**PHILOSOPHY 3600-MBI (60316): Philosophy of Religion**

**Meeting:** TTh 3–4:15pm; Old Main 117  
**Instructor:** Professor Mike Ashfield | mike.ashfield@usu.edu or contact through Canvas  
**Office/Student Drop-in Hours:** Wednesdays 2–4pm over Zoom and by appointment

**Course Description**  
The aim of this course is to examine religious beliefs and practices and what it means for us to engage in them, and religion can mean for us as whole human beings. To accomplish this, we will focus on four themes. First, we will examine the development of classical theism, primarily through the interaction between Greek philosophy and Christian theology, and some of the arguments advanced in support of the existence of God. Second, we will examine some of the problems vexing classical theism, including the problem of evil, and we will put classical theism into conversation with the Mormon concept of God. Third, we will focus on the experiential dimension of religion and look at mystical practice as a potential source of knowledge of the divine. Finally, we will transition to consider the place of the afterlife in religious thinking more broadly. Ultimately, the course aims to give students a better sense of what stakes they might have in their personal religious orientation, and how they can navigate this, communally as well as individually. The writing exercises draw on this same holistic approach, and will encourage personal reflection and critical examination.

**Course Objectives**  
The learning outcomes of this course are in line with the aims of a liberal arts education. I hope that philosophy of religion will be useful for you in your working life, and in your life more broadly as responsible, active citizens. We live in a multicultural, religiously pluralistic society—it is important for us to reflect on this diversity and to understand ourselves as situated within it. In particular, you will:

- Learn to understand, expound, and analyse a range of textual source materials, including primary and secondary texts; summarize the arguments of others and also devise and present arguments of their own, both orally and in writing; and research, plan, and write assessed work to specified deadlines.
- Critically examine yourself, your traditions (including religious traditions), by obtaining a broader understanding of western philosophy of religion. In addition, we will occasionally draw on religious thought from beyond the western tradition, to help you further understand the diversity of religious thought.
- With this understanding of religion, as a phenomenon that has both affective and rational elements, understand yourself as a member of a broader religiously pluralistic society, and by extension, the world.
- Identify and critically discuss what have traditionally been treated as some of the “big questions” in philosophy of religion — and, consequently, in philosophy more generally — while also raising and responding to questions about whether those are in fact the best

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1 Incorporating syllabi design elements from Taylor-Grey Miller (UT Austin), Dr. Helen De Cruz (SLU), Dr. Mikel Burley (Leeds), Dr. Michael Otteson (USU), and Dr. Richard Sherlock (USU).
questions to be addressing, thereby keeping in view the question of what we mean by “philosophy of religion.”

- Recognize, appreciate the arguments of, and critically engage with some of the major contributors to debates in philosophy of religion, while also exploring lesser-known, but no less stimulating and insightful thinkers.

**Required Texts**
All readings will be provided through Canvas.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

**Reading Questions: 20%**
The academy is about the intellect. It is about the mind’s ability to grasp and comprehend truth, goodness, and rightness (among many other important and valuable things). To this end, the three questions of academia are as follows:

- “Huh?”
- “Really?”
- “So what?”

“Huh?” is about what someone has said. It is the ability or process of understanding what another person has tried to communicate. This is an act of interpretation. Whenever someone says something, it is always a separate process for the listener(s) to determine what the person said. This may seem trivial, but it is not (especially in a field like philosophy). Interpreting what other people have said is often ambiguous, difficult, or contested. This does not mean there are not right answers, or that some answers are not better or more plausible than others. However, it does mean that a simple question like “huh” is actually an exercise or activity of the intellect, not a matter of vain or rote repetition or regurgitation.

“Really?” is about justification or reasons. That is, it is about determining why someone believes or defends something that they have said. It is the process of both understanding why another person holds the position that they do and evaluating for yourself whether or not those reasons or arguments are satisfactory. This is also an exercise of the intellect. Rationality is about the search for reasons. Why do we believe as we do? Why should we act or behave in a certain way?

“So what?” is about why something matters. It is determining the value or importance of information, concepts, ideas, or arguments within a human life. Why does something matter to us? Should we care about something? How does it make us wiser, more thoughtful, or better? For every day that we assigned readings in class, you will need to send to me your answers to these questions in regards to the readings for the day. You will take no more than three sentences (for each question) to explain about each reading the “Huh,” the “Really,” and the “So What.” In other words, you will briefly explain what the author said, why the author said it, and why it matters or potentially matters for their larger project, ethics, or human life generally. Your answers to these questions will be due thirty minutes before the beginning of class. I will use them (as should you) to facilitate class discussion. It will prepare you to
engage in a rigorous examination and consideration of the text in conjunction with myself and your classmates.

This is a lot of work. However, it is work that is essential for developing critical thinking skills that you will use everywhere. As Aristotle and the other virtue ethicists know, any skill requires practices to master. There is no way around improving other than doing it over and over again with an eye towards improvement. However, I will not grade these responses on content. If you have made a good faith effort to do them, then you will get your points for the day. Furthermore, I will give you seven days during the semester where you don’t have to turn in questions. Therefore, if you respond to the questions for all but seven of the days where we have assigned readings (20 of 27), you will get full credit for the semester.

Reading questions are to be submitted through Canvas by noon, the day they are assigned in class, and you are very welcome to submit them early, but late assignments will not receive credit. Two of these (9/9 Aristotle’s Metaphysics V.1–2; Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae I.Q2; 12/7 Jantzen, 1984, “Do we need immortality”; Charles Taliaferro, 1990, “Why we need immortality”) are Mandatory Diagnostic Assessments. Both must be completed to complete the course. If they are submitted on time, they will be graded as usual. If they are submitted late, they will satisfy the Mandatory Diagnostic Assessment requirement, but you will receive no credit for them.

Four Short Papers: 60% (15% each)
The goal of this course is to examine complex and difficult texts about weighty issues in the philosophy of religion and correctly explain key concepts related to them. This process of interpretation is sometimes called “exegesis.” These assignments are a way to practice this skill. You will need to find key passages from the text(s) where author(s) discuss the relevant topic, quote them, and explain what they mean in your own words. Your reading question responses should help you immensely in preparing to write these papers.

Final Exam: 20%
There will be a final cumulative exam that covers material from all aspects of the course. Preparing for this exam will help you review and understand the material from this course. It will include material that is not directly covered by the papers. Your reading questions should also help you prepare for this exam.
## Course Schedule

### Week 1
8/31  Course Introduction
9/2   Some Ancient Philosophical Context: Plato on the Creator
      Reading: Excerpt (the creation story) from Plato’s *Timaeus*

### Week 2
9/7   The Influence of Neoplatonism in early Theistic Thought: Boethius & Augustine on God
      Readings: Excerpt (on the timelessness of God) from Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy*; Augustine’s *De Trinitate V*
9/9   The Influence of Aristotle in Medieval Theistic Thought: Aquinas on the Five Ways
      Readings: Aristotle’s *Metaphysics V.1–2*; Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae I.Q2*
      Mandatory Reading Questions; Class Seating Chart Finalized in Canvas

### Week 3
9/14  Ontological Arguments for God’s Existence
9/16  Moral Arguments for God’s Existence
9/19  Paper 1: Carefully summarize and critically evaluate one argument for the existence of God.
      (To be submitted no later than 11:59pm; value: 15%)

### Week 4
9/21  The Problem of Evil
9/23  The Problem of Evil continued: The Mormon Perspective

### Week 5
9/28  Classical Theism and Mormonism
9/30  The Mormon Concept of God
Week 6
10/5  The Problems of Hell

10/7  Taylor-Grey Miller & Derek Haderlie. 2020. “Sider’s Puzzle and the Mormon Afterlife.”

10/10 Paper 2: Carefully explain and critically evaluate one point of philosophically significant disagreement between orthodox Christianity and Mormonism. (To be submitted no later than 11:59pm; value: 15%)

Week 7
10/12 What should we make of the diversity of religious traditions?

10/14 The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

Fall Break: October 15–19: Ponder Hopsin’s “Ill Mind of Hopsin 7”

Week 8
10/19 No Class
10/21 So What if God is Hidden?

Week 9
10/26 Reading: William James, The Will to Believe.

10/31 Paper 3: Analyze Hopsin’s “Ill Mind of Hopsin 7” with reference to course materials on the problem of evil OR the problem of divine hiddenness. Critically assess Hopsin’s relevant remarks. (To be submitted no later than 5pm; value: 15%)

Week 10
11/2 Desiring God and God’s existence

11/4 Why pursue mysticism?
Reading: al-Ghazali’s Deliverer From Error

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Week 11
11/9 Philosophy’s encounter with mystical experience

11/11 Philosophical reflections on areligious or ambivalent experience

Week 12
11/16 Reformed Epistemology


11/21 Paper 4: Summarize and critically reflect on a recent first-person description of a religious experience, with reference to the course materials on religious experience. (To be submitted no later than 11:59pm; value: 15%)

Week 13
11/23 Issues of Immortality and the Afterlife

11/25 No Class
   Thanksgiving Holiday: November 24–26

Week 14


Week 15

12/9 What’s the point of doing philosophy of religion?

Week 16 Finals Week: Final Exam (20%)
COURSE POLICIES

Classroom Civility
Utah State University supports the principle of freedom of expression for both faculty and students. The University respects the rights of faculty to teach and students to learn. Maintenance of these rights requires classroom conditions that do not impede the learning process. Disruptive classroom behavior will not be tolerated. An individual engaging in such behavior may be subject to disciplinary action. Read Student Code Article V Section V-3 for more information.

COVID-19 Classroom Protocols
See Canvas for updates.

Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibilities
Academic freedom is the right to teach, study, discuss, investigate, discover, create, and publish freely. Academic freedom protects the rights of faculty members in teaching and of students in learning. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Faculty members are entitled to full freedom in teaching, research, and creative activities, subject to the limitations imposed by professional responsibility. Faculty Code Policy #403 further defines academic freedom and professional responsibilities.

Academic Integrity – "The Honor System"
Each student has the right and duty to pursue his or her academic experience free of dishonesty. To enhance the learning environment at Utah State University and to develop student academic integrity, each student agrees to the following Honor Pledge: “I pledge, on my honor, to conduct myself with the foremost level of academic integrity.”
A student who lives by the Honor Pledge is a student who does more than not cheat, falsify, or plagiarize. A student who lives by the Honor Pledge:
- Espouses academic integrity as an underlying and essential principle of the Utah State University community;
- Understands that each act of academic dishonesty devalues every degree that is awarded by this institution; and
- Is a welcomed and valued member of Utah State University.

Academic Dishonesty
The instructor of this course will take appropriate actions in response to Academic Dishonesty, as defined the University’s Student Code. Acts of academic dishonesty include but are not limited to:
- Cheating: using, attempting to use, or providing others with any unauthorized assistance in taking quizzes, tests, examinations, or in any other academic exercise or activity. Unauthorized assistance includes:
  ○ Working in a group when the instructor has designated that the quiz, test, examination, or any other academic exercise or activity be done “individually;”
○ Depending on the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems, or carrying out other assignments;
○ Substituting for another student, or permitting another student to substitute for oneself, in taking an examination or preparing academic work;
○ Acquiring tests or other academic material belonging to a faculty member, staff member, or another student without express permission;
○ Continuing to write after time has been called on a quiz, test, examination, or any other academic exercise or activity;
○ Submitting substantially the same work for credit in more than one class, except with prior approval of the instructor; or engaging in any form of research fraud.

- Falsification: altering or fabricating any information or citation in an academic exercise or activity.
- Plagiarism: representing, by paraphrase or direct quotation, the published or unpublished work of another person as one's own in any academic exercise or activity without full and clear acknowledgment. It also includes using materials prepared by another person or by an agency engaged in the sale of term papers or other academic materials.

For additional information go to: Article VI. University Regulations Regarding Academic Integrity

**Sexual Harassment/Title IX**
Utah State University is committed to creating and maintaining an environment free from acts of sexual misconduct and discrimination and to fostering respect and dignity for all members of the USU community. Title IX and USU Policy 339 address sexual harassment in the workplace and academic setting.

The university responds promptly upon learning of any form of possible discrimination or sexual misconduct. Any individual may contact USU's Office of Equity for available options and resources or clarification. The university has established a complaint procedure to handle all types of discrimination complaints, including sexual harassment (USU Policy 305), and has designated the Office of Equity Director/Title IX Coordinator as the official responsible for receiving and investigating complaints of sexual harassment.

**Withdrawal Policy and 'I' Grade Policy**
Students are required to complete all courses for which they are registered by the end of the semester. In some cases, a student may be unable to complete all of the coursework because of extenuating circumstances, but not due to poor performance or to retain financial aid. The term 'extenuating' circumstances includes: (1) incapacitating illness which prevents a student from attending classes for a minimum period of two weeks, (2) a death in the immediate family, (3) financial responsibilities requiring a student to alter a work schedule to secure employment, (4) change in work schedule as required by an employer, or (5) other emergencies deemed appropriate by the instructor.
**Students with Disabilities**

USU welcomes students with disabilities. If you have, or suspect you may have, a physical, mental health, or learning disability that may require accommodations in this course, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) as early in the semester as possible (University Inn # 101, (435) 797-2444, drc@usu.edu). All disability related accommodations must be approved by the DRC. Once approved, the DRC will coordinate with faculty to provide accommodations.

Students who are at a higher risk for complications from COVID-19 or who contract COVID-19 may also be eligible for accommodations.

**Diversity Statement**

Regardless of intent, careless or ill-informed remarks can be offensive and hurtful to others and detract from the learning climate. If you feel uncomfortable in a classroom due to offensive language or actions by an instructor or student(s) regarding ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, contact:

- Division of Student Affairs: https://studentaffairs.usu.edu, (435) 797-1712, studentservices@usu.edu, TSC 220
- Student Legal Services: https://ususa.usu.edu/student-association/studentadvocacy/legal-services, (435) 797-2912, TSC 326,
- Access and Diversity: http://accesscenter.usu.edu, (435) 797-1728, access@usu.edu; TSC 315
- Multicultural Programs: http://accesscenter.usu.edu/multiculture, (435) 797-1728, TSC 315
- LGBTQA Programs: http://accesscenter.usu.edu/lgbtqa, (435) 797-1728, TSC 3145
- Provost’s Office Diversity Resources: https://www.usu.edu/provost/diversity, (435) 797-8176

You can learn about your student rights by visiting: The Code of Policies and Procedures for Students at Utah State University: https://studentconduct.usu.edu/studentcode

**Grievance Process**

Students who feel they have been unfairly treated may file a grievance through the channels and procedures described in the Student Code: Article VII. Full details for USU Academic Policies and Procedures can be found at:

- Student Conduct
- Student Code
- Academic Integrity
- USU Selected Academic Policies and Procedures
- USU Academic Policies and Procedures
- Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibility Policy

**Emergency Procedures**

In the case of a drill or real emergency, classes will be notified to evacuate the building by the sound of the fire/emergency alarm system or by a building representative. In the event of a disaster that may interfere with either notification, evacuate as the situation dictates (i.e., in an earthquake when shaking
ceases or immediately when a fire is discovered). Turn off computers and take any personal items with you. Elevators should not be used; instead, use the closest stairs.

**Mental Health**
Mental health is critically important for the success of USU students. As a student, you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. Utah State University provides free services for students to assist them with addressing these and other concerns. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus at Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

Students are also encouraged to download the “SafeUT App” to their smartphones. The SafeUT application is a 24/7 statewide crisis text and tip service that provides real-time crisis intervention to students through texting and a confidential tip program that can help anyone with emotional crises, bullying, relationship problems, mental health, or suicide related issues.