

Course Syllabus
PY/RE 209: Philosophy of Religion
Department of Philosophy

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Calendar Description:

A critical study, based on classical and contemporary readings, of such issues as: the basis of religious claims, the meaning of religious discourse, the relationship between faith and reason, the nature and existence of God, the nature of religious experience, the problems of evil and human destiny.

Course Overview:

This is an introduction to the *analytic philosophy of religion*, a style of philosophy of religion which became prominent in the last quarter of the twentieth-century. Nearly all of our primary readings are taken from authors currently engaged in this discipline; this course will look at a dynamic and evolving field of contemporary (western) philosophy.

A recent trend in this field has been the broadening of its interests, from issues exclusively limited to theism, to issues surrounding specific religious doctrines which go beyond belief in a theistic deity.¹ This course will follow that trend by progressing toward a final issue of specific philosophical relevance to *Christian* theism: is it rational, reasonable, justified, etc., to believe that Jesus rose from the dead?

We will get to *that* topic in the following way. For the first two weeks of the course we'll look at introductory articles in the philosophy of religion. These will discuss the philosophy of religion in general, as well as explain important concepts and distinctions within the philosophy of religion (e.g., natural theology, theism, atheism, agnosticism). Many of these will be relevant to our later readings.

The third week will start looking at pro/con exchanges concerning arguments for the existence of God. Specifically, week 3 will cover the moral argument, week 4 the cosmological argument, and week 5 the design argument. Discussion of the design argument leads naturally into the creation-evolution debate, which will occupy weeks 6 and 7.

Weeks 8 and 9 will address two arguments *against* the existence of God – the argument from evil (or problem of evil) and the argument from nonbelief. The former is a classic problem for theism, while the latter is a relatively recent construction; both are alleged to provide good reason to think God (or, at least, a certain sort of god) does not exist.

Next, we'll step back from arguments for and against God's existence and look at some readings which address whether there is a need for such arguments. Week 10 will deal with a particular school of religious philosophers, called *Reformed (Calvinist) epistemologists*, who argue that theism in general, and *Christian* theism in particular, can be intellectually respectable without any evidential-argumentative defence.

¹ Roughly defined, a theistic deity is a creator-deity with many attributes, the most prominent of which are omnipotence, omniscience, as well as superlative moral qualities. As we'll find in investigating deism, theists also believe God has given mankind one or more special revelations.

Week 11 will deviate from traditional philosophical material, stepping into matters of biblical scholarship. Specifically, we will look at some chapters from an historical introduction to the New Testament, which should provide some useful background to the final issue of the course.

The 12th and final week of this course will introduce the philosophical debate over the resurrection of Jesus. Specifically, we will be examining the debate between the Christian philosopher Stephen T. Davis and the atheologist Michael Martin.

Course Goals and Learning Outcomes:

The goal of this course is to introduce students to the philosophy of religion, with particular emphasis on the contemporary state of that subject. Students who successfully complete the course should gain a good general understanding of some of the main topics currently considered important in the contemporary philosophy of religion, and be sufficiently informed to participate in discussions on those topics. Additionally, students who complete the course with a high grade, such as an “A,” will be well-prepared to pursue more advanced research in the philosophy of religion at either the undergraduate or graduate level.

More specifically, by the end of this course, successful students will be able to do the following:

- explain many of the basic concepts central to the philosophy of religion (e.g., theism, atheism, natural theology), both the differences between these terms (e.g., the difference between atheism and agnosticism), and the distinctions contained in the terms themselves (e.g., the difference between positive and negative atheism).
- summarize the major arguments for the existence of God, including contemporary formulations of the cosmological and design arguments, as well as criticisms raised against these arguments.
- paraphrase the reasoning of both sides in the debate over whether arguments are even necessary for reasonable belief in the existence of God.
- summarize some of the major reasons used to support evolutionary theory, as well as some of the more common arguments used against evolution today.
- explain how the arguments from evil and nonbelief are supposed to show that God most probably doesn't exist, as well as how some religious philosophers criticize those arguments. Since these are the topics covered by the essay, successful students will be able to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of at least one of these arguments, both the points in its favour and the points used against it.
- explain how the books of the New Testament can be examined from a historical perspective.
- summarize some of the arguments raised in favour of the reasonableness of believing in the resurrection of Jesus, as well as objections raised both against those arguments and for the unreasonableness of belief in Jesus' resurrection.

Course Tools and Learning Materials:

Course Package: The Course Package contains a number of selections, drawn from a wide variety of sources; there is no textbook for this course. When possible, readings were chosen which directly address one another, with the aim being to show students how philosophy works as an exchange of ideas involving the raising of points, counterpoints, counter-counterpoints, etc. Frequently, philosophy is metaphorically compared to a conversation, and students should fully appreciate that metaphorical description by the completion of this course.

Online Course Notes: These will be your constant guide through the readings and other materials of this course. The notes will provide learning questions for each unit, clarify important and/or difficult material, and advise you how to best proceed through the material. The Course Notes also contain the Marked Participation Exercises for this course.

DVDs: There are three DVDs for this course. “Great Transformations” is a documentary accompanying Unit 6, and is intended to help you understand both the nature of evolutionary theory (i.e., what it says), and some of the reasons the mainstream scientific community supports it. “What About God?” is a documentary which accompanies Unit 7, and illustrates how segments of the specifically Christian religious community either embrace or reject evolution. Both “Great Transformations” and “What About God” are taken from the larger PBS documentary series *Evolution*. The final DVD for the course, “What is Truth? The Gospels and Their Authors,” accompanies Unit 11 and is intended to help students understand some of the reasoning behind debates over the identities of the authors of the New Testament gospels, as well as other details of their authorship and composition. Material from these DVDs will be tested on your quizzes and, in the case of the episodes on evolution, the midterm.

WebCT Login Page: <http://www.wlu.ca/webct>

Student Evaluation

Following is a list of each assessed component of the course, and its value out of 100%

- **Online Quizzes: 20%**
Ten online quizzes, worth 2.5% each, made up entirely of multiple-choice and/or true/false questions, ten questions in total. The two lowest quiz scores will be dropped. Students will have fifteen minutes to write each quiz, and all questions will be presented simultaneously. The questions for any given quiz will be drawn randomly from a question bank.
- **Marked Participation Exercises: 10%**
Students must do five of these worth 1% each, and write five responses the exercises of your peers, worth 1% each. Both types of participation exercise are not marked for spelling or grammar (unless such problems render your post incomprehensible). They are not intended to be difficult: to get the full mark, you must demonstrate a sincere effort to answer the question (or respond to your peers), demonstrate some original thought (i.e., you cannot simply quote one of the readings or some other source) and familiarity with the relevant course materials. Postings which fail to meet these criteria, or otherwise fail to take the exercise seriously, will receive a mark of ½ or zero (at my discretion).
- **Midterm: 35%**
Covers the material from Units 1-6. **Not written online.** Composed entirely of multiple-choice and true/false questions.
- **Essay: 35%**
Written on the topics of either Unit 8 or Unit 9. Due either by the end of Week 9 (in which case it will be returned with comments) or by the end of Week 11 (in which case it will not be returned). Consult the Essay Topics page for full details on the essay.

Weekly Schedule:

Week/Unit Number	Topic	Required Readings/Viewings	Learning Activities
One	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quinn, “Philosophy of Religion” • Stump, “Religion, philosophy of” • Rowe, “Deism,” “Agnosticism,” “Atheism” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • none (practice quiz, not worth marks)
Two	Basic Concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macdonald, “Natural Theology” • Plantinga, “God, arguments for the existence of” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz
Three	The Moral Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lewis, “The Law of Human Nature,” “What Lies Behind the Law” • Davis, “The Moral Argument” • Wielenberg, “Divine Justice, Self-Sacrifice and Moral Absurdity” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercises #1 and #2
Four	The Cosmological Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craig, “The <i>Kalam</i> Cosmological Argument” • Morrison, “A critical examination of the cosmological argument” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #3
Five	The Design Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swinburne, “How the Existence of God Explains the World and Its Order” • Everitt, “Teleological Arguments” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #4 and #5
Six	Evolution I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miller, “Darwin’s Apple,” “Eden’s Children” • PBS, “Great Transformations” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marked Participation Exercise #6
Seven	Evolution II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johnson, “Evolution as Dogma,” “Response to Pennock” • Pennock, “Naturalism, Evolution, and Creationism: The Case of Phillip Johnson,” “Reply: Johnson’s <i>Reason in the Balance</i>” • PBS, “What About God?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #7-11 • Midterm

Eight	The Problem of Evil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rowe, “Evil is Evidence Against Theistic Belief,” “Reply to Howard-Snyder and Bergmann” • Howard-Snyder and Bergmann, “Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism,” “Reply to Rowe” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz
Nine	The Problem of Non-Belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McKim, “The Hiddenness of God” • Drange, “The Argument From Non-Belief,” “McHugh’s Expectations Dashed” • McHugh, “A Refutation of Drange’s Arguments From Evil and Non-Belief” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #12-15 • First due date for essay
Ten	Reformed Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sennett, “Reformed Epistemology and the Rationality of Theistic Belief” • Everitt, “Reformed Epistemology” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #16-18
Eleven	The New Testament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ehrman, “What is the New Testament? The New Testament and Their Literature,” “The Historical Jesus: Sources, Problems and Methods,” “The Historian and the Problem of Miracle” • Films for the Humanities and Sciences, “What is Truth? The Gospels and Their Authors” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #19 and #20 • Second due date for essay
Twelve	The Resurrection of Jesus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Davis, “It is Rational to Believe in the Resurrection,” “Reply to Martin” • Martin, “It is Not Rational to Believe in the Resurrection,” “Reply to Davis” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quiz • Marked Participation Exercise #21

University Policies

Academic Misconduct (cheating): The university has an established policy with respect to cheating on assignments and examinations, which the student is required to know. Students are cautioned that in addition to failure in the course, a student may be suspended or expelled from the University for cheating and the offence may appear on one’s transcript, in which event the offence can have serious consequences for one’s business or professional career. For more information refer to the current Undergraduate calendar <see: <http://info.wlu.ca/~wwwregi/ugcalendar/index.html> >.

Special Needs: Students with disabilities or special needs are advised to contact Laurier’s Accessible Learning Centre <see: <http://www.mylaurier.ca/accessible.htm> > for information regarding its

service and resources. Students are encouraged to review the Calendar <see: <http://info.wlu.ca/~wwwregi/ugcalendar/index.html>> for information regarding all services available on campus.

Plagiarism: Wilfrid Laurier University uses software that can check for plagiarism. Students may be asked to submit their written work in electronic form and have it checked for plagiarism.

Course Policies

Late Policy: Since there is so much latitude already built into the course, late assignments will not be accepted. For instance, if you miss the window for writing an online quiz, that quiz can be one of the two which do not count toward your final course grade. Since you can miss two quizzes without effectively suffering any penalty, no leniency will be allowed for missing three or more. Likewise, if you miss the due date for a Marked Participation Exercise, there will likely be plenty more you can do to make up the five required. Finally, the essay comes with a very generous automatic two week extension; asking for a further extension amounts to asking for an unfair advantage over your fellow students when you have already been granted an extension, and will not be viewed sympathetically.

Deferred Midterm Policy: If a student cannot write the midterm for a legitimate documentable reason contact Debbie Kohlruss immediately at <dkohlruss@wlu.ca>. Since Distance Education administers the midterms, they are the people you need to talk to about arranging a deferred midterm.

Communications Policy: The best way to contact me if you are in a hurry is to email me at <tywunder@golden.net>. Otherwise you can write me a private message in the Private Mail section of the website, or publically in the Bulletin Board. Since I am seldom on campus, trying to call me there by phone is not likely to succeed; I do not give out my home phone number. In general, expect messages sent to me via email to be answered by the next day; messages sent to me on WebCT may not receive a response for two or three days.

Computer Malfunction: Computer malfunction is not generally a valid reason for being allowed to rewrite a missed quiz (the exception being in the event that the University's system is down for the duration of the quiz). If you are experiencing troubles with your own personal computer (or your connection to the internet), you are expected fulfill any necessary course requirements on another computer and/or internet connection.