

Philosophy and Religion
PHIL 2030, MWF 1:25-2:20
Spring Semester, 2014

Syllabus

Professor John Martin instructor, 259B McMicken, office hours Wednesday, after class, email john.martin@uc.edu, voice mail 556-6339. Please use email if possible

A link to the class web page, which includes the syllabus, announcements, readings, and links to readings is at:

[http://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy and Religion/](http://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/)

Text to be purchased:

J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford U. Press)

http://www.amazon.com/Miracle-Theism-Arguments-Against-Existence/dp/019824682X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1382137328&sr=1-1

Leibniz, G.W., *Theodicy* (Open Court). (Available also online [Leibniz, Theodicy.](#))

http://www.amazon.com/Theodicy-Essays-Goodness-Freedom-Origin/dp/0875484379/ref=sr_1_1_title_0_main?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1382136897&sr=1-1

Nagel, Thomas, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford U. Press)

http://www.amazon.com/Mind-Cosmos-Materialist-Neo-Darwinian-Conception/dp/0199919755/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1382137186&sr=1-1

Additional assigned readings may be downloaded from the course web page

Introduction. The Problem of Faith and the Critical Thinker. The main goal of this course is to confront what is probably the greatest intellectual challenge facing any serious person who thinks and feels deeply about religion. What should you believe, and why? The answer is far from clear for two reasons. First, there are a large number of competing religious claims, advance by religions that are vastly different, and even by various sects within a single religious tradition. Strictly speaking, these competing claims are logically inconsistent – they cannot all be true. Which of these, if any, should you believe? The second problem for those serious about religion is the rational basis of religious belief. Only a little reflection shows that the reasons, if any, that can be given in support of religious belief are quite different from the sort of reasons we give to support our belief in facts about the natural world. Religious “justifications” – including appeals to “faith” alone – are quite different from the sort of empirical or rational arguments we offer to support our belief in the facts of daily life or in the more formal results of science and mathematics. Why is there this difference? What is the difference exactly between reason and faith? In particular, what is the relation of reason and faith to genuine knowledge about the world and our place in it, and to our personal morality that governs what we think of as right and wrong? The course falls into four parts.

Part I. The Beliefs of the Major Monotheistic Western Religions. Religion fills various roles in our lives. Of particular interest to philosophy are its metaphysical and ethical claims. Developed views on metaphysics and ethics making use of the rational methods of philosophy are characteristic of Western religion. The major Western religions make profound claims about the nature of reality, about what exists and its causes. It also makes claims about morality, about what we are ethically bound to do and not to do. The task of both serious specialists in religious studies and the ordinary person who takes religion seriously is to investigate whether any of these claims are true. The serious study of whether religious beliefs are true is part of theology, and that branch of theology that investigates belief grounded in reason and science rather than revelation or “mysticism” is called *philosophical theology*. It is also called *philosophy of religion*. This course falls in that area.

Our first task is to become familiar with the “religious” philosophy that predates the rise of the three great western monotheistic religions. This early philosophical tradition provided great repository of already worked out explanations of religious ideas. Historically it was in fact dipped into and appropriated as needed by the early fathers of the Christian church, as well as by Islamic and Jewish theologians who wanted to explain their views in a rational manner.

Our second task to acquire some familiarity with the actual beliefs that the western monotheistic religions espouse. Doing so is harder than it might seem because listing the “articles of faith” – the “creed” – of a religion is no easy task. The beliefs of a given religion are rooted in history. They have evolved over many centuries, usually with a good deal of controversy and disagreement. There is, in fact, no one Christian creed, but rather different belief-sets proffered by rival sects, both concurrently and at different periods. There is a similar diversity in Judaism and Islam.

Part II. Rationality and Religion. Historically, religious thinkers have divided on the worth of reason. The “rationalists,” on one side, hold we should bring the same standards to bear on assessing claims to religious knowledge as we do to science and daily life. Opposed to rationalism is the mystical tradition, which holds that reason and scientific thinking is somehow irrelevant to religious belief. We shall discuss mysticism and the limits of reason in Part IV of the course, but in Parts II and III will deal with the rational approach. This approach holds that if a religious claim does not meet the standards of ordinary knowledge or of the scientific method, it should be rejected. A sub-variety of this view holds that religion and science are compatible and overlap. This view, in fact, prevailed among most educated religious thinkers prior to the upheaval caused in the mid 19th century by Darwin’s theory of evolution and the subsequent successes in modern materialist physics and chemistry.

In other words, until about 1900 serious religious thinkers thought religion was supported by science. It is fair to say that until the 20th century the vast majority of serious religious thinkers were rationalist of some form other and thought that religion and science were both compatible and mutually supportive. This is not to say that they found it easy to reconcile religion with reason.

Every serious student of religion today should be familiar with this “rationalist” literature. Part II of the course, therefore, focuses on the most basic of religious claims: that God exists. We will study four traditional arguments for the existence of God. Our textbook, which sets out this material, is by J.L. Mackie, one of the best analytical philosophers to write on philosophical theology in recent decades.

Part III. The Problems of Evil and Free Will. One of the great religious mysteries is the *problem of evil*. How is the existence of an all powerful, all knowing, and all loving deity consistent with the existence of physical and moral evil? What is a deity's purpose in permitting moral evil and human suffering? We shall read major parts of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, perhaps the most famous classic in philosophy that attempts to justify God's tolerance of worldly evil.

Ancient philosophers, more or less, thought that the cosmos was governed by chaos or necessity, even the actions of humans. Religious thinkers, however, introduced the concept of free will. The view had two parts. First, God is free. He created the world and humans, not because he had to, but because he was benevolent. The Christians also believe that God became man and did so voluntarily. If Jesus had been forced to sacrifice himself by necessity, there would be no virtue in the incarnation and redemption, and hence these acts could not have merited compensation for the sin of Adam. Second, humans too are free. They are free to choose to do right or wrong. If they were not free, but had to do what they did, or did so by chance, then they could not be held personally responsible for the good or ill they did. Heaven and hell as reward and punishment would not make any sense. But these views about freedom clash with the view that God is omniscient. If I will sin, then God knows it. If he knows it, it must be true. It therefore seems to be necessary that I will sin. How is that consistent with free will?

Our approach to these topics will be critical and rational – because this is a course in philosophy, which uses rational inquiry as its method for justifying its conclusions, and because religious thinkers themselves have tried to puzzle out these mysteries using reason. Our job will be to see whether the arguments for God's existence and the solution to the problems of evil and free will are convincing as science or philosophy.

Part IV. Mysticism. The second major approach to religious belief is mysticism, the view that religion is outside the province of reason. We should believe in God, these traditions hold, even if religious doctrine is not supported by science or reason, even if science and reason are inconsistent with religious claims. We should believe – they say – even in the teeth of rational refutation. Mysticism has had major supporters in all the world's religions. In various forms, some of which are so watered down that they are difficult to spot, it dominates religion in America today. Mysticism has in fact produced some of the most beautiful and, some would say, the most profound art and literature. Mystical art and writing is something that every educated person, religious or otherwise, should know, and we shall discuss some of this in class.

We will conclude the course by reading two philosophers who question the commonly held contrast between faith and science. First, we will read the famous essay, "The Will to Believe" by William James, the important 19th century American pragmatist philosopher. James has a special view of truth that makes it an obligation to believe religious propositions which are important to life even when they are not fully justified empirically. Second, we will read a new and controversial book, *Mind and Cosmos*, by the American philosopher Thomas Nagel, who argues that modern scientific materialism, the dominant view in modern science, is seriously incomplete. What is lacking, according to Nagel, is a philosophy or "science" that explains consciousness and its relation to matter and the evolution of the human mind. This new philosophy may not be religious in the traditional sense, but it would certainly be quite different from the normal materialism of modern physics, chemistry and biology.

Course Assignments. The course assignments are designed to bring you to the point at which you can write in a reasoned and philosophical manner about religious topics. There will

be four papers, each 7 to 10 pages, during the quarter:

- (1) A critical discussion of how well early western philosophy could be used to explain one of the newer religious beliefs. (20%).
- (2) A critical evaluation of one of the traditional argument for God's Existence (20%).
- (3) A critical discussion of some aspect of the solution to the problem of evil or free will as presented in Leibniz' *Theodicy*. (20%).
- (4) A critical discussion of some aspect of the argument of Thomas Nagel in *Mind and Cosmos*. (20%).

N.B. If in your writing you make use of an idea that you obtained from some source, you must footnote (or endnote) that source precisely enough that the reader can locate the place in that source where the idea is expressed. Place a footnote or endnote in your text with a reference to the page(s) in the source where the idea is expressed and give full publication information in a bibliography. You should use a standard humanities style format for your notes and bibliography, either the *Chicago Manual of Style* (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html) or the MLA Style Sheet <http://debate.uvm.edu/dcpdf/mlacrib.pdf>. Plagiarism (i.e. the use of the ideas of others without citation) will be grounds for failing the course.

There will be a final (essay) examination on the course's content based on study questions handed out in advance (20%).

Extra credit of up to one grade point will be given for regular attendance and participation in class discussion. You are strongly encouraged to ask questions if the material is unclear, and to present arguments critical of the views expressed by the professor and other students.

Please be aware that the topic of religion is controversial and that religious opinions are deeply held. Be prepared for the fact that philosophical discussion in the abstract is highly argumentative and critical. Some of the arguments and ideas may well defend religious views you strongly disagree with or may be critical of your own religious views. On the other hand, classroom discussion should always be formulated in terms of rational arguments and is to be respectful of the views of others.

If you are not in class, you are expected to let the instructor know in advance by email (john.martin@uc.edu).

The instructor reserves the right to alter the syllabus as the course progresses.

Lecture Topics and Reading Assignments

Part I. Background. Jan 6-24. (No class Jan 20 & Feb 24.) The God of Philosophers, and the Beliefs of the Western Monotheistic Religions. Readings from the course webpage (<http://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/>):

- <http://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/Greek%20Background/Reading%20in%20Greek%20Philosophy.doc>
- <http://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/Christianity%20and%20its%20Creeds/Creeds%20and%20Articles%20of%20Faith%20of%20the%20Western%20Monotheistic%20Religions.pdf>

The first reading consists of philosophical texts. It is the more difficult. Divide it into three parts and read a third each week. Your task in this reading is to master some of the basic philosophical terms and the theories they fit in, so that you can spot them when they turn up in the second set of readings. The second set consists of formal and official statements of the religious doctrines of various major Western religions. Though the reading is long, the length is misleading. Much of it is notes or consists of the original texts in Latin and Greek (which are there for the more serious scholars among you). Many of the doctrines are repeated so you can easily skim them. Of special interest for our course are the places where they formulate a doctrine not in terms of ordinary everyday language, but in the highly technical vocabulary of Greek and Medieval philosophy. So, note the doctrines they disagree about, but pay special attention to those places where they use

First Paper. The creeds of the various religious share some very basic doctrines that seem, on the face of it, to contradict the evidence of ordinary experience. Some of these, moreover, are topics that were discussed by philosophers. The large body of carefully worked out philosophical theory provided an intellectual resource that religious thinkers could make use of when they tried to “explain” or “justify” rationally their rather non-common sense views. Below is a partial list of basic religious beliefs that religious thinkers might try to explain by appealing to one or another of the various philosophical “systems” from your first reading:

- God exists.
- There is a non-material (spiritual) reality.
- God created the world, and the world had a beginning in time.
- God can causally affect the natural world.
- Every human possesses a spiritual soul that constitutes his or her true person.
- There are special forms of non-empirical knowledge that allow humans to know about God and about religious truths.
- God has a deep benevolence for humans, and humans have an obligation to love and worship him.
- Humans have free will and are responsible for their actions.
- Some actions are morally right and others morally wrong.
- There is life after death.

Such beliefs are “profound” in the sense that they are not obviously true, but if they are true, they

affect the nature of reality in a very fundamental way.

First Paper Assignment, due Jan. 29:

Choose a basic religious belief (it need not be from the list above) that is espoused in the creed of one or more of the religious traditions from your second reading, and discuss critically how that belief might be explained, rationalized, or shown to be true by appeal to one or more of the philosophical systems encountered in your first reading.

Detailed Expectations. You should discuss critically both whether the philosophical system does in fact teach the belief in question and whether the philosophical views of that system are independently plausible or convincing. Make sure each paragraph has a clear topic – a topic sentence is usually a good idea. In general, it is a good idea to limit a paragraph to a single overall point. The discussion should be critical in the sense that you should give arguments or reasons for the points you make, and you should stop to define a key term if the discussion turns on what it means. (Philosophy papers are almost entirely made up of arguments and definitions. Learning to argue and “define” are skills you acquire in a philosophy course.) At the start of your paper explain what overall points you are going to make – what your “thesis” is – but then jump right into discussing the ideas. Avoid any lengthy stage-setting or historical introduction. The paper should be 7-10 pages, double space, 12 pt, 1 inch margins, proof read for grammar and spelling (by somebody who can spell and punctuate). **Both** bring a hard copy of the paper to class on Jan 29, and email a copy to the instructor (john.martin@uc.edu, with “Philosophy and Religion” in the subject line) by 5:00 Jan 29.

Part II. Philosophical Theology. Jan 27-Feb 28. The Grounding of Theism in Reason. The Traditional Arguments for the Existence of God. (Textbook: J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*). **Paper due March 3.**

Thomas Aquinas. The Five Ways.
Mackie, Chapter 5. Cosmological Argument.
Mackie, Chapter 8. Arguments from Design.
The Ontological Argument. Readings to be assigned in class.

Part III. The Problems of Evil and Free Will. March 3-March 24. No Class March 17-21.
Mackie, Chapter 9. Problem of Evil. **Paper due March 26.**

[Leibniz, Theodicy](#)
Readings on Free will to be assigned in class.

Part IV. Mysticism: Faith vs. Reason. March 24-April 18. Paper due April 19.

William James, “Will to Believe”
Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

Final Exam. April 23, 9:45-11:45.

Course web page: <http://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/>

Instructor's email: john.martin@uc.edu

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