

Philosophy of Religion



Winter 2025

Fridays 1:00 pm–3:50 pm, D 215

Dr. Joseph Carew

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PHIL 240: Philosophy of Religion

Course Description

If one surveys human activity from its prehistory up to now, the significance of religion to human life is unmistakable. Indeed, despite centuries of predictions about the inevitable triumph of science and reason over superstition and the death of God, religion is still a force to reckon with, with some 85% of the world's population claiming some religious affiliation. But what, precisely, is religion? Is it an antiquated relic that refuses to perish or something that holds the answer to the greatest mysteries of existence? What, if anything, justifies religious belief? Should we regard it as a source of meaning or oppression the world?

This course tackles these questions by examining how philosophers, past and present, have interpreted the key religious ideas from diverse traditions and religion itself as a perennial aspect of the human condition—some defending religion and others attacking it. We will cover a wide range of topics including but not limited to the following: religious conceptions of ultimate reality; historical and contemporary arguments for and against the existence of God; religion's role in modernity; the relationship of faith and reason; and Marx's and Freud's claim that religion is the opium of the masses and a form of neurosis.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe central concepts in the philosophy of religion (e.g., ultimate concern, theism vs. non-theism, and the secularization thesis).
- Describe philosophical perspectives on religion (e.g., the Enlightenment conception, Romanticism, and existentialism).
- Assess defences of and challenges to religion (e.g., the cosmological argument, the design argument, and the problem of evil).
- Provide close readings of important philosophical arguments.
- Apply key philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments in conversation and writing.

Texts

The textbook listed below is required and is the basis for coursework. It is available through the bookstore. Other readings will be made available on Blackboard.

- Chad Meiser, ed. *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*. Routledge, 2007.

Background Reading

If you are seeking supplementary texts to help you navigate the world of philosophy, there are many excellent resources available. Both the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) and the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) are free and reputable. Another valuable resource is the [Very Short Introductions](#) book series published by Oxford University Press. All three are written by experts for a general audience, making them ideal for students. They are a great place to get your bearings in the discipline.

Requirements and Grading	Holistic Assessment	10%	
	Midterm Exam	30%	February 14
	Presentation	25%	March 21 & 28
	Final Exam	35%	<i>See university exam schedule</i>

Holistic Assessment

Holistic assessment will be determined not only by regular attendance and contributions to discussions, exercises, and activities but also by preparation, improvement in academic performance throughout the semester, and eagerness to acquire course-specific knowledge and skills.

Exams

The midterm and final exams will consist of short-answer questions on the philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments studied throughout the term. The final exam is non-cumulative.

Presentation

The presentation will be a short group project. Each presentation will be between 10 to 15 minutes long. Each group will be responsible for teaching the class one of the readings by summarizing its main argument and evaluating the latter's strengths and weakness.

Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
1	Jan. 10	<i>Homo Religiosus</i>
2	Jan. 17	<p>Theistic Religions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 1-2 • Boethius, <i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i>, Book V, excerpt • Avicenna, "God's Nature and Knowledge," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 93-99 • Aquinas, "Omnipotence," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 119-122, • Maimonides, "Divine Simplicity, Negative Theology, and God-talk," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 100-107
3	Jan. 24	<p>Non-Theistic Religions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>Upanishads</i>, excerpts • Shankara, "Brahman is All," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 171-175 • The <i>Hīnayāna</i>, excerpts • Jayatilleke, "Nirvana is Ultimate Reality," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 181-186
4	Jan. 31	<p>A Defence of Theistic Religion: The Cosmological Argument</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aquinas, "The Classical Cosmological Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 193-196 • Craig, "The Kalam Cosmological Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 197-214
5	Feb. 7	<p>Another Defence of Theistic Religion: The Design Argument</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paley, "The Classical Design Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 251-255 • Collins, "A Recent Fine-Tuning Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 267-278
	Feb. 14	Midterm Exam
	Feb. 21	Reading Week

6	Feb. 28	<p>The Enlightenment Conception of Religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" • Hegel, "The Tübingen Essay"
7	Mar. 7	<p>The Romantic Conception of Religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schleiermacher, <i>On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers</i>, excerpts • Gündrode, "Story of a Brahmin"
8	Mar. 14	<p>The Existentialist Conception of Religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>, excerpts
9	Mar. 21	<p>Challenges to Theistic and Non-Theistic Religions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mackie, "A Critique of Cosmological Arguments," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 215-225 • Hume, "A Critique of the Design Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 279-287 • Rowe, "The Problem of Evil," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 526-537 • Copan, "The Moral Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 315-337 • Nietzsche, <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> and <i>The Genealogy of Morality</i>, excerpts • Kalupahana, "Suffering—A Buddhist Perspective," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 576-584
10	Mar. 28	<p>The Epistemology of Religious Belief</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Pluralistic Hypothesis," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 5-25 • Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 40-59 • Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 359-365 • James, "The Will to Believe," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 366-378 • Plantinga, "Belief in God as Properly Basic," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 379-388 • Pascal, "The Wager," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 389-393
11	Apr. 4	<p>The Critique of Religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marx, <i>A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right</i>, excerpts • Freud, "Religious Ideas as Wish Fulfillments," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 501-505
12	Apr. 11	<i>Homo Religiosus</i> Revisited

Course Procedures and Policies

Professionalism

I require that students maintain a professional attitude. This entails doing all readings before each session, paying attention during lectures, participating in class discussions with meaningful interventions, completing in-class activities, arriving on time, not leaving early, and being respectful to the instructor and one's peers.

Email Communication

The subject line should include the course number and the nature of the inquiry. I do my best to respond within 2 weekdays. Please refrain from resending your email or asking about its status before this timeframe has passed. If it has passed without a reply, feel free to reach out with a friendly reminder. Should it be an urgent matter, indicate so in the subject line. That way, I can prioritize getting back to you as soon as possible. Kindly note that UFV's Instructional Responsibilities Policy 46 states that "Instructors are not expected to respond to student emails on weekends or statutory holidays."

AI Use

Students are strictly prohibited from using generative AI for any requirements. In alignment with UFV's Student Academic Misconduct Policy 70, it "shall be an offense knowingly to [...] submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source." This includes work created by generative AI tools.

Missed Exams

Please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule through [Assessment Services](#).

Drafts

I appreciate the eagerness to learn students display when asking for feedback on drafts. However, I must respectfully inform you that I cannot provide this service. Reviewing academic work for some students and not others creates an uneven playing field that is contrary to the principle of fairness that I uphold myself to. I encourage you to make use of my office hours for any specific questions about course content or concerns you may have regarding your presentations. For general help, the [Academic Success Centre](#)

offers [individual tutoring](#) and [writing support tools](#). If you need assistance with references, please consult the [Citation Style Guides](#) developed by the [Library](#) or [request an appointment](#) with a librarian.

Rewrites

While I admire the dedication to academic success students show when they request a rewrite, I do not permit rewrites of exams. It is inequitable to offer some students and not others the opportunity to improve their grades. I encourage you to make use of my office hours throughout the term for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding course material, learning outcomes, and requirements. For your information, the [Academic Success Centre](#) and the [Library](#) also offer personalized support in the form of [tutoring](#) and [consultation](#), [writing support tools](#), and [Citation Style Guides](#) to aid you in your studies. By taking advantage of all the resources available to you, you will be prepared for each requirement by its scheduled time.

Grade Grubbing

Grade grubbing is when a student requests, threatens, or pleads for a grade increase for no legitimate academic reason. Instances include asking or begging for a grade bump, seeking preferential treatment, disputing grades on subjective rather than objective criteria, and seeking to complete requirements long after they were scheduled or due. The course syllabus clearly articulates students' responsibilities in demonstrating learning outcomes through the listed requirements and policies regarding missed requirements. Furthermore, the grading scheme and rubrics will be made available on Blackboard. There will be no grade changes that are not rightfully earned.



"A wise man [...] proportions his belief to the evidence."

— Hume "Of Miracles,"

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Sect. 10