

# Philosophy of Religion



## Winter 2026

Fridays 11:30 am–2:20 pm, D 136

Dr. Joseph Carew

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*The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.*

# 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 reason over faith, religion is still a force to reckon with, with approximately 85% of the world's population claiming some religious affiliation. But what, precisely, is religion? Is religion an antiquated relic that refuses to perish or the key to unlocking the greatest mysteries of existence? What, if anything, justifies religious belief? Should we regard religion as a source of guidance or control?

This course tackles these questions by examining how philosophers, past and present, have interpreted religious ideas from diverse traditions and religion itself as a perennial aspect of the human condition—some supporting 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, the problem of religious truth, arguments for and against the existence of God, the relationship of religion and science, the secularization thesis, and psychological critiques of religion as rooted in fear and illusion.

## Learning Outcomes

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

- Describe central concepts in the philosophy of religion (e.g., transcendence vs. immanence and soteriology).
- Describe philosophical perspectives on religion (e.g., the Enlightenment and psychoanalytic conceptions).
- Assess defences and critiques of religion (e.g., Hegel's postsecularism and the hermeneutics of suspicion).
- Provide close readings of important classical and contemporary 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 Brightspace.

- Chad Meister, ed. *The Philosophy of Religion Reader*. Routledge, 2008.

## 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.

Assessment	Attendance	10%	
	Presentation	25%	January 29 or April 2
	Midterm Exam	30%	March 5
	Final Exam	35%	See university exam schedule

### *Attendance*

Philosophy is best understood as a conversation with ideas past and present. In this class, we will join that conversation together. By attending, you will contribute to the exchange of ideas that will bring our exploration of religion to life. If you have perfect attendance, you will earn bonus points in recognition of your dedication.

### *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 overviewing its topic, summarizing its main argument, and evaluating it.

### *Midterm Exam*

The midterm exam will consist of two in-class mini-essays on the content from the first half of the term.

### *Final Exam*

The final exam will consist of one in-person critical essay, written during the university-scheduled exam period, on the content from the second half of the term.

# Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
1	Jan. 8	<i>Homo Religiosus</i>
2	Jan. 15	<p>The Theistic Conception of Religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genesis 1-2</li> <li>• Avicenna, "God's Nature and Knowledge," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 93-99, but focus on the sections "That there is a Necessary Being" and "God's knowledge"</li> <li>• Julian of Norwich, "Experiencing God," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 485-490, but focus on the section "How God is everything that is good"</li> </ul>
3	Jan. 22	<p>The Non-Theistic Conception of Religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Upanishads, excerpts</li> <li>• Shankara, "Braham is All," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 171-175</li> <li>• Nikāya Buddhist texts, excerpts</li> <li>• Jayatilleke, "Nirvana is Ultimate Reality," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 181-186</li> </ul>
4	Jan. 29	<p>The Epistemology of Religious Belief</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hick, "Religious Pluralism and the Pluralistic Hypothesis," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 5-25</li> <li>• Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 40-59</li> <li>• Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 359-365</li> <li>• James, "The Will to Believe," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 366-378</li> <li>• Pascal, "The Wager," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 389-393</li> </ul>
	Feb. 5	<p>Class Cancelled—Instructor at a Conference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Writing Philosophy"</li> </ul>
5	Feb. 12	<p>A Defence of Theistic Religion – The Cosmological Argument</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aquinas, "The Classical Cosmological Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 193-196</li> <li>• Craig, "The Kalam Cosmological Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 197-214</li> </ul>

	Feb. 19	Reading Week
6	Feb. 26	Another Defence of Theistic Religion – The Design Argument <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paley, "The Classical Design Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 251-255</li> <li>• Collins, "A Recent Fine-Tuning Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 267-278</li> </ul>
	Mar. 5	Midterm Exam
7	Mar. 12	The Rationality of Religious Deconversion – Guest Lecturer: Dr. Myron Penner (Trinity Western University) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White et al., "The Cognitive Science of Religion: Past, Present, and Possible Futures"</li> <li>• Norenzayan et al., "The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions"</li> <li>• Van Tongeren, "How to Flourish After Leaving Religion"</li> </ul>
8	Mar. 19	Religion in the Age of Reason <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"</li> <li>• Spinoza, <i>The Theologico-Political Treatise</i></li> <li>• Hegel, "The Tübingen Essay"</li> </ul>
9	Mar. 26	Religion in Crisis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freud, <i>The Future of an Illusion</i></li> <li>• Freud, "Religious Ideas as Wish Fulfillments," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 501-505</li> </ul>
10	Apr. 2	Philosophical Challenges to Religion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mackie, "A Critique of Cosmological Arguments," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 215-225</li> <li>• Hume, "A Critique of the Design Argument," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 279-287</li> <li>• Rowe, "The Problem of Evil," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 526-537</li> <li>• Kalupahana, "Suffering—A Buddhist Perspective," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 576-584</li> <li>• Feuerbach, "Religion as Projection," <i>The Philosophy of Religion Reader</i>, 338-345</li> </ul>
11	Apr. 9	<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 workdays. If that timeframe 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*

In this course, 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*

Should you miss an exam, 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](#).

## *Rewrites*

While I admire the dedication to academic success that students show when they request a rewrite, I do not permit rewrites of any of the tests. It is inequitable to offer some students and not others the opportunity to improve their grades. The best way to succeed is to be engaged throughout the term. 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; I am here to help you! Just so you know, 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 Brightspace. There will be no grade changes that are not rightfully earned.



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

— Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. 10