

Philosophy of Religion

PHIL-226 (RELIG-226) – Spring 2022
Mount Holyoke College

Basic course information

Instructor: Justin Mooney
Email: jmooney@mtholyoke.edu
Office: Skinner 314
Office hours: TBD

Course dates: 1/24/2022 – 5/9/2022
Days: Mondays and Wednesdays
Time: 11:30a – 12:45p
Room: Clapp Laboratory 126

The best way to communicate with me outside of class is via the email address listed above. I will do my best to answer emails within 48 hours.

Course description and objectives

Is there a God? And if there is, what is God like? Could all religions be true, or are they contradictory? Is religion in conflict with science? Can we have morality without religion? What happens when we die? Do we go to heaven or hell? Are we reborn? In this class, we will consider arguments for and against different positions that people have on these questions. This course will give you a sense of the issues that philosophers of religion are currently thinking and writing about.

As we think through topics such as these, we will be working to develop and hone philosophical skills such as analyzing concepts, constructing and critiquing arguments, and evaluating philosophical theories.

The objectives for this course are the following:

1. Learn some of the arguments and views that philosophers have defended on various subjects in the philosophy of religion, including the existence and nature of deities, the existence and nature of afterlives, and the epistemic status of religious belief.
2. Develop the skill of evaluating an argument for validity and soundness.
3. Write and revise a philosophical paper arguing for or against a philosophical thesis on a topic in the philosophy of religion.

This is a four-credit humanities course. It will include readings, exercises, and writing assignments to be completed outside of scheduled class hours. You can expect to spend about six hours per week working on these assignments outside of class.

Assignments

Validity and Soundness Exercise: near the beginning of this course you will be asked to complete a short exercise that gives you an opportunity practice a basic philosophical skill: determining whether an argument is valid and sound.

Reading Responses: You will be asked to complete a total of eight reading responses throughout the course. These are short, written reactions to the reading assignments, and they will be posted in a shared forum on our course Moodle page. Some of them may be replies to other student's posts. Aim for about one paragraph for each response. These assignments will give you practice expressing philosophical thoughts in writing.

Argument evaluations: You will be asked to complete two argument evaluations: 1-1.5 page critical discussions of the philosophical arguments that I will introduce to you in class lectures. These argument evaluations will help you learn how to critique a philosophical argument. They will also prepare you to write the final paper. More details about these argument evaluations will be provided in class.

Final paper (and draft): You will be asked to write a 5-6 page final paper in which you defend a position on a topic in the philosophy of religion. You should use one of your argument evaluations as the foundation for the final paper. One class period near the end of the semester will be a peer-review session where you can get feedback on a draft of your paper before turning in the final version. More details about the final paper will be provided in class.

Participation: this is a discussion-based class, and participation will be important to your learning experience. In this class, participation has three main components:

- (i) Attending class regularly. Poor attendance may negatively impact your grade. (See below for my attendance policy.)
- (ii) Completing the assigned readings on time. In the course schedule below, each reading is listed next to the date that we will discuss it in class, and should be completed by the start of class on that date.
- (iii) Speaking up regularly during small group discussions and class discussions. Most class sessions will include both a small group discussion time and a full class discussion time. To ensure that you get full points for participation, you should always contribute to small-group discussions, and you should aim to say something during full-class discussions about once a week or more.

Grades

Your final grade in this class breaks down as follows. The validity & soundness exercise will be worth 4% of your final grade; the eight reading responses will be worth 16% of your final grade (2% each); the two argument evaluations will be worth 30% of the final grade (15% each); the first draft of the final paper will be worth 10% of your final grade; the final paper will be worth 30% of your final grade; and the remaining 10% will be based on class participation, which includes attendance and contribution to class discussion.

This class will use a standard grading scale:

A	93-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-92%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	65-66%
B-	80-82	F	0-65%
C+	77-79%		

Policies

Attendance: Regular attendance is expected. However, students are permitted three unexcused absences with no penalty. More than three unexcused absences may result in a deduction of points from the student's final grade.

Extensions: Suitable documentation (like a doctor's note) is required to get an extension on an assignment or (in extreme cases) to be excused from an assignment. Otherwise, assignments will be deducted by 1/3 letter grade for each day they are late (e.g. a B+ paper drops to a B paper if it is one day late; it drops to a B- if it is two days late; etc.).

Class Discussion: There will be many opportunities for in-class discussion during this course. Students are expected to be respectful of others. To help ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute during class discussions, we will use "the finger system", which I will explain on the first day of class.

Academic Honesty: As always, academic honesty is expected. The University policies regarding academic honesty will be followed in this class. For more information, see: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/academicdeans/academic-honor-board>

Accessibility: I intend this class to be accessible to all students. Students who need or would benefit from relevant accommodations should talk to me and also reach out to AccessAbility Services. For more information, see: www.mtholyoke.edu/accessability

Readings

All of the required readings for this course will be articles and extracts provided on the course Moodle page. You do not need to purchase any textbooks.

Class Schedule

*This schedule is subject to change.

Week 1: Faith

Jan 24 – Intro

Jan 26 – Jackson, “Belief, Credence, and Faith.”

Week 2: Religious Disagreement

Jan 31 – Soundness & validity

Feb 2 – Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreement.”
Validity & soundness exercise due

Week 3: Religious Pluralism

Feb 7 – Hick, “Is Christianity the Only True Religion?”
Reading Response 1 due

Feb 9 – Bogardus & Urban, “Christians and Muslims,” sections 1 & 2.

Week 4: Hindu Monism

Feb 14 – Śaṅkara, commentary on the Vedānta Sutra (selections).
Reading Response 2 due

Feb 16 – Rāmānuja, commentary on the Vedānta Sutra (selections).

Week 5: Buddhist Emptiness

Feb 21 – *The Questions of King Milinda* (excerpt about the chariot)
Reading Response 3 due

Feb 23 – Priest, “Compassion and the Net of Indra.”

Week 6: God and the Universe

Feb 28 – Craig, “The Kalam Cosmological Argument.”
Reading Response 4 due

Mar 2 – Rasmussen, “Foundation of Matter.”

Week 7: God and Morality

Mar 7 – Antony, “The Failure of Moral Arguments.”
Reading Response 5 due

Mar 9 – Adams, “Abraham’s Dilemma.”
Instructions for first argument evaluation
Mid-term student feedback

Week 8: Spring Recess

Week 9: The Problem of Evil

Mar 21 – Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence.”
Argument Evaluation 1 due

Mar 23 – Stump, “The Problem of Evil.”

Week 10: Heaven and Hell

Mar 28 – Lewis, “Divine Evil.”
Reading Response 6 due

Mar 30 – Pelsner, “Heavenly Sadness.”

Week 11: Rebirth (Reincarnation)

Apr 4 – Hales, “Evidence and the Afterlife.”
Argument evaluation 2 due

Apr 6 – Stoeber, “Personal Identity and Rebirth.”

Week 12: Miracles

Apr 11 – Hume, “Of Miracles”
Reading Response 7 due

Apr 13 – Goldschmidt, “A Proof of Exodus”
Instructions for final paper

Week 13: Prayer

Apr 18 – Galton, “Statistical Inquiries into the Efficacy of Prayer.”

Reading Response 8 due

Apr 20 – Kleinschmidt, “Atheistic Prayer.”

Week 14: Cognitive Science of Religion

Apr 25 – Writing Workshop: peer review session

Draft of final paper due

Apr 27 – De Cruz, “The Naturalness of Religious Belief”

Final paper due on May 8th at 5:00pm