

**Philosophy of Religion**  
**(Tentative Syllabus, Spring 2018)**

PHIL 150, MF 10:25-11:40

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**Course Description**

In this course we will examine the nature of religion, both the nature of particular religions (Islam, Hinduism, and so on), and the nature of religion as a perennial feature of human life. What is the relationship between religious belief and rationality? Can a religion be viewed as progressive, in the sense that it develops toward the truth over time? Are religious claims to be regarded merely as useful, or as claims about the nature of reality? These are some questions we will examine in this course.

We will first look briefly at the some of the core claims and texts of certain religious traditions: Greek Polytheism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, as well as some of the core texts of non-theistic traditions: Buddhism and Taoism. This background will allow us to approach questions about religion with the resources of these various traditions at hand. We will then turn to arguments for the existence of God, responses, and challenges raised against religion, particularly the problem of evil, and ways that religious thinkers have responded to this challenge. From there, we will address various approaches to religious belief: pragmatism and fideism, and enlightenment conceptions of religion as progressive, and post-enlightenment views of diversity and dialogue. We will end the course with a return to individual religions, discussing various conceptions of the self, of death, and of the afterlife.

**Readings**

Please purchase *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*, ed. Chad Meister, Routledge (2007) ISBN 978-0415408912. Other readings will be handed out or sent to you as a pdf to print. *No laptops or other devices are allowed out in class.*

**Assignments**

Your grade will be based on two mini-papers (10% each), two exams: a midterm and a final (20% each), a reflection paper for the panel on religion and social justice (5%) attendance and participation in class discussion (10%) and a final paper (25%).

All grading in class will be done with letter grades, figured on a four point scale (A=4.0, A-=3.67, B+=3.33, etc.). A *missing* assignment will be figured as *negative four* points on a four point scale. So please do not miss major assignments.

**Final paper (25% final grade)**

You will write a final paper (4-6 pages). I will hand out sample prompts for this paper, but you can also choose your own topic.

**Midterm Exam (20% of final grade)**

You will receive a sheet of questions in advance of the midterm. We will choose two questions at random from this sheet of questions on the day of the exam. You will answer those two questions in short essay format, with no notes, in a blue exam book which will be provided.

**Final Exam (20% of final grade)**

The final exam will not be cumulative, and will have the same format as the midterm exam. You will have an hour and fifteen minutes to complete the exam, which will cover the material for the second half of the course.

### **Mini-Essays (20% of final grade)**

Over the course of the semester, you will write two “mini-essays” which should be no more than two pages double-spaced. *Do not write more than two pages!* This essay will take the form of a philosophical response to one or more of the readings, which will be due the same day as that reading. For more specific instructions, see “How to write a 2 page paper” and “Common Pitfalls and Suggestions”, handed out and up on moodle. You will sign up for two dates and thereby for two essay topics. **You will be required to read your essay aloud in class on at least one of these days.**

### **Reflection Paper on Panel (5% of final grade)**

Sometime in March, we will host a panel of local religious leaders in which they will address the topic of social justice and religious practice. You will be required to attend this panel and to write a one page reflection paper, which will be graded as A (completed in a satisfactory way), C (unsatisfactory), or F (not completed). If you are unable to attend this panel, talk to me and we will arrange an alternative assignment (likely an alternative event).

### **Participation (10% of final grade)**

It is in your interest to come to class and participate in discussion. This will be the best way to understand the readings, to perform well on the exams and to write penetrating and insightful papers, and to come to a greater understanding of the nature of religion. However, if this is not enough to motivate you, 10% of your grade also depends upon coming to class and participating.

Generally, there is an ‘A’ baseline for this portion of your grade. If you have perfect attendance (2 or fewer unexcused absences), you will receive an A. If you have less than perfect attendance (3 unexcused absences, for instance) but are an enthusiastic and respectful participant in class, you will also receive an A. If your attendance is sub-par, and you don’t speak up in class, you will get less than an A. If you miss 6 classes or more without prior permission, you will get an ‘F’ in this category. I also reserve the right to bump up borderline final grades of students who perform particularly well in this category.

An “excused” absence generally means you have notified me in advance and have a good reason to miss. Do not come to class if you are sick with more than a minor cold. Just send me an email letting me know. This will not count against you.

### **Academic Integrity**

Violations of academic integrity will not be tolerated. There are many ways to violate the academic integrity, and you are responsible to know what counts as a violation of academic integrity. If you have any doubt, send me an email and I will let you know. Plagiarism can take many forms, but the most common are as follows: using another author’s idea in your paper without citation, paraphrasing someone else’s work without citation, inserting phrases from another person’s work without quotation marks, and extensive collaboration with other students. While discussing the ideas in your paper with other students is worthwhile and I would encourage you to do this, you must write your paper on your own. When in doubt, just add a footnote, don’t worry so much about the format of it: “I got this idea from Rafe’s comment in class on 3/2” is fine. Most forms of plagiarism can be avoided by simply not consulting any material for your paper except those required for the course. Do not consult sources that originate on the internet (e.g. wikipedia, blogs). For more information visit:

<http://www2.clarku.edu/offices/aac/integrity.cfm>

## **Schedule**

Below is a schedule of the core readings. My primary method of communication with you (apart from in class) will be via email. I reserve the right to change this schedule. If there is a significant change to this schedule, I will send out the revised schedule via email, and post the new syllabus on Moodle.

*Friday 1/19:*

Opening discussion/Syllabus

## **Unit 1: Visions of Ultimate Reality**

*Monday 1/22:*

Xenophanes, Aristotle selections (handed out)

Cicero “On the Nature of the Gods” selections (handed out)

*Friday 1/26:*

Avicenna “God’s Nature and Knowledge” (Meister 93-99)

Al-Ghazali, selections from *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (handed out)

*Monday 1/29:*

Maimonides “Divine Simplicity, Negative Theology, and God-Talk” (Meister 100-107)

*Friday 2/2:*

Boethius “Providence, Foreknowledge, and Free Will” (Meister 108-118)

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* selections (handed out)

*Monday 2/5:*

Ramanuja “God as Infinite, Personal, and Good” (Meister 123-126)

Sankara “Brahman is All” (Meister 171-175)

*Friday 2/9:*

Lao Tzu “The Tao” (Meister 176-180)

Jayatilke “Nirvana is Ultimate Reality” (Meister 181-186)

## **Unit 2: Arguments and Challenges**

*Monday 2/12: Cosmological*

Aquinas “The Classical Cosmological Argument” (Meister 193-196)

Craig “The Kalam Cosmological Argument” (Meister 197-214)

Al-Ghazali (handout)

*Friday 2/16: From Design*

Aquinas (handout)

Paley “The Classical Design Argument” (Meister 251-255)

Hume “A Critique of the Design Argument” (Meister 279-288)

*Monday 2/19: Naturalistic Explanations of Religious Belief*

Feuerbach “Religion as Projection” (Meister 338-345)

Freud “Religious Ideas as Wish Fulfillments” (Meister 502-505)

*Friday 2/23: Evil & Human Suffering*

Rowe “The Problem of Evil” (Meister 526-536)

Hick “A Soul-Making Theodicy” (Meister 537-549)

*Monday 2/26: Evil & Human Suffering*  
The Book of Job (handed out)

*Friday 3/2: Evil & Human Suffering*  
Adams “Horrendous Evil” (Meister 564-575)

\*\*\*\*\* 3/5-3/9 SPRING BREAK\*\*\*\*\*

*Monday 3/12: Evil & Human Suffering*  
Dostoevsky “Rebellion” (handed out)

*Friday 3/16: Evil & Human Suffering*  
Augustine, selections (handed out)  
Kalupahana “Suffering–A Buddhist Perspective” (Meister 576-584)

*Monday 3/19*  
MIDTERM EXAM

### **Unit 3: Pragmatism and Fideism**

*Friday 3/23*  
Clifford “The Ethics of Belief” (Meister 359-365)  
Pascal “The Wager” (Meister 389-394)

*Monday 3/26*  
William James “The Will to Believe” (Meister 366-378)

### **Unit 4: Kant, Progressivism, Traditions, and Dialogue**

*Friday 3/30*  
Ward “Truth and the Diversity of Religions” (Meister 26-39)  
Plantinga “A Defense of Religious Exclusionism” (Meister 40-59)

*Monday 4/2*  
Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, essay 3 (skim essays 1 & 2)

*Friday 4/6*  
Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, essay 4  
The Dalai Lama “Interreligious Harmony” (Meister 79-86)

*Monday 4/9*  
Hick “Religious Pluralism and the Pluralistic Hypothesis” (Meister 9-25)  
MacIntyre “Moral Pluralism without Moral Relativism”, other selections (handout)

### **Unit 5: Religious Perspectives on the Self and Afterlife**

*Friday 4/13*  
Augustine “The Fallen Self” (Meister 441-446)  
Moser “Death, Dying, and the Hiddenness of God” (Meister 613-624)

*Monday 4/16*  
Nagarjuna “The Empty Self” (Meister 458-463)  
Aurobindo “Rebirth and the Self” (Meister 636-641)

*Friday 4/20* \*\*\*\***FINAL PAPERS DUE**\*\*\*\*

Mencius "Human Nature is Naturally Good" (Meister 447-450)

Taliaferro "Why We Need Immortality" (Meister 625-635)

*Monday 4/23*

Nietzsche "The Noble Human Being" (Meister 451-457)

Le Poidevin "Should the Atheist Fear Death?" (Meister 642-652)

*Friday 4/27*

Plato "The Immortality of the Soul" (Meister 587-594)

*Monday 4/30*

Conclusion and Review

*Thursday or whatever? 5/5*

Final Exam