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## PH 600 Suffering, Tragedy and Christian Faith

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# PH-600 ExL SYLLABUS

## Suffering, Tragedy and Christian Faith

Spring 2004

Instructor: Kevin Paul Kinghorn

### I. WELCOME FROM KEVIN KINGHORN

When I was an M.Div student at Asbury some years ago I had the good fortune to have David Seamands as my professor for the course *Pastoral Care and Counseling*. For those who don't know David, he was the senior pastor at Wilmore UMC for many years and has authored such books as *Healing of Memories* and *Healing for Damaged Emotions*. Drawing upon many years spent in his role as a pastoral counselor, he once remarked to our class that the #1 cause of distress in Christians who had entered his counseling office over the years was a conflict between a person's *theology* and a person's '*knee-ology*'. By 'knee-ology' he meant a person's gut feeling about, or knee-jerk reaction to, a given situation. So for example, when a Christian experiences suffering or tragedy, s/he may give an intellectual, 'theological' response to the suffering in terms of "God's plans are always good, even if we don't understand them"; or "God's ways are above our ways"; or "All things work together for those who love the Lord and are called according to his purposes". These are all fine theological answers. At the same time, David remarked, the person's knee-jerk reaction, or gut feeling,—i.e., their '*knee-ology*'—was often more along the lines of: "There couldn't possibly be any good reason for God to allow this to happen." Thus, there can often come to exist within a person a persistent conflict and struggle between one's public theology and one's private '*knee-ology*'.

There are many approaches to the existence of suffering and tragedy that might be found in a seminary course. Certainly the course *Pastoral Care and Counseling* is one such approach, and that course deals with how to provide comfort and care to those who are hurting and in need of immediate pastoral care. PH-600, in contrast, is a philosophy course; and in this course we'll be engaged in a philosophical exploration of what philosophers often term 'the Problem of Evil'. Put in rough form, this 'problem' centers on the question: "If God is all-powerful, so that He can do anything...and if God is perfectly-loving, so that he wants us to flourish and not suffer...then why does He allow the evil, sufferings, and tragedies that befall us in our world?"

To state what I hope should be an obvious point, people in the *midst* of suffering and tragedy do not want or need intellectual, philosophical answers to their question, “Why did God let this happen.” When people are in the midst of suffering, I think a perfectly good pastoral answer is: “I don’t know. For whatever reason God does not simply ‘wipe out’ all evils and injustices in our world. Instead, He covenants to go through these things with us—to hurt with us and to carry the load when the load gets too heavy.” The Cross, of course, shows us this commitment of God, as we see Jesus suffering in his human condition as the Father watches the suffering of His beloved Son. To state again the obvious, people in the midst of suffering don’t need their pastors to provide a philosophical line of argument as to why God allows evil. Rather, they need to know that the pastor is simply there for them and that God will walk their path with them. The time for more philosophical discussions comes well after the times of crisis. Better still, the time for such discussions comes *before* times of crisis, so that people do have intellectual resources for approaching the problem of evil when times of crisis come. For, I think that, at least for many people, part of the suffering during times of crisis does stem from intellectual confusion as to why a good and all-powerful God would allow this. And if we as pastors can help provide at least some kind of intellectual resources to those we pastor as to why God does not simply ‘wipe out’ suffering and injustice wherever it exists, then we will have gone some way toward bridging the ‘theology--knee-ology’ gap that can rip open so easily during times of crisis.

Turning now to our particular class this semester, If you've not yet filled out a resume in Asbury's computerized directory of staff and students, let me invite you to do so. It's one way for us to get to know a bit about our other classmates. Include anything you feel comfortable including. Please do feel free to read my resume/personal profile (though I’m afraid it’s a bit out of date!). I’m currently doing tutoring work at Oxford University, where a couple years ago I completed my doctoral studies in philosophical theology. Also, I’m a member of the Kentucky Conference in the United Methodist Church, having spent three years as an assistant pastor at Pikeville, KY UMC. I’m excited to think what I might learn from our time together in this class, and I look forward to being a part of your learning experience this semester, which I pray will better equip you to be an effective ambassador for our Lord Jesus Christ.

## II. COURSE AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Broadly speaking, our goal will be to become more effective ministers for the kingdom of God. Part of one's being an effective minister clearly includes being on firm ground oneself as to what one believes. One of our goals this semester will be to gain a deeper personal understanding of the God we embrace. Our focus in this course will be on how God’s loving character might be reconciled with the presence of suffering and tragedy in our world. (Such attempts to

defend God's goodness in the face of evil are termed 'theodicies' in the philosophical literature).

Part of effective ministry for the kingdom also involves, of course, being able to address the concerns of both (1) professing Christians who struggle at times in their faith; and (2) those in the modern world who have not yet come to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord. Suffering and tragedy clearly represent the most difficult set of issues we as Christ's ambassadors are sometimes called upon by others to address. And so as we explore how various Christian thinkers have sought to provide an (at least partial) explanation why a loving God would 'allow' the suffering and tragedy in our world, my hope is that through our studies we will all become more effective ambassadors for Christ.

More specifically, there are a number of course and learning objectives for PH 600 ExL:

- (1) We will learn to articulate the alleged 'problem' of evil and be able to explain why it can indeed seem like a powerful objection to Christian claims about God.
- (2) We will learn to distinguish the so-called 'logical' problem of evil from the so-called 'evidential' problem of evil and be able accordingly to interpret problem-of-evil objections to Christianity as being one of these two sorts.
- (3) We will learn to distinguish so-called 'moral' evil from so-called 'natural' evil and, again, be able accordingly to interpret problem-of-evil objections to Christianity as involving one of these two kinds.
- (4) We will become familiar with the different ways in which theologians have sought to articulate the 'free will defense' in explaining the presence of suffering and tragedy in our world.
- (5) We will become familiar with two notable lines of theodicy within the Christian tradition—stemming, respectively from St. Augustine and St. Irenaeus—and be able accordingly to identify defenses of God's goodness as being in line with either an Augustinian or an Irenaean type of theodicy.
- (6) We will gain a better insight into how we might understand the term 'good' with respect to God's declaration in Genesis that His creation was good.
- (7) We will become familiar with how the Christian tradition has understood the moral state of the first humans, Adam and Eve, and how the Christian tradition has sought to explain their fall from a state of moral innocence.
- (8) We will explore a recent trend in Christian philosophy of religion that suggests that traditional approaches to the problem of evil by Christian philosophers may be in some respects misguided.

(9) We will explore the way in which suffering and tragedy contribute to 'religious ambiguity' in the world and why God does not take steps to make his existence more obvious to people on earth.

(10) We will distinguish Christian belief from Christian 'faith' and explore the possibility that one might stand firm in the latter even while the former comes under fire through suffering and tragedy.

(11) Making use of the contributions from the various Christian writers studied during the term, we will we will develop our own response to the question: Why does God allow suffering and tragedy in this world?

### III. REQUIRED TEXTS

(1) Peterson, Michael, ed. The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

(2) Swinburne, Richard. Providence and the Problem of Evil (Oxford University Press, 1998)

(3) Adams, Marilyn Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God (Cornell University Press, 1999).

(4) (There will also be several various articles provided in the modules.)

\*PLEASE NOTE: We will begin the term by looking at the books by Peterson and Swinburne. So do try to ensure that you have these books by **February 9**, the first day of class.

These books can be ordered from Asbury's bookstore, which you can call (859) 858-4242 or e-mail at [exlbooks@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:exlbooks@asburyseminary.edu).

(While the assigned readings are not especially large in volume, they can be quite dense. I often find myself having to re-read sections; in fact, everybody does.)

### IV. COURSE SCHEDULE

There are 4 modules in the course center. Each module has 2 lessons, each with its own assignment. Modules due dates and required readings are given

below. Full module assignments will be posted in the course center at least one month prior to assignment due dates. The course schedule is as follows:

### 01 Module - Due February 29 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time

LESSON 01 – Should Philosophy Address the Problem of Evil?  
reading assignment: Peterson 23-56; Swinburne chpt. 1.

LESSON 02 – The Logical vs. the Evidential Problem of Evil  
reading assignment: Peterson 89-152, 331-338.

### 02 Module - Due March 24 11:59 p.m. ET

LESSON 03 – Augustinian vs. Irenaean Theodicies  
reading assignment: Peterson 191-265. Swinburne 30-45; article by Kinghorn, “Why Doesn’t God Make His Existence More Obvious?”

LESSON 04 – John Wesley on the Problem of Evil  
reading assignment: excerpts from various Wesley sermons; article by Jerry Walls, “John Wesley on the Problem of Evil”.

PAPER DUE

Topic: TBA

### 03 Module - Due April 18 11:59 p.m. ET

LESSON 05 – God’s Goals for Our World  
reading assignment: Swinburne 49-122.

LESSON 06 – Moral and Natural Evils in our Good World  
reading assignment: Swinburne 125-251.

PAPER DUE

Topic: TBA

### 04 Module - Due May 15 11:59 p.m. ET

LESSON 07 – Re-thinking the Category of ‘Evil’  
reading assignment: Adams 1-151.

LESSON 09 – Putting into Context our Philosophical Resources  
reading assignment: Adams 155-208.

PAPER DUE

Topic: TBA

\*One final note on papers. Since I will be providing a discussion summary the day after each module is due, and since some of the discussion summaries will provide some of the 'answers' to the papers, it is important that papers are in on time. Late papers (unless arrangements are made in advance with the professor) are subject to grade reductions. Of course, the ExI program is designed with flexibility in mind; and I readily understand that unexpected events in ministry, at work, and at home can sometimes demand immediate attention. So, please do feel free to let me know in advance if there is a problem with getting an assignment in on time. My experience has been that we can always work out some kind of arrangement.

## V. HOW WE WILL COMMUNICATE WITH ONE ANOTHER

### discussion center

Every lesson assignment will ask you to answer 2-4 questions and to respond/reply to 2 other classmates' answers.

If you have any general questions about assignments, sudden explanatory revelations regarding difficult material, etc.--**post all such items here**. Unless the class size is unduly small (which would be a rarity indeed), you will be assigned to a team. Each team will include up to ten students. Each team has its own Discussion Center; and your answers and responses to the questions for each lesson should be posted in **your team's Discussion Center**. Typically, I will not post responses in the discussion threads here—though I do read through all the answers and responses in each team's discussion center. If you have a particular question or issue that you would like me specifically to respond to, then please post such a question in the **general Discussion Center** to which the entire class has access. The day after each module is due, I will post a Discussion Summary of the material just covered. Given that my discussion summaries come after the assignments are due, please do feel free to post in the general Discussion Center any questions about the readings that crop up along the way. Also, if you have any general questions about assignments, please post such items in the general Discussion Center. Finally, if you have any prayer requests/praises (please feel free to post them), they can go here (as well as in Asbury's general 'Prayer News' folder, which the whole ExI community can read). The discussion center is a **Public Forum**, in that all of us in PH600-ExI can read and respond to all the messages posted there. This will be our primary method of communication with one another.

### archive center

7-10 days after posting the discussion summary for each module/lessons, I will move all the threaded discussions from that module into the Archive Center. You can access and read any of the material in the Archive Center at any time during the semester, but the Archive Center will not allow you to post messages there.

### my office

Any personal messages to me (problems getting an assignment in on time, suggestions for how the course structure might be altered/improved, etc.) should be sent to me at my office (click on "office" icon). This is a **Private Forum** in that only I will see these messages, and my replies to you will go to your private mailbox.

Your assigned 4-6 page papers should be sent to **my office** via an attachment to an e-mail. (This is done by sending an e-mail to my office and attaching your paper, which you will save as an ".rtf document" (or .doc document if you use Microsoft Word as I do).

### my phone

If calling from the USA, my phone number is 011 44 01865 553261. Please note that I live in England and am 5 hours ahead of Eastern Time. The cheapest way to talk personally to me is to meet me in an ExI chat room. This can be arranged by e-mailing me and then agreeing with me on a time we can both be online together so that we can meet in the chat room.

### chat room

Anytime someone else from our PH600 class or from any other ExI class is online, you can invite that person(s) into a chat room. Other people are able to join an existing chat only by invitation. Unlike our threaded discussions in our PH600 discussion center, chat room messages are not saved; once you exit the chat room, your discussion is lost forever (unless you choose to copy the discussion and paste it in one of your other files).

## VI. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING ASSESSMENTS

There will be a separate assignment for each of the 8 lessons (2 lessons per module). In addition to the required readings found in each assignment, each assignment will ask you to answer 2-4 questions and to respond to two other classmates' posted answers. While we won't be too strict about making sure that every sentence is grammatically impeccable, we will stay away from 'cyber slang' and 'stream of consciousness' writing in these assignments. In addition to giving answers/responses for each of the fourteen lessons, you will be assigned three 4-6 page papers (double-spaced) during the course of the semester. These papers are to be **formal papers**. I'm of the firm opinion that, as ambassadors of

Christ Jesus, we are called to communicate clearly to the world in which we find ourselves. Consequently, in assessing the overall line of argument in your papers, I will look to see whether that line of argument is clear, smooth, and uninterrupted by grammatical and spelling mistakes. With that said, I leave up to you specific format questions such as how to format footnotes if you choose to include them (they're not required), whether to use the 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person while writing, etc.. You are free to write in whatever style best helps you communicate your line of argument.

## How grades will be assigned:

For each of the seven lessons, each student will be expected to give thoughtful answers to all assigned questions, as well as thoughtful responses to other classmates' answers to the assigned questions. 25 percent of each student's grade for the class will be based on class participation. Additionally, each of the three assigned papers will constitute 25 percent of a student's final grade.

## VII. AVAILABLE EXL SUPPORT

Asbury has an excellent EXL staff to support you. The following people are available to assist you with any concerns you have about technical or administrative issues concerning the ExL program:

For General Information about ExL, contact:

Kevin Osborn  
exl\_director@asburyseminary.edu

For Technical Support with ExL, contact:

Jared Porter  
exl\_support@asburyseminary.edu

For Library Assistance regarding Book and/or Article Requests, contact:

Hannah Kirsch at hannah\_kirsch@asburyseminary.edu

For Interlibrary Loan Information, contact:

Dot James at dorothy\_james@asburyseminary.edu

The following message comes from the Library staff at ATS:

**Obtaining Library Materials and Reference Assistance**  
Email: [Ats\\_Reference@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:Ats_Reference@asburyseminary.edu)  
Toll-Free Reference Help Line: 1-866-454-2733

ExL students are encouraged to make use of local libraries whenever possible; however, library services are also available to students through Asbury's B. L. Fisher Library. All requests for books and journal articles should be e-mailed to the Reference Desk. The Reference workers (Hannah, Robbie, and Joy) are also available to assist ExL students with reference requests, use of the online databases, or formation of research strategies.

To request material from the B.L. Fisher Library, begin by searching the library catalog or one of the restricted journal databases available on the library's website (<http://www.asburyseminary.edu/library>] [www.asburyseminary.edu/library](http://www.asburyseminary.edu/library) - choose "library catalog" or "restricted databases"). Then, send an email to the reference desk citing the sources that you would like to request. Students who live within a 50 mile radius of either the Florida or the Wilmore campus should come to campus to obtain their materials.

Requests normally take 1-2 business days to process. Books are mailed media rate and normally require 5 business days for shipping (longer for addresses in the West). This service is free. Students who need items delivered more quickly may pay for priority or express mail services. Articles and excerpts from reference materials may be scanned and delivered via email for 10 cents per page, or photocopied and mailed media rate for 5 cents per page. Plan ahead and allow enough time for processing and shipping of your requests! We look forward to helping you!

## VIII. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

While part of our learning experience will include uncovering for ourselves what certain terms mean, it might prove helpful if we have a glossary of some basic terms found in the philosophical literature before we begin reading. Feel free to keep this glossary handy as you read through the material.

a priori: Prior to experience. Take, for example, the three line argument: (1) All bachelors are unmarried; (2) Bob is a bachelor; (3) Therefore, Bob is unmarried. You do not need any experiences in the world to evaluate this argument. You only need to know the meaning of the word 'bachelor'.

a posteriori: Following experience. Take, for example, the three line argument: (1) All bachelors have brown hair; (2) Bob is a bachelor; (3) Therefore, Bob has brown hair. To evaluate this argument, you will need to rely on your experiences about the world--e.g., whether you've ever seen or heard others talk about bachelors with blond or red hair.

apologetics: The task of providing a defense for one's beliefs.

causal relation: This is how the connection between two events is described when one event (e.g., a breeze blowing) is said to be the cause of another event (e.g., a pencil rolling across a desk).

cumulative case argument: An argument which proceeds from several separate pieces of evidence to a conclusion which best explains that evidence.

deductive argument: An argument which necessarily/logically follows from premises to a conclusion. Take, for example, the two premises: (1) All bachelors are unmarried; and (2) Bob is a bachelor. If these two premises are true, then it is definitely/necessarily/logically the case that the conclusion--' Bob is unmarried'-is true.

e.g.: Abbreviation for 'for example'.

epistemology: The study of human knowing--i.e., how humans come to form beliefs and know things.

i.e.: Abbreviation for 'that is', or 'in other words'.

inductive argument: As opposed to a deductive argument, an inductive argument is one in which the conclusion is made probable by the premises. Take, for instance, the argument: (1) Most bachelors have brown hair; (2) Bob is a bachelor; (3) Therefore, Bob probably has brown hair. A cumulative case argument is one kind of inductive argument.

modus ponens: A deductive argument of the form: (1) If p, then q; (2) p; (3) Therefore, q. For example: (1) If I hear a knocking sound, then someone is at the door; (2) I hear a knocking sound; (3) Therefore, someone must be at the door.

modus tollens: A deductive argument of the form: (1) If p, then q; (2) not q; (3) Therefore, not p. For example: (1) If I hear a knocking sound, then someone is at the door; (2) No one is at the door; (3) Therefore, I can be sure I'm not hearing a knocking sound. BUT BE CAREFUL! Unlike modus tollens, the following is NOT a valid argument: (1) If p, then q; (2) not p; (3) Therefore not q. For example, it is not a valid argument to claim: (1) If I hear a knocking sound, then someone is at the door; (2) I don't hear a knocking sound; (3) Therefore, there is no one at the door.

natural theology: The study of God from the natural world, apart from special revelation (e.g., scripture).

necessary cause: Some cause, C, the occurrence of which is necessary for the occurrence of some effect, E. In other words, the only way in which E (the flooding of a town in five minutes) can occur is by C (the breaking of a dam) occurring and causing E to occur.

ontology: The study of being in its most general terms.

sound argument: A deductive argument that is valid and has all true premises (and conclusion). Consider the following argument: (1) All bachelors have brown hair; (2) Bob is a bachelor; (3) Therefore, Bob has brown hair. This is a valid

argument, as there is no logical error in the argument. However, the first premise is clearly not true. Thus, the entire argument, while valid, is not sound.

special revelation: Information about God which comes from a special and unique revelatory act of God.

theodicy: Explanations for the problem of evil intending to justify God in allowing evil to occur.

valid argument: A deductive argument in which the conclusion follows logically from the premises. Take, for example, the argument used in our previous definition of a 'deductive argument'. Note: An argument can be valid without being sound.