

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

PR 324
Fall 2012

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Skidmore College

An investigation of the fundamental paradoxes of religious belief. Questions to be considered will include the arguments for the existence of God, the problem of suffering and evil, the nature of mystical knowledge, and the rise of modern religious skepticism. We will explore religious skepticism, religious faith, and religious diversity. We will emphasize Western religions, especially Christianity, but will give attention to other Western and Asian religious traditions.

Learning Goals:

1. Explore some of the basic philosophical issues about religion, as mentioned above, by focusing on three central issues: religious skepticism, religious faith, and religious diversity.
2. Study selected texts by important philosophers of religion.
3. Focus on key Western religious ideas, especially in Christianity as our case study, but also consider some key Asian religious ideas.
4. Place philosophical inquiry in the broader context of religious life by surveying key elements in five religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, including some study of the Bible.
5. Develop subtle reading, writing, and analytical skills, including critical evaluation, by discussing readings and writing essays about them.
6. Develop with me and others in the class a fruitful way to discuss controversial and sensitive issues about religion.
7. Explore your own views about religion and about philosophy to develop your own philosophical and religious values.

I would be delighted to talk with you outside of class. Make an appointment or drop by during my office hours:

Office hours: Monday & Wednesday: 2:30- 3:30
Tuesday & Thursday: 11:30-12:30
Friday: 1:45- 3:00

Office: Ladd 217 **Email:** jsmith@skidmore.edu
Office phone: (518) 580-5407 (Please don't call me at home.)

Texts:

1. Dewey, John, A Common Faith (New Haven: Yale University, 1934).
2. Ehrman, Bart D., God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer

- Our Most Important Question—why We Suffer (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
3. Freud, Sigmund, The Future of an Illusion, tr. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961).
 4. Hick, John H., Philosophy of Religion, Fourth Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963/1990).
 5. Kierkegaard, Soren, Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio, tr. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1985).
 6. Prothero, Stephen, God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World--and Why their Differences Matter (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
 7. Rowe, William, & Wainwright, William (ed.), Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings, Third Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973). [PRSR]
 8. Smith, Huston, Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).
 9. Tillich, Paul, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

Schedule of Assignments:

RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM

- 6: What is the Philosophy of Religion?--The Judaic-Christian Concept of God (Hick pp. 1-14).
- 11: Arguments for God's existence:
1. Design (or Teleological) Argument (Hick pp. 23-26; PRSR 155-172). P1.1
 2. First Cause & Cosmological Argument (Hick pp. 20-23); optional: PRSR 126-132, 137-140. P1.2
 3. Moral Argument (Hick 28-29); optional: PRSR 194-196. P1.3
 4. Ontological Argument (PRSR 95-97; Hick pp. 15-20); optional: PRSR 97-108. P1.4
- 13: Freud, The Future of an Illusion (all: pp. 5-71)); P1.5
Arguments against the Existence of God (Hick, Ch 3). P1.6
- 18: Dewey, A Common Faith (all: Ch I-III). P1.7, 1.8, 2.1
**Prothero, Judaism (Ch 7).
- 20: Ehrman, God's Problem: Ch 1-2 (pp. 1-55); P2.2
Ch 3 (pp. 75-90 only).
- 25: Ehrman, God's Problem: Ch 5 (pp.132-157 only); P2.3
Ch 6-7 (pp. 159-227);

- Ch 8 (pp. 255-260 only);
On free will (pp. 119-123 & 261-278). P2.4
- **Prothero, Christianity (Ch 2).
- 27: The Problem of Evil (Hick Ch 4). P2.5
- 2: The 'Soul-Making' Theodicy (PRSR 251-259); P2.6
reread Hick, pp. 39-48;
Introduction to Section III (PRSR pp.210-215); P2.7
Hume and Dostoyevsky on Problem of Evil (PRSR 224-241); P2.8
Problem of Evil, Varieties of Atheism (PRSR 242-247, 249-251) P3.1
- 4: The Problem of Verification (Hick Ch 8); P3.2
Proudfoot, Introduction on William James (handout). P3.3
- **Prothero, Islam (Ch 1).

RELIGIOUS FAITH

- 9: Pascal, Clifford, James on Faith (PRSR 444-446, 456-472); P3.4
Revelation and Faith (Hick pp. 56-62 & 64-67 & 80-81 only) P3.5
Hume & Tillich on Miracles (PRSR 492-499, 433-435, 507-509) P3.6
- 11: Introduction to Section V (PRSR pp 358-359 on Alston & 430-435
Rational Belief without Proof (Hick Ch 6). P3.7
- 16: Ehrman, God's Problem, pp.237-242. P3.8
Immortality & Resurrection (PRSR 540-545; Hick Ch 10); P4.1
- **Prothero, Hinduism & Buddhism (Ch 4-5).
- 18: Karma & Reincarnation (Hick Ch 11). P4.2
- 23: Essay #1 due at start of class; discuss topic in class.
- 25: W.C. Smith, Faith and Belief (handout). P4.3
- 30: Dynamics of Faith (Tillich Ch I-II, V-VI); P4.4
Tillich's Conception of Faith (Hick, pp. 62-64 only).
- 1: Religious Language (Tillich Ch III; Hick Ch. 7; handouts). P4.5
- 6: God, Abraham, Isaac (Genesis handout; Kierkegaard 41-95). P4.6
- 8: God, Abraham, Isaac (Kierkegaard 96-147). P4.7

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

- 13: Prothero, Introduction (pp. 1-24); P4.8
Cannon, Six Ways of Being Religious (handout). P5.1
- 15: Religious Diversity (Hick Ch 9); P5.2
The Pluralistic Hypothesis (PRSR 313-327); P5.3
A Religious Theory of Religion (PRSR 327-352). P5.4

- 20: Smith, *Forgotten Truth* (Ch. 1-5). P5.5, P5.6
22: Thanksgiving break
- 27: Stace, Zaehner, Smart (background for Katz; PRSR pp.356-383)
Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" (handout). P5.7
29: Forman, "Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the
Perennial Psychology" (handout). P5.8
- 4: Progress reports #1- 5 on final essay.
6: Progress reports #6-10 on final essay.
- 11: Progress reports #11-16 on final essay.
- 17 (Monday): Essay #2 due at 12:00 noon sharp in Ladd 217.

Course Requirements:

1. **Participation** in class discussion is essential to your learning in this course, and I encourage you to participate in discussions actively.

a. Attendance is required at **every** class (unless there is a certified medical reason or family emergency or religious holiday. Missing even one class will severely damage this component of your grade. The following guidelines express my expectations about attendance and participation:

- A or A- = attend every class and make at least one useful contribution to discussion in every class.
- B+ or B = attend every class and make regular contributions.
- B- = attend every class and contribute occasionally.
- C or D or F = one or more absences no matter how much you talk.

Please don't come to class late or leave during class unless it is absolutely necessary. Please be sure that your cell phone and other electronics are turned off. Laptop use is not permitted during class unless you have special permission from me.

Your understanding of class discussions, and the quality of class discussion itself, depends on how well you have prepared the reading assignments, so read the assignments carefully. Readings about philosophy and religion are difficult, so I strongly recommend underlining or highlighting passages and outlining or taking notes on the reading. Often you will need to read the assignment, or part of it, more than once. Read actively, not passively, by raising questions and criticisms about the readings.

Note that this course earns four, not three, credits. This means

that this course involves considerable more work than a three credit course. Compared to a three credit course, each of our classes will meet an extra 30 minutes longer (1 hour 50 minutes instead of 1 hour 20 minutes). The Skidmore College guideline is that students should study two hours outside of class for every hour of class time. Thus I expect you to spend about 3 1/2 hours preparing for each class, and I have assigned work based on that expectation. I suggest that you work out a study schedule that sets aside a regular 3 1/2 hour period of time to prepare for each class.

b. Study Guides: Written assignments on the readings will be due almost every class. These will be graded pass/fail. Have them finished and ready to turn in at the beginning of class. Late study guides will receive no credit or only partial credit.

c. Provocations: Five times during the semester I will ask you to pair up with someone else in class, preferably with someone you don't know. After reading the assignment, you must meet with your partner before class meets and think of one point about a specific passage in the reading which you will bring up in class to "provoke" discussion. The point might be a criticism that sparks a controversy, or you could simply raise a question or offer a comment or highlight an important subtle point. Offer a point that goes beyond what the casual reader would normally get from the reading. Make connections to other readings from our course, if possible. This is not a formal presentation but a brief comment on a specific passage to focus our class discussion. Class periods with Provocations are marked P1.1, etc.

d. Progress Report: During our last two classes, everyone will have 15-20 minutes to discuss the topic of their final essay with the class. More instructions about this will be given later.

The combination of the above four requirements a-d will count 20% of your final course grade.

2. Two essays (80%): Two essays, due on Tuesday, October 23 and Monday, December 17 (the first day of exam week), will each count 40% of your final course grade. I will provide detailed instructions for each essay later. Each essay must be typed (double-spaced) and a maximum of 10 pages long.

There is no final exam for this course.

Eligibility for A or A- or extra credit: To be eligible for a course grade of A or A-, or to earn general extra credit, you must read the following five chapters in Prothero's God Is Not One: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We will

probably not have time to discuss any of these during class, but I will try to schedule a brief discussion session for each outside of class, which you must attend to receive credit. ** marks the place in the syllabus when you should have read the chapter indicated. These chapters provide a general introduction to the religious traditions that we will be reflecting on philosophically.

Learning Disability: If you have a certified learning disability, please let me know as soon as possible. Even if you don't have a certified disability, if you have concerns about how to learn in this course, don't hesitate to discuss them with me.

Honor Code: Skidmore has a strong Honor Code that I will strictly enforce. I will discuss issues about plagiarism when I give you the essay topics. Read the Honor Code section in the Student Handbook about "Academic Policies," as well as the section on "Documentation and Plagiarism" in The Skidmore Guide to Writing."