

Philosophy 2800  
Winter/Spring 2002  
2029  
Humanities 2072  
Tues-Thurs. 12-1:20  
appt.

Professor Haskins  
Office: Humanities

Phone: (251) X 6588; email: casey.haskins@purchase.edu  
Office Hours: Mon. 3:30-4:30 and by

## Philosophy of Religion

This course introduces a few of the most important philosophical debates about religion from medieval times to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Among the main topics discussed will be: the problem of defining "religion" as a philosophical and a cultural phenomenon; arguments for and against the existence of God; the problem of reconciling scientific and religious worldviews; the rationality of religious belief; and the question of what forms religion might, and should, and should not, take in our postmodern and global age.

This is a philosophy course, which means that emphasis will be placed not on individual religions and their histories so much as on critical reflection about general questions that a wide spectrum of religious experience and practice raises. Our philosophical readings are taken from an array of pre-modern and modern philosophers of religion. Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*, one of the required texts, contains chapters on the major religious traditions which will provide helpful background for our more general discussions. In referring to "critical reflection" above I mean that the goal of the course is not to defend any specific religious (or for that matter non-religious) point of view, including my own, even though my opinions on various issues will be evident from time to time. It is to offer intellectual tools for sorting through the cacophony of opinions and arguments about religion, spirituality, god, and related matters that is a vital (if also sometimes politically and existentially troublesome) part of our culture and that, as much as anything else in our culture today, needs the emphasis on the clear and rational evaluation of arguments that philosophy at its best tries to encourage. Our readings and discussions accordingly will represent a wide spectrum of affirmative and sceptical philosophical views about religious themes, not all of which each class member is likely to find congenial to her or his own personal convictions. But that's fine: in a class like this, the more debate the better. In evaluating written work I will be less interested in *what* you believe about the topics we discuss than in *how* you reason about and with those beliefs.

Non-philosophy students are welcome, and there are no formal course prerequisites. On the other hand, since it is a 2000-level course, I'll assume that if you are taking the course for credit, you will have had some experience (i.e., at least a course or two) in writing clearly on abstract topics, in philosophy or in another discipline. If you think you may not meet this informal condition, please see me before taking the course for credit. Auditors are welcome also.<sup>1</sup>

### Texts .

- (1) Gary E. Kessler, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective* (Available at Bookstore)
- (2) Huston Smith., *The World's Religions* (Available at Bookstore)
- (3) In addition there will be some packets of xeroxed material which will at different points in the semester be available for a small charge in the Humanities Office on the second floor of the Humanities Building.

---

<sup>1</sup>**Auditors:** please note that the College requires all auditors to register.

**Course Requirements and Grading Policy** Written work for the course will consist of (i) three short papers (3 typed pages minimum) on assigned questions at different points in the term; (ii) an in-class final exam at the end of the semester (essay questions), and (iii) a final paper (7 pages minimum) on a topic selected from a list to be supplied. Writing will be evaluated with an eye to grammar and general readability as well as to content. *Regular attendance* is required, and attendance will be called periodically. To pass the course, you may have no more than four unexcused absences. *Makeups, Extensions, & Incompletes* will be permitted only with a medical excuse. Two practices which are not permitted: submitting a paper done for another class in this class, and plagiarism in any form. Doing either can result in failure of the course.

## Philosophy of Religion Spring 2002

### **Schedule of Readings and Discussion Topics**

Unless indicated otherwise, the readings listed below are required readings. These will form the basis for the short paper assignments. In terms of pages, the reading assignments are relatively short, but you'll find that you generally need to read a given selection *at least twice* to fully digest it. In general, I encourage you to read widely beyond the regular syllabus. Readings designated as recommended are those that seemed particularly relevant and useful as supplements to our discussions, but in fact all of the Kessler and Smith books are well worth reading. Don't hesitate to ask for further reading suggestions on any topic.

## **I. Introductory Themes**

### *January*

17 Introduction. Why philosophize about religion? Is religion necessarily a good thing? "Insider's" vs. "Outsider's" perspectives on the subject, and the need for both. First paper assignment (on the two Smiths) distributed. Note: I omitted to specify on the assignment sheet that you may choose any religion in Huston Smith's book to discuss in your paper *other than Hinduism or Islam* (we're discussing them below)

22 The challenge of defining religion. Gary Kessler, "What Is Religion?" (xerox); Gary Kessler, "What Is Philosophy of Religion?" (Introduction to *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective* [hereafter "Kessler"]). Recommended: Ninian Smart, "The Nature of Religion" and Rem B. Edwards, "The Search for Family Resemblances of Religion" (in Kessler)

24 The cultural relativity of the general idea of religion. Xeroxed excerpt from Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Meaning and End of Religion" and further selection (pp. 24-33 in Kessler) Recommended: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Meaning and End of Religion"; Keiji Nishitani, "What is Religion?" (in Kessler)

29 Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" (in Kessler)

**First short paper due by end of the day in my office on Wednesday, January 30.**

## **II. God and Ultimate Reality in the World's Religious Traditions** (a nonsystematic survey)

31 Kessler, introduction to Chapter Two and introduction to the Islamic idea of God (pp. 62-4); Avicenna, "The Nature of God" (in Kessler) Recommended: (in connection with this and many other topics on the syllabus) Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (on reserve)

### *February*

5 Kessler, introduction to Buddhist conceptions of emptiness and God (pp. 69-70); John B. Cobb, Jr., "Emptiness and God" (in Kessler); Chapter III ("Buddhism") of Smith

7 St. Thomas Aquinas, "The Five Ways" (in Kessler) Recommended: William Rowe, "The Cosmological Argument" (in Kessler) Second short paper topic (on arguments for God's existence) distributed.

12, 14 The early modern debate over teleology in nature. William Paley, "The Watch and the Watchmaker" (from *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* [1802]; xerox); David Hume, "The Teleological Argument" (from his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [1779] ; in Kessler

19, 21 St. Anselm and Gaunilo, "The Ontological Argument" (in Kessler) Recommended: Yeager Hudson, "Problems and Possibilities for the Ontological Argument" (in Kessler)

**Second short paper due in class Thursday, February 28.**

*February (cont.)*

### **III. Explaining Evil**

26 Kessler, introduction to chapter 5; excerpt from Elie Wiesel, *Night* (in Kessler) Out of the ocean of writing on this major theme, I recommend two books in particular: Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. (Oxford University Press, 1999) An eye-opening and chilling chronicle of all the bad things we did to one another—including bad things done to and by Americans-- in the last century alone which is all too relevant in the current post-9/11 dispensation. I also recommend Fyodor Dostoevsky's remarkable novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, which explores (among many other things) the existential conflicts generated out of modern religious scepticism. See especially the chapter entitled "The Grand Inquisitor," which is reprinted in many places and can be read on its own. For further philosophical discussion of the issues raised in this part of Dostoevsky's novel, see Charles Guignon's introduction to the Garnett translation of "The Grand Inquisitor" (Hackett Publishing Company, 1993)

28 Bruce Reichenbach, "Karma and the problem of evil" and Kessler's introduction. (in Kessler, pp. 246-55)

*March*

5, 7 Robert Nozick, "Theological Explanations" and editor's introduction (pp. 255-67 in Kessler)

12, 14 Spring break; no class

### **IV. Faith and Reason**

19 Introduction to Kessler, chapter 9 ("Do Faith and Reason Conflict?"; Blaise Pascal, "A Wager" (Kessler); **Third short paper (on the problem of evil) due by the end of the day Wednesday, March 20.**

21 Karl Marx, "Religion is an Opiate" (in Kessler) Recommended: Ludwig Feuerbach, "God is a Projection" (Kessler)

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Master and Slave Morality" (276-80 in Kessler)

28 Passover; no class.

*April*

2 Sigmund Freud, excerpt from *The Future of An Illusion* (xerox)

4, 9 William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"; William James, "The Will to Believe" (in Kessler) Fourth short paper topic (on faith and reason) distributed.

11 Religion from a Darwinian perspective. E.O. Wilson, "Religion" (xerox; from his sociobiological work *On Human Nature*, on reserve)

16, 18 Contemporary scientific critics of religious belief. John C. Avise, "An Evolutionary-Genetic Wager"; Steven Weinberg, "A Designer Universe?"; Richard Dawkins, "You Can't Have It Both Ways: Irreconcilable Differences?" (xeroxes) Recommended: Massimo Pigliucci, "Design Yes, Intelligent No: A Critique of Intelligent Design Theory and Neocreationism" (all on reserve the Avise, Weinberg, and Pigliucci articles appear in *Skeptical Inquirer*, Sept/Oct 2001) I recommend that publication for further recent discussions of the science/religion relationship which tend to argue for their incompatibility. Recent arguments in favor of their compatibility can be found in John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (on reserve) and Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be A Christian? The Relationship Between Science and Religion* (Cambridge University Press 2000) (excerpts for this and various other titles I mention in this class can be found on the website of Amazon.com)

*April (cont.)*

23 Another scientist's search for a middle ground. Excerpt from Chet Raymo, *Skeptics and True Believers: The Exhilarating Connection Between Science and Religion* (reserve)  
**Fourth short paper due in class April 17.**

## **V. Religion in Postmodernity**

25 Steinar Kvale, "Themes of Postmodernity" (xerox) Recommended: George Johnson, *Fire in the Mind: Science, Faith, and the Search for Order* (a wide-ranging, anthropologically inflected account of various contemporary practices, from shamanism and theology to mainstream science and Complexity Theory. If the Purchase College library doesn't have it, it's in paper.)

30 Kenneth Gergen, "The Healthy, Happy Self Wears Many Masks"; Connie Zweig, "The Death of the Self in the Postmodern World" (xerox)

*May*

2, 7 (last regular class), Huston Smith, "Postmodernism and the World's Religions" (xerox)

**14** 12:00-2:30 final exam, same room.

**Final papers due at the latest by the end of the day in my office on Friday, May 17. No extensions.**