

## Philosophy of Religion

Among other things, religions make claims about the fundamental nature of reality. In this class, we will use philosophical reasoning to consider whether we have good reasons to accept these claims. (We will focus primarily on the claims about God made in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but, at times, we will also discuss questions which arise in other religious traditions.) The primary questions we will discuss are (1) whether the physical world is all that exists, (2) whether the world has a purpose, (3) whether, if there is a God, God is good, (4) whether God has any particular plans for us, and (5) whether it can be rational to accept religious claims without evidence. In order to answer these questions, we will need to answer some others, such as whether it's ever rational to believe in miracles and whether morality can exist without God. In the final weeks of the class, we will have a vote to determine what other issues we'll discuss.

### **Tentative Course Outline (remember, often you will only be asked to read part of a piece):**

"Moralizing in Public," Anita Allen

#### **I. Is the physical world all there is?**

"The Presumption of Atheism," Anthony Flew

"The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe," William Lane Craig

#### **II. Does the world have a purpose?**

"The Fine-Tuning Design Argument," Robin Collins

"The Ultimate Boeing 747," Richard Dawkins

"The Intrinsic Probability of Theism," Calum Miller

#### **III. Is there a good God?**

"Ontological Arguments for God's Existence," Laura Garcia

"The Argument from Religious Experience," Kai-man Kwan

"In Defense of Non-Natural, Non-Theistic Moral Realism," Erik Wielenberg

"The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," William Rowe

"Some Major Strands of Theodicy," Richard Swinburne

"The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," Stephen Wykstra

"On the Problem of Paradise," Laura Francis Callahan

"Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," Marilyn McCord Adams

"Moral Indulgences," Rebecca Chan and Dustin Crummett

#### **IV. Does God have any interest in us?**

“Of Miracles,” David Hume  
“The Argument from Miracles,” Tim and Lydia McGrew  
“The Hiddenness of God,” Robert McKim  
Excerpts from *A Grottesque in the Garden*, Hud Hudson

#### **V. Belief without sufficient evidence?**

“Theology and Falsification,” Anthony Flew, R.M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell  
“When is Faith Rational?,” Lara Buchak  
“Pascal’s Wager Defended,” William Lycan and George Schlesinger

#### **VI. People’s choice**

In any time that remains after this material has been covered, we’ll discuss whatever people want to talk about: I’ll provide a list of possible topics, and we’ll take a vote. (People will also be free to suggest topics.) Possible topics include issues as diverse as whether it’s possible for us to survive death, whether there will be animals in heaven, how we should understand God’s attributes, whether God has a gender, whether more than one religion could be true, whether church and state should be separate, religious ethics, the relationship between science and religion, and whether we might all be God’s imaginary friends.

#### **Texts:**

Readings for this class will be posted on Sakai. Oftentimes, you will not be responsible for the entire piece; this is both because I want to keep the length of your readings manageable and because many texts include parts which aren’t too important for our purposes (for instance, those parts may address objections which we won’t focus on, or attack a view which we won’t discuss.) However, I will usually post the whole thing in case anyone is interested in reading non-assigned parts of it, or in case anyone would find having the entire piece helpful when writing their papers. (E.g., I may post an entire article, but you may only need to read one or two sections of it.) I will post “reading instructions” on Sakai which will tell you which parts of the assigned materials are required reading. In the case of difficult pieces, these instructions may also include a brief explanation to help you understand what the author is arguing for, some definitions, and so on. Doing the readings ahead of time will help you understand the material better and participate in class more fully. If I think people are not doing the readings, I may give pop quizzes on them which will count towards your participation grade.

#### **Assignments and rubric:**

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

Participation: 20%

First exam: 18%  
Second exam: 22%  
First paper: 18%  
Second paper: 22%

*Participation:* A major part of your participation grade will just be showing up. After two unexcused absences, your participation grade will seriously suffer. However, to get an A in participation, you should also (naturally) participate in class. A big part of philosophy is just *talking* to people. You understand your own views better by learning to articulate them to other people; you get a sense of alternatives by listening to other people articulate their views to you; you refine your views by listening to how people who disagree with you respond to them, and by responding to their responses; and so on. Each of you has different skills, different perspectives, and a different set of life experiences, and so has unique things to contribute to our investigation of philosophical issues. I know that some people *really* don't like talking in class, even when they understand and are interested in the material; if this is your situation, talk to me and we'll work something out.

During discussions, you should also practice good classroom etiquette. We will talk about some sensitive and controversial topics in this class. Some of the authors we read, and some of the students in the class, will hold views which other students find silly, morally wrong, offensive, and possibly hurtful. It is fine to disagree, and to *passionately* disagree, with the authors we read, or other students, or me; the fact that people disagree about philosophical questions is why we have to work so hard on them. But it's important, insofar as it's feasible, to state one's own views, and to express one's disagreements with others, in a way that's considerate and respectful towards the other participants in the conversation. At the same, if something happens in class that makes you uncomfortable, let me know and I'll see what can be done about it.

*Exams:* You will have two exams, each of which will consist of a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and short essay questions. The exams exist to test your knowledge of the material we've read. At least a week before the exam, you'll get a study guide which points out particular things which you ought to know.

*Papers:* You'll also have two papers due, each of which should be about 1800 words long. The papers exist to give you a chance to *do* philosophy. You'll be asked to select an author we've read whose position you disagree with, argue against their position, and anticipate and argue against the response they might give to your objection. At least two weeks before the papers are due, you'll be given a more specific prompt with guidelines about how to write the paper and the criteria I'll use when grading it. If you have questions during the paper writing process, or if you want feedback on a draft, I'll be happy to answer any questions you have during my office hours.