

Debates about God

Religious Studies 200
Winter, 2000
DePaul University

Instructor: Dr. Jeffrey Carlson
Office: SAC 463 (773.325.7733)
Hours: T-Th 1:00-2:00 and by appointment
E-mail: jcarlson@wppost.depaul.edu

A. Introduction

This course will study classical and contemporary arguments regarding the existence and meaning of "God." The course is situated within the Religious Studies Department's category of "Religious Thought-The Meaning of Religious Beliefs and Practices." It also fulfills Liberal Studies Program requirements in the Religious Dimensions Learning Domain, under the category "Patterns and Problems." The class will be reading intensive, and our quarter will be structured as an ongoing dialogue with and about challenging and provocative, mostly primary texts. Classroom discussions and student writings will focus on these texts and our responses to them.

B. The Readings

- We'll begin with *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction*, a 1998 book by Beverly Clack and Brian R. Clack. It's a survey of many of the most intriguing and perennial issues major thinkers have considered over many centuries in their reflections about God. Some of their questions include the following: What is religion? What do we mean by "God?" Can the existence of God be proven? What are the best arguments in favor of God's existence? What are the most serious counter-arguments? What about miracles, revelation, and the hope for immortality? Are there grounds for believing in these things, or not? Does the very definition of God need to be revised in light of modern discoveries and sensibilities? Or do we live in a religionless age that no longer needs the God hypothesis at all? This book explores these questions and more, citing excerpts from the writings of some of the most profound and original thinkers in the western philosophical and theological traditions, where "God" is generally understood to be the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By reading this book, I hope you'll come away with a good grasp of the major issues in the philosophy of religion and fundamental theology, and a good sense of who some of the most important thinkers in those traditions have been and are. My further hope is that you'll find some "conversation partners" among all of those thinkers, that you'll come to view some of them as authors who help you advance your own thinking, authors you'd like to explore further in the future. This text is available in the bookstore and on reserve in the Richardson Library.

The rest of our course will be a more selective, focused and in-depth study of important books by four modern thinkers who represent a variety of viewpoints within modern debates about God.

- The first will be a study of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, originally published in 1841. It is a profound critique of traditional religion and especially Christian theism. It develops the thesis that "theology is anthropology," that is, consciousness and talk about God is really consciousness and talk about humanity, and divine attributes are really humanity's attributes projected outside of humanity. Feuerbach opposes the very foundations of most of the tenets of traditional religion, focusing especially on core Christian doctrines, because, he contends, they debase and alienate humanity from its own best qualities. We'll read Feuerbach's book, which has provoked and challenged so many

religious thinkers since its publication, and compare it with other thinkers discussed in the Clack book. We'll raise our own questions and engage in lively discussions about the relative merits of Feuerbach's argument. This text is available in the bookstore and on reserve in the Richardson Library.

- The second focused study will be Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*, published in 1957. Tillich's book seeks to correlate the truths of religion with what he takes to be the best insights of the modern worldview. He argues that it is possible for modern men and women to become or remain religious without ceasing to be modern. He seeks to retrieve and defend core religious beliefs and practices, in response to critiques from thinkers like Feuerbach, by developing an analysis of "faith" as intrinsic to the human condition, located in our most basic and grounding experiences of "ultimate concern." In this way Tillich argues that an intellectually honest justification of religious belief and practice is possible even in this modern, secular age. We'll read and discuss Tillich's book in relation to the thinkers surveyed in Clack and in relation to Feuerbach. This text is available in the bookstore and on reserve in the Richardson Library.
- The third focused piece we'll consider is Irving Greenberg's major article, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," which appears in the 1977 volume *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* Greenberg develops a radical critique of traditional Jewish and Christian concepts of a just God who cares for the faithful and punishes the wicked. Greenberg asks, "where was this God at Auschwitz?" as countless innocents were murdered. To legitimate the Holocaust by viewing it as part of God's plan is, for Greenberg, absurd and sadistic. "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children," he writes. Again, we'll consider Greenberg's article in relation to Clack, Feuerbach and Tillich. This article is not available in the bookstore. You need to check it out from the reserve desk of the Richardson Library (and make a photocopy for yourself), or obtain it from the electronic reserves on the library's web page as follows:
 1. Take your internet browser to http://www.lib.depaul.edu/Electronic_Reserves/electronic_reserves.html.
 2. Accept the conditions.
 3. Select "list courses by instructor's last name."
 4. Select "Carlson."
 5. Select "Rel 200-000."
 6. Type in the password "rel200."
 7. The Greenberg reading is posted in two parts. Be sure to open and print both parts.
- The fourth focused exploration will be Sallie McFague's 1987 book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. McFague argues that all Godtalk is metaphorical and not literal. She further argues that much of the traditional language naming God as "king," "ruler" and "master" is triumphalist, monarchial and patriarchal, and needs to be replaced by metaphors that are more appropriate for our time. She develops a new set of images for God-as "mother," "lover" and "friend"-and argues that they are more faithful to core religious insights and also more suitable for promoting healing and meaning in our age of ecological crisis and global violence. As with the other focused studies, we'll discuss McFague's book in relation to key facets of what we will have explored throughout our course up to this point.

C. Our Approach

Occasionally I will offer brief lectures to set issues or figures into context, or to develop one or more of the themes we're considering. But most days, I hope we'll engage in sustained and penetrating discussions about the assigned readings. Think of the experience of "conversation." In any really meaningful conversation, you bring your own already-held assumptions and beliefs, but you attempt initially to bracket them to some extent and really listen to the conversation partner, trying as far as possible to understand what he or she is saying and how it might be plausible, meaningful, even true. Then, you respond, drawing upon your assumptions

and beliefs. You interact with what you think your conversation partner has said. You offer your own sense of whether and to what extent her or his views correspond with your own, whether they suggest a possibility you find illuminating, or entail a consequence you find significant. After listening seriously, you give a serious response. Perhaps, as a result of this process, the very assumptions and beliefs you brought to the conversation will be altered in light of what you've encountered. Perhaps assumptions and beliefs you didn't realize you had will be exposed and revealed, for better or worse. Perhaps you'll bring a revised set of assumptions and beliefs to the next conversation. In any case, try to think of the learning process as an ongoing series of conversations. Try to enter into authentic conversation with the texts in our course, with the other students, with me, and with your own developing set of assumptions and beliefs. Perhaps then you'll experience a deepening and widening of your present understanding-and from new understanding often comes more intentional choice about how to live one's life. True conversation, understood as a deliberate and self-conscious interaction with interesting and compelling possibilities, is at the very heart of the educational experience.

D. Learning Goals

In short, our overall learning goals for this course may be summarized as follows:

- To gain accurate knowledge about the important terms, facts, persons, basic concepts and principles considered in the course.
- To comprehend the meaning of what we're studying so that you can explain key concepts in your own words.
- To apply what you've learned to new contexts.
- To analyze, that is, to break down complex ideas into its component parts so that its structure might be understood.
- To synthesize, that is, to put parts together to form a new whole, pattern or structure.
- To evaluate, that is, to judge the value of ideas or actions for a given purpose, based on definite criteria.
- To develop your capacity for clear and effective writing.
- To develop your capacity for clear and effective verbal communication.

E. Requirements

1. Assignment preparation. Please come to each class session having done the assigned readings, taken careful notes, and having tried your best to find out the meanings of terms and concepts in the readings that are unfamiliar to you. I have designed this course with the expectation and requirement that you will spend at least six hours per week outside of class preparing readings and writing assignments. Being in college is hard work, but hopefully it's work you enjoy doing, and take pride in doing well. You owe it to yourself, to others in the class, and to the integrity of the learning process to approach your academic work with sufficient seriousness.

2. Class discussions. Asking questions, raising concerns and offering your own ideas during class discussions is a crucial component of the learning process. This is where it gets the most interesting, where discovering insights becomes part of the fun of learning. This is where conversations happen. You will be encouraged and expected to be an active participant in classroom conversations. At the end of the quarter I will make an assessment of the overall degree of intellectual engagement you demonstrated in class, focusing on the extent to which you were an active, informed, stimulating participant in class discussions. Participation in discussions will be worth 100 points toward your final grade.

3. Conversation Starters. "Conversation Starters" are one-page, single-spaced, typed pieces of writing produced independently by each student. A Conversation Starter is to be written after you complete the assigned readings for a particular class session, and then brought with you to that session. Conversation

Starters must be completed in preparation for every class session for which new readings are assigned (i.e. every session except January 4, February 3 and February 17). A good Conversation Starter does two things:

- a) It summarize the overall and key themes from the assigned reading for a particular class session.
- b) It sets forth 2-4 significant questions for discussion.

Bring TWO copies of each new Conversation Starter to class. One copy will be turned in before the start of class, and the other is for you to use and revise during and after class. Each Conversation Starter must have your name on both the front and the back (otherwise blank) side of the page. For each Conversation Starter you submit on time, I will determine whether it constitutes a "Good Faith Effort" (GFE) based on the following questions:

- Does it demonstrate that you have completed the entire reading assigned for that day?
- Does it demonstrate that you have attempted to explain the overall and major themes of the reading?
- Does it offer 2-4 serious and informed questions for discussion, showing evidence of a significant degree of engagement with the text?

Conversation Starters lacking in any of these areas will not receive a GFE designation. Furthermore, in order to be eligible for a GFE, the Conversation Starter must be turned in before the beginning of class (so be on time for class). Final grades will be based in part on the number of GFEs you accumulate throughout the quarter (see part F below). Your collection of revised Conversation Starters should be extremely valuable resources as you write your Papers for this course (see #4 below).

4. Papers. You will write three Papers during the quarter (each being approximately six pages in length, typed and double-spaced). Developing these Papers will be an opportunity for you to step back from the readings and class sessions, gather your thoughts, sort through the observations and insights recorded in your revised set of Conversation Starters, and engage in more focused and sustained thinking-in writing. Each Paper will allow you to demonstrate competence in the first seven of the Learning Goals listed in part D of this syllabus.

Paper 1 will be assigned January 27 and is due February 3 in class.

Paper 2 will be assigned February 10 and is due February 17 in class.

Paper 3 will be assigned March 9 and is due March 16 by 2:00 PM in my office.

Each Paper will be worth 300 points toward your final grade.

F. Grading

Final letter grades will be calculated based on both Conversation Starter GFEs (17 possible) AND points for Papers and class discussion (1000 possible), using the following chart:

A	at least 15 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 930 points on papers and class discussion
A-	at least 15 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 900 points on papers and class discussion
B+	at least 14 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 870 points on papers and class discussion
B	at least 14 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 830 points on papers and class discussion
B-	at least 14 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 800 points on papers and class discussion
C+	at least 13 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 770 points on papers and class discussion
C	at least 13 GFEs <u>AND</u> at least 730 points on papers and class discussion

C-	at least 13 GFES <u>AND</u> at least 700 points on papers and class discussion
D+	at least 12 GFES <u>AND</u> at least 670 points on papers and class discussion
D	at least 12 GFES <u>AND</u> at least 630 points on papers and class discussion
F	fewer than 12 GFES <u>OR</u> fewer than 630 points on papers and class discussion

G. Academic Integrity

Plagiarism and cheating, like other forms of academic misconduct, are always serious matters. This course adheres to the university's policies on academic integrity as stated in the current Student Handbook. If you're not sure about what constitutes proper citation or acknowledgment of the work of others in class assignments, please see me.

H. Schedule

Tuesday January 4

Introduction and Syllabus

Thursday January 6

Clack pages 1-48: "Religious Belief and the Philosophy of Religion" and "Natural Theology."

Tuesday January 11

Clack pages 49-97: "Challenges to Theism."

Thursday January 13

Clack pages 98-148: "Alternative Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion" and "Divine Action and the Beyond."

Tuesday January 18

Clack pages 149-189: "Divine Action and the Beyond" and "The Future of Religion."

Thursday January 20

Feuerbach pages i-43: "Preface," "The Essential Nature of Man," "The Essence of Religion Considered Generally," and "God as a Being of the Understanding."

Tuesday January 25

Feuerbach pages 44-100: "God as a Moral Being, or Law," "The Mystery of the Incarnation," "The Mystery of the Suffering God," "The Mystery of the Trinity and the Mother of God," "The Mystery of the Logos and Divine Image," "The Mystery of the Cosmogonical Principle in God," and "The Mystery of Mysticism."

Thursday January 27

Feuerbach pages 101-149: "The Mystery of Providence and Creation Out of Nothing," "The Significance of the Creation in Judaism," "The Mystery of Prayer," "The Mystery of Faith," "The Mystery of the Resurrection and of the Miraculous Conception," and "The Mystery of the Christian Christ or the Personal God." PAPER 1 ASSIGNED.

Tuesday February 1

Feuerbach pages 150-203: "The Distinction Between Christianity and Heathenism," "The Christian Significance of Voluntary Celibacy and Monachism," "The Christian Heaven or Personal Immortality," "The Essential Standpoint of Religion," and "The Contradiction in the Existence of God."

Thursday February 3

PAPER 1 DUE IN CLASS.

Tuesday February 8

Tillich pages 1-40: "What Faith Is" and "What Faith is Not."

Thursday February 10

Tillich pages 41-85: "Symbols of Faith," "Types of Faith," and "The Truth of Faith." **PAPER 2 ASSIGNED.**

Tuesday February 15

Tillich pages 85-127: "The Truth of Faith," "The Life of Faith," and "Conclusion: The Possibility and Necessity of Faith Today."

Thursday February 17

PAPER 2 DUE IN CLASS.

Tuesday February 22

Greenberg article on reserve (paper and electronic), pages 7-34: "Judaism and Christianity: Religions of Redemption and The Challenge of History," "The Challenge to Modern Culture," "The Holocaust as Orienting Event and Revelation," and "Jewish Theological Responses to the Holocaust."

Thursday February 24

Greenberg article on reserve (paper and electronic), pages 34-55: "Explorations in Post-Holocaust Theological Models," "The Central Religious Testimony after the Holocaust," "Religious and Secular after the Holocaust," "Final Dialectic: The Dialectic of Power," and "Living with the Dialectic."

Tuesday February 29

McFague pages ix-45: "Preface," "A New Sensibility," and "Metaphorical Theology."

Thursday March 2

McFague pages 45-95: "Metaphorical Theology," "God and the World," and "Introduction to Part Two."

Tuesday March 7

McFague pages 97-146: "God as Mother" and "God as Lover."

Thursday March 9

McFague pages 146-187: "God as Lover," "God as Friend," and "Conclusion."

PAPER 3 ASSIGNED.

Thursday March 16 by 2:00 PM: PAPER 3 DUE IN SAC 463.