corn, and Management of the Poor" (1766), "On the Laboring Poor" (1768).

Alexis de Tocqueville: Selections from *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840).

Dorothea Dix: Selections from *Asylum, prison, and poorhouse : the writings and reform work of Dorothea Dix in Illinois* (1846-7).

Dubois, W.E.B. Selections from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

John F. Kennedy: Inaugural Address ("To those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.") (1961).

George H. W. Bush: Inaugural Address ("I have spoken of a thousand points of light, of all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the Nation, doing good. We will work hand in hand, encouraging, sometimes leading, sometimes being led, rewarding.") (1989).

Wells, Ida B. Selections from *Crusade for Justice* (1970).

Jane Addams: *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1912).

Marjane Ambler: "Indians Giving: The New Philanthropy in Indian Country" (1994).

Self-Reliance and/as Service:

Benjamin Franklin: "The Way to Wealth" (1757).

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Self-Reliance" (1841).

Henry David Thoreau: "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849).

Horatio Alger: *Ragged Dick* (1867).

Andrew Carnegie: "The Gospel of Wealth" (1889).

Booker T. Washington: "How to Help Men Most With Money" (1910).

Gwendolyn Brooks: "The Lovers of the Poor" (1960).

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