

JOSEPH CAREW  
SAMPLE SYLLABUS

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*Philosophy of Religion*

**Short Course Description**

In today's age, largely due to science's ability to explain the world effectively, more and more people think that the religious worldview is not only redundant, but also actually stands opposed to science and rational enquiry. The most popular expression of this secular trend is Richard Dawkins' now-famous—or perhaps better: now-infamous—book *The God Delusion*. Books of this kind, of which there are many, have given rise to the so-called “new atheism” that vehemently criticizes all forms religion. While it may seem that religion is being invalidated by science as an irrational belief, there is a rich, longstanding tradition of contending that religion is not opposed to science and rational enquiry and has important insights to offer. Considering the cases for and against religion will help students appreciate the philosophical complexity of religion, that is, how there are good arguments from both the secular and religious sides.

**Thematic Course Description**

In this course, we will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis that religious belief is irrational by investigating key topics in the philosophy of religion from a historical and contemporary perspective. In Part I, we will discuss whether faith itself could be a unique source of rational knowledge by revelation, whether it is justifiable by non-rational, pragmatic concerns, or whether it can be legitimately grounded without any adequate evidence. In Part II, we will assess three proofs for God's existence: the ontological proof, which claims that God must necessarily exist; the cosmological proof, which claims that God is the only feasible explanation for the universe; and the argument from design, which claims that only an intelligence could have created the order that we perceive everywhere around us, similar to how if we found a watch we would assume that only a watch-maker could have made it.

While Parts I and II will deal with epistemological and metaphysical questions in the philosophy of religion, Parts III and IV will shift our focus from theoretical concerns to moral and social ones. In Part III, we will read Primo Levi's *If this is a Man*, an account of his survival of the Holocaust. This will set the stage for a discussion of the problem of evil: Can the existence of such atrocities as those of the Holocaust be reconciled with the idea of a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God or does it instead disprove the latter's existence? From here, Part IV will conclude with some theories of the origin of religion that, reducing religion to a cultural or natural phenomenon, attempt to discredit it and whether such theories are truly capable of understanding the true nature of religious experience.

**Class Schedule**

**Part I: The Rationality of Faith**

Week 1: Reason and Faith as Sources of Rational Knowledge

- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, excerpts

Week 2: Justifying Faith Pragmatically: Pascal's Wager

- Hájek, A. Pascal's Wager. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

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Week 3: Fideism: Justifying Faith

- William James, 'The Will to Believe' in *The Will to Believe and Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Dover, 1956), 1-31

Week 4: Reformed Epistemology: The Direct Evidence of Theism in Experience

- Alvin Plantinga, "Warranted Belief in God," in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (Blackwell, 1999), 285-297

**Part II: Proofs of the Existence of God**

Week 5: The Ontological Argument

- Anselm's *Proslogion* (Chapters 2-4), in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, edited by Brian Davies and G.R.Evans (Oxford University Press, 1998)
- Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. A603/B631-A630/B658

Week 6: The Cosmological Argument

- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, excerpts.
- Mackie. *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), excerpts

Week 7: The Argument from Design

- Paley. *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, excerpts
- Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, and The Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), excerpts

**Part III: Evil**

Week 8: The Holocaust

- Primo Levi, *If this is a Man*, translated by Stuart Woolf (Abacus: 2013), excerpts

Week 9: Classical Theodicy

- Leibniz (1646-1716), *Theodicy*, excerpts

Week 10: Does Evil Disprove Theism?

- Hume, "Evil Makes a Strong Case Against God's Existence," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* [Fourth Edition], edited by Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 276-281
- Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* (64): 1955

**Part IV: The Origin of Religion**

Week 11: Religion as Power

- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swesen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), first essay

Week 12: Naturalizing Religion

- Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), chapters 1 and 4

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Week 13: The Critique of New Atheism

- Armstrong, *The Case for God* (Random House Canada, 2010), 1-33

**Assessment**

- The final grade will consist of four components:
- Participation (10%)
- In-Class Midterm Exam (20%)
- Term Paper of 2500-3000 words (40%)
- Take-Home Final Exam (30%)

**Learning Outcomes**

At the end of the course, students will be familiar with several major debates in the philosophy of religion, including the rationality of faith, proofs for and against the existence of God, theodicy, and the origin of religion. The course is designed to be an introduction to both historical and contemporary figures. The two exams, in which students are asked to summarize key concepts and arguments from different texts, are meant to assure that students have sufficiently internalized this knowledge for their future studies. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical thinking best learned in practicing it.