**Saints, Heretics and Atheists[[1]](#footnote-1)**

An Historical Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

Culture and Belief 31

Syllabus – Spring 2019



**Important Information:**

Lecture: MW 9:00 am – 10:15 am, Harvard Hall 104

Professor: Jeffrey McDonough

Office Hours: 202 Emerson Hall, Mondays 3:00-4:45pm

E-mail: jkmcdon@fas.harvard.edu

**Recommended Texts** (available at the Coop - https://tinyurl.com/300-W19-GEND-CULBEL-31-1)**:**

Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, translated by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993). ISBN: 0-87220-188-0

*Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings,* translated and edited by Muhammad Ali Khalidi (New York: Cambridge University Press 2005). ISBN: 0-521-52963-8.

Aquinas, *A Summary of Philosophy*, translated and edited by Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003). ISBN: 0-87220-657-2

Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics*, translated by Samuel Shirley, edited by Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992). ISBN: 0-872201-309

David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Second Edition*, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980). ISBN: 0-87220-402-2

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998). ISBN: 0-87220-283-6

**Course Description:**

Does God exist? What is the nature of evil and where does it come from? Are humans free? Responsible? Immortal? Does it matter? This course will explore foundational questions in the philosophy of western religion through the study of classic works by Plato, Augustine, Anselm, Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali, Aquinas, Pascal, Spinoza, Hume, Mill, Nietzsche and James, as well as discussions by contemporary authors such as Pamala Milne, Marilynne Robinson and Daniel Dennett. Students will have the opportunity to reexamine their own views and assumptions about religion in dialogue with great thinkers of the past and present.

**Requirements and Grading:**

*1. Reading*

The ability to read texts carefully and thoughtfully is one of the most important skills the study of philosophy can help to foster. In order to better understand what is being taught, and to promote informed classroom discussions, readings should be completed before lecture. There are three kinds of readings for this course. *Core readings* will be our central focus. These readings will serve as the basis for lecture discussions and students will be responsible for understanding them thoroughly. Students should be prepared to identify by author passages taken from core readings. *Supplemental readings* are intended to broaden the experience of students and relate our topics to contemporary concerns. Students should be prepared to discuss supplemental readings and understand broad, general themes taken from them. Finally, *optional readings* are entirely optional but available to students who would like to fill out their understanding of our primary texts.

*2. Attendance*

Students are strongly encouraged to attend both lectures and discussion sections. Students who attend both lectures and discussion sections typically do better and get more out of the course. That said, we will endeavor to video record all lectures and post them to the course web site for viewing. If you cannot attend a lecture, you are invited to view it online through the course web site. **Discussion section attendance, however, is absolutely mandatory.** Discussion section leaders will take attendance and section participation will factor into grading (see grading below).

*3. Exams*

This course aims to help students gain an overview of the development of philosophical thought about religion in the western tradition. To promote that aim, as well as to provide students with an alternative means of being evaluated, a mid-term and final exam will be administered. These exams are intended to test comprehension of the material covered in required readings, lectures, and discussion section. They will not require outside reading or research. Exams will typically include a handful of multiple-choice questions, a handful of (core reading) passage identifications, and a couple of short essay questions.

4. *Short writing assignments*

The ability to write clearly and succinctly is another important skills the study of philosophy can help to foster. In order to give students a chance to develop their writing skills, there will be ten short writing “opportunities.” Students are asked to participate **in any four** of those opportunities by writing a short paper on one of the week’s assigned topics. (So, students will write on four of the ten writing opportunities.) Students may submit up to five writing assignments. Students who submit five writing assignments will have their lowest writing score dropped. At least one writing assignment must be completed before the mid-term exam. **No late writing assignments will be accepted**.

*5. Grading*

Students’ grades will be determined by their performance on their exams, writing assignments, and by attendance and participation in discussion sections. The mid-term will count for 20% of a student’s grade, the final exam 30%, and writing assignments 40%. The remaining 10% of each student’s grade will be determined by attendance and participation in discussion sections. Each student will start with 12 attendance points and 12 discussion points. Students will lose one point for each missed section, and one point for failing to become meaningfully involved in a week’s discussion. (If you miss a section altogether you will therefore lose 2 points – one for missed attendance, one for failure to become meaningfully involved in the week’s discussion.) Missed points can be made up by attending the TF’s office hour that week, by arranging to participate in another section that week, or by other arrangements under special circumstances.

*6. Special Needs and Emergencies*

Students requiring special assistance are encouraged to inform either the professor or teaching fellow. We will do everything we can to help. Absences from class or exam periods and late papers will be dealt with in accordance with the policies described in the [Harvard College Handbook for Students](https://handbook.fas.harvard.edu/book/welcome). Students should expect that failure to attend an exam without an excuse deemed legitimate by those policies will result in a score of zero for that exam. Requests made to the professor or teaching fellow prior to an absence or due date may allow us to better accommodate your needs.

**Tentative Schedule**

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| **Mon, Jan 28** | **What Is Piety?** |
| Core reading: | [Plato, “Euthyphro.”](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyfro.html)  |
| Supp. reading: | [Tim Whitmarsch, “Black Achilles,” *Aeon*, May 9, 2018](https://aeon.co/essays/when-homer-envisioned-achilles-did-he-see-a-black-man).  |
| Homework: | Read course syllabus, explore course web site.  |
| Optional reading: | [Margaret Talbot, “The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture,” *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2018](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture) |

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| **Wed, Jan 30** | **Whence Evil?** |
| Core reading: | Augustine, Book I of *On Free Choice of the Will* (pages 1-28 in the Williams translation) |
| Supp. reading: | [Pamala Milne, “Genesis from Eve’s Point of View,” *The Washington Post*, March 26, 1989](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/03/26/genesis-from-eves-point-of-view/dc371184-1f4c-4142-ac2d-d5efee72a0da/?utm_term=.53015fdbe9c9) |

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| **Mon, Feb 4** | **Why Free Will?**  |
| Core reading: | Augustine, Book II of *On Free Choice of the Will* (pages 29-69 in the Williams translation) |
| Supp. reading: | [Allison Arieff, “Life is Short. That’s the Point,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2018](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/18/opinion/life-is-short-thats-the-point.html).  |

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| **Wed, Feb 6** | **Why Do We Sin?** |
| Core reading:  | Augustine, Book III, Chapters 1-9 of *On Free Choice of the Will* (pages 69-91 in the Williams translation) |
| Optional reading: | Book III, Chapters 10-25 (pages 91-124 in the Williams translation) |
| Supp. reading: | [Jim Holt, “Thinking Inside the Boxes,” *Slate* February 1, 2002](https://slate.com/culture/2002/02/robert-nozick-and-newcomb-s-problem.html).  |

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| **Mon, Feb 11** | **What is Free Will Anyway?** |
| Core reading: | [Anselm, “On Freedom of Choice”](http://jasper-hopkins.info/DeLibertate.pdf) (Jasper Hopkins translation) |
| Supp. reading:  | [C. S. Lewis, “Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer,” *Christian Reflections*](http://www.basicincome.com/bp/files/Petitionary_Prayer_by_C.S._Lewis.pdf) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing 1967, pages 142-151). |
| **Due:**  | **Short writing opportunity #1** (Options: Anselm’s Ontological Argument, Pamala Milne on Reformists and Rejectionists, C.S. Lewis on Petitionary Prayer, Daniel Dennett on Questions of Personhood) |

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| **Wed, Feb 13** | **Are We Immortal?**  |
| Core reading: | Ibn Sina, “On the Soul,” from *The Book of Salvation* (Khalidi trans., pages 46-57). |
| Supp. reading: | [Daniel C. Dennett, “Where Am I?,” excerpt from *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology*](https://lafavephilosophy.x10host.com/where_am_i.html) (Bradford Books, 1978). |

**Monday, February 18: University Holiday – President’s Day**

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| **Wed, Feb 20** | **Is Religious Belief Founded in Reason?** |
| Core reading: | Al-Ghazali, *The Rescuer from Error,* by Al-Ghazali (Khalidi trans., pages 59-78: roughly first half of the work).  |
| Supp. reading: | Podcast: [Peter Adamson, “Special Delivery: al-Gazhali,” in The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps](https://historyofphilosophy.net/al-ghazali).  |

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| **Mon, Feb 25** | **Is Religious Belief Founded in Experience?** |
| Core reading: | Al-Ghazali, *The Rescuer from Error,* by Al-Ghazali (Khalidi trans., pages 79-98: roughly second half of the work). |
| Optional reading:  | Ibn Rushd, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (Khalidi trans., pages 155-180). |
| Supp. reading: | [Laurie A. Paul and Paul Bloom, “How Should We Make the Most Important Decisions of Our Lives? A Philosophical Debate,”](https://slate.com/culture/2015/03/transformative-experience-by-l-a-paul-in-conversation-with-paul-bloom.html) *Slate* March 5, 2015. |
| **Due:** | **Short writing opportunity #2**(Options: Aristotle’s causes and prime mover, Al-Ghazali on prophecy, Transformative experiences)  |

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| **Wed, Feb 27** | **Can We Prove that God Exists?** |
| Core reading: | *Aquinas, A Summary of Philosophy,* (pages 1-6 in Regan edition). Excerpted from: Aquinas’s *Summa Theologicae* Part 1, question 2, articles 1-3. |
| Supp. reading: | [Meghan Sullivan, “Uneasy Grace,” *First Things*, April 2014](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/04/uneasy-grace).  |

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| **Mon, Mar 4** | **What is the Impersonal Nature of God?** |
| Core reading: | *Aquinas, A Summary of Philosophy*, pages 6-20 in Regan edition. Excerpted from: Aquinas’s *Summa Theologicae* I, Q3, Q4, Q7, Q11, Q13 |
| Supp. reading: | [Lawrence Shapiro, “A Drop in the Sea,” *Aeon*](https://aeon.co/essays/don-t-believe-in-miracles-until-you-ve-done-the-math) November 1, 2013 |
| **Due:**  | **Short writing opportunity #3**(Options: Aquinas on perfection, Sullivan on four approaches, Shapiro on miracles)  |

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| **Wed, Mar 6** | **What is the Personal Nature of God?** |
| Core reading: | Aquinas, *A Summary of* Philosophy, abridged from his *Summa Theologica*, (pages 20-37 in Regan edition). Excerpted from Aquinas’s *Summa Theologicae* I, Q14, Q19, Q20. |
| Supp. reading: | [Julie Zauzmer, “Is God male? The Episcopal Church debates whether to change its Book of Common Prayer,” *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2018](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/07/03/is-god-male-the-episcopal-church-debates-whether-to-change-its-book-of-common-prayer/?utm_term=.4e11d5afdc20); OR [C.S. Lewis, “Priestesses in the Church?” from *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdmanns](http://www.episcopalnet.org/TRACTS/priestesses.html)); OR [Michael Rea, “Gender as a Divine Attribute](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c9fdf5_e6877c8bc07f43cf9da452533656bea0.pdf). |

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| **Mon, Mar 11** | **Should We “Bet” on God?** |
| Core reading: | [Pascal, “The Wager”](http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/Pascal_Wager.htm)  |
| Supp. reading: | [Gary Gutting, “Pascal’s Wager 2.0,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2015](https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/28/a-new-wager/). |
| Due:  | **Short writing opportunity #4**(Options: Background assumptions, Rea on gender, Gutting on Pascal’s wager 2.0) |

**Wednesday, March 13: MID-TERM EXAM**

**Monday March 18 and Wednesday, March 20: Spring Break**

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| **Mon, Mar 25** | **Is God Nature?** |
| Core reading: | Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part I, Definitions, Axioms, Explication, Propositions 1-15 (including demonstrations and scholia), Appendix (appears at end of Part I) (pages 31-43, 57-62 in the Shirley edition). |
| Supp. reading: | [Jonathan Bennett, “Glimpses of Spinoza,” *Syracuse Scholar* (4) 1983, 43-56.](https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/jfb/glimpses.html)  |
| Due:  | **Short writing opportunity #5**(Options: Spinoza’s appendix, Glimpses of Spinoza, Determinism and just punishment)  |

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| **Wed, Mar 27** | **Are We Modes of God?** |
| Core reading: | Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part I, 1d3, 1d4, 1d5; Part II, Axioms, Propositions 1-3, 6,7, 9, 10, 48 (dem but not scholium), 49Scholium (together with dem, scholium, corollary); Part III, Preface, Definitions, Propositions 1,2, 6-13 |
| Supp. reading: | [Gregg Caruso and Daniel Dennett, “Just Deserts,” *Aeon* October 4, 2018](https://aeon.co/essays/on-free-will-daniel-dennett-and-gregg-caruso-go-head-to-head). |

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| **Mon, April 1** | **Good without God?** |
| Core reading: | Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part IV Preface, Definitions, Axiom, Propositions 20-25, 30-37, 72 (including scholium) (pp. 31, 64-70, 95-100, 102-112, 152-155, 165- 167, 169-176, 194 in the Shirley edition) |
| Supp. reading: | [Louise M. Anthony, “Good Minus God,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2011.](https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/good-minus-god/)  |
| **Due:**  | **Short writing opportunity #6**(Options: Spinoza’s Scholium to 5p6, Is God necessary for morality? The importance of an “afterlife”)  |

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| **Wed, April 3** | **Life After Death?**  |
| Core reading: | Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part V, Preface, Proposition 6, 19-33, 41-42 (pages 201-203, 205, 211-218, 222-223 in Shirley edition). |
| Supp. reading: | [Samuel Scheffler, “The Importance of the Afterlife. Seriously.” *NYU Law Magazine*, 2014](https://blogs.law.nyu.edu/magazine/2014/the-importance-of-the-afterlife-seriously/). |

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| **Mon, April 8** | **Is the Universe Designed?**  |
| Core reading: | Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts I – IV |
| Supp. reading: | [Hans Halvorson, “Fine-Tuning Does Not Imply a Fine Tuner,” *Nautilus*, January 2017](http://cosmos.nautil.us/short/119/fine-tuning-does-not-imply-a-fine-tuner) |
| **Due:**  | **Short writing opportunity #7**(Options: The design argument, The fine-tuning argument, Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism) |

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| **Wed, April 10** | **Design without a Designer?** |
| Core reading: | Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts V – VIII |
| Supp. reading: | [Thomas Nagel, “A Philosopher Defends Religion,” *The New York Review of Books*, September 27, 2012](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/09/27/philosopher-defends-religion/). |

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| **Mon, April 15** | **True Religion?** |
| Core reading: | Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts IX – XII |
| Supp. reading: | [Marilyn McCord Adams’s, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, pages 250-257](https://www.dropbox.com/s/wct7jxh1eoka0rh/Marilyn%20McCord%20Adams%20Horrendous%20Evils%20and%20the%20Goodness%20of%20God%20copy%20for%20sharing.pdf?dl=0). |
| Due:  | **Short writing oportunity #8**(Options: True religion?, The logical problem of evil, Horrendous evils and the Goodness of God)  |
| Optional: | [Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “Cosmic Pantheism,” *Nautilus*, January 2017](http://cosmos.nautil.us/short/91/cosmic-pantheism).  |

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| **Wed, April 17** | **Is Religion Useful?** |
| Core reading: | Mill, *The Utility of Religion*, available online at: <https://www.laits.utexas.edu/poltheory/mill/three/utilrelig.html> |
| Supp. reading: | [Tara Isabella Burton, “’Spiritual but not religious’: Inside America’s Rapidly Growing Faith Group,” *Vox*, November 10, 2017](https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/11/10/16630178/study-spiritual-but-not-religious).[Greg M. Epstein, “Introduction” to *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (HaperCollins 2010).](https://aerbook.com/books/Good_Without_God-43385.html?social=1&retail=1&emailcap=0)  |
| Optional: | Greg M. Epstein, “Humanism at Harvard,” Interfaith Voices, July 14, 2017.  |

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| **Mon, April 22** | **What do “Good,” “Bad” and “Evil” Mean?**  |
| Core reading: | Nietzsche, *First Treatise: “Good and Evil,” “Good and Bad”* (pages 9-33 in Clark and Swensen translation) |
| Supp. reading: | [Sue Prideaux, “Far right, misogynist, humourless? Why Nietzsche is Misunderstood,” *The Guardian*, October 6, 2018](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/06/exploding-nietzsche-myths-need-dynamiting) |
| Due:  | **Short writing opportunity #9**(Options: The meaning of Good, Bad and Evil, The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn) |

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| **Wed, April 24** | **Whence Conscience, Bad Conscience, and Guilt?** |
| Core reading: | Nietzsche, *Second Treatise: “Guilt,” “Bad Conscience,” and Related Matters* (pages 35 – 66 in Clark and Swensen translation) (We’ll focus on sections 1-8 and 16-25, so if pressed for time you might skim sections 8-15.) |
| Supp. reading: | [Jonathan Bennett, “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn,” *Philosophy* 49 (1979): 123-134](https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/jfb/huckfinn.pdf). |

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| **Mon, April 29** | **No Alternative to Religion?** |
| Core reading: | Nietzsche, *Third Treatise: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?* (pages 67 – 118 in Clark and Swensen translation) |
| Supp. reading: | [Claudia Roth Pierpont, “After God,” *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2002.](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/04/08/after-god) |
| Due:  | **Short writing opportunity #10**(Options: Ascetic ideals, Church and Enlightenment)  |

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| **Wed, May 1** | **The Right to Believe? – William James’s *The Will to Believe*** |
| Core reading: | Required reading: *The Will to Believe*, William James. Available on-line at:<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm> |
| Supp. reading: | [Peter van Iwagen, “*Quam Dilecta*,” *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Morris, 1994.](http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Quam_Dilecta.pdf) |

**-- FINAL EXAM GROUP TBD --**

1. The image below is of Raphael’s *Disputation of the Holy Sacramen*t (1510). The fresco in the Stanza della Segnatura stands opposite Raphael’s famous *The School of Athens* and represents Christianity’s victory over philosophy. Each lecture in our course will open with a relevant piece of visual artwork and accompanying music. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)