Philosophy of Religion

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Course Description
In its capacity as a critical and reflective discourse on all human practices, philosophy has always concerned itself with religion, which is after all one of the most important human institutions and experiences. Yet it is primarily in the modern period—which saw the emergence of a powerful intellectual and political revolution that put forward the ideals of human autonomy and of a government based in reasoned debate within a “secular” space—that what we now know as “philosophy of religion” arose, which means that religion became an object of critique in philosophy when its role in society and in the life of the individual became most questionable.

It is on this modern development that this course focuses. After a brief discussion of ancient and medieval philosophical discourses concerning religion, it investigates a series of key texts in the Western philosophical tradition that investigate the problem of religion, and thereby the ways that “strictly religious” questions (What is religion? What good is it? Where did it come from? What is the meaning of religious claims?) always wind up spilling over into broader questions about society (Where do social institutions come from? What is the nature of the social bond? What is the origin of morality?) and individual life (What is the meaning of my life? How can I live with integrity?).

Course Goals
Upon completing this course, students should:

- be familiar with the primary questions that philosophers ask about religious phenomena and their relationship to other areas of life;
- be able to identify the central themes and arguments of primary texts and state them in a clear and sympathetic way in class discussion; and
- be able to formulate criticisms in a way that is attentive to the original author’s intent and argumentation.

Course Requirements
1. **Check your e-mail:** E-mail will be the professor’s primary mode of communication outside of class; all students should check their e-mail at least once a day and preferably every few hours throughout the day.
2. **Shared readings:** All common readings should be completed before the class session for which they are listed.
3. **Class participation:** Class periods will incorporate significant lecture elements, but each class period will include an in-class discussion. Students are expected to arrive in class ready to discuss the assigned readings in a way that is attentive and accountable to the texts, providing specific references to back up their points.
4. **Reading responses:** For each class period, students should complete a reading response paper of approximately one page (single-spaced), which will each be graded on a pass-fail basis. Responses should contain the following elements:
   - **Summary:** a statement of the key questions that the reading selection seeks to address and the primary claims that it makes.
   - **Key quotations:** a list of quotations that you found most illuminating and most baffling (with a brief parenthetical remark indicating the reason you chose each).
Questions for class discussion: while some factual or clarifying questions are appropriate, the focus should be on questions that you could foresee generating significant discussion—either more detailed analysis of the text at hand or a broader consideration of its claims.

5. Papers: In addition to the regular responses, students will be required to submit two longer papers, of approximately 4-6 pages, responding to the following prompts:
   - Paper #1: Choose two figures from among Mendelssohn, Kant, and Schleiermacher and compare and contrast their claims about the nature and function of religion in society and in the life of the individual. Which vision do you find more convincing or interesting? If neither is appealing to you, why not?
   - Paper #2: In consultation with the professor, choose two texts from the second half of the class that address a similar question, comparing and assessing their respective arguments. Alternative assignment: choose a research topic in consultation with the professor.

6. Attendance: Attendance is expected, in light of the fact that this is a discussion-heavy class. While attendance will not be formally tracked, a clear pattern of absenteeism will result in a reduction in your grade.

7. Late assignments: Students desiring an extension should contact the professor; these will be handled on a case-by-case basis.

8. Academic integrity: All students are expected to fully abide by the Honor Code of Kalamazoo College, particularly as regards plagiarism.

9. Grade summary:
   - Class participation: 10%
   - Reading responses: 30%
   - Papers (each): 30%

Course Texts

Required textbooks:
   - Mendelssohn, Jerusalem: Or, Religious Power and Judaism
   - Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone
   - Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers
   - Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals
   - Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments
   - Irigaray, The Way of Love

Other supplemental readings, marked in the course outline with asterisks (**), are available in a course packet, which may be purchased from Deb Pattison at Humphrey House.

Outline of Course and Readings

Week 1: Philosophy and Religion in the Ancient and Medieval Periods

Week 2: Religious Power, Religious Authority, Religious Particularity
   - Mendelssohn, Jerusalem

Week 3: Religion, Reason, and Ethics
   - Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (**); Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, bks. 1 and 2

Week 4: Religion, Reason, and Ethics (cont.)
   - Kant, Religion Within the Limits, bks. 3 and 4; “The End of All Things” (**)

http://www.kzoo.edu/phil/Philosophy of Religion.html
Week 5: The Distinctiveness of Religion
- Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, speeches 1 and 2

Week 6: The Distinctiveness of Religion (cont.)
- Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, speeches 3 and 5

Week 7: How to Do Things with Religion (I): Christology, Messianism
- Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*; Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (**)
- Paper #1 due Monday

Week 8: How to Do Things with Religion (II): Love
- Irigaray, *The Way of Love*

Week 9: The Origin of Religion: Power and Morality
- Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*; *Gay Science*, §§108 and 125 (**)

Week 10: The Origin of Secularity: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam
- Boyarin, selections from *Borderlines* (**); Asad, selections from *Formations of the Secular* (**)

Final paper due by 5:00pm, Thursday of finals week