

Philosophy 320: Philosophy of Religion

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Winter 2016, TR, Time/Location TBA
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Course Description

This course is an introduction to philosophy of religion from a contemporary and global perspective, opening up the field of inquiry to a variety of texts from the recent past. Many philosophy of religion courses focus on the Western tradition of Christian philosophy and on monotheistic concerns such as proofs of the existence of God. Instead, our course will focus on what diverse religions mean today from a philosophical perspective, linking philosophical interpretations of religion to experiences of the sacred and profane (for example, in sexuality and mystical transcendence), and then engaging in a close reading of a work from the Kyoto School that seeks to bridge the gap between Buddhism and Western philosophy of religion. By addressing the current state of affairs in philosophy of religion, we will consider what still remains unaccounted for and what we might contribute.

Course Objectives

In this course, students will:

- 1) Become familiar with contemporary and 20th-century issues in philosophy of religion and associated concepts.
- 2) Apply the rigorous argumentation and conceptual analysis claimed by Western philosophy to diverse contemporary topics related to philosophy of religion.
- 3) Charitably and critically approach texts on the philosophy of religion from outside the Western philosophical canon.
- 4) Reflect on the philosophical methods used to approach marginal texts and ideas, and how those methods might be improved.

Course Requirements

Reading

Two books will be required for the class:

- Schibrack, Kevin. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

- Nishitani, Keiji. *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt. University of California Press, 1983.

Schibrack's text is available free as an online resource through the UO Library website. Nishitani's text will be available for purchase. The rest of the readings will be posted to Blackboard as PDFs.

Participation

Attendance will be taken each day of class via a sign-in sheet. You will be expected to contribute to small- and large-group discussions, or if you are uncomfortable speaking in large groups, to attend my office hours to discuss the material one-on-one or with some of your peers. See the grading scheme below for more details.

Writing

There will be three **six- to eight-page essays (1500-2000 words)** due for this class. These assignments will offer a set of prompts to choose from, but you will be allowed to propose a different topic as long as I judge it to be of equivalent complexity. You will be expected to develop an argument that clearly asserts a thesis, charitably considers possible objections, and is attentive to the texts and our discussions in class. Specific expectations will be outlined as the prompts are assigned.

Grading

- Participation: 20%
- First Essay: 20%
- Second Essay: 30%
- Third Essay: 30%

Grades for this class will be divided between the three essay assignments and a participation score. The first essay is weighted less than the second and third to allow students to adjust to the demands of a 300-level philosophy essay.

Your participation score will be split halfway between your attendance and your contributions to small-group and large-group discussions. For example, a student who shows up but does not speak would receive 10%, a student who speaks in small-group discussions but does not contribute to large-group discussions would receive 15%, and a student who contributes actively and thoughtfully at both levels would receive the full 20%. Alternatively, if you are very uncomfortable speaking up in large-groups, you may also receive that 5% of the participation grade by regularly coming to my office hours and discussing the material one-on-one or, ideally, in small groups with your peers.

Academic dishonesty (e.g. cheating, plagiarism) is strictly prohibited and may result in severe penalties. Definitions, procedures, and penalties for such cases are spelled out on the UO website for Academic Misconduct.

Schedule

Part One: Philosophy of Religion, Renewed from the West (Three Weeks)

Week One

Jan. 5: Introduction: Discussing What We're Discussing, What We're Not Discussing, and Why. *Recommended:* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion/>, esp. Section 5: Religious Pluralism.

Jan. 7: Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, Ch. 1, "The Full Task of Philosophy of Religion" (1-27). *Recommended:* Pojman and Rea, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 2008 edition, Introduction (1-16).

Week Two

Jan. 12: Schilbrack, Ch. 2, "Are Religious Practices Philosophical?" (29-51). *Recommended:* Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture*, excerpts from Ch. 4.

Jan. 14: Schilbrack, Ch. 3, "Must Religious People Have Religious Beliefs?" (53-80). *Recommended:* Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, excerpts from Ch. 1.

Week Three

Jan. 19: **First paper topics assigned.** Schilbrack, Ch. 5, "What Isn't Religion?" (113-147). *Recommended:* Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, excerpts from Ch. 1.

Jan. 21: Schilbrack, Ch. 7, "The Academic Study of Religions: a Map with Bridges" (175-206). *Recommended:* Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, excerpts from Ch. 6.

Part Two: Religious Experiences, Sacred and Profane (Four Weeks)

Week Four

First paper due Sunday, Jan. 24th, before midnight.

Jan. 26: William James, *The Will to Believe*, "The Will to Believe" (1-31).

Jan. 28: James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, “Mysticism” (379-421).

Week Five

Feb. 2: Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, “Gravity and Grace,” “Void and Compensation,” “To Accept the Void,” “Detachment,” “Imagination Which Fills the Void” (1-18), “The Self” (26-31), “Affliction,” “Violence” (80-86), “Meaning of the Universe” (141-144)

Feb. 4: Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Foreword and Introduction (7-25).

Week Six

Feb. 9: Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Ch. I-IV (29-63).

Feb. 11: Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Ch.V-VIII (63-93).

Week Seven

Feb. 16: **Second paper topics assigned.** Linda Alcoff and John Caputo, *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion*, “Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion” (1-17), “The Return of Religion during the Reign of Sexuality” (39-55).

Feb. 18: Alcoff and Caputo, “It’s All About the Blues: The Black Female Body and Womanist God-Talk” (103-124), “Nihilism, Sexuality, and Postmodern Christianity” (124-130).

Part Three: Philosophy of Religion, Renewed from the East (Three Weeks)

Week Eight

Second paper due Sunday, Feb. 21st, before midnight.

Feb. 23: Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, “What is Religion?” (1-45)

Feb. 25: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, “The Personal and the Impersonal in Religion” (46-76).

Week Nine

Mar. 1: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, “Nihilism and Sunyata” (77-118).

Mar. 3: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, “The Standpoint of Sunyata” (119-167).

Week Ten

Mar. 8: **Third paper topics assigned.** Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, “Sunyata and Time” (168-217).

Mar. 10: Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, “Sunyata and History” (excerpts).

Third paper due Sunday, Mar. 13th, before midnight.