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PH 501 Introduction to Philosophy of Religion

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PH 501: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion
ExL Course
Spring 2004
Instructor: Joseph B. O. Okello

Introductory Remarks

Greetings! I consider it a great honor and privilege to know that you will be taking this course. Think of it as a philosophical journey in which you will have an opportunity to explore some fundamental issues in the area of Philosophy of Religion, and think of me as your “tour guide” in this journey.

We will focus, *specifically* on the Philosophy of Christian Religion rather than the Philosophy of Religions in general. Some of the issues we will explore from a philosophical stand-point include: different views (theological) of human freedom, the problem of evil, arguments for the existence of God, the relationship between faith and reason, the justification of religious beliefs, and so on. Of course we will go beyond this list, but for the sake of whetting your appetite, I thought of listing some of these here.

As you might have guessed by now, the electronic method of learning can be quite depersonalized. This need not be the case in this course. It would be a good idea for us to get to know each other through some specified frameworks. For instance, take some time to fill out your resume in ATS’ computerized directory of staff and students. You will also find my resume there. In this way, we can gain better knowledge of each other, and hopefully, form a community of believers desiring to love God with all our minds.

Meanwhile, let me tell you something about me. I am a Kenyan by nationality, and a PhD student at the University of Kentucky, majoring in philosophy. I am almost done with my course-work, and at the very initial stage of putting my dissertation committee together. Doing philosophy has always been my passion right from my undergraduate days. And since I come from a continent that knows, in a very real way, the nature of tragedy, I am particularly interested in the problem of evil, and how it can best be addressed in an African setting. I am also a licensed pastor with Africa Inland Church, Nairobi, Kenya. Upon completion of my studies, I intend to return to my home-country to “contend for the faith” from that region.

It is from this perspective that I come to you as your guide in this course. I hope the course will provide some life-changing experience for you, as you seek to be better equipped for God’s work of service.

Course Description

Our philosophical journey will comprise a survey of the philosophical method; a study of the mutual impact of the Christian faith and philosophical discourse upon each other; a reflection upon the overlap between Christian and philosophical ethics; and a critical

assessment of the relationship between the Christian understanding of reality and other ways of perceiving it.

General Learning Objectives

What we are aiming at here is not only a firm establishment in the philosophy of our theology, but also a clear articulation of the reasons for the hope that we have in us. But most importantly, we aim at developing a deeper and personal relationship with God through the act of loving Him with all our minds. Needless to say, we will find ourselves entering the arena of Christian Apologetics. In fact, “Philosophy of Christian Religion” and “Christian Apologetics” are quite similar in many ways. It is my hope, therefore, that whether we are doing Philosophy of Religion as defined above, or Christian Apologetics, we will be firmly established in our faith as we allow the Cross of our Risen Lord to be seen clearly.

Specific Course Objectives

It is my hope that by the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Explain the different accounts of human freedom found within the Christian tradition.
2. Explain your understanding of the attributes of God, and their implications for your life.
3. Articulate the different traditional arguments for the existence of God.
4. Provide your understanding of the relationship between reason and the Christian faith.
5. Provide an epistemological justification for holding religious beliefs.
6. Provide arguments for and against examined religious experiences, and give a philosophical justification for the Christian vantage point.
7. Explain what miracles are in light of the agnostic’s rejection of miracles, and providing a rational justification for the Christian position.
8. Explain the key issues surrounding the problem of evil, namely, “If God is good, loving and just, why does he allow evil.”
9. Argue for or against the answer to the following question: “Is there a relationship between science and religion.”
10. Explain how finite human language can be used in describing an infinite God.
11. Explain the mind-body problem, and how this problem bears on personal identity, as well as the question of eschatology.
12. Articulate a Theological-cum-Philosophical account of the exclusive claims of Christianity in light of those who have never heard the Gospel.

Required Course Texts

1. Hasker, William. *Metaphysics*. (Downer’s Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983).
2. Peterson, Michael, ed. *Reason and Religious Belief*. 3rd edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
3. Peterson, Michael, ed. *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*. 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

These books can be ordered from Asbury's Bookstore. The telephone number is 859-858-4242. The email address is exlbooks@asburyseminary.edu

Recommended Text: Do your best to own a Dictionary of Philosophy of some Kind. Oxford and Cambridge Dictionaries are probably the better ones, since they are readily available and at reasonable prices.

Course Schedule

This course will have seven modules, and each module has two lessons, and each lesson has one assignment. The due dates for the required readings are also given. Also, I will post full module assignments in the course center at least one month prior to assignment due dates.

Module 01 Due February 20 2004

Lesson 01: Introducing Philosophy of Religion

Reading: Hasker p. 13 – 28; Reason and Religious Belief, p. 5 – 14

Lesson 02: Freedom and Responsibility

Reading: Hasker p. 29 – 55

Module 02 Due March 5 2004

Lesson 03 – God's Attributes

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 58 – 76; Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings p. 124 – 129, 139 – 148

Lesson 04: Arguments for the Existence of God

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 77 – 106; Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 165 – 169, 170 – 218, 241–246).

Module 03 Due March 19 2004

Lesson 05: Faith and Reason.

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 39 – 57; Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 67 – 70, 77 – 108)

Lesson 06: Justification for Religious Belief

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 107 – 127. Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 355 – 365)

1st PAPER DUE: You may write your assignment on *any one* of the following topics:

- Is it rational to believe in the existence of God? Answer this question in light of the arguments for God's existence presented by at least one of the authors you read.
- What is the relationship between faith and reason? Do they undermine each other? Or do they complement each other? In light of the assigned readings, state and justify your opinion.

- Identify and critique the account of freedom implicit in the Westminster Confession of Faith. State whether or not you think it is an appropriate system of philosophy.

Module 04 Due April 9 2004

Lesson 07: Religious experience.

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief, p. 15 – 38, Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 5 – 55)

Lesson 08: Miracles

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief, p. 173 – 193; Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 415 – 444)

Module 05 Due April 23 2004

Lesson 09: The Problem of Evil

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 128 – 153; Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (249-314)

Lesson 10: Science and Religion

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 246 – 266; Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 497 – 530).

2nd PAPER DUE: Choose only one of the following topics.

- Compare two opposing views on Miracles (Hume's and Swinburne's, or Mackie's and Swinburne's). State your view, in light of the reading, and give reasons for your position.
- Formulate a philosophical critique of Michael Martin's "Critique of Religious Experience."
- State the problem of evil as forcefully as you can, and then respond to it. (Hint: The readings will be of help here.)
- Is there a relationship between science and religion? Answer this question in light of Nancy Murphy's "Theology and Scientific Methodology."

Module 06 Due May 7 2004

Lesson 11: Religious Language

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief p. 220 – 245; Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 369 – 413)

Lesson 12: Mind-Body Issues

Reading: Hasker p. 57 – 80; Reason and Religious Belief (p. 194 – 219); Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (445 – 488).

Module 07 Due May 21 2004

Lesson 13: Religious Diversity

Reading: Reason and Religious Belief (p.267 – 288); Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 539 – 570)

Lesson 14: Philosophy and Theological Doctrines

Reading: Philosophy of Religion: Sel. Rdgs (p. 597 – 630)

3rd PAPER DUE: You may choose either one of the of the following assignments:

- Select two opposing world-views in at least one of the lessons from Module 06 and Module 07. Using your own words, Identify what, in your opinion, is the central claim made by each author. Also, show how both support their claim (in other words, what reason do they give to support their claim?). Evaluate their positions, and formulate your own.
- Does Philosophy support or undermine theological doctrines? Present your view, in light of the assigned readings

For the anthology (*Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*), the editors usually provide helpful introductory remarks that would assist you in knowing the main point of each article.

Means of Communication

Team Discussion Center

You will be assigned to a team of ten other students. Each team will have its own Discussion Center. Your response(s) to the questions for each lesson should be sent to your team discussion center. I will read all the responses in these centers, but I will not provide a personal view here.

General Discussion Center

The entire class has access to this center. It is a center for you to send particular questions that, in your opinion, require my specific response. This includes general questions about assignments, readings and so on. Here, you will also have access to my summary of each lesson, which will be posted after the due date of each module.

Also, feel free to send your concerns and prayer requests here. But this will be available only to your classmates. However, if you wish to have the entire Asbury Community pray for your specific need, then you might want to consider sending the requests to Asbury's general "Prayer News" folder.

Archive Center

The discussion summaries will stay in the General Discussion center for about 10 days. After this period, I will move them to the Archive center. Happily, you will be able to read any of the material in the Archive Center at any time during the semester. However, you will not be able to send any messages there.

My Office

If you have personal messages for me, then send them to "my office" by simply clicking on the "office" icon. Note that this is a Private forum. This means that I will be the only one capable of seeing the sent personal messages. Also, my replies to these messages will go to your private mailbox. The personal messages include your specific personal concerns about the assignments, inability to submit a given assignment on time, and so on. Also, you will submit the assigned papers through "my office" as an attachment. I am sure most of you know how to do this. But for those who do not know, here is the process: Go to your inbox, and type my email address and then click on the "attachment"

link. You will be prompted to provide the file name of your saved document. Once you have typed in the file name, click “OK” or hit “enter” on your keyboard. Then click the “send” button.

Telephone Number

My telephone number is 858-859-9183.

Chat Room

The chat room is probably the cheapest way to get in touch with me. Simply send me an email so we can plan for a chat. Also, let me encourage you to invite any of your PHI 501xl classmates for a chat, if both of you happen to be online at the same time. Remember, though, that chat room messages are not retained. An end of your chat means a termination of the messages, unless, of course, you highlight the message and paste it onto another file.

Course Requirements

1. You will be expected to read the material assigned for each of the fourteen lessons. Quite a number of the readings are difficult to understand, and may require a “re-read” before you grasp the main thread of argument. It happens to me all the time!
2. No more than four questions will be provided for each reading assignment. You will then send your answers to your team discussion center. You will also respond to at least one question from your team member. In 1 and 2, you will get credit for participation, irrespective of whether your answers were right or wrong.
3. Three papers have been assigned, and all three will be graded. Each paper is to have no more than 1200 words (i.e. about five pages of regular font). In grading your paper, I will expect you to do the following:
 - When presenting another author’s view, identify the main claim of the author’s argument, and the reason the author gives to support that position.
 - When presenting your own view on a specific topic, state your position clearly, and support your position with equal clarity.
 - Be sure to hand your paper on time. An “A” quality paper submitted a day late will, at most, receive a B+ grade. Penalties will be waived only under extenuating circumstances (like, sickness, death, etc).

Grading Procedure

1. Participation in team discussion: 10%
2. Paper 1: 30 %. Due March 19 2004 anytime before Midnight!
3. Paper 2: 30 %. April 23 2004 anytime before Midnight!
4. Paper 3: 30 %. Due May 21 2004 anytime before Midnight!

I sincerely hope you will enjoy this philosophical journey. *Bon Voyage!!!*

Available EXL Support

The following EXL staff members will support when you have EXL-related needs:

1. General Information: Kevin Osborn at email: exl_coord@asburyseminary.edu
2. Technical Support: Jared Porter at email: exl_support@asburyseminary.edu
3. ATS Bookstore: exlbooks@asburyseminary.edu
4. Exl Library Support: Hannah_Kirsch@asburyseminary.edu