

Philosophy of Religion – 332 (Winter Term, 2011) CNR 6718

2 sessions per week, 90 minutes each (Tue. & Thu. 11:35–12:55).

No Prerequisite

Expected Enrolment: 60 to 70

Location: EngTR 1080

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Evaluation: Two short essays (1,000 words approximately; due dates to be posted on WEB-CT), 30% of final mark each. One take-home examination, 40% of final mark. Students will have a choice of topics for both essays and examination questions.

There is a course-pack that I recommend students to buy. Two other inexpensive texts (by Mircea Eliade and Kierkegaard – see the readings below) will be available at Paragraphe Bookstore.

Description: The assumption motivating this course is that religion is an essential and irreducible dimension of human existence. The task is to establish the nature of this aspect of human existence: how does it differ from such other aspects as, for instance, scientific curiosity or artistic creativity? Just as Plato sought to establish the concept of ‘virtue’, we seek to establish the concept of ‘religion’. This search will require a reflection on the historical practices of religion that will entail an element of criticism. Just because religion is irreducible, it does not follow that all that is normally associated with it, such as belief in God or in an after-life for instance, is necessary. Can there be a religion without belief in God? We shall try to separate the essential from the unessential in the concept of religion.

Historically, the practice of religion has been shaped by these factors: faith, cult (ritual), feeling, community. Such factors give rise, in order, to the following question:

(1) How does religious belief differ from scientific certitude. Given the proposition: ‘I believe in God, the creator of heaven and earth’, does its meaning differ according as the proposition is asserted in a religious as contrasted to a scientific context?

(2) Religious ritual is based on otherwise mundane practices. How do these practices change in meaning when performed in a religious context? For instance, how does the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine in the Christian liturgy differ from the same practices in daily eating?

(3) Religious individuals seem to display feelings specific to their religiosity in the course of their religious practices. How do these feelings differ from other feelings? For instance, how is the same piece of music (say, Verdi's *requiem*) experienced differently as prayer or as the object of aesthetic appreciation?

(4) Religion has traditionally been the foundation of strong communal bonds? How do these bonds differ from purely political ones?

These questions naturally give rise to four areas of enquiry, traditionally recognized under the following headings:

1. Faith and Reason
2. The Sacred and the Profane
3. Aesthetic Feelings and Feelings of Piety
4. The Secular and the Divine.

Below is a list of readings and materials on which I shall draw for my lectures. Students are not required to read or consult ALL of them. However, these readings and these materials should be the main, though not necessarily the exclusive, sources for their essays and for the final examination. There will be a choice of topics for both the essays and the examination.

Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), Chapters 1 and 4 (in course-pack).

Dawkins, Richard. "Heat the Hornet," Review of Jerry Coyne, *Why Evolution is True*, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 February 2009, No. 5524, pp. 3-5.

Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, Introduction and Part 1, Chapter 1, "Homo religiosus," pp. 1-33.(Excerpts in course-pack)

Immanuel Kant, excerpts from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (The Impossibility of a Cosmological Proof of God's Existence), standard pagination A603/B631-A630/B658, in the Norman Kemp Translation, pp. 507-524. This translation is available on line free of charge:

<http://arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Philosophy/Kant/cpr/> . In the Table of Contents, go to Division II, Book II, Chapter 3, Section 5. The standard pagination is on left margin; the translation pagination is at the top left of every page in bold.

Goethe, the poem *Prometheus*. Tr. Jeremy Walker† (uploaded in the WEB-CT page for the course)

Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), trans. Jacqueline Redding and W. S. F. Pickering, in *Durkheim on Religion* (1975), ed. W. S. F. Pickering, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. pp. 145-8. (Excerpt in course-pack).

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007), pp. 505-535, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Chapter 14, pp. 505-535. (Excerpt I in course-pack).

Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* (a play). The William Taylor's translation, no longer under copyright protection, is available on line:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9186>

Leibniz (1646-1716), *Theodicy*, only 'Observations Concerning the Origin of Evil). The Huggard-translation (no longer under copyright) is available on line:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17147/17147-h/17147-h.htm>; for the required section, see pp. 405-443.

The Bible: *Genesis* 1-3; *Isaiah*, 14.12-15 (in course-pack).

Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History* (1978), Chapter 16, 'Midrashic Existence after the Holocaust: Reflections Occasioned by the Works of Elie Wiesel', pp. 252-272 (in course-pack).

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (1987), paperback available at Paragraphe Bookstore.

The Exultet (English translation uploaded in WEB-CT page).

Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (1960), pp. 11-15 (in course-pack).

James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (2004), pp. 1-27 (in course-pack).

Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (1843). An excerpt from the first Essay, 'The Immediate Stages

of the Erotic, or The Musical Erotic', in the Alastair Hannay' translation (Penguin Edition), pp. 59-81 (approximately). Copies of this Penguin edition are available at Paragraphe Bookstore.

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007), pp. 423-472 (Excerpt II in course-pack).

George di Giovanni (2009), "Religion, History, and Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal. Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 226-245. (In course pack).

Examples of liturgical music:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsZEv7kAllo>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dlr90NLDp-0&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lRQVZA3ciA>

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In accord with McGill University Charter of Students Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.