

## CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION (PHIL 370)

Fall 2020

Instructor: Jeff Tolly

### **Instructor Contact Information:**

**Email:** [jeff.tolly@rutgers.edu](mailto:jeff.tolly@rutgers.edu)

### Class Meeting Schedule:

Mini-lecture videos and lecture notes will be posted to Sakai on Wednesdays and Fridays by 1:00PM Eastern Time—with some exceptions (see “course schedule” below)

Option Q&A sessions with me and other students will take place (via Webex) on

- Mondays, from 3:30PM-4:30PM Eastern Time
- Thursdays, from 12:00PM-1:00 PM Eastern Time

(with some exceptions—see “course schedule” below)

### **Communication note:**

Email is the best way to contact me, although, due to family commitments, I do not check email after 5:00PM or on weekends. I try to respond to emails sent to me within 1-2 business days. If I haven't responded to your email in that time frame, go ahead and send me a reminder follow up email.

### **Required Texts—**

-None—all readings or required video viewings will either be available on Sakai (under “resources” or as a link on the “course schedule” below).

### **Course Description:**

Philosophers ask and seek answers to important questions about the fundamental nature of reality—questions that aren't specifically addressed by the other disciplines in the humanities or the empirical sciences. These questions include (but are not exhausted by): “Do we have free will?” “What does it take to know something?” etc. Certainly, questions that are importantly *religious* in nature fall well within the scope of philosophical inquiry. In this class, we'll examine some of the key debates surrounding the following questions:

- Is there good reason to believe God exists?

- Is there good reason to believe God *doesn't* exist?
- What conception of the divine being is most plausible?
- Why, according to Buddhism, does the self not exist?
- What is the relationship between God and morality?
- What is faith, and how does faith relate to belief?
- Can one have rationally justified religious belief? If so, how?
- If God knows everything, do we still have free will?
- Does the phenomenon of widespread religious disagreement undermine the rationality of religious belief?
- Do the findings of contemporary cognitive science of religion undermine the rationality of religious belief?
- In what ways (if any) could divine judgment and Hell be *just*?
- What is the relationship between religion and science?

**There are two key goals** for this course:

- (1) developing the philosophical skill of critical reasoning
- (2) gaining an understanding of the best reasons for and against the various positions on these questions in contemporary philosophy of religion.

Note: with each batch of mini-lecture videos that I make, I'll post a new set of notes for you to follow along with as you watch the videos (on Sakai under "resources")

## Grading System

	<u>Possible Points</u>
Question Assignment	20 points
Reading Report Assignment	50 pts
Forum Participation assignments (12 of them)	120 (10 pts each)
Peer review comments	40 pts
Final Paper	160 total points:
Prospectus	20 points
Rough Draft	50 points
Final Draft	90 points
<hr/> Total Possible Points:	390 points

## Grading Scale

A: 390-365

B+: 364-340

B: 339-315

D: 269-266

C+: 314-290

F: 265-

C: 289-270

Note: When looking on the Sakai gradebook, only pay attention to your point total value (for the semester) on there—*don't* pay attention to the overall letter grade that Sakai will post, (because Sakai's letter grade calculator is not using the official grade scale for the class that you see above).

### **Due Dates**

Question assignment: assigned 9/2, due 9/5

#### Forum Participation Assignment

Post 1 (due 9/18) -assigned on 9/14

Response to Post 1 (due 9/25)

Post 2 (due 10/2) -assigned on 9/28

Response to Post 2 (due 10/9)

Post 3 (due 10/16) -assigned on 10/12

Response to Post 3 (due 10/23)

Post 4 (due 10/30) -assigned on 10/26

Response to Post 4 (due 11/6)

Post 5 (due 11/13 ) -assigned on 11/9

Response to post 5 (due 11/20)

Post 6 (due 12/4 ) - assigned on 11/30

Response to post 6 (due 12/11)

Peer Review Comments: due 12/9

#### Long Paper Assignment

Prospectus: Assigned 10/7, Due: 10/21

Rough Draft: due 11/16 (a Monday)

Final Draft due: (Final Exam day: TBD)

## Assignments

### **Final Paper**

(160 points). This paper will be formally assigned at the beginning of the second half of the course. I will provide a formal grading rubric and writing instructions around the time the paper is formally assigned.

The final draft of the paper will be due on the final exam period day.

Grade breakdown:

Prospectus	20 points
(partial) Rough Draft (4-5 pgs)	50 points
Final Draft (7-8 pgs)	90 points

### **Question Assignment**

(20 points) In the first week of the course, I will ask you to write up and explain why you're interested in philosophy of religion, and which question (thus far) interests you the most in philosophy of religion. This is also a chance for us to get to know each other a bit as a class, so it will be posted on a Sakai forum where you classmates can see you.

### **Forum Participation Assignments (12 assignments worth 10 pts each).**

Throughout the course of the semester, we'll keep a class forum (on Sakai) where we can share our reactions to (and philosophical arguments about) the key issues that we study in the course. Everybody's posts will be visible to everyone. Every other Monday morning (starting 9/14), I'll post a new forum prompt for the students to answer in their submission for that week (which will be due on the Friday of that same week (at 5PM Eastern Time)). These submissions will be 250-300 words long. On the off weeks where there's no new prompt to answer, the students will have 6-7 days to pick one of the student submissions to the previous week's forum to respond/reply to (they can pick any student's submission to reply to)—also due Fridays at 5PM EST. This will also be 250-300 words long. So, every other week there will be a new forum topic to write a submission for, and on the off-weeks, the students will be writing a reply submission to the previous week's forum. (6 new-forum submissions + 6 critical responses= 12 total assignments). These will all be graded on a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the highest grade possible (instructor will provide a grading rubric before the first response is posted).

### **Reading Report Assignment (50 pts)**

The student will pick one of the readings/videos that was assigned during the semester and write a 900 word critical engagement with that reading. In addition to summarizing the key points of the article/video, the student will discuss what she takes to be the shortcomings in the author's argument and offer suggestions for how the argument could (if possible) be repaired. The student can pick any reading from the semester so long as it's *not* on the topic on which the student is writing their final paper. The student can submit this assignment any time before Thanksgiving break

## Peer Review Comments (40pts)

After the students submit their rough drafts for the final paper, we'll hold an online peer editing workshop (on Sakai) where students will be paired up with a peer editor from the class. The student's job as a peer editor is to offer formatting, organizational, and content suggestions for the author they've been paired up with. I'll give clear guidelines for the high quality comments that I expect peer editors to give, and I'll grade students based on the quality of their comments.

## Late and Missed Assignments

Work that is not turned in receives a 0. In some specific cases, I will tell students that I will accept late work with a specific penalty attached. But if I don't communicate a specific penalty policy for a given assignment, assume that you'll receive no credit for turning it in late.

**POLICY:** Because all due dates have been provided to you at the beginning of the course, you can plan your work-weeks accordingly *ahead of time*. Hence, in order to be fair to each student, I do *not* give extensions on assignments because students have multiple assignments from other classes due around the same time or extra-curricular/work activities going on around the time of the due date.

-of course, in extenuating circumstances or emergencies (e.g., medical emergencies, tragedies in the family, etc.) I'll work with students to meet an adjusted deadline. If you find yourself in an emergency or extenuating circumstance situation, please reach out to me as soon as possible so that we can set an alternative deadline or come up with an alternative to the given assignment.

## Academic Integrity and Academic Misconduct

You are expected to be familiar with and to abide by RU's policy on academic and intellectual integrity: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy>

### Class Policy for Plagiarism Penalty

First offense: If I determine that a student plagiarized in a particular section of that paper, then that student won't earn any points *on that section* of the paper.

Second offense: My grade penalty will be *much* more severe.

Rule of thumb: If you're going to write down an idea that is *not yours*, don't hesitate to cite it either with a footnote or a parenthetical citation.

## **Students with Disabilities**

If you need special accommodations because of a learning disability or for another reason, please have the Office of Disability Services ([ods.rutgers.edu](https://ods.rutgers.edu)) get in touch with me. I want to work with you in whatever way I can.

## **Reading Drafts of Papers**

I will read drafts of the final paper and give you comments on them at any stage in the writing process, so long as you submit your draft to me before 48-hours prior to the deadline. I will do this over email, but I prefer students to make appointments with me or come to office hours—students get the most out of their comments in that way.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS**

Wednesday 9/2: First day-Introductions

-going over the syllabus

Friday 9/4 : Problem of Evil—the Logical Problem of Evil

Readings:

- Excerpts from J.L. Mackie -- "Evil and Omnipotence"

-optional-

(how philosophical arguments work)

Video: How to Argue

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKEhdsnKKHs&t>

Also optional

Excerpts from Alvin Plantinga -- "The Free Will Defense"

**Saturday 9/5: Question assignment due**

Wednesday 9/9: Problem of Evil—the Evidential Problem of Evil

Readings:

- Fyodor Dostoevsky -- "Rebellion"
- Excerpts from William Rowe -- "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism"

-optional-

Excerpts from John Hick -- "Evil and Soul Making"

Friday 9/11: The Problem of Evil—Responses to the Evidential Problem of Evil, Day 1

Readings:

- Video: “Philosophy: Problem of Evil Part 3” Greg Ganssle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L67dlpMgDa4>

Wednesday 9/16: The Problem of Evil—Responses to the Evidential Problem of Evil, Day 2

Readings:

- Video: Cornel West – “Sherman Jackson and Cornel West on the Problem of Black Suffering” time code 9:55-through the end

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNfqZ2PTfe8>

- Video: Cornel West—“Sherman Jackson and Cornel West on the Problem of Black Suffering” time code -beginning through 11:30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXBiO5lRTXA>

- Marilyn McCord Adams – “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God“ –pdf pgs 1-15.

Friday 9/18: Morality requires no theistic basis

Readings:

- Video: Peter Singer -- video: "Ethics without Religion" time code beginning up to 41:00

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5WA9I4AaFg>

**Forum Part. Assignment 1 due**

Wednesday 9/23: theism as the basis for morality

Readings:

- George Mavrodes -- "The Queerness of Morality"

Friday 9/25: The Fine Tuning Argument for God's Existence

Reading:

- Robin Collins--The Fine Tuning Design Argument (pgs 1-8)

**Response to Forum Part. Assignment 1 Due**

Wednesday 9/30: Multiple Universes and responding to the Fine Tuning Argument

Reading:

- Robin Collins--The Fine Tuning Design Argument (pgs 8-14)

Friday 10/2: Is it ever rational to believe in miracles based on testimony? (day 1)

Reading:

- Excerpts from David Hume -- *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

**Forum Part. Assignment 2 due**

Wednesday 10/7: Is it ever rational to believe in miracles based on testimony? (day 2)

Reading:

- Peter van Inwagen -- "Of 'Of Miracles'"

Friday 10/9 Can you have a justified religious belief without having a good argument for it?

Reading:

- Michael Bergmann -- "Rational Religious Belief Without Arguments"

**Response to Forum Part. Assignment 2 due**

Wednesday 10/14: Hinduism and the concept of God

Reading:

- Sushanta Sen—"The Vedic-Upanisadic Concept of Brahman (the Highest God)

Friday 10/16: Buddhism and arguments against the existence of the self (day 1)

Reading:

- Mark Siderits – “Non-self: Empty Persons” (32-50)

**Forum Part. Assignment 3 due**

Wednesday 10/21: Buddhism and arguments against the existence of the self (day 2)

- Mark Siderits – “Non-self: Empty Persons” (50-68)

**Prospectus Due**

Friday 10/23: Religious Disagreement—Religious Pluralism

Reading

- John Hick—“Religious Pluralism and Ultimate Reality”

**Response to Forum Part. Assignment 3 due**

Wednesday 10/28: Religious Disagreement—Religious Exclusivism

- Alvin Plantinga—“A Defense of Religious Exclusivism”

Friday 10/30: Religious Disagreement – Wrap up

-no new reading-

**Forum Part. Assignment 4 due**

Wednesday 11/4: The Nature of Religious Faith and Rationality (day 1)

Readings:

- Lara Buchak -- “Can it be Rational to have Faith?” (524-531)

Friday 11/6: The Nature of Religious Faith and Rationality (day 1)

Readings:

- Lara Buchak -- "Can it be Rational to have Faith? (531-539)

**Response to Forum Part. Assignment 4 due**

Wednesday 11/11: Hell: What is it, and is it justified? (day 1)

Reading:

- Ted Sider -- "Hell and Vagueness"

Friday 11/13: Hell: What is it, and is it justified? (day 2)

Reading:

- Excerpts from C.S. Lewis -- *The Great Divorce* (65-87)

**Forum Part. Assignment 5 due**

**11/16: Rough drafts due**

Wednesday 11/18: Does divine omniscience rule out human freedom? -- yes

Reading:

- Excerpts from Nelson Pike -- "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action"

Friday 11/20: Does divine omniscience rule out human freedom? -- no

Reading:

- Excerpts from Alvin Plantinga -- *God, Freedom and Evil*

**Response to Forum Part. Assignment 5 due**

Tuesday 11/24:

Science and Religious Faith—Are the incompatible?

Reading:

- Video: "Science and Religion are *not* Compatible"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aB9NOpAYRcQ>
- Video 2: "Does Science make Belief in God Obsolete?" (just watch the short segment from time code 3:30-5:20):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hn92R8C4MY>

- Video 3: Franice Collins-- “Why It’s so hard for Scientists to Believe in God”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pINptKQYviQ>
- Alvin Plantinga -- Excerpt from *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (pgs. 266-274, although feel free to keep reading)

**Due: Reading Report Assignment**

Wednesday 12/2: Is Scientific practice incompatible with atheism?

Reading:

- Video – Alvin Plantinga – “Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cs6zFymVKJM>

Friday 12/4: The Cognitive Science of Religion (day 1)

Reading:

Video-Helen De Cruz - “Roundtable Discussion on Experimental Philosophy of Religion”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsNuAYXvrvo>

**Forum part. Assignment 6 due**

**-Send what you have done on your final paper to your editing partner-**

Wednesday 12/9: Does the Cognitive Science of Religion undermine the rationality of theistic belief?

Reading:

- Matthew Braddock – “Debunking Arguments and the Cognitive Science of Religion”

**Due: Peer Review Comments**

**12/11: Response to forum part. Assignment 6 due**

**Due: Final Paper (Final Draft) -Due on final exam day (TBD) --Submit on Sakai**

\*Instructor reserves the right to alter/change the syllabus. Students will be notified of any such changes (well in advance of any relevant deadlines).