

840:222 THE QUESTION OF GOD IN MODERN CULTURE

Dr. James W. Jones

Spring 2014

Office Hours M:1:30- 3:00 and by appointment, Loree 118

The following books are available at New Jersey Books.

Paul Tillich, The Dynamics of Faith

James W. Jones, Waking From Newton's Sleep

All other readings are on electronic reserve through the Douglass Library

Examinations: There will be four in class multiple-choice exams as marked on the syllabus. No make-up exams will be given unless either: (1) You can document that you (not a friend or relative) are confined to the hospital when the exam is given. Making an appointment at the Health Service will NOT suffice. Or (2) a close relative has died and the exam is being given on the day of the funeral. A copy of the obituary or death notice is required for documentation. All make-up exams must be taken within one week of the date of the exam.

Note: All cell phones, pagers, etc. must be turned off in class. Anyone whose device goes off during class will be asked to leave for the remainder of that period. Anyone whose device goes off during an exam must leave the exam and will receive an "F" for that exam.

INTRODUCTION

This course will introduce students to some of the fundamental issues surrounding the question of God in modern culture. Topics include: why the question of God is important, how the question of God arose in modern culture, four different views of the nature of God, does modern science make belief in God impossible, and belief in God in a pluralistic world. This course will provide some of the intellectual tools necessary to think critically and constructively about these issues and to do so in a cross-cultural perspective.

This is a difficult course. Students should know that up-front. Even though it is graded by multiple-choice exams, it will require you to think about very difficult topics. But these are topics that every conscious human being should think about because our capacity to think about such things defines us as *Homo sapiens* (which means "thinking hominoids"). Simply taking notes and memorizing terms and concepts will not be sufficient to benefit from this course (nor, probably, to get a good grade). This course is taught by an instructor who has been thinking and writing about these things for a very long time. But who is also a practicing clinical psychologist who has worked with convicts, veterans, police officers, and patients from most every social and economic group and, more recently, been involved in studying terrorism and counter-terrorism. So the connection of people's lived experience to the religious and philosophical topics we'll be discussing is of vital concern to the instructor. There will be opportunities to ask questions, debate with the instructor, and have discussion. How much you take advantage of those opportunities is entirely your responsibility.

Learning Goals for This Course

1. Gain the intellectual tools necessary to think critically and constructively about religious issues

today [entire course]

2. Understand why the controversy about God takes the form that it does in modern society [Topic 1]

3. Understand and compare several different theories about the nature of God/Ultimate Reality in Western and Eastern Traditions [Topics 2-5]

4. Gain a general understanding of the controversy between religion and science over the nature of religious claims [Topic 6]

5. Explore the impact of religious pluralism on religious traditions today [Topic 7].

COURSE OUTLINE

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Introduction: Why is the question of God important?

1. How the Question of God Arose in Modern Culture. As an introduction we will explore some of the characteristics of the modern world and their impact on religion, the nature of secularization, and the function of religion in a modern, secular society. As part of this, we will explore the development of Existentialism and the rise of the religion of Individual Subjectivity

Reading: P. Berger, The Sacred Canopy, chapters 5 & 6 [E-Reserve]

“Secularization” [E-Reserve]

THE NATURE OF GOD

2. Soren Kierkegaard: Selfhood and God This section will introduce you to the ideas of S. Kierkegaard on religion, faith, and God. Students should understand Kierkegaard's 'stages on life's way,' his relation to modernity and to existentialism, and his understanding of religious faith.

Reading: “ Soren Kierkegaard” 4 readings, [E-Reserve].

EXAM 1 [Kierkegaard and secularization]

3. Paul Tillich: The Ultimate Source. This section will introduce you to the basic ideas of Paul Tillich on religion, faith and God. Students understand the basic thrust of Tillich 's theology and what he means by 'ultimate concern,' 'ground of being,' 'sign and symbol,' and 'particular and universal.'

Reading: Paul Tillich, The Dynamics of Faith

Paul Tillich, “God as Being” [E-Reserve]

4. Martin Buber: The Ultimate Person. This section will introduce you to the basic ideas of Martin Buber on religion, human life and God. Students should understand what Buber means by 'I- You' and 'I-It' relationships, by the phrase 'all life is meeting' and how his idea of God compares and contrasts with that of Tillich and other existentialists.

Reading: Martin Buber. Buber, I & Thou, parts I & III [E-Reserve]

M. Diamond, Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, chapter 6 [E-Reserve]
EXAM 2 [Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Buber]

5. Nargajuna: The Ultimate Reality. This section will introduce you to some of the ideas about ultimate reality found in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism as expounded by Nagarjuna, one of Buddhism's greatest philosophers. Students should consider how this Buddhist idea of ultimate reality compares and contrasts with the idea of God found in Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Buber. Students should consider why Nagarjuna's language is so paradoxical and why he emphasizes "practice" so much.

Reading: Nagarjuna, The Fundamental Wisdom, pp.31-76, 87-102, 196-334 [chapters XI-XXV] [E-Reserve]

D. Mitchell, Buddhism, Chapter 5 [E-Reserve]

EXAM 3 [Tillich, Buber, Nargajuna]

DOES MODERN SCIENCE MAKE BELIEF IN GOD IMPOSSIBLE?

6. The knowledge of God. This section is designed to help you understand the nature of human knowledge and the place of religious knowledge within it. Emphasis will be on comparing and contrasting religious knowledge with that found in natural science. During this section, you should understand the following: the major similarities and differences between religion and science; whether or not science explains everything and, if not, what science leaves unaccounted; and various definitions of such crucial terms such as "objectivity," "proof" and "knowledge." We will also discuss various definitions of faith and the nature of our most basic convictions in religion and other disciplines and how we arrive at and defend our most basic convictions. We will also develop an analogy between perception and faith. Students should understand these topics (the nature of basic convictions, the analogy to perception) as well as what T. Kuhn means by "paradigms."

Reading: James W. Jones, Waking From Newton's Sleep.

James W. Jones, Texture of Knowledge, chapters 1,2,3,4,6. [E-Reserve]

7. The Question of God in a Pluralistic World. This section will discuss the problems raised for religion by the existence of many other religious traditions, such as how one religion can claim our allegiance when other religions also exist and how we might respond to the variety of religious options available today. Students should understand those issues and, as well, be able to define the terms 'relativism,' 'absolutism,' 'critical relativism,' 'pluralism.'

Reading: James W. Jones, Texture of Knowledge, chapter 5 [E-Reserve]

John Hick, "The Real..."[E-Reserve]

Leonard Swidler, "Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue" [E-Reserve]

EXAM 4 [Religious Knowledge, Pluralism] May 9, 2014, 12:00-1:00. Exam must be taken at this time. No exceptions.