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PH 501 Philosophy of Religion

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I. Introduction

Perhaps you are thinking to yourself, “Philosophy of Religion? Isn’t that something of a contradiction in terms?” In light of the fact that one might argue that philosophy represents the extreme in our use of reason to understand the world of shared human experienced and that religion represents the extreme in our use of faith to make sense of that same world, this is a reasonable question. However, as we shall see, a better argument would be one that argues that both reason and faith must function jointly if we are to best understand our world. In many ways, the interaction between faith and reason is exemplary of the sorts of issues that we will examine in this course.

It is my hope that the various topics we will examine this semester under the rubric of the philosophy of religion will not only help each of us to grow in our knowledge of a range of philosophical issues, but that it will also contribute to our growth as Christian disciples. There is a sense in which the biblical injunction to “Be always prepared to give an account of the hope that lies within you” is most fundamentally enabled through a thorough philosophical examination of our faith commitments. Let us proceed, then, using as our motto that old expression: “Faith seeking understanding.”

II. COURSE DESCRIPTION

As a graduate course, PH501, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, assumes that the participant is somewhat beyond the novice level in academic pursuits. At the same time as an introductory level course, we do not assume any in-depth knowledge of the themes to be studied for this semester. Since this course is designed as an introductory course, it is focused more broadly than narrowly--i.e., the intent is to introduce a wide range of issues of concern to the philosopher of religion rather than to examine in great detail a more restrictive list of topics. Consequently, this course consists of 14 modules which, to a certain extent, can be viewed as stand-alone modules dealing with one theme of particular interest to the
study of the philosophy of religion. That is not to say that there is no building upon earlier modules by later modules, but rather that each of these modules deals with at least one issue that is the subject of substantial discussion within the trade. For example, module nine deals with the problem of evil, while module five deals with the faith/reason debate. Also, while one might pursue the philosophy of religion in the abstract, i.e., separate from any particular religious tradition, we shall proceed, as one might expect, clearly recognizing our firm commitment to the Christian religion.

There has rarely been a time in recent history when the human race seems so hungry for spiritual insight, while at the same time desiring to maintain intellectual integrity. As Michael Peterson notes in the introduction to his work, Reason and Religious Belief:

Philosophy of religion is receiving more attention in recent years than it has for many decades. Professional philosophers are bringing new techniques to bear on traditional problems and are pioneering important new territory as well. In 1980 Time reported this resurgence of interest in the philosophical examination of religion, stating that “God is making a comeback.” It is becoming increasingly obvious to more and more people that the issues surrounding belief in God are extremely significant. (Peterson, 1991, p. xi)

We are positioned to make a unique contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is my hope that this course will equip you with the means to answer some of the questions facing individuals in our world which is largely destitute of spiritual truth.

III. COURSE RATIONALE

At this point, some of you may be asking how this course fits into Asbury’s overall plan for equipping students for Christian ministry. There are at least four different ways in which one might go about answering this question. First, consider that John Wesley frequently indicated the importance of studying logic and metaphysics. Further, he saw logic, more narrowly, and philosophy, more broadly, as tools that allowed him to discover the fallacies and inconsistencies in the arguments of his opponents. As you can see, Wesley clearly saw philosophy as aids in the task of clarifying and demonstrating the validity of Christian truth claims. In a sense, then, to use Luther’s phrase, philosophy is the hand-maiden of theology.

Secondly, we live in an age which, perhaps more than any other single historical period, reverences the utilization of rational methods. It may be
common in conservative theological circles to claim that it is the liberals who are overly committed to the rational structure of inquiry, one only need examine closely the sorts of arguments advanced by conservatives to defend their truth claims (in fact, one only need note that such arguments are even made) to see the extent to which they are committed to the canons of reason. Consequently, one can hardly even enter the public marketplace of ideas without being adequately schooled in certain aspects of philosophy method.

Third, when engaging what many consider to be a largely post-Christian culture, the ability to clearly and articulately layout and assess our own as well as competitive positions is extremely important. After this course of study, you will be better equipped to describe and defend the fundamental truth claims of the Christian faith.

Fourth, over the last 400 years, a remarkable number of important transitions in the way that people look at the world have occurred. The truth of God’s existence, taken utterly for granted by Jesus in the New Testament, has been questioned in a number of ways--some scientific and some philosophical, for example. The very foundations of moral theory have been attacked from a number of perspectives. In short, numerous challenges to the Christian faith have arisen. And, if we are to be able to respond effectively to those challenges, we must understand not only their weaknesses, but also their strengths and attractiveness.

In summary, a common theme underlying the various rationale for this course is the desire to equip you to be able to respond to the challenges to Christian faith which are being advanced by those hostile to Christian belief.

**IV. COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Through our work together this semester, we will accomplish a number of important course objectives.

1. We will learn to evaluate a variety of arguments for their soundness and validity, and to apply certain of the basic logical forms of arguments.

2. We will develop our own response to the problem of evil by drawing upon the resources contained within the Christian tradition.

3. We will analyze the alleged conflicts between faith and reason, and then develop our own, more holistic account.
4. We will develop the ability to explain the impacts that theology and philosophy have upon each other.

5. We will examine the nature of explanation in order to discover the best way to think of Christianity as relates to its explanatory power.

6. We will analyze the classical arguments for God’s existence, and we shall learn to outline them and place them within their broader historical context.

7. We will develop an adequate theory of the nature of language in order to understand how finite human language can be used to describe an infinite God.

8. We will develop an adequate account of the manner in which science and religion are inter-related.

9. We will develop an adequate account of human knowledge from a Christian perspective.

10. We will examine the critique of miracles provided by David Hume, and others, and develop an adequate response to those challenges.

V. COURSE REQUIREMENTS
All class members will be expected to complete the reading assignments in a timely fashion, attend class, and complete the assigned projects. Your grade assignment in this course will be a result of the quality of the work that you undertake. See below for writing projects and exam schedules.

VI. ASSIGNED READINGS AND SCHEDULE
The required texts for this course are:
The Mike Peterson et al text *Reason and Religious Belief* (referenced as RRB),
Mike Peterson et al text *Philosophy of Religion Selected Readings* (referenced as SR), William Hasker’s *Metaphysics*. For bibliographic detail, see the bibliography.

There may be additional materials provided in the course center and/or on reserve in the libraries. I will advise you either in class if and when this should occur.
In addition to the required readings, I will occasionally reference optional readings for those of you who are particularly interested in the theme of that module. If you undertake any of these additional readings, please let me know. I would be particularly interested in your comments as to the helpfulness of these collateral readings in grasping the material covered in that module.

VII. MODULE OUTLINE AND SCHEDULE

Module One: The theme of module one is an introduction to the philosophical study of religion. Here we will consider such questions as: what does it mean to analyze something philosophically? What is philosophy? What would constitute an acceptable definition of religion? What methodologies do philosophers of religion use? In addition, this module will examine the nature of explanation. Issues include: what constitutes an acceptable argument form? What is a cumulative case argument and how should it be deployed?

Module Two: The theme of module two is the conflicting claims of those who embrace freewill over those who embrace determinism. The debate over freewill and determinism is one of the defining debates in the relationship between the Wesleyan tradition and the Reformed tradition. We will consider both positions and assess them for their philosophical and theological adequacy.

Module Three: The theme of module three is the inter-relation of the physical and spiritual/mental aspect of human existence, sometimes called the mind/body problem. We shall consider such questions as: Are the mind and body separate realities (is dualism true)? Or, are the mind and body united in some way? How do our Christian commitments influence our position on this matter?
Readings: Hasker 57-80.

Module Four: The theme of module four is the religious use of language. In this module, we will consider such questions as: how can finite language be applied to an infinite God? What role does metaphor and analogy play in our articulation of God’s nature and attributes? How is religious language justified?
Module Five: The theme of module five is the relationship between faith and reason. In this module, we will consider such questions as: What is the fundamental nature of faith? Reason? How are the two related in an adequate theology? We will consider such views as critical realism, naive realism, and anti-realism, evaluating each for its adequacy.
Readings: Peterson RRB 43-61; Peterson SR 59-94

Module Six: The theme of module six is religious epistemology. In this module, we will consider the justification of religious belief. This will involve the evaluation of classical foundationalism as well as Reformed Epistemology. We will consider such questions as: What warrants are necessary for Christian belief? Must one have adequate evidences before one is justified in believing?
Readings: Peterson RRB 146-65; Peterson SR 309-46

Module Seven: The theme of module seven are the so-called arguments (sometimes called proofs) for the existence of God. In this module, we will examine the three primary arguments for God’s existence: the cosmological, the ontological, and the teleological arguments.
Readings: Peterson RRB 85-115; Peterson SR 145-150, 163-210, 221-27

Module Eight: The theme of module eight is religious experience. In this module, we shall consider such questions as: What is a religious experience? What is the evidential force of a religious experience? How do religious experiences which happen to one person come to bear in the beliefs held by another? What role do the religious experiences of other religious traditions play in Christian faith?
Readings: Peterson RRB 18-42; Peterson SR 10-54

Module Nine: The theme of module nine is the problem of evil. As this problem represents the atheist’s strongest against belief in God, we shall examine both critical responses raised to atheistic challenges (often referred to as “defenses”) as well as the primary theodicies which have been develop from within the Christian tradition. These will include the Iranaean theodicy, the Augustinian theodicy, and the process theodicy.
Readings: Peterson RRB 116-35; Peterson SR 231-305
**Module Ten:** The theme of module ten is miracles. In this module, we will examine the critique of the possibility of miracles as raised by David Hume. We will also consider modern day arguments against miracles advanced by theists as well as atheists. We will develop an adequate response to these objections.
Readings: Peterson RRB 190-211; Peterson SR 389-416

**Module Eleven:** The theme of module eleven is the question of human immortality. Many of the different world religions affirm that this physical world is not all that there is, even though the manner in which they understand the next life varies considerably. We shall consider different understandings of human immortality with the objective of developing an understanding of an adequate doctrine from a Christian perspective.
Readings: Peterson RRB 212-36; Peterson SR 421-62

**Module Twelve:** The theme of module twelve is the inter-relation of science and religion. Since we live in a culture which generally takes the sciences, particularly the natural sciences, as paradigmatic of the proper inquiry into truth, it is of significant importance that we understand the similarities and differences between scientific and theological methods of inquiry. Further, we will defend theological inquiry as not inherently inferior to scientific inquiry.
Readings: Peterson RRB 237-58; Peterson SR 467-86

**Module Thirteen:** The theme of module thirteen is religious diversity. We live in an ever-increasingly pluralistic society in which a wide variety of religious communities live in close proximity to each other. In many cases, these religious traditions make conflicting truth claims--more precisely, these truth claims are often of a nature such that not more than one set of them can be true. We will examine the appropriate manner for assessing these competing claims.
Readings: Peterson RRB 259-78; Peterson SR 495-523

**Module Fourteen:** The theme of module fourteen is the inter-relation between philosophy and theology. It is without question that one’s philosophical commitments has an impact on one’s theological position on a wide variety of matters. In this module, we will consider the manners in which this interaction occurs, and we will seek to become intentional about our commitments in light of this interaction.
Readings: Peterson RRB 302-23; Peterson SR 551-76
VIII. ASSIGNMENTS/ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The assignments and the assessment tools to be used for evaluation in this class, as well as the modules to which they correspond, are to be as follows:

a. Examine and critique an argument dealing with the freedom/determinism issue. The argument will be provided. Our study of this topic occurs in module two.

b. Consider the relation between faith and reason, and propose a synthesis of the two. Our study of this topic is in module five. A question that you might ask yourself by way of access to this issue might be: what roles do reason and faith play in my embrace of Christianity?

c. Write a paper on the argument for God’s existence that you find most persuasive. You should indicate why you find it persuasive, and you should also indicate the reasonable criticisms which you realize may be raised. You may also write a paper which uses the concept of a cumulative case argument. If you choose to do this, please let me know for additional resources. Our discussion of this topic occurs in module seven.

d. This paper deals with the problem of evil, and it has two components. The scenario is: You are pastor of a local congregation. This last weekend, one of your most faithful members suffered a terrible tragedy. Their 8 year old was killed in a biking accident in the community. Part one of your assignment: at the funeral, or shortly thereafter, the parents ask you why God allowed this to happen. What do you say? Part two of your assignment: it is now a year later, and the parents schedule a meeting with you in which they say: We are working through the loss of our child, but we are curious about the reasons why God allows evil to occur. What insights can you give them. Of course, the first part of your assignment deals with the pastoral problem of evil while the second deals with the philosophical problem of evil. Our discussion of this problem occurs in module nine.

e. Develop an adequate understanding of the relationship between science and religion from a Christian perspective. In so doing, you may critically examine the alternatives we examined in class, accepting one of them or a combination of them as your own. Or, you may develop your own position. Our discussion of this topic occurs in module twelve.

Due dates will be one week after the close of the module which contains the material pertaining to the assignment. Please note that papers turned in late will be subject to a 3 point per day (not counting weekends) deduction.
These five papers will constitute 75% of your grade, 10% will be determined by the percentage of the assigned readings completed, and 15% will be based upon a final exam. Study guides, etc. for the final will be developed during the course of the semester.

**Detailed requirements for assigned papers.**

All writing assignments for this class are to be not less than four full pages and not more than six full pages. Text is to be double spaced. Please include a cover page (not part of the four to six pages) which indicates the course number, the topic, the date and the due date (listed as “date”/“due date”), and your name and SPO.

Please leave approximately one inch margins at top, bottom, and sides. You may use any font you desire (as long as it is English and readable). I prefer left and right justification, but this is not required. As two indenting of quotations, footnotes, etc., you may use any accepted style. Please be sure to carefully cite all of your sources, as plagiarism, by seminary policy, is to be taken most seriously. If you are in doubt, it is better to cite than not.

Please pay particular attention to spelling and grammar. Here I get on my soapbox a bit. We are, by virtue of God’s calling, to serve the kingdom of Christ in a variety of capacities. However, almost all of those capacities include the need to be able to communicate clearly. Using good grammar and spelling correctly are central aspects of that responsibility. Remind yourself that you are “Ambassadors for Christ” (as Paul puts it), and consider the care you put into your writing a reflection upon the seriousness with which you take that calling.

In each case, I will assess written work according to the following system. Out of a possible 100 points for each paper, 30 points will be awarded on the basis of the generally readability, which includes spelling, grammar, and felicity of constructions. 35 points will be award based upon the adequacy of the content and the final 35 points will be award upon the accuracy of content. As always, if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

**X. GLOSSARY**

*agency theory:* in the freewill/determinism debate, the position that agents may begin causal chains

*analogy:* the comparison of two terms so that one more ambiguous is understood by reference to one more clear in its meaning
a priori: prior to experience
a posteriori: following experience
apologetics: the task of providing a defense for one’s beliefs
causal relation: a relation between two events such that one can be understood as the cause of the other, i.e., the connection is not merely accidental
compatibilism: the belief that freedom and determinism
cosmological argument: an a posteriori argument for God’s existence which is based upon our experience of the world (why is there anything at all rather than nothing?)
cumulative case argument: an argument which proceeds from several separate pieces of evidence to a conclusion which best explains those evidences
deductive argument: an argument which necessarily follows from true premises to a certain conclusion
determinism: the belief that humans are not free with regard to actualization of various states of affairs. Determination may be by God (as in theological determinism) or by the law-like mechanisms in the world (as in the universal law of causality)
epistemology: the study of human knowing
equivocal: the use of one term for more than one meaning
fatalism: a position in the freedom/determinism debate that believes “what will be, will be”.
general revelation: the revelation of God that comes from observation of the world or of human existence
inductive argument: an argument which proceeds from true premises to a conclusion which is only probable
interactionism: the name of the problem that arises in dualism when one tries to make sense of how an incorporeal thing (a mind) interacts with a physical thing (a body/brain)
law of universal causality: the claim that all events stand in a very long series of causal relations
libertarian freedom: the belief that humans are significantly free in their actualization of various states of affairs
metaphysics: the study of that which is beyond the physical/natural world
mind/body problem: the attempt to make sense of the fact that humans exhibit physical characteristics (a body) and spiritual characteristics (mental, for example)
miracle: a notoriously difficult term to define, which we shall take to mean a violation of a known law of nature
**modus ponens:** one of the general arguments, of the form: 1) if p, then q. 2) p. 3) Therefore, q.

**modus tolens:** one of the general arguments, of the form: 1) if p, then q. 2) not q. 3) Therefore, not p.

**natural theology:** the study of God apart from special revelation (that is, primarily apart from Scripture)

**necessary cause:** some cause, C, the occurrence of which is necessary for the occurrence of some effect, E

**ontological argument:** an a priori argument for God’s existence which is based upon the concept of the greatest possible being

**ontology:** the study of being in its most general terms

**philosophy:** technically, the love of wisdom. This implies that the main task of the philosopher’s inquiry is to gain wisdom about some aspect of human existence

**problem of evil:** the atheist’s strongest argument for their position. It arises from the seeming incongruity between the claims that God is perfectly good, all-knowing, all-powerful, and yet, evil exists

**Reformed epistemology:** the theory of knowing as espoused particularly by Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston

**religion:** an exceedingly difficult term to define which includes both theistic and non-theistic belief sets, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

**special revelation:** information about God which comes from God’s special revelatory acts, generally taken to be primarily embodied in the Scriptures

**sufficient cause:** some cause, C, which, if it occurs, is sufficient to assure the occurrence of some effect, E

**theodicy:** explanations for the problem of evil intending to justify God’s allowing evil occurrences

**theory to the best explanation:** an argument which attempts to provide the best explanation for a set of data

**teleological argument:** an a posteriori argument for God’s existence which is based upon our experience of the orderliness of the world

**univocal:** the use of one term to convey only one meaning

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**XI. BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Franks-Davis, C.  *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*.


Mitchell, B.  *The Justification of Religious Belief*.


Wolterstorff, N.  *Divine Discourse*. 
Attachment One

GRADING PROCEDURES

I am including this document with the class syllabus in order to provide clarification regarding the manner in which grades for this class will be determined, including the level of work which corresponds to various grades.

First, in accordance with the seminary catalog, please note that a grade of B is given for work which satisfactorily meets the parameters of a given assignment. More specifically, let us assume that in response to a particular assignment a paper is handed in which satisfactorily answers the questions raised by the assignment and which does so in a clear and articulate fashion and which, further, has relatively few errors in spelling or grammar. Such a paper would receive a grade of B. Please note that this means that I might return a paper with a letter of B assigned which has few or no errors marked and which has an ending comment such as “good, solid work”. In other words, the starting point for a relatively error-free paper is a grade of B.

Obviously, in the course of examining the response to a particular assignment, there are specific aspects of the work which I consider in determining whether a higher or lower grade is appropriate. First, I consider the standards identified by the seminary for the relationship between assignments and their responses. Those standards are summarized below:

A Exceptional work; outstanding or surpassing achievement of course objectives.
B Good work; substantial achievement of course objectives.
C Acceptable work; essential achievement of course objectives.
D Marginal work; minimal or inadequate achievement of course objectives.
F Unacceptable work; failure of course objectives.

(Specific descriptions of “-” and “+” grades are not given, but may be judged to fall appropriately between the descriptions given above.)

While I cannot, for a number of reasons, give a precise indication of the number of points that would be deducted for specific ways in which a paper might be lacking, the following list summarizes certain things which might potentially result in a reduction in total score.

+Misspellings +“Stream of consciousness” writing
+Incomplete sentences +Answering a different question
+Grammatical errors +Presentation of a weak conclusion
+Punctuation errors +Presentation of a weak argument
+Poor overall structure +Faulty logic
+Awkward constructions +Failure to interact critically with the material (if part of the assignment)
Similarly, I cannot give a precise indication of the number of points that would be added to a paper for going beyond “good, solid work”. However, following is a list of the sorts of things that would evidence going beyond the basic assignment and would, therefore, warrant a higher total score for the response.

+ Writing that is particularly articulate and/or worded with exceptional clarity and concision.
+ Particularly insightful interaction with the material, including exceptional criticisms or the recognition of the more profound implications of certain positions.
+ Presentation which moves beyond mere repetition of the arguments of others.
+ Evidence of research that goes beyond what is required for the assignment.
+ Conclusions which effectively summarize criticisms and which propose solutions.
+ Critical interaction which probes deeply into the arguments at hand.

Some assignments lend themselves better to scoring by numerical assessment rather than by assigning a letter grade initially. Of course, these numerical scorings must be converted to letter grades for recording at the end of the semester. I offer the following breakdown of my numerical scoring system to allow you to track their correspondence to letter grades as you wish.

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<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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<td>B+</td>
<td>86.7-89.9</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>83.4-86.6</td>
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<td>80-83.3</td>
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<td>C+</td>
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<td>73.4-76.6</td>
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<td>70-73.3</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>60-69.9</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>less than 60</td>
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With these guidelines in place, I commit to give my best effort to assessing your work in accordance with these standards and in a fair and impartial fashion. In the course of the semester, if you should have any questions about the grade assigned for any particular assignment, please do not hesitate to contact me for further discussion.