

Jonathan Ray
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Office Hours:
by appointment

THE PROBLEM OF GOD

M-TR 1:00-3:00
July 12th – August 13th

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%)

Class Schedule Problem of God 2020

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
- “The Power of Righteousness,” in *Rabbinic Stories*, ed. J. Rubenstein, pp. 190-192

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
- Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari, *Explanation of the Fundamentals of Religion*, in *The Theology of al-Ash'ari*, ed. R. J. McCarthy, selections

*Quiz

Week 2: Major themes in Traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Monday: Reason and Revelation

- Armstrong, ch. 6
- Biography of Maimonides, *Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, 410-111
- Selections from al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi, in *Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. F. E. Peters, pp. 1116-1123
- Maimonides, “Guide for the Perplexed,” in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. I. Twersky, selections

First Response Paper Due

Tuesday: Mysticism

- Armstrong, ch. 7
- Hayyim Vital’s “Book of Visions,” in M. Faienstein ed., *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies*, pp. 50-53
- Meister Eckhart’s “Teaching” in R. Anderson ed., *Medieval Worlds*, pp. 303-305

Wednesday: Martyrdom

- Ariel Glucklich, “The Martyr’s Theater,” in *Dying for Heaven*, ch. 9
- 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”
- Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” trans. L. White Beck, pp. 85-92

Thursday:

- Voltaire and Isaac de Pinto on the Jews, from *The Jew in the Modern Word*, pp. 304-5
- Leo Tolstoy, “A Confession,” in *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. D. Stewart, pp. 65-70

*Quiz

Week 4: Religion in the Modern World: New 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:

- Mark Taylor, "Introduction," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*
- Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," from *Genealogies of Religion*, pp. 27-54
- J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, pp. 179-198

*Quiz

Week 5: The Return of Religion

Monday:

- Armstrong, ch. 11
- Carole P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, "Introduction," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*
- "How do You Solve a Problem Like a Maharat," *The Times of Israel*, November 5, 2015

Fourth Response Paper Due

Tuesday:

- Marla F. Frederick, "Neo-Pentecostalism and Globalization," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. R. Orsi, pp. 380-403
- 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:

- Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004. 12-23
- Joseph O'Brian Baker and Buster Smith, "None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religions Nonbelief and Nonbelonging in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (2009): 719-733.

*Quiz