1-1-2003

PH 501 Philosophy of Christian Religion

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Introduction

Welcome to the Philosophy class! I am delighted you have decided to register for this course. I hope it will be a challenging and thought provoking experience as we try to look together at reality in general, Christianity in particular from a ‘philosophical’ standpoint. Now, as I hope will become apparent, looking at things ‘philosophically’ is not that different from just trying to reflect a bit deeper upon things and trying to situate such reflections within a tradition of thought, that is to say, realizing that other people, before us, thought about such, or similar problems.

There is an old saying that Philosophy cannot and should not be edifying. What is often inferred from such a claim is that being as it is, only concerned with cold reasoning and detached and abstract descriptions, Philosophy is necessarily tiring and boring. As I hope you will soon realize, not so with true Philosophy!

I still have a vivid recollection of the moment when, as a young student, living in a Communist totalitarian regime, I acquired (for the first time in my life) a little Christian philosophy book. It was that little booklet that effectively opened my eyes to the rich and profound explanatory power of the Christian view of reality. As an enquiring student trying to resist the Marxist propaganda, I really needed a sound and well constructed case for Christianity. Well, I got that, and much more... It was a somewhat surprising experience of freedom and joy... Suddenly the ‘facts’ about the world, what one could ‘scientifically’ claim about reality appeared not only intelligible but also profoundly meaningful!

I shall only add one more thing at this point. I promise you excellent company in your attempt of climbing the heights of critical reason, argumentation and logic, and you are certainly justified in your expectation of becoming more confident and ‘better situated’ at the end of our journey together.
Nonetheless, we should not forget that there is a sense in which the Christian Philosopher remains fragile as he or she attempts to reconcile philo-sophia (love of wisdom) with Paul’s reminder that it is in Christ that we witness ‘the manifold wisdom of God’. From this perspective, love of wisdom entails an unwavering exercise of uncovering a rationality that also proclaims the ‘folly of the Cross’, that requires divestment of self and a moment of decided ‘No’ to the principles and standards of the world in which we live... A Reason that comes against our consumerist society and its promise of well-being and success. It is the never-ending pursuit of this Reason that remains the paramount concern of the Philosophy of Christian Religion.

Catalog Description

This course intends to be a:
1) survey of philosophical method,
2) study of the mutual impact of the Christian faith and philosophical discourse upon each other,
3) reflection upon the overlap between Christian and philosophical ethics,
4) a critical assessment of the relationship between the Christian understanding of reality and other ways of perceiving it.

Learning Goals

‘Formally’, upon completion of this course the student will be expected to use philosophical argumentation, logic and critical thinking. More specifically, he or she will be expected to:

1. Understand and develop the ability to use central philosophical categories
2. Be able to produce different types of arguments (inductive; deductive, cumulative)
3. Be able to identify the scope and the limits of an argument
4. Be able to formulate and test an hypothesis
5. Be able to assess and critique various philosophical positions

As ‘good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ we all need to be able ‘to give a reason of the hope that is in us’. Indeed, when properly used, Philosophy, as Luther noted, may well function as the ‘hand-maiden’ of Theology. Unfortunately however, philosophy is not a neutral ‘tool’ whose only raison d'être is to enable us some kind of ‘direct access’ to reality. Even as it functions as
‘method’, more often than not, philosophy implicitly carries with it its own agenda. That is why, a second major goal of this course is learning to evaluate and critique not only the explicit content of a particular philosophy but also its implicit assumptions, by looking at its main concerns and its historical expression. We will especially focus on three major topics: the problem of evil, the problem of freedom and the problem of religious language.

Accordingly, our more specific learning goals here are as follows:

1. To gain initiation in the Philosophical tradition of the West (its history and concerns) and in Philosophy of Religion in particular (its object and specificity).
2. To examine the ‘historical’ nature of philosophical interpretation and to give an account of the main features of modernity/post-modernity.
3. To analyze and critique the alleged autonomy of Philosophy and to develop an account of the problematic of reason and the nature of validation and criteria in general (epistemology and meta-epistemology).
4. To examine the problematic of evil and to develop an adequate response to the problems it poses.
5. To analyze and critique competing accounts of human freedom and to be able to produce and defend our own account.
6. To offer an adequate account of language in general, religious language in particular from a Christian perspective.
7. To get a better understanding of the relationship between Philosophy and Theology, Faith and Reason.
8. To evaluate the basic arguments for God’s existence (natural theology).
9. To evaluate and engage with competing accounts of understanding reality.
10. To examine the structure of action in general, the human response to God’s command in particular (Philosophical & Christian ethics).

**Required Reading**

Aristotle, *Categories*, Section I. Translated by E. M. Edghill; Provided by The Internet Classics Archive. Available online at http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/categories.html


Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty*, (Introduction; Ch. 1 available at http://www.bartleby.com/130/)


**Recommended Reading**


*Other materials (articles, reviews, book selections) will be made available during the course (in digital form).*
Course Schedule

**Module 1**
*Introduction to Philosophy*

**Week 1**
*September 4*
*Due date for assignment September 8 11 PM ET*

Introduction. The ‘Object’ of Philosophy; Method, Truth, Meaning.
Philosophical categories; Philosophical argumentation; the nature of explanation;

**Main reading**
Thomas, Nagel, *What does it all mean?*, 3-18;
Aristotle, *Categories*, Section I. Translated by E. M. Edghill; Provided by The Internet Classics Archive.
Available online at http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/categories.html

**Recommended reading**

**Reflection questions**

*Philosophy is fundamentally method as it always provides the ‘proper tools’ for investigating reality. Discuss*

*Discuss the way Aristotle divides ‘things that are’. List Aristotle’s categories. Is Aristotle’s theory of reality still valid today?*

**Week 2**
*September 11*
*Due date for assignment September 15 11 PM ET*
Foundation; Starting point and horizon of expectation; The ongoing dialectic of ‘form’ and ‘content’, ontology and epistemology;
The specificity of Philosophy of Religion;

**Main reading**
Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 7-17;

**Recommended reading**

**Reflection questions**

Is Philosophy a science? Discuss.

Insofar as philosophical discourse retains its critical dimension, it remains unaffected by one’s religious commitments. Discuss.

**Module 2**
*Epistemology. The Problematic of Reason and the Nature of Knowledge.*

**Week 3**
**September 18**
**Due date for assignment September 22 11 PM ET**

The Nature of Validation. Evidentialism.
Foundationalism. Objectivism. Realism.
**Required reading**

Wolfe, *Epistemology*, (19-70);
Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, (146-151);
Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (349-355);
Helm, *Objective Knowledge*, (Chapter 1-2);

**Recommended reading**

Audi, Robert, *Epistemology*, London: Routledge, 1998 (Chapters 1;4;7;8);


**Reflection questions TBA**

**Week 4**
**September 25**
**Due date for assignment September 29 11 PM ET**

Reformed Epistemology; Knowledge and Experience. Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Alston.

**Required reading**

Wolfe, *Epistemology* (43-84);
Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 151-165;
Plantinga, A. & Wolterstorff, N., *Faith and Rationality*, Introduction; Chapter 1

**Recommended reading**

Audi, Robert, *Epistemology*, London: Routledge, 1998 (Chapters 1,7;8)
Chapter 4

**Reflection questions TBA**

**Week 5**
**October 2**
**Due date for assignment October 6 11 PM ET**

Post-Modernity and the ‘Death of Metaphysics’
Post-Enlightenment and ‘Post-Critical Reason’.

**Required reading**

Pannenberg, W. _Metaphysics and the Idea of God_, 3-21
Nancey Murphy, _Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism_. Chapter 4.
Thiselton, C. Anthony. _Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self_ (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995). Part I; Part III;

**Recommended reading**

Phillips, D.Z., _Faith after Foundationalism_, London: Routledge, Chapters 1;2

**Reflection questions TBA**

**Module 3**
**The Problem of Freedom**

**Week 6**
**October 9**
**Due date for assignment October 13 11 PM ET**

Introduction. Legitimacy. Definition.
Libertarianism vs. determinism (logical, scientific, theological).
**Required reading**
Hasker, *Metaphysics* 29-55;
Westphal, *The Activity of Philosophy*, 123-160;
J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, (Introduction; Ch. 1 available at http://www.bartleby.com/130/)

**Recommended reading**

**Reflection questions TBA**

**Week 7**
**October 16**
**Due date for assignment October 20 11 PM ET**

Freedom and Determinism: Is a synthesis possible? Philosophical and Theological problems;
Validating freedom. Freedom, responsibility and authentic living;

**Required reading**

**Recommended reading**
Module 4
The Problem of Evil

Week 8
October 23
Due date for assignment October 27 11 PM ET

Stating the problem; Theodicy; The free will defense; Irenaeus, Plantinga
Alternative answers (Swinburne; C.S. Lewis);

Required reading
Peterson, Reason and Religious Belief, 116-135;
Plantinga, God, Freedom and Evil, 7-58;

Additional Bibliography

Kolakowsky, L, Religion: If There Is No God: On God, the Devil, Sin, and Other Worries of the So-Called Philosophy of Religion; St Augustine Press, 2001.
Vardy, P., The Puzzle of Evil, ME Sharpe, 1997
Swinburne, Providence and the Problem of Evil, Part 1; Part 3.

Reflection questions TBA

Week 9
October 30
Due date for assignment November 3 11 PM ET

Biblical theodicy; The problem of Hell;
The limitations of theodicy; Knowledge and Praxis; Evil between justification and solution; (Forsyth, Surin, Moltmann, Ricoeur);

**Required reading**

Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Crucified God*, 200-278

**Additional Bibliography**


**Reflection questions TBA**

**Module 5  
The Problem of Language**

**Week 10  
November 6  
Due date for assignment November 10 11 PM ET**

Language and reality. Language and truth. Analogy. Metaphor. Theory of speech-acts; How can our language of God be truthful?

**Main reading**

Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*, pp. 166-189;
Peterson, Hasker, (Philosophy of Religion), pp. 497-530. Ch. 7 (pp. 369-413)
Ricoeur, *Philosophy & Religious Language* in *Figuring the Sacred*.

**Recommended reading**

Reflection questions TBA

Module 6
Philosophy, Science and Religion

Week 11
November 13
Due date for assignment November 17 11 PM ET

Faith and Reason; History, present discussions;
Transcending Rationalism and Fideism.

Main reading

Peterson (Reason and Religious Belief) 43-61;
Peterson, Hasker (Philosophy of Religion) 65-110;
Plantinga, A. & Wolterstorff, N., (Faith and Rationality) 1-15;

Recommended reading

Bewkes, E.B. & Keene, J. Calvin, The Western Heritage of Faith and Reason,
Kant, Immanuel. Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone (London, Harper
Wolterstorff, N., Reason within the Bounds of Religion, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
1984.
Plantinga, A. & Wolterstorff, N., Faith and Rationality, Notre Dame: University of
Notre Dame Press, 1983

**Reflection questions TBA**

**Week 12**  
**November 20**  
**Due date for assignment November 24 11 PM ET**

Philosophy, Foundationalism and modern science. Toward a new paradigm of truth and knowledge. (Michael Polanyi; Thomas Kuhn)

**Main reading**

Larry Wood (*Faith, History and Hermeneutics*) ch. 16;17;  
George Ille, (*Hermeneutical Explorations of Agency*) - selections (in digital format)  
Michael Polanyi, (*Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*), Ch. 1.

**Recommended reading**

Nancey Murphy, (*Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism*), Ch. 6;  

**Reflection questions TBA**

**November 27 - Reading Week**

**Module 7**  
**Natural Theology**

**Week 13**  
**December 4**
Due date for assignment December 8 11 PM ET

Arguments for the Existence of God. Evaluation and Critique
The concept of Natural Theology; Natural Theology and Theology of Nature.

Main reading
Peterson (Reason and Religious Belief) Ch. 5 (pp. 85-115).
Peterson, Hasker, (Philosophy of Religion), Ch. 4; Ch 6 (pp. 163-246; pp. 327-341).

Recommended reading

Reflection questions TBA

Module 8
Ethics

Week 14
December 11
Due date for assignment December 12 11 PM ET

Christian Ethics between deontology and teleology. Ethics of freedom.

Main reading
Peterson (Reason and Religious Belief) Ch. 13 (pp. 279-301).
Peterson, Hasker, (Philosophy of Religion), Ch. 12 (pp. 573-596).
Paul Ricoeur, Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule in Figuring the Sacred, (pp. 293-302)

Recommended reading
Reflection questions TBA

Requirements and expectations
You are expected to complete the required reading prior to class session and to sketch brief answers to the reflective questions (no more than 300 words for each answer). As you may note from the above schedule, however, the deadline for handing in the answers is 4 days after the class (except for the last class). You will have thus the opportunity to correct/improve your answers in the light of the lecture/discussions.
During the course, three additional essay questions/topics will be posted. The student is expected to treat ONE topic or answer ONE question only (at his or her choosing). The length of the essay will not exceed 2,000 words.

Assessment and Grading

40 percent of the grade will be constituted by the assignment(s) for each lecture and by the level of interaction in the class. (15% for the level of interaction and 35% for the assignments).
The long essay that will conclude the course will make the other 50% of the grade.

I am including below the standards for grading from the seminary catalog.

A 4 = Exceptional work: surpassing, markedly outstanding achievement of course objectives
B 3 = Good work: strong, significant achievement of course objectives
C 2 = Acceptable work: basic, essential achievement of course objectives
D 1 = Marginal work: minimal or inadequate achievement of course objectives
F 0 = Unacceptable work: failure to achieve course objectives

Please note that for ‘good, solid work’ you get the grade of B. In order to get a grade of A, you must produce exceptional work, that surpasses the objectives of the course; That usually translates into a combination of the following:
- Well researched and comprehensive analysis and criticism that goes beyond what is required for the assignment.
- Work that is exceptionally articulated, well structured and concise;
- Insightful and creative work that includes elaborate and profound interaction with the material and advances the present discussions on the subject matter.
Following are the types of issues that devalue a paper listed in the order of their importance.

- Faulty logic; incoherence; lack of discernment in evaluating what is at stake in the argument; answering a different question;
- Insufficient interaction with the material; insufficient research; weak argument; poor structure
- Grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, etc; While I am mainly interested in content issues, persistent grammatical and spelling errors will reduce your grade.

Regarding the writing standards you may want to follow The Chicago Manual of Style. Particular attention should be given to argument construction, outline, the standard of language expected in a paper as well as the proper way of referencing resources. If you plan to work hard anyway, it would be a pity to miss helpful hints on impressing your professor with your wide-ranging erudition:-)

The due date for the final essay is December 16.