

Instructor: J. Neil Otte (jeffotte@buffalo.edu)
Class Room: #
Fall 20--

PHILOSOPHY 212: PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Course Description

This is a course on the *philosophy* of religion—a special branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and existence of God, the nature of religious experience, the status of evidence for religious beliefs, and the relationship between religion and science, among other concerns. We will begin by reading Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, as well as essays by Thomas Morris and Paul Tillich. The hope here is to bring one of our main subjects (God) and our methodology into focus. We will then begin looking at issues surrounding the existence of God. This will include looking at arguments that purport to prove that God exists, and then we will look at special problems concerning free will and omnipotence. We will then look at an argument that God does not exist, some articles concerning the existence of miracles, the afterlife, and some questions about how we can claim we know anything at all about God.

At this point, we turn to issues of more general concern. Do science and religion conflict? What is the nature of religious experience? Are religious claims capable of being true? We conclude with two broader issues. The first concerns the fact that a majority of people in the world do not share one consistent set of religious beliefs. How should religious people respond to this diversity? Finally, some cognitive scientists now argue that human beings have evolved to have instincts that propel us to be religious, and that religious behavior helps society solve complex problems. We will look at one of these theories, and examine both the good and bad effects religion can have on society. Every week, you will need to spend time preparing the assigned readings. This means not only reading them, but also taking the time to clearly comprehend the argument in the text. The course will include online quizzes, in-class participation, two exams, and a final 5-7 page research paper.

Required Readings

All required readings will be posted as pdfs to BlackBoard. Each week, you will need to print them off, prepare them, and bring them to class.

Recommended (but Not Required) Reading

[The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#): This is a valuable tool for clarifying ideas, but should **not** be used as a source in papers. Wikipedia can be very good, but the Stanford Encyclopedia is curated by experts and its articles are edited by philosophers. This is also true of the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

Why Philosophy

I find a majority of students love philosophy, but increasingly, I encounter students who forego majoring because they are worried about paying student loans and getting a job. Contrary to their reputation, philosophy undergraduates do very well on the job market compared to many other majors. See [this link](#) for further information about pursuing philosophy. You don't need to choose between studying what you love and getting a job.

Learning Outcomes

COURSE GOALS	METHOD OF EVALUATION
Demonstrate comprehension of important articles in philosophy of religion	Weekly Online Quizzes and Exams
Actively analyze and critique textual arguments	Online participation
Develop clear, original criticisms of the arguments and positions we read.	Assignments, Papers

Grade by Percentage

40%	Participation, Assignments, and Quizzes
15%	Exam 1
20%	Exam 2
10%	Paper 1
15%	Paper 2

Grading Scale

A = 92-100%
A- = 90-91%
B+ = 88-89%
B = 82-87%
B- = 80-81%
C+ = 78-79%
C = 72-77%
C- = 70-71%
D+ = 68-69%
D = 60-67%
F = 59% and below

Online Reading Quizzes

Every article we read will be accompanied by an online reading quiz. These quizzes are meant to ensure that you are reading carefully, and to help you focus on the main issues and arguments in the text. Some quizzes may ask you to provide a definition from the text, while others might ask you to spell out the author's argument in your own words.

Examinations

There will be two exams: a midterm and a final. These will cover only the material within those periods. A week in advance, you will receive a list of possible short answer essay questions (twenty to twenty-five questions). You will need to prepare answers to these, and I recommend you work with others. On the day of the exams, you will not be able to use any preparation. The exams will present you with five of the possible questions from the list and you will need to answer four (i.e. you will need to choose one answer to leave blank). This means each answer will be worth 25% points. Answers should be clear, concise, and complete.

Paper

Students will need to write one research papers of 8-10 pages (not including the reference page). These papers can criticize one of our authors, or articulate an original argument on the basis of the evidence. You will need to run your topic by me in advance. The paper will need to use [MLA format](#) and include a separate page for references. See the paper topics and instruction handout for more details.

Accessibility Resources

Students who require accommodation should contact me within the first three days of the session, so that we can make appropriate arrangements with the accessibility office. To contact Accessibility Resources, please follow [this link](#).

Academic Honesty

As the world is increasingly online, it has become very easy to present the words and ideas of others as our own. This can be particularly tempting in an online course like this. *Resist this temptation*. All student work may be scanned by online plagiarism checkers, which are remarkably good at catching plagiarized work. Students who are discovered to have plagiarized will be dealt with according to the university's academic integrity policy. In particular, no work that includes plagiarism will be graded or allowed to be made up, and evidence of plagiarism may be grounds for filing a report with the academic integrity office. It is your responsibility to know what plagiarism is and to avoid it. There will be no exceptions. To educate yourself on what counts as plagiarism, please visit [this link](#) or reach out to me if you have specific questions. For more information on the University at Buffalo's policy on academic integrity, visit [this link](#).

Course Schedule

I. GOD, SOULS, MIRACLES, AND EVIDENCE

1. Thinking about God: an Introduction

- a. Euthyphro by Plato
- b. The Concept of God by Thomas Morris
- c. The Reality of God by Paul Tillich

2. Source Material

- a. Excerpts from Aristotle and Plato
- b. Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good by Stephen Menn
- c. Letters by St. Augustine
- d. Summa Theologica by Aquinas

3. Is the Concept of God Coherent?

- a. The Logic of Omnipotence by Harry G. Frankfurt
- b. God's Foreknowledge and Human Free Will Are Compatible by Alvin Plantinga
- c. The God Beyond Time by Hugh J. McCann
- d. Can God Be Free? by William Rowe

4. Can We Prove God Exists?

- a. The Ontological Argument by St. Anselm
- b. An Examination of the Cosmological Argument by William Rowe
- c. The Watch and the Watchmaker by William Paley

5. Why Would God Let Bad Things Happen to Good People?

- a. Evil and Omnipotence by J.L. Mackie
- b. The Inductive Argument from Evil Against the Existence of God by William Rowe

6. Do Miracles Exist?

- a. Of Miracles by David Hume
- b. Of 'Of Miracles' by Peter Van Inwagen

7. Is There Life After Death?

- a. The Finality of Death by Bertrand Russell
- b. Personal Identity and Life After Death by Jeffrey Olen

8. Evidence and Pragmatic Justification for Religious Belief

- a. The Wager by Blaise Pascal
- b. The Ethics of Belief by W. K. Clifford
- c. Rational Theistic Belief Without Proof by John Hick
- d. The Presumption of Atheism by Anthony Flew

II. NATURALISM AND PLURALISM

9. Science and Religion

- a. Faith and Science: Lessons from the Galileo Case and Message on Evolution by Pope John Paul II
- b. Is Religion a Science? by Richard Dawkins

10. Religious Experience and Language

- a. Language, Truth, and Logic by Ayer
- b. The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James
- c. The Gay Science by Nietzsche

11. Religious Pluralism

- a. Religious Pluralism and Ultimate Reality by John Hick
- b. A Defense of Religious Exclusivism by Alvin Plantinga
- c. Hick's Religious Pluralism and "Reformed Epistemology"—A Middle Ground by David Basinger
- d. Excerpts on Madhyamaka and Yogācāra from Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass
- e. An Introduction to Zen Buddhism by D.T. Suzuki

12. Have We Evolved to Be Religious?

- a. Functional Origins of Religious Concepts by Pascal Boyer
- b. Why Believe in God? by Justin Barrett