PH 501 Philosophy of Christian Religion

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PH501
Philosophy of Christian Religion Fall 2008
3 units of credit

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Please check for the latest version of this syllabus prior to the beginning of class.

Online Section Descriptions and Communication Guidelines

The Virtual Classroom is built upon the open-source Moodle platform. By logging into http://virtual.asburyseminary.edu you will have access to this course and be able to collaborate with participant-colleagues and me throughout the course. The following are functions with which you should familiarize yourself:

1. The **Course Information Center** contains many features to be used throughout the semester:
   
   a) **Course News and Announcements**, where I will post items important for the entire class;
   
   b) **Syllabus**, where a copy of the syllabus is provided;
   
   c) **To Professor**, which is a way for you to post a message directly to me and we can discuss an issue privately;
   
   d) **Course Questions**, which is a public forum where you can publicly post any questions you have regarding the course so others may see your message and respond. Anytime you have a question or comment about the course, the schedule, the assignments, or anything else that may be of interest to other participants and me you should post it to the Course Questions Forum;
   
   e) **Prayer Forum**, which is a public forum where you can post prayer concerns and praises for all to see. This is a way for us to build community;
f) **Open Forum**, which is a public forum where you can post anything that is not course-related for all to see. Examples include someone getting married, an upcoming birthday, discussions on topics not course-related, etc. This is a way for us to build community.

2. **Modules**, which are located below the Course Information Center, will contain forums where group discussions will take place, documents or other files to download or view online, and assignment links where you will post your assignments to me. Modules will be clearly labeled so you can follow along during the semester.

3. **Resources**, a section located on the left side, provides links to items you may want to use often in the semester.

**Introduction**

Welcome to the Philosophy class! I am delighted you have decided to register for this course. I hope it will be a challenging and thought provoking experience as we try to look together at reality in general, Christianity in particular from a ‘philosophical’ standpoint. Now, as I hope will become apparent, looking at things ‘philosophically’ is not that different from just trying to reflect a bit deeper upon things and trying to situate such reflections within a tradition of thought, that is to say, realizing that other people, before us, thought about such, or similar problems.

There is an old saying that Philosophy cannot and should not be edifying. What is often inferred from such a claim is that being as it is, only concerned with cold reasoning and detached and abstract descriptions, Philosophy is necessarily tiring and boring. As I hope you will soon realize, not so with true Philosophy!

I still have a vivid recollection of the moment when, as a young student, living in a Communist totalitarian regime, I acquired (for the first time in my life) a little Christian philosophy book. It was that little booklet that effectively opened my eyes to the rich and profound explanatory power of the Christian view of reality. As an enquiring student trying to resist the Marxist propaganda, I really needed a sound and well constructed case for Christianity. Well, I got that, and much more... It was a somewhat surprising experience of freedom and joy... Suddenly the ‘facts’ about the world, what one could ‘scientifically’ claim about reality appeared not only intelligible but also profoundly meaningful!

I shall only add one more thing at this point. I promise you excellent company in your attempt of climbing the heights of critical reason, argumentation and logic, and you are certainly justified in your expectation of becoming more confident and ‘better situated’ at the end of our journey together.
Nonetheless, we should not forget that there is a sense in which the Christian Philosopher remains fragile as he or she attempts to reconcile philo-sophia (love of wisdom) with Paul’s reminder that it is in Christ that we witness ‘the manifold wisdom of God’. From this perspective, love of wisdom entails an unwavering exercise of uncovering a rationality that also proclaims the ‘folly of the Cross’, that requires divestment of self and a moment of decided ‘No’ to the principles and standards of the world in which we live... A Reason that comes against our consumerist society and its promise of well-being and success. It is the never-ending pursuit of this Reason that remains the paramount concern of the Philosophy of Christian Religion.

Catalog Description

This course intends to be a:

1) survey of philosophical method,
2) study of the mutual impact of the Christian faith and philosophical discourse upon each other,
3) reflection upon the overlap between Christian and philosophical ethics,
4) critical assessment of the relationship between the Christian understanding of reality and other ways of perceiving it.

Learning Goals

‘Formally’, upon completion of this course, the student will be expected to use philosophical argumentation, logic and critical thinking. More specifically, he or she will be expected to:

1. Understand and develop the ability to use central philosophical categories
2. Be able to produce different types of arguments (inductive; deductive, cumulative)
3. Be able to identify the scope and the limits of an argument
4. Be able to formulate and test an hypothesis
5. Be able to assess and critique various philosophical positions

As ‘good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ we all need to be able ‘to give a reason of the hope that is in us’. Indeed, when properly used, Philosophy, as Luther noted, may well function as the ‘hand-maiden’ of Theology. Yet, Philosophy is not a neutral ‘tool’ whose raison d’etre would be to enable us some kind of ‘direct access’ to reality. Even as it functions as ‘method’, more often than not, philosophy implicitly carries with it its own agenda. That is why a second major goal of this course is learning to evaluate and critique not only the
explicit content of a particular philosophy, but also its implicit assumptions, by looking at its concerns in its specific historical expression. We will especially focus on three major topics: the problem of evil, the problem of freedom and the problem of religious language. Accordingly, our more specific learning goals here are as follows:

1. To gain initiation in the Philosophical tradition of the West (its history and concerns) and in Philosophy of Religion in particular (its object and specificity).
2. To examine the ‘historical’ nature of philosophical interpretation and to give an account of the main features of modernity/post-modernity.
3. To analyze and critique the alleged autonomy of Philosophy and to develop an account of the problematic of reason and the nature of validation and criteria in general (epistemology and meta-epistemology).
4. To examine the problematic of evil and to develop an adequate response to the problems it poses.
5. To analyze and critique competing accounts of human freedom and to be able to produce and defend our own account.
6. To offer an adequate account of language in general, religious language in particular from a Christian perspective.
7. To get a better understanding of the relationship between Philosophy and Theology, Faith and Reason.
8. To evaluate the basic arguments for God’s existence (natural theology).
9. To evaluate and engage with competing accounts of understanding reality.
10. To examine the structure of action in general, the human response to God’s command in particular (Philosophical & Christian ethics).

Expectations and Course Requirements

**What I am expecting from you:**
As you sit comfortably in front of your screen, you need, perhaps, to be reminded that this is not an independent study course. You may feel ‘alone’, but you’re really not! Your ‘actions’ (or lack thereof) in this virtual environment are monitored :-) (I guess, the post-modern ‘critique of presence’ may have an interesting application here!) We ‘came together’ (albeit in a non-traditional way) to grow and to learn as a team. In this sense, we are all in a ‘training process’ and perhaps we should not differentiate too dramatically between ‘training’ (our discussions among us in the forums) and ‘performance’ (your formal assignments and papers).
Nonetheless, evaluation is fundamental to the learning process and my role is not only to facilitate the process of the dissemination of information but to evaluate it and offer proper feedback. There are a few things worth remembering in this respect:
1) You are expected to stay up-to-date in assignments and be actively involved in the classroom and in the group to which you will be assigned. The specific details of your assignments will be spelled out in each module.

2) Send all class-related questions/answers to the appropriate forums unless otherwise instructed. Also, you may want To Professor for questions/concerns addressed specifically to me (i.e. issues you don’t want others to read).

3) Each module is the equivalent of a three-hour on-campus lecture. As the class takes 14 weeks to complete, the necessary time you need to set aside for the course is approximately 8 h per module/week. As stated above, apart from reading the material and preparing your assignments, spending time in the classroom is vital for the overall success of the course.

4) If you have special commitments/problems that prevent you from ‘showing up’ on-line for a couple of days, let me know in advance. If you encounter unexpected/urgent problems, let us all know, so that we may pray for you and, if need be, re-schedule assignment(s). (IMP! If you encounter serious problems and cannot finish your assignment(s), please remember what qualifies for ‘unavoidable emergency.’ I quote: “A grade of ‘I’ denotes that the work of a course has not been completed due to an unavoidable emergency, which does not include delinquency or attending to church work or other employment” (Catalog, 29)).

5) Send longer assignments as ‘attached files’. For regular discussions and interaction in forums, try to limit your message to 200 words.

6) In order to properly assess your participation in the class, you need to use the forums.

7) You may also want to remember in this connection that when assessing your participation in the class, quality is an important factor. That is to say, not all postings ‘are created equal’. So, before hitting ‘send,’ make sure that you post a thoughtful remark/assessment/critique, etc. In other words, messages of the type ‘I don’t agree’ or ‘Good response!’ will probably not count very much.

**Things you can expect from me:**

1) All the necessary materials and assignments will be available on-line, at 9 am (EST) at the latest, on the starting date of each week.

2) I will respond to all of your messages on a first-come first-serve basis. I might not intervene in all your discussions (especially when working in groups), but I will read all your postings and intervene when appropriate. If you need urgent assistance, write ‘URGENT’ in the subject line and send your message using To Professor.
3) If I need to be away from my computer for more than 2 days, I’ll let you know in advance and provide you with contact information in case you need urgent assistance.

4) And last (but not least), we should be reminded that prayer needs to remain central to all our endeavors, so that includes our Philosophy course! As we ‘get together’ as a class, if you have a specific prayer request, post it to me (or to the class, as you feel appropriate) and I (we) will pray for you. Also, please feel free to send me your worries, comments and suggestions.

Assessment and Grading

50 percent of the grade will be constituted by the assignments for each module and by the level of interaction in the class-wide forums and in the Individual groups. (25% for the level of interaction and 25% for the assignments).

The long essay that will conclude the course (2,500 words) will make the other 50% of the grade. The title (or titles) for the long essay will be posted during the course.

More specific assessment details will be provided with each module, depending on the nature and length of the assignment.

I am including below the standards for grading from the seminary catalog.

A 4 = Exceptional work: surpassing, markedly outstanding achievement of course objectives
B 3 = Good work: strong, significant achievement of course objectives
C 2 = Acceptable work: basic, essential achievement of course objectives
D 1 = Marginal work: minimal or inadequate achievement of course objectives
F 0 = Unacceptable work: failure to achieve course objectives

Please note that for ‘good, solid work’ you get the grade of B. In order to get a grade of A, you must produce exceptional work, that surpasses the objectives of the course; That usually translates into a combination of the following:
- Well-researched and comprehensive analysis and criticism that goes beyond what is required for the assignment.
- Work that is exceptionally articulated, well-structured and concise;
- Insightful and creative work that includes elaborate and profound interaction with the material and advances the present discussions on the subject matter.
Following are the types of issues that devalue a paper, listed in the order of their importance.
- Faulty logic; incoherence; lack of discernment in evaluating what is at stake in the argument; answering a different question;
- Insufficient interaction with the material; insufficient research; weak argument; poor structure
- Grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, etc; while I am mainly interested in content issues, persistent grammatical and spelling errors will reduce your grade.

Regarding the writing standards, you may want to follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Particular attention should be given to argument construction, outline, the standard of language expected in a paper, as well as the proper way of referencing resources. If you plan to work hard anyway, it would be a pity to miss helpful hints on impressing your professor with your wide-ranging erudition. :-) 

**How To Submit Work**

The assignments for each Module will be generally posted to the appropriate assignment link by the end of each Module (unless otherwise instructed). More specific instructions regarding both class participation and assignments will be given at the beginning of each course.

**Required Reading**

Aristotle, *Categories*, Section I. Translated by E. M. Edghill; Provided by The Internet Classics Archive. Available online at http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/categories.html


**Recommended Reading**


Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty*, (Introduction; Ch. 1 available at http://www.bartleby.com/130/)


Vardy, P., The Puzzle of Evil, ME Sharpe, 1997


Course Schedule

Module 1
Introduction to Philosophy

Week 1
Introduction. The ‘Object’ of Philosophy; Method, Truth, Meaning.
The language of Philosophy. Philosophical categories.

Main reading
Thomas, Nagel, What does it all mean?, 3-18; 95-101;
Aristotle, Categories, Section I. Translated by E. M. Edghill; Provided by The Internet Classics Archive.
Available online at http://classics.mit.edu//Aristotle/categories.html

Recommended reading

Week 2
Philosophical argumentation; the nature of explanation; Foundation; Starting point and horizon of expectation; The ongoing dialectic of ‘form’ and ‘content’, ontology and epistemology;
The specificity of Philosophy of Religion;

Main reading
Peterson, Reason and Religious Belief, 7-17;
Hasker, Metaphysics, 13-28;

Recommended reading
Module 2
Epistemology. The Problematic of Reason and the Nature of Knowledge.

Week 3


Required reading

Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, (146-151);
Wood, *Epistemology*, (77-125)
Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (349-355);

Recommended reading

Audi, Robert, *Epistemology*, London: Routledge, 1998 (Chapters 1;4;7;8);
Helm, *Objective Knowledge*, pp. 29-40;
Wood, *Epistemology*, (105-125);
Westphal, Fred A. *The Activity of Philosophy*. 205-255;

Week 4

Reformed Epistemology; Knowledge and Experience. Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Alston.

Required reading

Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 151-162;
Recommended reading

Audi, Robert, *Epistemology*, London: Routledge, 1998 (Chapters 1, 7, 8)
Wolfe, *Epistemology* (43-84);

Week 5

Post-Modernity and the ‘Death of Metaphysics’
Post-Enlightenment and ‘Post-Critical Reason’.

Required reading

Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism*. 85-109

Recommended reading

Pannenberg, W. *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, 3-21

Module 3
The Problem of Freedom

Week 6
Introduction. Definition. Legitimacy
Libertarianism vs. determinism (logical, scientific, theological).

Required reading
Hasker, *Metaphysics* 29-55;
The determinism and freedom Philosophy Website *edited by Ted Honderich* (selections) http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfwIntroIndex.htm

Recommended reading
J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, (Introduction; Ch. 1 available at http://www.bartleby.com/130/)
Westphal, *The Activity of Philosophy*, 132-158;

Week 7

Freedom and Determinism: Is a synthesis possible? Philosophical and Theological problems;
Validating freedom. Freedom, responsibility and authentic living;

Required reading
The determinism and freedom Philosophy Website *edited by Ted Honderich* (selections) http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfwIntroIndex.htm

Recommended reading
Module 4
The Problem of Evil

Week 8

Stating the problem; Theodicy; The Free Will Defense: Augustin, Plantinga. The Irenaean theodicy (Irenaeus, Hick). Alternative answers (Swinburne, C.S. Lewis).

Required reading
Peterson, Reason and Religious Belief, 116-135;
Peterson M., Philosophy of Religion. Selected Readings, 274-315;

Recommended reading
C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain, Fount Paperbacks, 1960
Kolakowsky, L, Religion: If There Is No God: On God, the Devil, Sin, and Other Worries of the So-Called Philosophy of Religion; St Augustine Press, 2001.
Vardy, P., The Puzzle of Evil, ME Sharpe, 1997
Swinburne, Providence and the Problem of Evil, Part 1; Part 3.

Week 9

The limitations of theodicy; Knowledge and Praxis; Evil between justification and solution; (Forsyth, Surin, Moltmann, Ricoeur); ‘Biblical’ theodicy.

Required reading
Paul Ricoeur, Evil, a Challenge to Theology and Philosophy in Figuring the Sacred, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. 249-261
Moltmann, Jürgen, ‘The Crucified God’ in  *Theology Today*
http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1974/v31-1-article1.htm
http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1975/v32-1-bookreview1.htm  (Book Review)
Michael Quirck review of Kenneth Surin’s *Theology and the Problem of Evil*
(http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1987/v44-3-bookreview13.htm)

**Recommended reading**


**Module 5**

**The Problem of Language**

**Week 10**

Theory of speech-acts;
How can our language of God be truthful?

**Required reading**

Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, pp. 166-189;
Murphy, Nancey, *Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism*. 110-135;

**Recommended reading**

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Divine Discourse*, (pp. 1-94)
Week 11

Faith and Reason; History, present discussions; Transcending Rationalism and Fideism.

Required reading

Peterson *Reason and Religious Belief*, 43-61;

Recommended reading


Week 12

Philosophy, Foundationalism and modern science.

Required reading
Recommended reading

Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism*, Ch. 6;
Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 3-17; 63-65;

Module 7
Natural Theology

Week 13

Arguments for the Existence of God. Evaluation and Critique
The concept of Natural Theology; Natural Theology and Theology of Nature.

Required reading

Recommended reading

Module 8
Ethics

Week 14

Christian Ethics between deontology and teleology. Ethics of freedom.
Required reading


Recommended reading

Paul Ricoeur, *Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule* in *Figuring the Sacred,* (pp. 293-302)

ExL Contact Information:

For **general questions and administrative assistance regarding the ExL program,** contact Dale Hale:

   ExL_Office@asburyseminary.edu
   Phone:    (859) 858-2393

For **technical support, library research support, library loans, and ExL media** contact Information Commons:

   Info_Commons@asburyseminary.edu
   Phone:    (859) 858-2233
   Toll-free: (866) 454-2733

Accessing Information Commons Materials:

1. **General Questions:**
   § The Information Commons is a "one-stop shop" for all student research, circulation and technical needs. The Information Commons hours are posted here: http://www.asburyseminary.edu/information/hours

2. **Materials Requests:**
   § To search the library catalog for available materials, click here: http://www.asburyseminary.edu/information/
   § ExL Students may request books, photocopies or emailed attachments of journal articles/portions of reference books from Asbury Seminary's Library. Please allow 3-10 business days for all requests to be filled. Contact the Information Commons for costs and instructions on how to make requests.
§ ExL students are encouraged to make use of local library resources. Students who live within a 50 mile radius of either the Florida or the Kentucky campus should come to campus to obtain their materials.

3. Research Questions:
§ ExL students are encouraged to contact the Information Commons for research assistance including help choosing a paper topic, determining the best sources to use for a paper, finding book reviews, or research questions about using the online databases or any other library materials.

4. Online Databases:
§ To access the online library resources including the library catalog and full-text journal databases, go to http://www.asburyseminary.edu/information/ and enter your 10-digit student ID# number in the login box. Your student ID# is provided on the biographical information section of the student registration webpage. Add a 2 and enough 0’s to the front to make a 10-digit number (200000XXXXX where XXXXX = your student id).

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Philosophy of religion is "the philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions". Philosophical discussions on such topics date from ancient times, and appear in the earliest known texts concerning philosophy. The field is related to many other branches of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Especially the religious, metaphysical and philosophical elements of his philosophy of religion came under suspicion of being unscientific. This article expounds the problems of classifying Eliade as a representative of religious studies and counterposes a classification of Eliade as a representative of philosophy of religion. This new classification invalidates all critics attempting to portray Eliade as a representative of religious studies and criticize him as such afterwards. Eliade, the well-known and prolific historian of religion, has himself of late become an object of intense study. In his endeavours he sought to uncover the deeper, trans-historical meaning of religious expression.