Texts & Ideas: God

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

Instructor:
Instructor: Hent de Vries
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Office Hours:
2:00 PM – 4:00 PM Wed
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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:
TBA

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:

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 midterm 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, thee 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


Jan 30

*Scriptural Theologies & Idolatry*

Week 2  

**Patristic and Neo-Platonist Theologies**


Week 3  

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


Week 4  

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


Week 5  

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


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

March 3  

March 5  

Week 7  
**The Argument from Design**

March 10  

March 12  

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

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

March 24  

March 26  

Week 10  
**Anthropological Turn, the This-Wordliness of Faith, and Non-Religious Interpretation of the Bible**

March 31  

April 2  
| Week 11 |  
|---|---|
| **God, Evolution, and the Pragmatist View** |  

| Week 12 |  
|---|---|
| **God on Screen** |  

| Week 13 |  
|---|---|
| **Mysticism and the Darkness of God, Poetry as Anti-Bible** |  

| Week 14 |  
|---|---|
| **The Phenomenological View** |  

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


Further Recommended Reading:


