

Philosophy of Religion

Dr. Randy Ridenour
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Oklahoma Baptist University

January 2018

1 BASIC INFORMATION

- Term: January 2018
- Course: Philosophy of Religion
- Email: randy.ridenour@okbu.edu, rlridenour@gmail.com
- Course Materials: randyridenour.net/ghana/

2 COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

The philosophy of religion may very well be the oldest academic discipline, for we humans have been reflecting on the nature of God and our relationship to God for as long as we have existed. For this reason, philosophy of religion can be both the easiest and the most difficult course that a student will ever take. It can be the easiest because everyone has an opinion concerning the issues that will be discussed during this course. It is the most difficult because the subject requires that students critically examine those opinions.

The philosophy of religion is essentially philosophical reflection on topics regarding the rationality and coherence of religious belief. So, philosophers of religion are concerned with issues like the following (which, coincidentally, are some of the ones we will be examining this term):

- The nature and reliability of religious experience
- The relationship of faith and reason
- Evidence for the existence of God
- Evidence against the existence of God
- Whether evidence is required or even relevant
- The meaningfulness of religious language
- The possibility and likelihood of miracles

- The possibility and coherence of life after death
- The relationship of religion and science
- The problems of religious diversity

Why should a Christian minister study the philosophy of religion? The simple answer is that it is the only way that we can maximize our impact on the world. This can be demonstrated in three ways. First, Christians have the misconception that all you need to know is the Bible. For those of us in the reformation tradition, the Scripture is authoritative for all matters of belief. Our starting point is that the Bible is true. Other people don't assume that, however. They will require some reason to believe in the Bible. When asked why they believe the Scripture to be true, most Christians will reply something like "Because all Scripture is inspired, just read 2 Tim. 3:16." Citing a verse to prove the Bible is true to someone who doesn't already believe it won't convince them. Some kind of philosophical argument is needed.

Second, when you critically examine your beliefs, those beliefs become stronger. As we grow up, we get our beliefs from authority figures such as parents, ministers, and also from our peers. Are those beliefs really our own? Only after we've examined them and found that there are good reasons for holding them. Plato said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Compare that statement to Paul's in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Test everything. Hold on to the good."

Third, we have an obligation to ask the hard questions about our faith. Other people are asking those questions, and we have a calling to witness to, minister to, and make disciples of them. If we have never considered the difficult questions, we won't be able to answer them when they are asked. This only results in a lost ministry opportunity. For example, when you study philosophy you learn arguments for the existence of God, but you also learn arguments against. Other people know those arguments well, and if you have no response, you will never reach them. There is nothing in good philosophy that conflicts with Christian belief. Good philosophy always leads to truth, and truth never conflicts with the Truth. We still need to study philosophy that we think is wrong, because we need to know not only that it is wrong, but why it is wrong.

So, a person who already has a commitment to Christian belief might see this course as an opportunity to reflect on those beliefs and strengthen them. Many of us have grown up in religious families and have never really examined the nature of our religious beliefs. Critically examining those beliefs is an important part of the process by which we make them our own. Finally, most people in the world have strong beliefs concerning these issues. Those beliefs are the basis for how they perceive themselves and the world around them. We cannot truly understand others unless we understand the reasons for their beliefs. If we do not truly understand them, we cannot hope to reach them. This course will be an exciting journey, may God fill that journey with peace and joy.

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Understand and articulate the primary philosophical responses to the issues above.

2. Identify your own position on each issue, support your position, and defend it against alternatives.
3. Understand the reasons for holding the alternative views, and present the best case possible for those alternatives.

3 TEXTS

A textbook with readings will be provided in PDF format. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is an outstanding resource, and is available on-line at <http://plato.stanford.edu>

4 COURSE REQUIREMENTS (100 POINTS TOTAL)

4.1 QUIZZES (10 POINTS EACH)

Each week, there will be a quiz over the material for that week. The quizzes will consist of a variety multiple-choice and short answer questions. Sample questions will be provided to help students prepare for the quizzes.

4.2 PAPER (20 POINTS)

A short reflection paper is required on the following topic: "What have you learned in this course that will be most helpful in your ministry? Be sure to thoroughly explain the issue, the situation in your church to which the issue applies, and how your studies will make you a more effective minister in that situation."

4.3 FINAL EXAM (60 POINTS)

A comprehensive final exam will be completed after the end of the course. The exam will consist of multiple-choice, short answer, and essay questions covering material from readings, lectures, and class discussion.

5 ACADEMIC POLICIES

As this is a seminary course preparing students to fulfill their roles in vocational ministry, students will be held to highest standards of academic conduct. Regular attendance is expected, and academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.

Academic dishonesty includes cheating, plagiarism, and giving assistance on an exam or assignment when forbidden by the instructor. Plagiarism occurs whenever one uses the passages or ideas of another person without giving that person credit. Two common instances of plagiarism are failure to use quotation marks and failure to document sources. Quotation marks must be used when directly quoting a source. Sources must always be documented, even when they are not directly quoted. Anytime one uses an idea of another person, the source must be cited.

Students are expected to attend punctually every scheduled meeting of the course. Persistent absences will be reported to the administration. Excused absences require written notification of the professor in advance of the absence.

Some work may be completed outside of class. Unless instructed otherwise, students will not discuss the material on the assignment with anyone but the instructor.

6 TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>
Jan 8	Religious Experience
Jan 9	Faith and Reason
Jan 10	Divine Attributes
Jan 11	The Existence of God
Jan 12	The Existence of God
Jan 13	Evil
Jan 15	The Afterlife
Jan 16	Religious Diversity
Jan 17	Ethics
Jan 18	Christian Theology

The instructor reserves the right to amend this syllabus as required.