REL 3463: God: Concepts, Issues, and Debates
Fall 2015
MWF – 4th Period
MAT018

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Office Hours: Wednesday, 12:30-2:30PM & Thursday 12-2PM

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines theism, non-theism, and atheism in a comparative perspective. More specifically, we will examine how different “Western” and “Eastern” religions have dealt with the idea and experience of the divine. Topics include theistic proofs and their critics, the problem of evil, nihilism and its consequences, revelation, and the relation between faith and reason. In particular, we will focus on the implication of science for the belief in god(s), discussing the arguments of the “new atheists” and the work of neuro-scientists and cognitive psychologies on the origin, function, and experience of religion.

OBJECTIVES

1. To provide a historical overview of the theological, philosophical, and ethical questions surrounding Western and Eastern understandings of god.

2. To introduce students to traditional and contemporary forms of argumentation in theology and philosophy of religion.

3. To explore comparative frameworks for the study of religion.

4. To strengthen students’ critical thinking and their writing and expository skills.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Three Take-Home Exams: These take-home exams will contain a section on definitions of key terms and a choice of essay questions addressing the main issues raised in the readings, lectures, and class discussions. Since students will have at least a week to complete each of these assignment, I expect essays to be not only well-developed, with good grammar, spelling, and syntax, but also analytical substantive, making explicit references to the readings. Each exam will be worth 20% of your final grade. The exams will be due in class on Monday, October 5th, Monday, November 9th, and during final exam week for the third one.

2. Final Paper (10-12 pages) on a topic related to the course and chosen in consultation with the instructor. Students are encouraged to select their topic early on in the semester. They will produce a 2-page paper précis, including a brief abstract sketching the key questions, arguments, and/or hypotheses the paper will address and a short bibliography. The précis will be due on 09/25, and it will count for 5% of your grade. The completed paper will be due at the end of the semester, during exam week, and it will be worth an additional 25% of your final grade (for a total of 30%).

3. Attendance and Active Participation. Attendance is mandatory. Absences will be allowed only under very special circumstances, such as a medical emergency, which will need to be properly documented. Students are expected to read all the assigned material carefully before coming to class
and to participate actively in group discussions. The instructor reserves the right to give quizzes at any
time (especially in case students are not doing the readings). Attendance and participation represent 10% of
your final grade.

RULES AND RESOURCES

1. **Plagiarism or cheating:** On the issue of plagiarism and cheating, I operate under a **zero tolerance policy**. I remind you that all UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states: “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code.” Moreover, on all work submitted for credit at the University of Florida, students are bound by the following pledge: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Honor Code (Please see: [http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/)) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Please keep in mind that plagiarism does not consist only in copying verbatim someone else’s material and presenting it as if it were yours. It also includes taking ideas (even paraphrased!) from an author without according him/her proper recognition (through a footnote, for instance).

2. **Incomplete s are strongly discouraged** and will be given only when students who have finished most of the assignments satisfactorily cannot complete the final requirements due to unforeseen events. If this is the case, students must arrange for the incomplete before the end of the semester.

3. **Late papers:** Unless students can present proper, legitimate written documentation (in the form of a medical excuse or a funeral notice, for example) to justify their inability to turn in the assignments on time, I will deduct half a grade (e.g., from A to A-) for every day the paper is late. In case there is a legitimate excuse, the student must arrange with the instructor an alternative due date for the assignment.

4. **Make-up exams and quizzes** will be given only under very special circumstances, such as medical emergencies. In that case, the student will require an official excuse.

5. **Grading Scale:** A: 100-95; A-: 94-90; B+: 89-87; B: 86-84; B-: 83-80; C+: 79-77; C: 76-74; C-: 73-70; D+: 69-67; D: 66-64; D-: 63-60; E: <60.

6. **I expect students to treat each other with civility and respect.** I hope that our debates will be lively and that people will feel free to express their opinions and disagree with each other. However, these opinions and disagreements have to be presented in a manner that is appropriate to an academic setting.

7. Students engaging in any sort of disruptive behavior, including passing notes, reading a newspaper, playing computers games, checking their e-mail, or chatting while lectures and class discussions are taking place, will be asked to leave the classroom. They will be counted as absent for that particular day. **Please turn phones and pagers off during class.**

8. **Please make sure to arrive to class on time.** Late arrivals disrupt the flow of the lectures and discussions, especially for 50-minute classes.

9. **Students with Disabilities.** Students requesting classroom accommodation or special consideration must first register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide documentation to the student, who must then provide this documentation to the instructor when requesting accommodation or special consideration.
10. Academic life can be stressful. Be advised that the UF has resources to help students cope with this stress, including counseling and mental health services. See http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx. For emergencies and matters of safety, call the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 9-11.

11. **Course Evaluations.** Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course based on 10 criteria. These evaluations are conducted online at https://evaluations.ufl.edu. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. I will try to schedule some time in class for you to complete these evaluations. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at https://evaluations.ufl.edu.

**Required Books (Students are responsible for all the following readings)**


**Additional Articles and Book Chapters (Available through CANVAS):**


Aslan, Reza. “Sam Harris and the ‘New Atheists’ aren’t New, aren’t even Atheists” *Salon* http://www.salon.com/2014/11/21/reza_aslan_sam_harris_and_new_atheists_arent_new_arent_e ven_atheists/


These additional articles are marked with an asterisk (*) in the schedule.

**SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS**

Monday 08/24: Introduction to the Course. No Readings.

Wednesday 08/26: The Quest for God: Monotheism
Friday 08/28: God: A Genealogy of the Concept: Christianity

Monday 08/31: God: A Genealogy of the Concept: Islam

I. Does God Exist?

Wednesday 09/02: A Pragmatist Approach: Pascal’s Wager
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 101-103

Friday 09/04: Behind the Wager
Readings: Pascal, “Habit and Conversion” from the *Pensées* (*)

Monday 09/07: LABOR DAY – No Classes

Wednesday 09/09: The Ontological Argument: Saint Anselm and Gaunilo

Friday 09/11: The Ontological Argument Reworked (Plantinga’s Modal Version)
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 181-194

Monday 09/14: The Cosmological Argument I: St Thomas Aquinas

Wednesday 09/16: The Cosmological Argument II: The Kalam Version
Reading: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 210-222

Friday 09/18: The Cosmological Argument III: Critiques
Reading: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 223-231

Monday 09/21: The Teleological Argument I: The Analogical and Anthropic Versions

Wednesday 09/23: The Teleological Argument II
Reading: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, Same

Friday 09/25: The Moral Argument
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 246-257

*** PRECIS FOR THE FINAL COMPARATIVE PAPER DUE IN CLASS ***

II. If God Exists and is Good and Omnipotent, then Why is there Evil and Suffering?

Monday 09/28: God and the Suffering of the Righteous
Readings: *The Book of Job*, chapters 1-21,
Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 289-304

Wednesday 09/30: God and Suffering II
Readings: *The Book of Job*, chapters 22-42
Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 304-314

Friday 10/02: Evil and Nihilism
Reading: Dostoevsky, “The Great Inquisitor” (*)

Monday 10/05: Theodicy I: Evil and Free Will

*** FIRST TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE IN CLASS (covering up to 10/02) ***

Wednesday 10/07: Theodicy II: Soul-Making Theodicy

Friday 10/09: Theodicy III: The Concept of Karma
Reading: Sharma, “Theodicy and the Doctrine of Karma” (*)

III. Challenging Theism: West and East

Monday 10/12: Nietzsche
“The Madman” from the *Gay Science* (*)

Wednesday 10/14: The Buddha
Readings: “Buddhism” in *Anthology of World Scriptures* (*)

Friday 10/16: The First Encounter: The Self
Reading: Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, finish first part
*The Buddha Eye*, 3-10, 21-38

Monday 10/19: The Second Encounter: The World in Flux
Readings: Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, finish second part
*The Buddha Eye*, 83-106, 147-156

Wednesday 10/21: The Third Encounter: The Eternal Return or Emptiness?
Reading: Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, finish fourth part
*The Buddha Eye*, 171-182, 209-216

IV. God after Nietzsche and Zen

Friday 10/23: Recovering Religious Experience: The Mystics

Monday 10/26: Recovering Religious Experience: William James
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 29-44

Wednesday 10/28: Islam and the Problem of Revelation
Reading: Arkoun, “The Notion of Revelation.” (*)
Friday 10/30: Buber I: Religious Existentialism  
Readings: Buber, *I and Thou*, first part

Monday 11/02: Buber II  
Readings: Buber, *I and Thou*, second and third parts

Wednesday 11/04: Beyond Existentialism? God and Liberation  
Readings: Buber, *I and Thou*, Afterword  
Gutiérrez, “God Liberates: God is Life.” (*)

Friday 11/06: HOMECOMING – No Class

Monday 11/09: Critique of Religious Experience  
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 65-77

*** SECOND TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE IN CLASS (Covering up to 11/04) ***

Wednesday 11/11: VETERAN’S DAY – No Class

V. Faith and Reason: Conflict, Co-Existence, and/or Cooperation I: Setting the Debate

Friday 11/13: The Compartmentalization View  
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 547-558

Monday 11/16: The Cooperation View  

Wednesday 11/18: The Incommensurability View  
Readings: Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 559-562

VI. Faith and Reason: Conflict, Co-Existence, and/or Cooperation II: The New Atheism

Friday 11/20: The God Delusion  
Readings: Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Preface, Chapter 1 and 4-5

Monday 11/23: The God Delusion II  
Readings: Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Chapter 8

Wednesday 11/25: THANKSGIVING BREAK – No Class

Friday 11/27: THANKSGIVING BREAK – No Class

Monday 11/30: The God Delusion II  

Wednesday 12/02: Critiques of the New Atheists  
Readings: Plantinga, “Dawkins Confusion” (*)  
Aslan, “Sam Harris and the ‘New Atheists’ . . .” (*)

VII. Faith and Reason: Conflict, Co-Existence, and/or Cooperation III: The Neural God
Friday 12/04: Neurotheology I
Readings: Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*, Chapter 1-3

Monday 12/07: Neurotheology II
Readings: Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*, Chapter 4-6

Wednesday 12/09: Neurotheology III
Readings: Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*, Chapter 7, 9-10, epilogue

*** THIRD TAKE-HOME EXAM AND FINAL PAPER DUE DURING EXAM WEEK ***