

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION SYLLABUS

In the event of a significant disruption of course activities because of an extraordinary environmental situation (e.g., COVID-19), this syllabus is subject to change. Any and all changes will be communicated with students in as timely a manner as the situation allows.

Course Description and Overview

In a world filled with many varying (and sometimes conflicting!) worldviews and cosmologies, it can be difficult to answer some of life's hardest questions: Who and what are we? What happens when we die? What is our purpose and how do we live "Good" lives? Who or what determines those categories? This class is designed to look at and analyze these questions through the lens of philosophical investigation, with particular focus on the phenomenological nature of religious claims and the ethical implications they carry. This course will also examine some of the major arguments put forth by philosophers about the nature and existence of God, the problem of Evil in the world, and the different ways these arguments impact authentic religious expression.

Faculty Contact Information

Name of Instructor: Marshall Nelson
Office Location: 3600 Meadowview Dr. Room 14
Phone Number: 940-497-0059 Ext. 537
Office Hours: Mon-Fri. 7:30-8:00 a.m.
Email Address: mnelson@responsiveedtx.com

Measurable Student Learning Outcomes

1. Identify key philosophical and theological terms as they relate to the claims of major world religions and their metaphysical claims.
2. Be able to identify and understand key philosophical and theological figures related to the philosophy of religion.
3. Understand and analyze competing ontological, teleological, and ethical arguments stemming from the hermeneutics of religious claims.

Course Materials and Supplies

Textbooks:

World Philosophies: A Historical Introduction by David E. Cooper

Excerpts from various other classic texts used in class will be available online.

Supplies:

Personal computer access, and notebook/paper as desired.

Activities, Assignments, and Grading Policy

This course will have weekly discussions that will be assessed on Canvas. Every week there will be a discussion board to post questions on the assigned readings we are working through in class. We will also have a short exam at the end of every lecturing unit. All assignments and papers need to be submitted on Canvas no later than 11:59 p.m. on the assigned due date. **No** late assignments, without extenuating circumstances, will be accepted.

Major Course Assignments

For this class, you will be able to choose paper topics analyzing each of the major world religion categories. You must complete **three papers** from the prompts below (you may email me if you would like to do a unique paper topic, so long as you message me at least two weeks in advance from the due date). Papers must be between 1750-2000 words, and a detailed rubric is available on Canvas for all assignments. The first paper is due on **March 10th**, the second on **April 21st**, and the third is due **May 8th**.

Topic 1: One of the major issues of a monotheistic God who is omnipotent and omnibenevolent is the Problem of Evil, or, why a Good and All-Powerful God could/would allow evil in the world. The attempt to explain this is called *theodicy*. Write a paper explaining how each of the Abrahamic religions provides a unique *apologia* for God from their theology.

Topic 2: How does religion explain the Silence of God? Based on what we studied in class, do you think it is possible for humans to “experience” God if God is transcendent and non-empirical? Use explicit references from theologians and philosophers we discussed in class and in your own research.

Topic 3: American culture often refers to the “Judeo-Christian” roots of our society and its philosophy. After studying both religions’ teleological and ethical suppositions this semester, do you think this is an accurate assessment of our culture? If not, can you provide a more accurate assessment/title for our country’s predominant worldview?

Topic 4: Reincarnation teaches that our present lives are the result of our previous accomplishments and sins via karma. How would someone following a Dharmic belief system successfully defend this concept to a person who has spent a lifetime suffering from serious abuse or persecution (like the Holocaust)? Can this morally align with our ideas of Justice?

Topic 5: Buddhism teaches the doctrine of Non-self. If this is the case, how would a Buddhist explain why we should not be “selfish,” or compassionate to other non-selves? What actually gets reincarnated if we are not “Real” in the sense we normally think of? How does this compare to Hume’s idea of the Self, and does it have implications for that as well?

Topic 6: Daoism is focused on understanding the Dao and living in harmony with Nature. Compare and contrast the Dao with the Western idea of Natural Law and its implications on philosophy, teleology, and jurisprudence. On what do they agree, and where do they differ in their worldview practices?

Topic 7: Write a paper comparing Daoism or Ruism to Western Enlightenment and skepticism. Would you say that the humanism and skepticism of Zhuangzi, for example, is congruent and compatible with the writings of Western skeptics like Hume or Voltaire? Why or why not?

Topic 8: Several major Counter-Enlightenment figures played a part in the revival of *radical* religion (the desire for religion to return to a more zealous and fundamentalist approach to theology and practice). Research and analyze this link along with the specific philosophers and theologians involved, then determine whether you believe it was a logical progression of thought from the former to the latter.

Calendar of Classes, Sessions, Activities, Readings, Examinations & Assignments

Week of Jan. 17th: Syllabus Overview, Hermeneutics and Praxis: Why are People Religious?

Week of Jan. 23rd: The Abrahamic Religions: Monotheism and Defining “God”

Week of Jan. 30th: Arguments For God: Avicenna, Aquinas, and Maimonides

Week of Feb. 6th: Arguments Against God: Silence of God and The Problem of Evil

Week of Feb. 13th: From Euthyphro to Kierkegaard: Is God “Good?” (**Exam 1**)

Week of Feb. 27th: You Can’t Escape the Wheel: An Overview of Dharmic Philosophy

Week of March 6th: Cartesianism and Maya: Is Empirical Reality an Illusion?

Week of March 13th: **Spring Break- No Classes**

Week of March 20th: The Nature of the (Non)Self: Buddha and Hume

Week of March 27th: Natural Law and Dharma; the Dao and Dasein

Week of April 3rd: Eschatology and Ethics: Reincarnation, the Afterlife, and Justice

Week of April 10th: “Humanistic” Faith in Ruism and Daoism (**Exam 2**)

Week of April 17th: Materialism: Enlightenment, Marxist, and Postmodern Theology

Week of April 24th: Counter Enlightenment and New Religious Praxis

Week of May 1st: Conflicting Cosmologies, Authenticity, and Final Discussion

Week of May 8th: **Final Exam Week**

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism comes from the Latin word *plagium*, which meant to steal or kidnap, and I will treat instances of it with the same severity as those crimes. To steal another person's intellectual work, whether it is your classmate's or anyone else's, is no different to me than if you stole any of their other possessions. Not only does it show a lack of moral character on a student's part, which is a quintessential aspect of being a scholar at a classical academy, but it demonstrates that they have no respect for their peers, their school, or themselves if they are willing to mar their own educational and ethical growth over something as small as a grade. All plagiarized work will receive an automatic zero and further punitive measures (detention, suspension, etc.) will be explored. If you are struggling to develop your thoughts or complete assignments: *please* seek me out. It is why I am here, and I want to help you create the best work that *you* can produce: not someone else. Assignments will be randomly checked for plagiarism using Turnitin.com.

Attendance Policy

Consistent attendance is vital to academic success and is expected of all students. Grades are determined by academic performance, and instructors may give students written notice that attendance related to specific classroom activities is required. Absences do not exempt students from academic requirements. Excessive absences, even if documented, may result in a student failing the course. Excused absences are within the purview of the instructor. Students must consult with instructors regarding make-up work.