

PHIL 3390 - 001 | Special Topics: Philosophy of Religion

Spring 2025

Dr. Harris B. Bechtol

CRN: 24942

Class Time: MW 2:00-3:15 PM; MADLA 209

Office Hours: MTW 3:30-5:30 PM; Th 10-11:30 AM

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Special Topics. 3 Hours.

This course covers topics across the discipline of philosophy of religion in analytic and continental philosophy. Topics can include the nature and meaning of religion, the nature and meaning of faith, critiques of religious faith and experience, the question of the existence and nature of God, the problem of evil, types of theism, the relation of religion and ethics, relation of religion and politics, as well as rational, empirical and mystical approaches to God.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Hi, this is Dr. Harris Bechtol, but people often call me Dr. B. I am really excited to be teaching you this semester! We have a really exciting class to experience together based on my twenty years of study of and research in the philosophy of religion. This course will prove to be important not only for your overall education but especially for your own personal journey in coming to understand what being religious, spiritual, a believer, or a person of faith may look like for you. This course is an introduction to the field of philosophy of religion. Most often, philosophy of religion is taught from one of two perspectives: more often analytic philosophy of religion or less often continental philosophy of religion. We will be exploring *both* perspectives to this exciting field of philosophical inquiry in an effort to see what we learn about religion, faith, God, reason, and religious experience through these two perspectives. This means that we will be covering a series of themes that are both traditionally covered in philosophy of religion (e.g. the relation of faith and reason, arguments for the existence of God, solutions to the problem of evil through theodicy) as well as themes less traditionally covered in philosophy of religion (e.g. what can be learned positively from atheistic critiques of religion, thinking God otherwise than as the Big Other in the Sky, and what faith as a way of life looks like and entails). What we will find throughout the course are various explorations of the divine and the impact this experience has on us for how they make their way in the world.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Packback Account — **Purchase online from Packback.co *not* the bookstore (see below for more details)**

All Readings will be available on Blackboard

RECOMMENDED TEXTS — On Course Reserves at the Library Front Desk

Phillip Goodchild and Hollis Phelps, *Religion and European Philosophy: Key Thinkers from Kant to Žižek* (New York: Routledge, 2017). ISBN-13: 9781138188525.

Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). ISBN-13: 9780823242757.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. Students will understand the major approaches to philosophy of religion.
2. Students will reproduce the guiding ideas of the major themes in the philosophy of religion.
3. Students will interpret philosophical texts and apply these skills in writing critically about these texts.
4. Students will reflect on their own religious or spiritual beliefs, practices, and existence.

COURSE WORK

The basis for your grade is as follows:

(1) Reading Quizzes	20%
(2) Packback Journals	30%
(3) 2 Exams or 2 Essays	50% (25% each)

1. Reading Quizzes: Considering that we are reading philosophy, coming to class for lectures and discussion is paramount because often times the reading is difficult to understand. Often only through participation in class (i.e. listening, taking notes, asking questions, and talking during discussion) do the texts begin to make sense. **As an incentive to help you remember to come to class, take notes, and engage with the material, we will have an in class reading quiz at the end of every week throughout the semester. I will keep a running tally of your quiz points. You will have about 14 quizzes in order to earn this 20% of your total quiz grade. The maximum amount of points for quizzes will be 20 points. If you miss a quiz, I will only allow you to make up the quiz due to medical issues.** If you miss class, your responsibility is to acquire any information and notes that you may have missed. Get these from your peers. Once you have acquired notes from class, I would be happy to discuss any questions that you may have about the information covered on that day.
2. Assignments: You should approach writing in this course as a tool to use as part of your learning as well as a tool that I will use to assess your level of learning. For the journal entries

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and exams/essay papers make-up work or extensions must be pre-approved. Extensions are only granted for *extenuating* circumstances. **Late assignments will not be accepted except with university excused absences or in rare cases at the instructor's discretion.** If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

- a. *Journal Entires* (through Packback): After each philosopher that we cover, you must submit to me a journal entry that answers all three of the following questions. You may write as much as you like on these, which means there is no limit to how much you can write, but each entry **must be at least 250 words**. The Packback Deep Dives platform (www.packback.co) will be used for these journal entries. I have one primary goal for using Packback for our course: to help deepen your understanding of the material by getting you to connect the philosophical ideas that we are exploring with your own personal life. Approach the journals as a way to stimulate your ideas about issues, questions, and problems raised in class and in the readings. This kind of writing is called exploratory or expressive writing that helps inspire wonder, inquiry, and curiosity in the topics of a course. Don't be afraid to ask questions and question answers from the course in this writing. Other than you first journal entry, for *each* assignment you must write:

- (1) What did you agree with in this section of the course and why?
- (2) What did you disagree with in this section of the course and why?
- (3) How has this section of the course changed the way you think about religion and your experience of religion?

Each journal answer much be answered fully according to the reading and lectures based on the following guidelines. Each entry will be worth 50 points with 10 of these points coming from meeting the minimum word count, following correct grammar and spelling, and having good flow and structure for your entry. The remaining 40 points will come from the criteria below. A rubric is available on Packback for you to see:

- Clearly answer all three questions.
- Any answer for an agreement or disagreement that says, "I did not agree with anything" or "I did not disagree with anything," will not count as an answer.
- Say why you agree or disagree. Any agreement or disagreement that is unclearly explained will not be counted.
- Engage with the material that we discuss in the lectures and in the readings. Responding to something that you have Googled and we did not cover does not count.

To Register for Packback and Submit Assignments *Only* Follow These Instructions:

You will need to pay for Packback on the Packback website. It costs \$39 plus tax if you get it straight from Packback. If you need assistance in paying for this, reach out to help@packback.co asking in them for assistance with paying. You may register by following the instructions below.

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- Log in to our Blackboard page. Once there, click on the “Packback Journal Entries” navigation link on the left hand side of the page.
- Click the link on this page that says “Packback — Click Here to Begin.” This will take you to Packback where you can set up your account by following the onscreen instructions.

If you have ANY questions or concerns regarding Packback throughout our semester, please contact the customer support team at help@packback.co

b. *Exams/Research Project:*

- i. Option 1: Two take-home essay tests. Your answers should be typed and formatted as follows: 12-point Times New Roman font, double spaced, and 1-inch margins all around. Give yourself enough time to proofread and edit your papers. Format should conform to the Chicago style guideline or to the style guideline of your own discipline. Each exam will consist of four questions, and you will need to answer three of the questions. The questions will concern major themes and ideas from the philosophers that we will be reading and discussing. Each question should be answered in 2-3 double spaced pages and formatted as delineated above. So your exam will be anywhere from 6-9 pages. You will have approximately one week to prepare your answers for each exam. You will submit them on Blackboard through a TurnItIn link. See the course schedule below for due dates.
- ii. Option 2: Two research papers with the following guidelines. **NB: You must speak to me ahead of time about your paper topic if you choose this option.**
 - (1) Research Project #1: A paper written for an audience interested in philosophy of religion. The paper must be 8-12 pages and focus on a theme, topic, or figure from the first half of the course. This can be on a topic of your choosing that focuses on either one of the philosophers in the first half of the course, or it can be on two of the philosophers in the first half of the course. You can even write about one other figure not covered in the course as long as this external figure does not draw your paper too far afield of the major topic of the course. See the course schedule below for the due date.
 - (2) Research Project #2: A paper written for an audience interested in philosophy of religion. The paper must be 8-12 pages and focus on a theme, topic, or figure from the first half of the course. You can include any of the figures in the course, but the main focus of the paper needs to be on at least one of the figures from the second half of the course. Again, you can write about one other figure not covered in the course as long as this external figure does not draw your paper too far afield of the major topic of the course. See the course schedule below for the due date.

GRADING

Your final grade will be determined based on the above requirements. Late assignments will not be accepted unless I tell you otherwise. Grade equivalents are as follows:

A 89.5-100 B 79.5-89.4 C 69.5-79.4 D 59.5-69.4 F 59.4-0

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE

Weeks	Readings	Due Dates
Week 1	<p style="text-align: center;">Introductions</p> <p>Introductions Syllabus Analytic Philosophy of Religion and Continental Philosophy of Religion <u>Readings:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concepción, “How to Read Philosophy” 	PB 1 due 1/31
Weeks 2-4	<p style="text-align: center;">Section 1: Faith and Reason</p> <p><u>Readings:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaise Pascal, <i>Pensées</i> (selection) • Alvin Plantinga, <i>Knowledge and Christian Belief</i> (selection) • Søren Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i> (selection) 	PB 2 due 2/14
Weeks 5-7	<p style="text-align: center;">Section 2: God and Existence</p> <p><u>Readings:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. Thomas Aquinas, 5 Ways • Friedrich Nietzsche, “God is Dead” • Jean-Luc Marion, “Double Idolatry” • John D. Caputo, <i>What to Believe?</i> (selection) 	PB 3 due 3/7 Midterm/Research Project #1 Due 3/21

Weeks
9-11

Section 3: Theodicy

Readings:

- Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (selection)
- Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (selection)

PB 4 due 4/4

Weeks
12-15

Section 4: Religion and Lived Experience

Readings:

- Nietzsche's and Karl Marx's Critiques
- Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy"
- Marion, "Saturated Phenomena"
- Eleanore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer"
- Christina Gschwandtner, "Devotional Experience"

PB 5 due 5/5

Week
16

**FINAL/RESEARCH PROJECT #2 DUE
TBA**

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

A college philosophy class is a serious undertaking. Each one of you deserves a classroom environment that is most conducive for your learning. So make sure to use the restroom before class so that you minimize the disruptions of people leaving in the middle of class and attend the entire class each day. Additionally, cell phones must be turned off or turned to silent **and put away during class**. Come talk to me if this is an issue. The use of computers for taking notes is **not** allowed unless you have a DSS exception for the use of your computer for taking notes. You may drink an appropriate beverage in class, and if you need to eat something in class, choose something that is not disruptive. Do not begin preparing to leave class before the end of the class session. I will be keeping my eye on the clock.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT POLICY

Students at Texas A&M University-San Antonio are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Academic Dishonesty for which a student is subject to penalty includes cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, multiple submissions, misrepresentation of academic records, facilitating academic dishonesty, unfair advantage, and ethical misconduct. This includes holding other students to the same standards and reporting any incidents of alleged violation of the honesty policy to the instructor involved or, if necessary, to the appropriate academic department head. All students are responsible for being familiar with the Academic

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Dishonesty Policy, which may be found in the Texas A&M University-San Antonio Student Handbook. University policy prescribes serious consequences for acts of academic misconduct including, but not limited to, a grade of 'F' on the particular paper or assignment or a failing grade in the course. Also, a referral may be issued to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities where the sanctions can vary up to possible expulsion from the University. Considering the potential consequences of academic misconduct, it is obviously in students' best interests to avoid even the appearance of such behavior. If you are ever unclear whether a specific act might constitute academic misconduct, please contact your instructor for an assessment of the situation. All student term papers and other written assignments are subject to analysis by anti-plagiarism software.

AI STATEMENT FOR COURSE

For PHIL 2306, I assume that all work submitted by students will be generated by the students themselves, working individually or in groups. Students should not have another person/entity do the writing of any portion of an assignment for them, which includes hiring a person or a company to write assignments and/or using artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT. Use of any AI-generated content in this course qualifies as academic dishonesty and violates Texas A&M-San Antonio's standards of academic integrity.

DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES

Texas A&M University-San Antonio is committed to providing equitable access to students with disabilities through reasonable accommodation in accordance with The Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please contact Disability Support Services (DSS) for the coordination of services. Disability Support Services (DSS) is currently offering phone and virtual appointments as well as in-person meetings as necessary, by appointment only. To schedule a phone, virtual or in-person appointment, call DSS at 210-784-1335 or email us at dss@tamusa.edu.

COUNSELING RESOURCES

If you or someone you know is experiencing life stressors, emotional difficulties, or mental health concerns at Texas A&M University – San Antonio, please contact the Office of Student Counseling & Wellness Services (SC&WS) located in Modular C, Room 166 (Rear entrance) or call 210-784-1331 between the hours of 8:00AM and 5:00PM. All mental health services provided by SC&WS are free, confidential (as the law allows), and are not part of a student's academic or university record. SC&WS provides brief individual, couples, and group therapy, crisis intervention, consultation, case management, and prevention services. For more information, please visit www.tamusa.edu/studentcounseling. Any students interested in scheduling an appointment should call (210) 784-1331 Monday through Friday, 8:00AM – 5:00PM. After hours, please contact UPD at 911 or text "HOME" to 741-741 24/7/365 to

connect with a trained crisis counselor. The National Suicide Prevention hotline also offers a 24/7/365 hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

COURSE EVALUATIONS

At the end of the semester, you will have the opportunity to complete an evaluation of the course and my teaching. This will be available online through Blackboard. I will inform you as to when you will be able to fill this out.