

**PHIL 160: Philosophy of Religion** (Spring 2023)  
TR 10:30 to 11:45am in Room 7.246

Instructor: Ted Parent, Ph.D.

Office: Room 1.269

Office Hours: TR 12 to 1pm, and by appointment.

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This course is an introduction to some of the major religious controversies, as discussed by philosophers. After a review of fideism, the course will mostly cover the key arguments for and against God's existence. The final part of the course will be a philosophical examination of Buddhism as a non-theistic religion.

**Texts:**

Peterson, M. et al. (Eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford UP, 2010.

Thich Nhat Hanh. *Essential Writings*, Orbis, 2001.

*Additional materials posted on Moodle.*

**Course Assignments:**

- (1) **Participation** is worth 10% of the final grade. Attendance is *not* part of this grade—though obviously, you can't participate if you don't attend. How much should you participate? Well, if you don't participate *at all*, don't expect to get a passing grade for participation! Yet it is possible to earn an 'A' here without talking at every chance. Indeed, *quality matters much more than quantity* and you certainly should avoid dominating the discussion. Also, note that there are a variety of ways to participate, including:
  - Visiting office hours or emailing me with questions/comments
  - Sharing videos, websites, other content that are relevant to the course
  - Teaching one of the readings to the class. (Email me first to arrange this.)
  - Summarizing a reading in a handout for your classmates. (Email me first.)
- (2) **Short essay** (couple of paragraphs) due on **Jan. 24**, worth 15% of the final grade.
- (3) **Two in-class exams** at various points in the semester (see schedule below), each worth 25% of the final grade.
- (4) **Final project** worth 25% of the final grade. Detailed instructions will be given later.

**Course Policies:**

- *No late assignments accepted*, unless you can provide hard evidence of a legit emergency.
- Since philosophy often requires uninterrupted concentration, *please do not arrive late and remember to turn off your phone*.
- During class, *do not use your laptop/phone for anything other than class work*. Please resist the temptation to check your email/texts or visit random websites. (If you are buying stuff online, that will distract everyone sitting behind/beside you.)
- If you have special needs because of a disability (psychological or physical), I am very happy to make exceptions to the preceding three policies. But please contact me about such arrangements ASAP.
- Throughout the course, I will simply assume that you are keeping up with the readings. I will not be giving you reminders; you are responsible for doing the reading according to the schedule given below.

- Discussions must proceed in a respectful and well-mannered fashion. Philosophy can be difficult, and no one should be made to feel stupid. Relatedly, taking an aggressive tone is inappropriate. It usually signals that the goal is to “win” a dispute, rather than to co-operate in a mutual endeavor to seek the truth. You will be asked to leave the classroom if you violate these basic norms of courtesy.
- Be forewarned that the majority of my feedback on your work will be critical. But *please* do not take any of my criticisms personally! Loads of critical feedback is simply how academic philosophy operates. And in this class, the purpose of this is *certainly* not to belittle or discourage you, but to hone your writing/thinking skills.
- The Student Code of Conduct is in effect for this class. See <https://nu.edu.kz/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NU-Student-Code-of-Conduct.pdf>. Plagiarism is sometimes unintentional—visit the following tutorial from Cornell University to learn how to recognize plagiarism: <https://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/exercises.cfm>. You will be held responsible in this class for knowing what constitutes plagiarism. All assignments will be submitted on Moodle and checked by the Turnitin plagiarism-detection program.
- The grading scale at Nazarbayev University (as set by the Registrar) is as follows:

Percentage	Letter Grade	G.P.A. scale
95-100	A	4.0
90-94.9	A-	3.67
85-89.9	B+	3.33
80-84.9	B	3.0
75-79.9	B-	2.67

70-74.9	C+	2.33
65-69.9	C	2.0
60-64.9	C-	1.67
55-59.9	D+	1.33
50-54.9	D	1.0
<50	F	0.0

For helpful descriptions of an ‘A’ paper, a ‘B’ paper, a ‘C’ paper, etc., see the relevant links on the left-hand side of this webpage: <https://library.guilford.edu/c.php?g=111810&p=723881>.

### Reading Advice:

Be sure to PRINT OUT the reading materials. Studies show that people learn better by reading hard copies versus reading a computer screen.<sup>1</sup>

Reading philosophy is hard. That’s why I recommend reading the weekly material *twice*. BUT: As a first reading, it is sufficient to skim the texts, just to get a sense of the main ideas. *This takes less than 5 minutes!!!* After that, read the material again *carefully*. Your earlier skimming should provide a basic “framework” that allows you to process better what you read.

During your second reading, it’s best to *read with a pen and note the points of interest*. (This requires hard copies of the readings!) I do NOT recommend mere underlining or highlighting. Rather, it’s best to read as if you were *engaged in a conversation* with the author: Raise questions, ask for clarification, and levy criticisms in the margins. This also effectively prepares you for class discussion; also, your annotations will be useful to you for completing the assignments.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Clinton, V. (2019). Reading from paper compared to screens: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Research on Reading* 42(2): 288-325.

## Tentative Schedule

“P” indicates a reading in the Peterson et al. anthology  
[Materials listed in square brackets are optional]

### Part I: “Reasonable Faith.” The Very Idea.

#### WEEK ONE: *Fideism*

Jan. 10, 12      Handout: Pessimism about Argument; Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion*, ch. 2; *The Upaniṣads* (excerpts); Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te Ching* (excerpts); Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (excerpts); Handout: A few kōans from Chán/Zen Buddhism; Thich Nhat Hanh, “Getting Rid of our Concepts” [<sup>P</sup>*The Upaniṣads*, “Atman is Brahman;” Diener & Tay, “The Religion Paradox: If Religion Makes People Happy, Why are So Many Dropping Out?”]

#### WEEK TWO: *More Fideism*

Jan. 17, 19      Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*; Azriel of Gerona, *Commentary on the Sefirot* (excerpt); Ibn Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (excerpt); Meister Eckhart, selections from the *Sermons*; Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (excerpt) [<sup>P</sup>Maimonides, “Negative Theology;”  
<sup>P</sup>Evans, “Critical Dialogue in Philosophy of Religion”]

### Part II: Reasons for Belief.

#### WEEK THREE: *Cosmological Arguments*

Jan. 24, 26      <sup>P</sup>Aquinas, “The Classical Cosmological Argument;” <sup>P</sup>Craig, “The Kalam Cosmological Argument” Draper, “Critique of the Kalam Cosmological Argument” (excerpts) ***Short Essay due Jan. 24***

#### WEEK FOUR: *Teleological Arguments*

Jan. 31, Feb. 2      <sup>P</sup>Paley, “The Analogical Teleological Argument;” <sup>P</sup>Hume, “Critique of the Analogical Teleological Argument;” Collins, “The Anthropic Teleological Argument;” Swinburne, “The Argument from Design”

#### WEEK FIVE: *More Teleology*

Feb. 7, 9      Swinburne (cont’); Aquinas, “Whether God is Altogether Simple?;” Ruse, “Reply to Peterson” (excerpt)

#### WEEK SIX: *Pragmatic Arguments*

Feb. 14, 16      <sup>P</sup>Pascal, “The Wager;” <sup>P</sup>James, “The Will to Believe;” O’Malley, *Meeting the Living God* (excerpt) [Pojman, “Faith, Hope, and Doubt”]

### Part III: Reasons for Disbelief.

#### WEEK SEVEN: *Science contra Religion*

Feb. 21, 23      Worrall, “Science Discredits Religion;” Frances, “The Atheist Argument from Outrageousness” [<sup>P</sup>Gould, “Two Separate Domains”]  
***First In-Class Exam on Feb. 21***

WEEK EIGHT: *More Science*

Feb. 28; Mar. 2      Worrall, Frances (cont'); <sup>P</sup>Hume, "The Evidence for Miracles is Weak;" [<sup>P</sup>Dennett, "An Evolutionary Account of Religion;" Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (excerpt)]

WEEK NINE: *The Problem of Evil*

Mar. 7      Kushner, Intro and ch.1 of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*; <sup>P</sup>Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence;" <sup>P</sup>Hume, "Evil Makes a Strong Case against God's Existence" [Norland, "Congo: More Vicious than Rape;" <sup>P</sup>Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil"]

Mar. 9      Ghaly, "Evil and Suffering in Islam;" <sup>P</sup>Leibniz, "Best of All Possible Worlds Theodicy" [<sup>P</sup>Plantinga, "The Free Will Defense;" <sup>P</sup>Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy;" Madden & Hare, "Critique of Hick's Theodicy;" Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil"]

WEEK TEN: *More Evil*

Mar. 14, 16      <sup>P</sup>Marylin McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God;" Kushner, ch. 8 of *WBTHGTP* (excerpts) [Sharon Street, "If Everything Happens for a Reason, then We Don't Know What Reasons Are;" Dostoyevsky, "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"]

WEEK ELEVEN

Mar. 21, 23      NO CLASS (Spring Break)

**Part IV: Philosophical Buddhism.**

WEEK TWELVE

Mar. 28, 30      Handout: Buddhism as Non-Dogmatic; Wright, "Note to Readers;" Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Buddha's Heart," "The Three Jewels," "The Raft is Not the Shore," "Our True Home," "Happy Continuation," and "The Flower is Still Blooming;" [Wright, ch. 16 of *Why Buddhism is True*]  
***Second In-Class Exam on Mar. 28***

WEEK THIRTEEN

Apr. 4, 6      Handout: Well-Being in the *Sutta Piṭaka*; Thich Nhat Hanh, "Sunshine and Green Leaves," "The Sun of Awareness," "Mental Formations," "Transforming Anger," and "Mind of Compassion;" Gunaratana, ch. 1 of *Mindfulness in Plain English* (excerpt) [Duron, "19 Science-Backed Reasons to Meditate;" Videos: Kavita Maharaj, "Simple Meditation" and "Vipassana Meditation"]

WEEK FOURTEEN

Apr. 11, 13      Handout: Further selections from the *Sutta Piṭaka*; The Heart Sūtra; Thich Nhat Hanh, "Interbeing," "Roses and Garbage," and "Interpenetration" [Wright, chs. 1 and 5 of *Why Buddhism is True*]

WEEK FIFTEEN

Apr. 18, 20

Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing,” “The Five Mindfulness Trainings,” and “The Path of Transformation;” Handout: Buddhist Political Philosophy

***Final project due during finals week (Exact date/time TBA).***