

Sample syllabus: Philosophy of Religion
(intermediate undergrad)

Instructor: Dr. Colin Smith (he/him)

Course description: In this course, we will study perennial questions in philosophical theology. We will ask, is there a good argument for or against the existence of God? What would make such an argument good? When various societies talk about ‘God,’ are they talking about the same thing or something different? How do we know that? In what ways (if any) are theology and liberatory social movements connected, and how (if at all) can we use theology and organized religion to foment socio-political change? In what ways (if at all) does theological practice intersect with issues concerning race, gender, sexuality, and class? Do the advances in the human and natural sciences threaten religious practice as traditionally conceived? If so, what (if anything) makes the mode of scientific inquiry so different from, and allegedly better than, theological practice? And given all this, *how should we live our lives?*

We will presuppose no background in philosophy or religion, will not privilege one set of views over another, and will discuss in a manner open to the perspectives of believers, non-believers, and the undecided alike. Taking this class will, however, necessarily require an honest investment from the student in asking and attempting to answer complex, difficult, and occasionally frustrating questions about the natures and values of philosophical, theological, and scientific modes of inquiry.

Learning Objectives:

- To develop critical reading and thinking skills.
- To develop academic and professional writing skills.
- To become critically conversant in the best and most compelling rational arguments from philosophical theology concerning God's existence, the nature (if any) of divinity, and theological praxis.
- To improve understanding of world religious practices in their sameness and difference, and their relations to and contrasts with other modes of inquiry, including science and philosophy.

Textbook: No texts or other items are required for purchase in this course. All readings have been made available through the course Canvas page. These files were taken from the university library's electronic database.

Grading:

10% Participation

10% In-class reading responses (total of eight, lowest two dropped)

15% Average of two short writing assignments

25% Midterm exam

25% Final exam

15% Critical discussion: video or podcast

10% Participation: Students will be expected to demonstrate genuine engagement with and investment in the course content, as well an understanding derived from the readings. Students are required to prepare for each class session by completing the reading indicated on the course calendar below. Completing all readings is a necessary condition for success in this course. Attendance will be taken.

10% Reading responses: Eight reading responses will be given on unannounced days throughout the semester. Any student who has completed the reading should have no trouble passing. In calculating the final grade, the lowest two scores will be dropped. (Hint: These will start appearing sometime around the third week.)

15% Short writing assignments: Two writing assignments on the natures of faith, reason, morality, and the relationship between theology and the way we live our lives will be assigned throughout the semester. A grading rubric will be provided.

25% Midterm exam and 25% Final exam: Two exams will be given on the dates specified on the course calendar below.

15% Critical discussion video or podcast: Students must submit a structured discussion assignment. There are two possible formats: (1) a video presentation (~10 minutes); or (2) a podcast assignment (~15 minutes). The goal is to engage in Socratic discourse, as we will discuss, about a key aspect of philosophical theology with an “authority figure” such as parent, professor, or religious leader. A set of prompts, grading rubric, and explanation of standards will be provided.

(Additional boilerplate information removed; see previous syllabus.)

Unit 1: Theology and philosophy

Week 1: Introduction and sacred texts

Bhagavad Gita, discourses 1-4 and 9

Book of Genesis 1-22

Qu'ran, Al-Fatihah and Al-Baqarah

Week 2: Philosophical theology: dogma, rationality, and revelation

Norman Kretzmann, "The Nature of Natural Theology"

Scott MacDonald, "What Is Philosophical Theology?"

Week 3: Religious pluralism

John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation"

Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of World Religions"

Unit 2: Arguments for and against God's existence

Week 4: Ontological and cosmological arguments

Richard E. Creel, "The Ontological Argument"

Alexander Pruss, "Some Recent Progress on the Cosmological Argument"

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 due: Faith, rationality, and morality

Week 5: The design argument

Robin Collins, "A Scientific Argument for the Existence of God"

Elliott Sober, "The Design Argument"

Week 6: The problem of evil

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

Eleonore Stump, "Knowledge, Freedom, and the Problem of Evil"

Week 7: The problem of divine hiddenness (and the Cognitive Science of Religion)

Helen De Cruz, "Divine Hiddenness and the Cognitive Science of Religion"

Week 8: Midterm exam

Catch up, midterm exam review

MIDTERM EXAM given in regular classroom during class hours

Unit 3: Theology, critique, and liberation

Week 9: Liberation theology

Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Chapter One: "Theology, A Critical Reflection" (pg. 3-15) and Chapter Two: "Liberation and Development" (pg. 21-37).

Week 10: Black theology and Marxist thought

Cornel West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought"

Week 11: Womanist and queer theologies

Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman"

Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*, Introduction and

Chapter 1: "Black Women's Experience and Queer Black Women's Lives" (pg. 1-14)

and Chapter 2: "Philosophical Background to Queer Theology" (pg. 15-27)

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 due: Theology as a way of life

Unit 4: Atheism and the critique of faith

Week 12: Atheism: religion as a product

Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (excerpts)

Week 13: Religious extremism and faith

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (excerpts)

Alister McGrath, *Dawkins's God* (excerpts)

Week 14: Faith: theistic and atheistic perspectives

Watch YouTube video: The Dawkins-McGrath debate

Video or podcast assignment due

Week 15: Course conclusion

No reading -- catch up, conclude course, review for final exam

FINAL EXAM given sometime during finals week