THE PROBLEM OF GOD
Summer 2019

M-TR, 1:00-3:00
July 8-August 9

Course Description:
This course is an introductory survey of the religious traditions of the West. We will examine some of the central currents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam from their beginnings in the ancient world through their development in the medieval and modern periods. Students will be introduced to the core principles of these religions, and will be asked to identify the ways in which they approached various fundamental theological problems. Throughout the course we will discuss the interplay between formative developments in religious thought and the popular expressions of faith.

Required Readings:
Karen Armstrong, A History of God (available at the campus bookstore)
All other texts are available on CANVAS

Course Requirements:
Class attendance:
- More than 3 absences (for any reason) will adversely affect your grade

Preparation:
- Students must be prepared to discuss the assigned readings and texts
- Students are required to bring the relevant texts to each class

Response Papers:
- Students will write 4 short response papers analyzing the readings
- Late papers will not be accepted

Quizzes:
- Students will take quizzes at the end of each week

Grading:
- Class attendance and participation (20%)
- Response papers (40%)
- Quizzes (40%)
Schedule of Classes

Week 1: Foundations of Religion in the West
Monday – Introduction and class overview

Tuesday: Foundations of Judaism
- Armstrong, ch. 2
- Mishnah, Avot, 1-5; and Talmud, Bava Metsia, 59a-b, in L. Schiffman ed., Texts and Traditions, pp. 523-528

Wednesday: Foundations of Christianity
- Armstrong, ch. 4
- Paul, Letter to the Romans
- Augustine, Account of his Own Conversion, Confessions, selections

Thursday: Foundations of Islam
- Armstrong, ch. 5
- Qur’an, Suras 4: 163-177; 92; 93; 96, trans. M. Pickthall

*Quiz

Week 2: Major Themes of Traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
Monday: Reason and Revelation
- Armstrong, ch. 6
- Selections from al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, ed. F. E. Peters, pp. 1116-1123

First Response Paper Due

Tuesday: Mysticism
- Armstrong, ch. 7

Wednesday: Martyrdom
- Augustine, City of God, in F. E. Peters ed., Judaism, Christianity and Islam, pp. 890-891
- St. Perpetua, “The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” from The Medieval Sourcebook
Thursday: Reform
- Armstrong, ch. 8
- Martin Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” in Martin Luther, ed. J. Dillenberger, selections
- St. Ignatius of Loyola, “Letters,” selections
*Quiz

Week 3: God and Religion in the Age of Enlightenment
Monday:
- Armstrong, ch. 9
- Descartes, “Most Perfect Being,” in D. Stewart, Exploring the Philosophy of Religion, pp. 127-130
- Pascal, Pensees, “The Wager,” pp. 121-126
Second Response Paper Due

Tuesday:
- Spinoza, A Theological-Political Treatise, ed. and trans. Samuel Shirley, 46-57; 88-100; 140-172; 214-227
- The excommunication of Benedictus Spinoza and his letter to Albert Burgh, in The Jew in the Modern World, ed. J. Reinharz and P. Mendes-Flohr, pp. 57-60

Wednesday:
- Thomas Paine, “Of the Religion of Deism Compared with the Religion of Christianity”

Thursday:
- Voltaire and Isaac de Pinto on the Jews, from The Jew in the Modern Word, pp. 304-5
*Quiz

Week 4: Religion in the Modern World: Criticism and Categories
Monday:
- Armstrong, ch. 10
- Emile Durkheim, Elementary Forms of Religious Life, selections
Third Response Paper Due

Tuesday:
- Friedrich Max Muller, Chips from a German Workshop, selections
- Bronislaw Malinowski, “Bipolarity and the ‘Sublime Folly’ of Religion”

Wednesday:
- Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion, selections
• Franz Kafka, Two Parables, in Franz Kafka the Complete Stories

Thursday:
• Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” from Genealogies of Religion, pp. 27-54

*Quiz

Week 5: The Return of Religion

Monday:
• Armstrong, ch. 11
• “How do You Solve a Problem Like a Maharat,” The Times of Israel, November 5, 2015

Fourth Response Paper Due

Tuesday:
• Byron Sherwin, “Thinking Judaism Through: Jewish Theology in America,” in The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism, 316-335

Wednesday:
• Ihsan Bagby, “Isolate, Insulate, Assimilate: Attitudes of Mosque Leaders toward America,” in A Nation of Religions, ed. S. Prothero, pp. 23-42
• Omid Safi, “Progressive Islam in America, in A Nation of Religions, ed. S. Prothero, pp. 43-60

Thursday:
• Daniel Boyarin, “Gender,” in Critical Terms for Religious Studies
• Carole P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, Introduction, in Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion (Canvas)

*Quiz
Wrap Up