

Texts & Ideas: God

CORE-UA 400 020
1/27/2020 - 5/11/2020

Instructor:

Instructor: Hent de Vries

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Office Hours:

4:30 PM – 5.00 PM Th

Department of Religious Studies

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Lecture Schedule (Times and Location)

CORE-UA 400 020: Tu Th 2:00 PM - 3:15 PM, Location: TBA

Recitation Instructors:

Instructor: Gabriel Quigley (CORE-UA 400 021, 022)

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Office Hours:

11:00 AM – 12:30 PM Fri

Department of Comparative Literature

19 University Place, Room 317

Instructor: William Cheung (CORE-UA 400 023, 024)

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Office Hours:

4:30 PM – 6:00 PM Wed or by appointment

Department of German

19 University Place, 3rd floor, Room 326

Recitation Section Schedules (Times and Location)

CORE-UA 400 021: F 8:00AM - 9:15AM, SILV_409

CORE-UA 400 022: F 9:30AM - 10:45AM, SILV_409

CORE-UA 400 023: F 8:00AM - 9:15AM, SILV_514

CORE-UA 400 024: F 9:30AM - 10:45AM, SILV_512

Course Description

What or who is – or was – “God”? And what or who might “He” still – or yet again – become, for us, whether we consider ourselves true believers or not? Do admittedly insufficient philosophical proofs for His existence that, throughout the ages have been

attempted, add up, in the end? And, if so, in what sense or to what extent, precisely? Or, if God's existence and essential predicates can neither be verified nor even sharply defined, can they instead be falsified, as has also been claimed? Are God's concept and names – and there are, across past and present traditions and cultures quite a few in circulation – as many instances of “nonsense,” at least in rigorous logical, conceptual and argumentative, terms? Is to speak of and reason about “God” to proliferate mere noise, an inchoate feeling of cosmic and existential dependence, nothing more?

This course is devoted to historical and contemporary efforts to nonetheless understand and justify this at once most familiar and strangest of invocations or references: the Being called highest by many, but also eternal, all-knowing, perfectly good, itself enough, and much else besides. Inevitably the course is limited in its scope in that it largely traces a particular – Occidental – philosophical and theological, literary and visual cultural tradition. But students are invited to bring other traditions to bear on our admittedly selective use of exemplary authors and texts.

We will discuss etymologies and genealogies of this increasingly controversial name, term, and concept, analyze different – apriori and a posteriori – proofs for God's existence, demonstrations of His essential predicates, and differentiate between the mystical theological tradition of divine names and the so-called natural theological ascription of infinite attributes (in so-called apologetics, scholasticism, and onto-theology). We will also revisit some of their most successful refutations, which have not put the theological challenge (to logical, reasonable thought and, indeed, language as such) to rest and, perhaps, never will.

From Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas, Descartes and Kant, the philosophical concept of God – and, eventually, the very idea of the infinite – has both substantiated and distorted or undermined the theological imagination, just as it has, indirectly, affected the sentiments of the common faithful, of theologians and mystics. Yet modern thought has also claimed that, in the process, the very concept of God suffered the “death of a thousand qualifications.” From positive via negative to mystical theologies, critiques of idolatry and blasphemy, a recurrent insight has been that there is, perhaps, an irreducible distinction between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that is, the God of the Bible, on the one hand, and the god of the philosophers and the learned scholars, on the other. While revelation and reason did not always seem to conflict, their sources and claims or aims were not quite the same. Moreover, it was often held that natural theology or onto-theology confused finite concepts and categories of common being, on the one hand, with the infinite or, more precisely, transfinite, virtual possibility or actuality for which the divine name “God” stands, on the other. Even where God was equated with nature, with the universe or cosmos, the distinction between transcendence and immanence gave way to other ways of theorizing His unique substance and eminent mode of existence, including the very mode of existence (or “way of life”) it, deep-down, inspired. And whereas recent critiques have questioned whether God so much as even needs to be – or suggest that He “may be” or, in any case, is still, if not forever, “to come” – the prominence that His name, concept or idea, has nonetheless acquired in intellectual and cultural, moral and political life remains squarely in place. “God” is the *alpha* and *omega*

of all thinking and discourse, religious and other, whether as the presumed carrier of all perfections or, indeed, as the sum and coincidence of all contradictions.

Readings will include both integral works and selective chapters, collections of letters and poems. In addition, several historical lexica will be regularly consulted and several relevant films will be screened. There is one general text book to which we will often return as a summary account and guiding thread through our argument:

John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

All relevant books will be ordered through the NYU Bookstore and shorter essays, chapters, and excerpts, will be made be available through NYU Classes.

The films discussed in class will be available through NYU Stream and be placed on reserve at the Avery Fisher Center.

Course Requirements

This core course will offer a mixture of lecture, presented by the instructor, and discussion formats or recitations, supervised by the recitation instructions. Students will be expected to contribute to the conversation in the recitation sessions, and most especially, to read the assigned material beforehand so that the lectures and subsequent discussions may be most productive.

For the recitation, rather than summarize the readings, students are expected to prepare three questions (not extending beyond ½ page in total) for every recitation based on the course readings. Please submit *weekly participatory question-assignments* via the NYU Classes learning management system, rather than via e-mail.

Attendance during the two weekly lectures is expected and this, together with the weekly *participatory question writing* for the recitation sessions will account for 20 % of the final grade. The weekly question-assignments will be counted toward the 20 pp. in total of writing for this course. As formal expectations for the completion and evaluation of the students' performance, they will be marked with v / v+ / v-, reflecting part of the holistic assessment of class participation.

Over the semester, each student will be asked to give a very brief (10 min) *presentation* during the recitation on one of the course readings, or on ideas that emerge on a topic under discussion that week (this exercise forms part of the 20% of the final grade for attendance and participation). If you prefer, you may work in groups of two. Although these presentations allow for individual reactions to the texts and ideas in question, they are also intended to provide a point of departure for class discussion and should try to raise specific questions.

The course is further designed around frequent, short *take-home graded writing assignments* or *papers*, building in length and weight (from 1, 2, up to 3 pp.) in the overall course grade, for a total of approx. 20 pages of formal written work, accounting for 40% of the final grade.

There will be an in-class *midterm exam* (approx.. 4 pp.) in the 6th week before the mid-term grading, which will make up 20% of the final grade, and a cumulative *final exam* (approx. 4 pp.) administered during the final exam period (the date for which will be available prior to the term and will be included on the syllabus), for a total of 20% of the course grade.

What is expected in all written assignments is critical exposition and analysis of the texts, ideas, and authors in question.

The instructor and recitation instructors will hold office hours every week. Please make use of them as you see fit, especially if you are having difficulties with some of the reading discussed during the core course.

Table of Assignments & Weight of Each in Overall Course Grade

- Attendance during lectures, email submission of participatory weekly questions (14 x ½ p.), and one individual or group class presentation: 20 % of total grade;
- Three short, graded writing assignments on set topics (approx. 1, 2, 3 pp., respectively) : 40 % of total grade;
- Midterm exam (approx. 4 pp.): 20 % of total grade;
- Final exam (approx.. 4 pp.): 20 % of total grade.

General Goals

The course aims to fulfill the general goals for Texts and Ideas Core Courses, which is to introduce students to the central role of humanistic study in the liberal arts while fostering understanding and appreciation of this kind of learning for society at large. Rather than offering a survey, we will use historical, philosophical, theological, and literary as well as visual methods to approach our object of study and apply them, first of all, to primary sources and thinkers. More specifically, the course enables students to examine in some depth how certain philosophical, theological, literary, and artistic works have not only been historically developed, analyzed and critiqued, but also continue to be greatly influential in shaping our contemporary world. The texts and ideas we will engage with have not only created and sustained whole traditions of thought, they also reflect societal ideals and forms of life to which they are nonetheless not fully reducible. In short, the texts and ideas in question help us to better grasp not only how ancient and medieval, modern and contemporary religious as well as secular cultures have been constructed and represented in a variety of ways, but are in a process of constant revision.

Week 1

Introduction: Why “God”?

Jan 28

Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) ISBN: 978-0679743682; Gary Gutting, *Talking God: Philosophers on Belief* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017) ISBN: 978-0393352818.

Jan 30

Scriptural Theologies & Idolatry

Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) ISBN: 978-0674443136.

Week 2

Patristic and Neo-Platonist Theologies

Feb 4

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, Books 1-3, Translated by John Ferguson (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

Feb 6

Damascius, “On the Ineffable,” in idem, *Problems & Solutions Concerning First Principles*, Translated with Introduction and Notes by Sara Abhel-Rappe (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Selection.

Week 3

Medieval Christian Definitions and Proofs for the Existence and Essential Predicates of God

Feb 11

Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, Translated with an Introduction and Philosophical Commentary by M.J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) ISBN: 978-0268016975.

Feb 13

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*, Ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) ISBN: 978-0521528924.

Week 4

Medieval Islamic Definitions and Proofs for the Existence and Essential Predicates of God

Feb 18

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. and ed. Michael E. Marmura (Brigham Young University Press, 2002), Selections.

Feb 20

Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines, Introductory Essay by Leo Strauss (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), Selections.

Week 5 ***Descartes and Pascal: Two Proofs for God’s Existence and the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob***

Feb 25 Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, Edited by John Cottingham, with an Introductory Essay by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) ISBN: 978-0521558181.

Feb 27 Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, A New Translation by Honor Levi, Edited and with an Introduction by Anthony Levi (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Selections.

Week 6 ***Spinoza’s God (Substance, Nature)***

March 3 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Translated by Edwin Curley, with an Introduction by Stuart Hampshire (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1996), Book I. ISBN: 978-0140435719.

March 5 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ed. Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), Selections.

Week 7 ***The Argument from Design***

March 10 David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, Edited with an Introduction by J.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) ISBN: 978-0199538324.

March 12 William Paley, *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by Matthew D. Eddy and David Knight (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Selections.

Week 8 ***March 16 – March 22 – Spring Recess (No Classes Scheduled)***

Week 9 ***The Ethico-Moral “Proof” for the Existence of God***

March 24 Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Selections.

March 26 Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Translated by Jane Kentish (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1987) ISBN: 978-0140444735.

Week 10

Anthropological Turn, the This-Wordliness of Faith, and Non-Religious Interpretation of the Bible

- March 31 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Translated by George Eliot, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008) ISBN: 978-0486454214.
- April 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, Translated by Reginald H. Fuller, Edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997) ISBN: 978-0684838274.

Week 11

God, Evolution, and the Pragmatist View

- April 7 Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), Selections.
- April 9 Richard Rorty, "Cultural Politics and Arguments for God," in Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 53-77.

Week 12

God on Screen

- April 14 *Ordet* ("The Word," 1957, a film directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer); Kaj Munk, *The Word: A Legend of Today* (1925). Please watch before class also its quasi-sequel: *Silent Light* (2007, a film directed by Carlos Reygadas)
- April 16 Ingmar Bergman, "The Faith Trilogy" (*Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, *The Silence*)

Week 13

Mysticism and the Darkness of God, Poetry as Anti-Bible

- April 21 Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, Translated by Josephine Koeppl (Washington, ICS Publications, 2003) ISBN: 978-0935216318.
- April 23 Paul Celan, *No-One's-Rose*, in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, Translated by John Felstiner (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2001).

Week 14

The Phenomenological View

- April 28 Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Of God Who Comes to Mind*,

trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 55-78.

April 30 Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991) ISBN: 978-0226505657.

Week 15 ***The Deconstructive, Genealogical, and Speculative Realist View of a Past and a Future God***

May 5 Gwenaëlle Aubry, "Miracle, Mystery, and Authority: A Deconstruction of the Christian Theology of Omnipotence," in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 132, No. 5, December 2017, pp. 1327-1350; Quentin Meillassoux, "Spectral Dilemma: Mourning to come, god to come," in *Collapse* Vol. IV, 2008, 261-276

May 7 Quentin Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence divine* [The Divine Inexistence], in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 175-238.

Further Recommended Reading:

H.J. Adriaanse, "After Theism," in Hent de Vries, eds., *Religion – Beyond A Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 392-412.

Edward Baring, "Theism and Atheism at Play: Jacques Derrida and Christian Heideggerianism," in Edward A. Baring and Peter Connor, eds., *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 72-87.

Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

Ernesto Laclau, "On the Names of God," in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005, 2007), 137-147.

Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deconstruction of Christianity," trans. Simon Sparks, in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 112-130.

Erik Peterson, "What is Theology?," in idem, *Theological Tractates*, Ed.

and Trans., with an Introduction by Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 1-14, 187-191.

G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1964).