

PHIL 357 B1: Philosophy of Religion

Winter 2023 - TR 12:30-13:50 pm

Instructor: Prof. Nathan Kowalsky

Description:

The philosophy of religion poses conceptual and theoretical questions about religion without presupposing a particular commitment for or against any or all religion(s). This course will consider the following sets of questions:

- What is religion? How do we know when something is religious and something isn't? Is politics a form of religion? Or science? Can there be a religion without gods or spirits or the divine?
- What is the divine anyway? What are gods or spirits? Is it better to speak of "ultimate reality"? Shall we just call it "God"? In order to do so, do we need to distinguish between mundane reality, different kinds of realities?
- If there are different kinds of realities at issue, how do we speak about them? Do we use the same language for both? Are religious speech acts fundamentally different from mundane ones?
- In the West, the earliest philosophers distinguished between *logos* speech (reason, truth) and *mythos* speech (myth, falsehood). Is this distinction relevant to religion? How about with respect to science? Is philosophy both? How about religion?
- What, therefore, is the role of "reason" in religion? Is "faith" opposed to reason? What is faith anyway? Do we have to have sufficient reasons for believing in an ultimate reality?
- Perhaps reason is not supposed to be related to belief in an ultimate reality. Perhaps faith is an entirely different kettle of fish? Is that a problem for religion, or a virtue?
- Perhaps reason isn't even at issue, but rather probabilities and volition are. Is religion a good bet, all things considered? Is it possible to believe something because you decide to, or think you should?
- Is reason an objective arbiter of religious questions anyway? Does the notion of "faith seeking understanding" even make sense? Perhaps reason isn't all it's cracked up to be. Now what?
- What reasons have people given for belief in God? What objections have been levelled against each?
- Does it even make sense to speak of the "existence" of God? Is existence itself a mundane category? If God is ultimate reality, does that mean God can neither exist nor not exist? What might follow from this, if it's true?
- What characteristics might God have? How would we be able to tell what they might be? Can we comprehend what those characteristics are? Do they lead to unresolvable contradictions?

- Is it safer or more useful to speak about what God is not? Does the *via negativa* get us closer to the truth about God? Is apophatic mysticism an attempt to overcome the limits of predication?
- What reasons have people given for *not* believing in God? What are the various formulations of the argument from evil?
- What is evil anyway? Is it a thing – a substance? Is it an *absence* of a substance? Does that help us solve the problem? Is it a moral evaluation? (How do ethics apply to God anyway?)
- How have theists responded to the problem of moral evil? Is the free-will defence successful? Are there unresolved issues with it?
- How have theists responded to the problem of natural evil? (free-will again, plenitude, soul making) Are they more problematic than the free-will defence?
- If nature is evil, can God (and environmentalism) be saved? Does transcendent goodness mean what the problem of evil assumes it means? What if God – and nature – are sublime?
- Is the God of philosophy not, therefore, a religious god? What is ontotheology? Does religious rationalism have more in common with techno-scientific rationality than is commonly thought? Is this a problem?
- Is it possible to *think philosophically* about the divine without putting it at our disposal? Can a possible phenomenology help us conceptualise a non-adequating form of conceptualization?
- What is the nature of religious experience or phenomenology? Is it possible to perceive God? Is religious experience innately ineffable or even irrelevant?
- Is religious experience innately self-serving? Does religion do nothing more than serve our own purposes and desires? Do we make the gods in our own image? Is religion always like this?
- Why are there so many religions? Are they all wrong? Can they all be right? Is it offensive or intolerant to say that one is right, or more right than the others?