Thank you for your prompt and thorough evaluation of our proposed Mayterm courses, particularly the PSY 150: Cultural and Narrative Psychology and the Arab-Israeli Conflict. I am pleased that the committee approved the course for the Competent and Compassionate Action: Communicating Cross Culturally category, and appreciate the positive and constructive feedback regarding the Thinking Globally category.

On the one hand, I feel a bit embarrassed that the syllabus did not address the two concerns you raise in your Sept. 25 memo – these are some of the most central goals of the course, and need to be featured more prominently in the syllabi and other marketing literature (indeed, these two themes formed the core of my presentation to students last night in our informational meeting). On the other hand, I wonder about the committee’s second concern – providing a framework for thinking about relativism and the Christian faith. Although this is a worthy goal (and a goal in my course), it is not explicitly or implicitly stated in either the GE document or the supplementary document. I would encourage the committee – as I did when I was a member, and as I envisioned when I was a member of the task force that created the committee – to restrict itself to the guidelines presented in these documents. This is important, I think, to preserve the integrity of the committee and the unique form of academic freedom we enjoy here at Westmont. I hope I am not out of place in making this observation: Ray will testify that I made this observation in the majority of GE committee meetings that I have attended over the years!

I have revised the syllabus, but will summarize my response to your concerns here. I’ll deal with them in the reverse order that they were presented in your memo, since I think that makes sense.

First, with regard to providing a framework for thinking about relativism and the Christian faith. Both narrative and cultural psychology have the capacity to deeply relativistic. I say this in case your concern was that the course was not “relativistic” enough – some form of relativism is necessary for a global perspective. Here is an excerpt from some notes I kept this summer while working on the course:

Social constructionism, epistemology, and ontology. Social constructionism (and its psychological cousin, social constructivism) suggest that cultural forces shape our understanding of reality. As such, they contrast with essentialism, the notion our perceptions of reality are straightforwardly related to transhistoric and transcultural essences.

For those of us raised in an essentialist milieu, constructionist theories are most
easily understood as theories of epistemology. Vaihinger, Vygotsky, and James (e.g.) can all be understood in this way: we should hold conceptions of reality rather lightly, since these conceptions are socially constructed and may or may not bear any close resemblance to ultimate reality.

But this is to miss the radical point of constructionism, a point that is more ontological than epistemological in nature. As we individually and corporately construct our conceptions of reality, we are in some cases constructing reality itself (even constructing our very selves, a concept more aligned with narrative psychology).

Take as an example a conflict -- perhaps the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both Arabs and Jews have historically perceived there to be a conflict. Is this perception, taken at the sociocultural level (and not merely the individual or psychological level), a socially constructed perception of some underlying reality? Or does the perception itself create the conflict? If there were no perception of conflict, there would be no conflict.

This is not to say that Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not "real." Such a conclusion might follow within a positivist, reductionism ontology, but it does not within a constructionist framework. The point is that human action and perception sometimes create the very realities within which perception and action take place.

But perhaps the committee was not concerned so much with the fact that the course was not relativistic enough, but instead that it was too relativistic – that it was not sufficiently focused on reconciling such potentially radical relativism with the important absolutes of the Christian faith (or not sufficiently sensitive to the fact that students may have a difficult time reconciling the subtleties of social constructivism with their own faith). I expect this to the source of some of our most meaningful conversations on the trip, as students begin to see that some of their deeply held absolutes (e.g., “left behind” eschatologies and Zionist Evangelicalisms) might be socially constructed concepts from a rather narrow subculture (late 20th century North American Evangelicalism), and that Christians around the globe and throughout the centuries have had other ideas that square well with scripture (this is where the integration with Bruce’s course will be indispensable). I’m not sure how to describe to the committee the ways in which we will have those discussions – I’m asking you to trust my sensitivities, my theological orthodoxy, and my promise to take the reconciliation of relativism(s) and Christian faith(s) seriously as a part of the course and experience.

Second, with regard to formulating a redemptive, Christian response to injustice and iniquity. I reversed the order on these concerns because I think that the proper introduction of relativism – a deep appreciation of the socially constructed nature of the self, including not only the Palestinian-Arab self and the Zionist-Israeli self, but also the Westmont-student, Evangelical-Christian self – is an entrée into a robust Christian
response to injustice and inequity. The readings I have selected (especially the book by Burge), makes an awareness of social justice and the Christian’s responsibility as a redemptive, reconciliatory agent a central theme. I’ll quote from my closing comments in last night’s information meeting, as I was describing my course. The point of closing with the last sentence was to emphasize that this is really the core concern of the entire course (and, as Bruce will agree, the entire trip):

    We’ll read books and popular media (Western, Arab, and Israeli) and compare the stories we hear about major events and issues (note: events and issues are social constructions). More important, we’ll talk with real people – from shop and restaurant owners to heads of state – and hear their stories. You’ll write about these, and share them with the group as we ask what difference it might make to think about the world in this way. Might we, if we were to become more aware of the storied and socially constructed nature of ourselves and our global neighbors, be better equipped to become agents of redemption and reconciliation?