

University of Waterloo

Religious Studies 261/Philosophy 237: Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

Instructor: Term: Winter 2015
Office: St. Paul's University College, Class Meets: Tues, Thurs 9:00 – 10:20 AM
Telephone: Location: St. Paul's, Alumni Hall (Rm 201)
Email:
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:30 – 11:30, or by appointment

1. About the Course

Religious belief is a very common feature of human community worldwide. Even in so-called secular societies such as Canada's, belief in a divine being is widespread among all age groups according to recent surveys. Religious belief can be strong or weak or in between but most people who are religious regard their beliefs and practices as integral to their life and identity. Religious believers do not all believe unquestioningly. Some questions are aimed at religious instruction, e.g., should I forgive that person? Other questions relate more to perplexities about the nature of religious belief itself, e.g., why pray for my son's illness to be cured when God who is omniscient already knows what I want? Both types of question can and have been asked by religious believers. The second question type may be called philosophical due to the fact that it expresses an apparent contradiction about a particular belief, in this case, a fairly central belief in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious tradition, namely, praying for God's help. Philosophical questioning of religious belief then is a feature within the life of religious believing; but, of course, such questioning can also occur, as it were, from outside any commitment to religious belief. We will examine a variety of apparent contradictions in religious belief and whether the proposals for resolving them are satisfactory.

Please note that the emphasis of the course is philosophical: The fact that an apparent contradiction in religious belief may have a satisfactory resolution is in no way a recommendation or endorsement of the belief. Conversely, the fact that a satisfactory resolution has not been found for a particular apparent contradiction is in no way an implied recommendation that the belief should be let go of.

Finally, a note on the spirit of inquiry in the course. In class discussion, any reasoned viewpoint (or sincere question) is welcome and no one need be concerned about differing with the instructor's views. Civility shall rule the classroom, but not inhibit forceful disagreement. Respect each other by agreeing or disagreeing with their views in a reasoned way. However, the point of the course is to introduce students to key problems and problem-solving responses relating to the meaningfulness and reasonableness of religious belief. Therefore, this course is not simply an opportunity to voice personal opinion. There is a body of material to master and, by doing so, students' ability to evaluate and express their own opinions will benefit.

Course Structure & Learning Objectives

The key learning objectives for this course are: (1) The ability to explain key intellectual challenges to the meaningfulness and reasonability of religious belief and the attempts to meet these challenges; (2) The ability to summarize an argument that challenges religious belief or proposes a resolution of a challenge; (3) The ability to critically evaluate a basic philosophical argument; and (4) The ability to construct an argument that challenges the meaningfulness or reasonability of a religious belief or defends it against a particular challenge.

The course uses LEARN. Please check the course site frequently. The syllabus and class schedule are posted on the site. The schedule includes the assigned readings for each class session. There will be two lecture-discussion classes each week. All lectures, discussions, etc. encourage student participation. The lecture discussions will take some time to understand the readings, and in some cases to raise questions about them.

2. Required Text (Available at UW Bookstore in South Campus Hall; check used books in SLC)

- Charles Taliaferro, Philosophy of Religion: A Beginner's Guide (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009)
- Note: Additional assigned readings will be provided on LEARN

3. Grading Requirements

Final grade for the course will be determined as follows:

1. Unannounced quizzes on the required readings. 10%
2. Mid-term in-class test. 20%
3. Essay of 5 – 7 pages. 30%
4. Final in-class test. 25%
5. Class participation (attendance, asking questions, taking part in discussion). 15%

Revised: December 2014

Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion
RS 261/PHIL237, Winter 2015

Week	Month	Day	Date	Topic	Read & Study
1	January	Tu	6	Introduction: What is philosophy of religion and is it important?	CT*: 1-23
		Tr	8	A philosophical tool kit for the course material	Brenner
2		Tu	13	Who or what is "God"? "Brahman"?	CT: 24 - 40, 146-156
		Tr	15	What is "God" like? "Brahman"?	
		F	16	<i>no class</i>	
3		Tu	20	What is it to believe in God?	CT: 41 - 47, Wisdom Plantinga, Malcolm
		Tr	22	Is belief in God irrational? Is denial of God irrational?	
		F	23	<i>no class</i>	
4		Tu	27	Proving and Persuading: Arguments for God's Existence - Ontological	CT: 48-60
		Tr	29	A Cosmological Argument: Assuming the Cosmos has a beginning	CT: 60-68
5	February	Tu	3	A Cosmological Argument: Assuming the Cosmos has no beginning	CT:60-68
		Tr	5	A Teleological Argument: God is like the designer of a complex machine	CT: 68-78
6		Tu	10	In class Test	2 grade points for attending & signing in. Reading TBA
		Tr	12	"One Philosopher's Personal View of Faith" Guest Lecture by Dr. Andrew Stumpf	
Reading Week: February 16th - 20th					
7		Tu	24	A Teleological Argument: The cause of a fine-tuned universe	Bai, Suskind at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cT4zZiHR3s CT:78-82, Radhakrishnan
		Tr	26	Religious Experience	
		F	27	Draft of Essay due by 4:00 PM	
9	March	Tu	3	Ludwig Wittgenstein & Religious Belief	Wittgenstein
		Tr	5	The logical & evidential forms of the problem of evil	CT:86-112, Mackie, Rowe
10		Tu	10	Theodicy: The mirror of evil	Stumpf, Video (in class): Weapons of the Spirit (Pierre Sauvage)
		Tr	12	Review	
		F	13	Essay due by 4:00 PM	
		Tu	17	Miracles	CT: 132-136, Hume
		Tr	19	Religion and Morality	CT: 172-193
11		Tu	24	Can there be religious faith without a divine reality?	CT: 172-179, Cahn
		Tr	26	Religious Diversity	CT: 137-138, Tolstoy, Whittaker
12	April	Tu	31	Review	
		Tr	2	Final Test	

* Charles Taliaferro, [Philosophy of Religion: A Beginner's Guide](#) (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009)