



School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music

TP232: Philosophy of Religion

**Module Handbook
Spring 2024**

Module Coordinator: Peter D. Larsen

Module Outline

Lecture	Monday 9am–10am Thursday 11am–12pm O'Donnell House G03
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Module description

Religious belief has been an integral part of the human experience since humans began thinking about their place in the cosmos. This has prompted people to ask questions like: Why is there something rather than nothing? How did the cosmos come into being? Why do I exist? Is there a higher power? If so, what is the nature of this higher power? How should I behave toward this higher power? What does it mean to be alive? How should I live my life? How should I behave toward other living things (other humans, non-human animals, plants, etc.)? And, what will happen to me after I die? The disciplines of Religion, Divinity, and Theology attempt to provide answers to these questions; the discipline of Philosophy of Religion seeks to understand the philosophical principles that underpin the ways in which thinkers approach these questions, how they ultimately arrive at answers they do, and where these answers fit in a wider philosophical context. This module introduces students to some of the major positions and debates in the Philosophy of Religion. Importantly, however, it neither, engages extensively with, nor seeks to validate or question the truth of any particular religion or religious belief.

We begin, in part I, by considering the nature and status of religious belief. Many philosophers have considered religious belief to be philosophically problematic because of the status of the evidence that underpins religious beliefs, and, in particular, the element of faith. In this regard, we consider the epistemic status of religious beliefs, the nature of religious disagreement, and the often-contentious relationship between religion and science.

Next, in part II, we turn to one of religion's most pervasive and enduring topics, the existence of God. Our discussion is framed within the context of the monotheistic, Abrahamic religions, but the arguments we consider are equally applicable to non-monotheistic belief systems. We canvas a number of philosophical arguments that have been mooted to prove the existence of a higher being. These arguments fall into three broad families: cosmological arguments; ontological arguments; and teleological, or design, arguments.

After considering how thinkers have attempted to justify belief in the existence of God, we proceed to an investigation of the nature of the divine. We begin, in Part III, by considering different conceptions of the divine, both monotheistic, and non-monotheistic. In Part IV, we delve into those characteristics that have been attributed to the divinity. In particular, we consider whether it makes sense to think that God possesses attributes in the same way that human beings possess them; and whether it makes sense to think that the attributes of God are the same as, or similar to, those of human beings. Prominent among these features are: omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence. As we shall see, however, the idea that God possesses all of these characteristics has given rise to a problem, which has come to be known as the problem of evil. This describes the tension that arises from the apparent incompatibility between, on the one hand, God's omnipotence and God's benevolence, and, on the other hand, the existence of evil in the world, be it natural or human in origin.

In the fifth and final part of the module we consider some enduring debates in the Philosophy of Religion. These have to do with the relation between religion and morality, and the question of death and what happens to one when one dies. We also introduce two of the more modern approaches to the Philosophy of Religion. Feminist theorists have attempted to disentangle religious belief from the patriarchal context within which many of the world's organized religions have developed. These feminist philosophers of religion not only reinterpret religious texts, and reimagine religious concepts and rituals by examining them through lens of gender studies, but they also bring the topic of religion and religious belief into the field of women's and gender studies. Phenomenologists have attempted to understand where experience and phenomena associated with that experience fit into the discussion of religion. They have also tried to understand the role of the subject and subjectivity in religious experience.

Objectives and learning outcomes of the module

On successful completion of this module, a student will be able to:

- assess the importance of religious belief historically;
- recognize and engage with the philosophical aspects of religious belief;
- think critically about the relation between faith and science;
- understand, reconstruct, and critically analyze the basic arguments for the existence of God;
- understand the significance of and engage critically with the characteristics that have traditionally been attributed to divine beings;
- identify and engage critically with the patriarchal aspects of traditional organized religion;
- write an essay that engages critically with topics in the Philosophy of Religion.

Assessment

Description	Due Date	Percentage of Final Grade
Mid-semester essay: 1,000-1,200 words	1 March 2024, 11:59pm	30%
End of semester essay: 2,000-3,500 words	12 April 2023, 11:59pm	70%

Module Coordinator Contact Details

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Office Hours: By appointment

Please note that for each unit below you will find some required reading, and often some suggested reading. All of these readings will be made available on Loop, and it is expected that students will do the reading in advance of each lecture. All written work will be submitted on Loop. It is expected that written work will be properly researched, and crucially, properly referenced. A sloppily referenced essay is a plagiarized essay. If you have any doubts, or questions about referencing, please contact the module coordinator.

Schedule

Part I. Religious Belief

Week 1

Monday 15 January 9am–10am

Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

Required reading: K. E. Yandell (1999), Chapter 2, pp. 13–19

Thursday 18 January 11am–12pm

The epistemic status of religious beliefs

Required reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 1, pp. 1–19.

Suggested reading: A. Plantinga (1992) “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?,” in Geivett & Sweetman, pp. 133–141.

Week 2

Monday 22 January 9am–10am

Religious disagreement

Required reading: B. Frances (2015), “Religious Disagreement,” in Oppy, pp. 180–191.

Suggested reading: King & Kelly (2017) “Disagreement and the Epistemology of Theology,” in Abraham & Aquino (eds.), pp. 309–324.

Thursday 25 January 11am–12pm

Religion and science

Required reading: M. Stenmark (2001) pp. 91–123.

Suggested reading: S. Sarkar (2015), “Religion and Science,” in Oppy, pp. 402–415.

Part II. Arguments for the Existence of God

Week 3

Monday 29 January 9am–10am

The existence of God: the ontological argument

Required reading: Anselm Selection from *Proslogion*, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 139–140.

Suggested reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 4, pp. 55–74.

Thursday 1 February 11am–12pm

The existence of God: the ontological argument

Required reading: Kant, Selection from *Critique of Pure Reason*, in Pojman & Rea (2012) pp. 141–144.

Suggested reading: B. Leftow (2005), “The Ontological Argument,” in W.J. Wainwright, pp. 80–115.

Week 4

Monday 5 February 9am–10am

St. Brigid’s Day — no in-person meeting

The existence of God: the cosmological argument

Required reading: Aquinas, Selection from *The Five Ways*, and Samuel Clarke on the argument from contingency, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 147–150.

Suggested reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 5, pp. 74–93.

Thursday 8 February 11am–12pm

The existence of God: the cosmological argument

Required reading: W. Rowe, Selection from *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 150–159.

Suggested reading: Pruss & Gale (2005), “The Cosmological and Design Arguments,” in W.J. Wainwright, pp. 116–137.

Week 5

Monday 12 February 9am–10am

The existence of God: the teleological argument

Required reading: W. Paley, Selection from *Natural Theology*, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 181–183.

Suggested reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 6, pp. 94–120.

Thursday 15 February 11am–12pm

The existence of God: the teleological argument

Required reading: D. Hume, Selection from *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 184–190.

Suggested reading: R. Swinburne (1992), “The Argument from Design,” in Geivett & Sweetman, pp. 201–211.

Part III. Conceptions of the Divine

Week 6

Monday 19 February 9am–10am

Non-monotheistic conceptions of the divine

Required reading: K. E. Yandell (1999), Chapter 8, pp. 101–117.

Suggested reading: M. Chadha (2015), “Hindu models of divinity,” in Oppy, pp. 127–137.

Thursday 22 February 11am–12pm
Monotheistic conceptions of the divine

Required reading: K. E. Yandell (1999), Chapter 7, pp. 85–97.

Suggested reading: J. Bishop (2015), “Christian Conceptions of God,” in Oppy, pp. 138–152.

Week 7

****Reading Week — no lectures****

Part IV. Divine Attributes

Week 8

Monday 4 March 9am–10am
Divine attributes: omnipotence

Required reading: Aquinas, Selection from *Summa Theologica*, and G. Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence,” in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 87–91.

Thursday 7 March 11am–12pm
Divine attributes: omnipotence

Required reading: W.E. Mann (2005), “Divine Sovereignty and Aseity,” in W.J. Wainwright, pp. 35–58.

Week 9

Monday 11 March 9am–10am
Divine attributes: omniscience

Required reading: Augustine, Selection from *On the Free Choice of the Will*, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 93–95.

Thursday 14 March 11am–12pm
Divine attributes: omniscience

Required reading: N. Pike, “Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action,” and A. Plantinga, Selection from *God, Freedom and Evil*, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 96–111.

Week 10

Monday 18 March 9am–10am
The problem of evil

Required reading: D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, D.10, pp. 243–253.

Suggested reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 3, pp. 32–54.

Thursday 21 March 11am–12pm

The problem of evil

Required reading: P. van Inwagen (2005), “The Problem of Evil,” in W.J. Wainwright, pp. 188–219.

Suggested reading: N.N. Trakakis (2015), “The Ecclesiological Problem of Evil,” *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 245–268.

Part V. Debates in and Theoretical Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion

Week 11

Monday 25 March 9am–10am

Religion and Morality

Required reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 9, pp. 168–189.

Suggested reading: D.S. Oderberg (2015) “Religion and Normative Ethics,” in Oppy, pp. 316–328.

Thursday 28 March 11am–12pm

Death and Immortality

Required reading: Selections from Plato, B. Russell, and J. Hick, in Pojman & Rea (2012), pp. 463–478.

Suggested reading: B. Davies (1993), Chapter 11, pp. 212–234.

Week 12

Monday 1 April 9am–10am

****Easter Monday — no in-person meeting****

Feminist philosophy of religion

Required reading: B. Clack (2015) “Feminist approaches to religion,” in Oppy, pp. 7–19.

Suggested reading: S. Coakley (2005) “Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” in W.J. Wainwright, pp. 494–526.

Thursday 4 April 11am–12pm

Phenomenological approaches to the Philosophy of Religion

Required reading: J.P. Manoussakis (2015) “Phenomenological approaches to religion,” in Oppy, pp. 20–31.