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Charles E. Gutenson

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PH 501 SYLLABUS
INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Fall 2001

Chuck Gutenson, Professor
Office AD 408

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

Distance Learning: This course will be offered on the Wilmore campus in the Distance Learning Room (BC157), with additional students located on the campus of Asbury Theological Seminary, Orlando.

Mixed Media: This course will be offered through *mixed mode delivery*—with use of ExL technology integrated into the instruction of the course, and with networking activities constituting a regular part of the course grade. Additionally, course materials as well as conferencing, web links, and a chat room will be available on-line through an icon (“PH 501-CG”) placed on each student’s desktop, using the Seminary’s FirstClass Client program. This means that every student will need access to the Seminary’s e-mail system; access is possible through use of computers available on the Wilmore or Orlando campus Media Center, through dialing into the system from a home computer, or via the World Wide Web (and thus through any computer, such as those available at public libraries). For assistance with all technical matters related to access to course materials, send your questions by e-mail to ExL_Support@asburyseminary.edu.

Information about how to access material for the class, handouts to download, etc., and about how to submit assignments is located in the “Course Center” on the FirstClass Client Desktop; double-click on the icon, “PH 501-CG.”

I. Introduction

Perhaps you are thinking to yourself, “Philosophy of Religion? Isn’t that something of a contradiction in terms?” In light of the fact that one might argue that philosophy represents the extreme in our use of reason to understand the world of shared human experienced and that religion represents the extreme in our use of faith to make sense of that same world, this is a reasonable question. However, as we shall see, a better argument would be one that argues that both reason and faith must function jointly if we are to best understand our world. In many ways, the interaction between faith and reason is exemplary of the sorts of issues that we will examine in this course.

It is my hope that the various topics we will examine this semester under the rubric of the philosophy of religion will not only help each of us to grow in our

knowledge of a range of philosophical issues, but that it will also contribute to our growth as Christian disciples. There is a sense in which the biblical injunction to “Be always prepared to give an account of the hope that lies within you” is most fundamentally enabled through a thorough philosophical examination of our faith commitments. Let us proceed, then, using as our motto that old expression: “Faith seeking understanding.”

II. COURSE DESCRIPTION

As a graduate course, PH501, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, assumes that the participant is somewhat beyond the novice level in academic pursuits. At the same time as an introductory level course, we do not assume any in-depth knowledge of the themes to be studied for this semester. Since this course is designed as an introductory course, it is focused more broadly than narrowly--i.e., the intent is to introduce a wide range of issues of concern to the philosopher of religion rather than to examine in great detail a more restrictive list of topics. Consequently, this course consists of 14 modules which, to a certain extent, can be viewed as stand-alone modules dealing with one theme of particular interest to the study of the philosophy of religion. That is not to say that there is no building upon earlier modules by later modules, but rather that each of these modules deals with a least one issue that is the subject of substantial discussion within the trade. For example, module nine deals with the problem of evil, while module five deals with the faith/reason debate. Also, while one might pursue the philosophy of religion in the abstract, i.e., separate from any particular religious tradition, we shall proceed, as one might expect, clearly recognizing our firm commitment to the Christian religion.

There has rarely been a time in recent history when the human race seems so hungry for spiritual insight, while at the same time desiring to maintain intellectual integrity. As Michael Peterson notes in the introduction to his work, Reason and Religious Belief,

Philosophy of religion is receiving more attention in recent years than it has for many decades. Professional philosophers are bringing new techniques to bear on traditional problems and are pioneering important new territory as well. In 1980 *Time* reported this resurgence of interest in the philosophical examination of religion, stating that “God is making a comeback.” It is becoming increasingly obvious to more and more people that the issues surrounding belief in God are extremely significant. (Peterson, 1991, p. xi)

We are positioned to make a unique contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is my hope that this course will equip you with the means to answer some of the questions facing individuals in our world which is largely destitute of

spiritual truth.

III. COURSE RATIONALE

At this point, some of you may be asking how this course fits into Asbury's overall plan for equipping students for Christian ministry. There are at least four different ways in which one might go about answering this question. First, consider that John Wesley frequently indicated the importance of studying logic and metaphysics. Further, he saw logic, more narrowly, and philosophy, more broadly, as tools that allowed him to discover the fallacies and inconsistencies in the arguments of his opponents. As you can see, Wesley clearly saw philosophy as aids in the task of clarifying and demonstrating the validity of Christian truth claims. In a sense, then, to use Luther's phrase, philosophy is the hand-maiden of theology.

Secondly, we live in an age which, perhaps more than any other single historical period, reverences the utilization of rational methods. It may be common in conservative theological circles to claim that it is the liberals who are overly committed to the rational structure of inquiry, one only need examine closely the sorts of arguments advanced by conservatives to defend their truth claims (in fact, one only need note that such arguments are even made) to see the extent to which they are committed to the canons of reason. Consequently, one can hardly even enter the public marketplace of ideas without being adequately schooled in certain aspects of philosophy method.

Third, when engaging what many consider to be a largely post-Christian culture, the ability to clearly and articulately layout and assess our own as well as competitive positions is extremely important. After this course of study, you will be better equipped to describe and defend the fundamental truth claims of the Christian faith.

Fourth, over the last 400 years, a remarkable number of important transitions in the way that people look at the world have occurred. The truth of God's existence, taken utterly for granted by Jesus in the New Testament, has been questioned in a number of ways--some scientific and some philosophical, for example. The very foundations of moral theory have been attacked from a number of perspectives. In short, numerous challenges to the Christian faith have arisen. And, if we are to be able to respond effectively to those challenges, we must understand not only their weaknesses, but also their strengths and attractiveness.

In summary, a common theme underlying the various rationale for this course is the desire to equip you to be able to respond to the challenges to Christian faith which are being advanced by those hostile to Christian belief.

IV. COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through our work together this semester, we will accomplish a number of

important course objectives.

1. We will learn to evaluate a variety of arguments for their soundness and validity, and to apply certain of the basic logical forms of arguments.

2. We will develop our own response to the problem of evil by drawing upon the resources contained within the Christian tradition.

3. We will analyze the alleged conflicts between faith and reason, and then develop our own, more holistic account.

4. We will develop the ability to explain the impacts that theology and philosophy have upon each other.

5. We will examine the nature of explanation in order to discover the best way to think of Christianity as relates to its explanatory power.

6. We will analyze the classical arguments for God's existence, and we shall learn to outline them and place them within their broader historical context.

7. We will develop an adequate theory of the nature of language in order to understand the how finite human language can be used to describe an infinite God.

8. We will develop an adequate account of the manner in which science and religion are inter-related.

9. We will develop an adequate account of human knowledge from a Christian perspective.

10. We will examine the critique of miracles provided by David Hume, and others, and develop an adequate response to those challenges.

V. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

All class members will be expected to complete the reading assignments in a timely fashion, attend class, participate in class discussion, and complete the assigned projects. Your grade assignment in this course will be a result of the quality of the work that you undertake. See below for writing projects and exam schedules.

VI. ASSIGNED READINGS AND SCHEDULE

The required texts for this course are:

The Mike Peterson et al text Reason and Religious Belief (referenced as RRB),
Mike Peterson et al text Philosophy of Religion Selected Readings (referenced as SR),
William Hasker's Metaphysics. For bibliographic detail, see the bibliography.

In addition to the required readings, I will occasionally reference optional readings for those of you who are particularly interested in the theme of that module. If you undertake any of these additional readings, please let me know. I would be particularly interested in your comments as to the helpfulness of these collateral readings in grasping the material covered in that module.

VII. MODULE OUTLINE AND SCHEDULE

Module One: The theme of module one is an introduction to the philosophical study of religion. Here we will consider such questions as: what does it mean to analyze something philosophically? What is philosophy? What would constitute an acceptable definition of religion? What methodologies do philosophers of religion use? In addition, this module will examine the nature of explanation. Issues include: what constitutes an acceptable argument form? What is a cumulative case argument and how should it be deployed?

Readings: Hasker 13-28, 119-123, Peterson (RRB=Reason and Religious Belief) 3-11.

Module Two: The theme of module two is the conflicting claims of those who embrace freewill over those who embrace determinism. The debate over freewill and determinism is one of the defining debates in the relationship between the Wesleyan tradition and the Reformed tradition. We will consider both positions and assess them for their philosophical and theological adequacy.

Readings: Hasker 29-55.

Module Three: The theme of module three is the inter-relation of the physical and spiritual/mental aspect of human existence, sometimes called the mind/body problem. We shall consider such questions as: Are the mind and body separate realities (is dualism true)? Or, are the mind and body united in some way? How do

our Christian commitments influence our position on this matter?
Readings: Hasker 57-80.

Module Four: The theme of module four is the religious use of language. In this module, we will consider such questions as: how can finite language be applied to an infinite God? What role does metaphor and analogy play in our articulation of God's nature and attributes? How is religious language justified?
Readings: Peterson RRB 136-52, Peterson (SR=Selected Readings) 351-365

Module Five: The theme of module five is the relationship between faith and reason. In this module, we will consider such questions as: What is the fundamental nature of faith? Reason? How are the two related in an adequate theology? We will consider such views as critical realism, naive realism, and anti-realism, evaluating each for its adequacy.
Readings: Peterson RRB 32-44; Peterson SR 59-94

Module Six: The theme of module six is religious epistemology. In this module, we will consider the justification of religious belief. This will involve the evaluation of classical foundationalism as well as Reformed Epistemology. We will consider such questions as: What warrants are necessary for Christian belief? Must one have adequate evidences before one is justified in believing?
Readings: Peterson RRB 117-32; Peterson SR 309-46

Module Seven: The theme of module seven are the so-called arguments (sometimes called proofs) for the existence of God. In this module, we will examine the three primary arguments for God's existence: the cosmological, the ontological, and the teleological arguments.
Readings: Peterson RRB 68-88; Peterson SR 145-150, 163-210, 221-27

Module Eight: The theme of module eight is religious experience. In this module, we shall consider such questions as: What is a religious experience? What is the evidential force of a religious experience? How do religious experiences which happen to one person come to bear in the beliefs held by another? What role do the religious experiences of other religious traditions play in Christian faith?
Readings: Peterson RRB 13-29; Peterson SR 10-54

Module Nine: The theme of module nine is the problem of evil. As this problem represents the atheist's strongest argument against belief in God, we shall examine both

critical responses raised to atheistic challenges (often referred to as “defenses”) as well as the primary theodicies which have been developed from within the Christian tradition. These will include the Irenaean theodicy, the Augustinian theodicy, and the process theodicy.

Readings: Peterson RRB 92-112; Peterson SR 231-305

Module Ten: The theme of module ten is miracles. In this module, we will examine the critique of the possibility of miracles as raised by David Hume. We will also consider modern day arguments against miracles advanced by theists as well as atheists. We will develop an adequate response to these objections.

Readings: Peterson RRB 156-71; Peterson SR 389-416

Module Eleven: The theme of module eleven is the question of human immortality. Many of the different world religions affirm that this physical world is not all that there is, even though the manner in which they understand the next life varies considerably. We shall consider different understandings of human immortality with the objective of developing an understanding of an adequate doctrine from a Christian perspective.

Readings: Peterson RRB 174-92; Peterson SR 421-62

Module Twelve: The theme of module twelve is the inter-relation of science and religion. Since we live in a culture which generally takes the sciences, particularly the natural sciences, as paradigmatic of the proper inquiry into truth, it is of significant importance that we understand the similarities and differences between scientific and theological methods of inquiry. Further, we will defend theological inquiry as not inherently inferior to scientific inquiry.

Readings: Peterson RRB 196-214; Peterson SR 467-86

Module Thirteen: The theme of module thirteen is religious diversity. We live in an ever-increasingly pluralistic society in which a wide variety of religious communities live in close proximity to each other. In many cases, these religious traditions make conflicting truth claims--more precisely, these truth claims are often of a nature such that not more than one set of them can be true. We will examine the appropriate manner for assessing these competing claims.

Readings: Peterson RRB 219-232; Peterson SR 495-523

Module Fourteen: The theme of module fourteen is the inter-relation between philosophy and theology. It is without question that one’s philosophical commitments

has an impact on one's theological position on a wide variety of matters. In this module, we will consider the manners in which this interaction occurs, and we will seek to become intentional about our commitments in light of this interaction.

Readings: Peterson RRB 254-71; Peterson SR 551-76

VIII. ASSIGNMENTS/ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The assignments and the assessment tools to be used for evaluation in this class, as well as the modules to which they correspond, are to be as follows:

a. Examine and critique an argument dealing with the freedom/determinism issue. The argument will be provided. Our study of this topic occurs in module two.

b. Consider the relation between faith and reason, and propose a synthesis of the two. Our study of this topic is in module five. A question that you might ask yourself by way of access to this issue might be: what roles do reason and faith play in my embrace of Christianity?

c. Write a paper on the argument for God's existence that you find most persuasive. You should indicate why you find it persuasive, and you should also indicate the reasonable criticisms which you realize may be raised. You may also write a paper which uses the concept of a cumulative case argument. If you choose to do this, please let me know for additional resources. Our discussion of this topic occurs in module seven.

d. This paper deals with the problem of evil, and it has two components. The scenario is: You are pastor of a local congregation. This last weekend, one of your most faithful members suffered a terrible tragedy. Their 8 year old was killed in a biking accident in the community. Part one of your assignment: at the funeral, or shortly thereafter, the parents ask you why God allowed this to happen. What do you say? Part two of your assignment: it is now a year later, and the parents schedule a meeting with you in which they say: We are working through the loss of our child, but we are curious about the reasons why God allows evil to occur. What insights can you give them. Of course, the first part of your assignment deals with the pastoral problem of evil while the second deals with the philosophical problem of evil. Our discussion of this problem occurs in module nine.

e. Develop an adequate understanding of the relationship between science and religion from a Christian perspective. In so doing, you may critically examine the alternatives we examined in class, accepting one of them or a combination of them as your own. Or, you may develop your own position. Our discussion of this topic occurs in module twelve.

Due dates will be one week after the close of the module which contains the

material pertaining to the assignment. Please note that papers turned in late will be subject to a 3 point per day (not counting weekends) deduction.

These five papers will constitute 75% of your grade, 10% will be determined by the percentage of the assigned readings completed, and 15% will be based upon a final exam, **which will be given on the day assigned for classes in this time slot unless otherwise mutually agreed.** Study guides, etc. for the final will be developed during the course of the semester.

Detailed requirements for assigned papers.

All writing assignments for this class are to be not less than four full pages and not more than six full pages. Text is to be double spaced. Please include a cover page (not part of the four to six pages) which indicates the course number, the topic, the date and the due date (listed as “date”/“due date”), and your name and SPO.

Please leave approximately one inch margins at top, bottom, and sides. You may use any font you desire (as long as it is English and readable). I prefer left and right justification, but this is not required. As two indenting of quotations, footnotes, etc., you may use any accepted style. Please be sure to carefully cite all of your sources, as plagiarism, by seminary policy, is to be taken most seriously. If you are in doubt, it is better to cite than not.

Please pay particular attention to spelling and grammar. Here I get on my soapbox a bit. We are, by virtue of God’s calling, to serve the kingdom of Christ in a variety of capacities. However, almost all of those capacities include the need to be able to communicate clearly. Using good grammar and spelling correctly are central aspects of that responsibility. Remind yourself that you are “Ambassadors for Christ” (as Paul puts it), and consider the care you put into your writing a reflection upon the seriousness with which you take that calling.

In each case, I will assess written work according to the following system. Out of a possible 100 points for each paper, 30 points will be awarded on the basis of the generally readability, which includes spelling, grammar, and felicity of constructions. 35 points will be award based upon the adequacy of the content and the final 35 points will be award upon the accuracy of content. As always, if you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

IX. GLOSSARY

agency theory: in the freewill/determinism debate, the position that agents may begin causal chains

analogy: the comparison of two terms so that one more ambiguous is understood by

reference to one more clear in its meaning

a priori: prior to experience

a posteriori: following experience

apologetics: the task of providing a defense for one's beliefs

causal relation: a relation between two events such that one can be understood as the cause of the other, i.e., the connection is not merely accidental

compatibilism: the belief that freedom and determinism

cosmological argument: an a posteriori argument for God's existence which is based upon our experience of the world (why is there anything at all rather than nothing?)

cumulative case argument: an argument which proceeds from several separate pieces of evidence to a conclusion which best explains those evidences

deductive argument: an argument which necessarily follows from true premises to a certain conclusion

determinism: the belief that humans are not free with regard to actualization of various states of affairs. Determination may be by God (as in theological determinism) or by the law-like mechanisms in the world (as in the universal law of causality)

epistemology: the study of human knowing

equivocal: the use of one term for more than one meaning

general revelation: the revelation of God that comes from observation of the world or of human existence

inductive argument: an argument which proceeds from true premises to a conclusion which is only probable

law of universal causality: the claim that all events stand in a very long series of causal relations

libertarian freedom: the belief that humans are significantly free in their actualization of various states of affairs

metaphysics: the study of that which is beyond the physical/natural world

mind/body problem: the attempt to make sense of the fact that humans exhibit physical characteristics (a body) and spiritual characteristics (mental, for example)

miracle: a notoriously difficult term to define, which we shall take to mean a violation of a known law of nature

modus ponens: one of the general arguments, of the form: 1) if p, then q. 2) p. 3) Therefore, q.

modus tollens: one of the general arguments, of the form: 1) if p, then q. 2) not q. 3) Therefore, not p.

natural theology: the study of God apart from special revelation (that is, primarily apart from Scripture)

necessary cause: some cause, C, the occurrence of which is necessary for the occurrence of some effect, E

ontological argument: an a priori argument for God's existence which is based upon the concept of the greatest possible being

ontology: the study of being in its most general terms

philosophy: technically, the love of wisdom. This implies that the main task of the philosopher's inquiry is to gain wisdom about some aspect of human existence

problem of evil: the atheist's strongest argument for their position. It arises from the seeming incongruity between the claims that God is perfectly good, all-knowing, all-powerful, and yet, evil exists

Reformed epistemology: the theory of knowing as espoused particularly by Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston

religion: an exceedingly difficult term to define which includes both theistic and non-theistic belief sets, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

special revelation: information about God which comes from God's special revelatory acts, generally taken to be primarily embodied in the Scriptures

sufficient cause: some cause, C, which, if it occurs, is sufficient to assure the occurrence of some effect, E

theodicy: explanations for the problem of evil intending to justify God's allowing evil occurrences

theory to the best explanation: an argument which attempts to provide the best explanation for a set of data

teleological argument: an a posteriori argument for God's existence which is based upon our experience of the orderliness of the world

univocal: the use of one term to convey only one meaning

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