

*The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience,
but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.*

- Martin Luther King Jr., '48

Philosophy 410, Philosophy of Religion, Spring 2010

[CRN 47809 - HPHI 410 - 01](#)

MWF 10:00-10:50 AM, Sale Hall _____

Instructor: Dr. Nathan Nobis; nathan.nobis@gmail.com

Office hours: MWF 2-3 PM and by appointment

Course blog: <http://philosophy410.blogspot.com>

Syllabus: <http://sites.google.com/site/nobisphilosophy/religion-syl-2010.pdf>

Email announcement group: <http://groups.google.com/group/morehouse-philosophy-of-religion/>

Catalogue Description:

Examination of philosophical questions involved in religion and religious beliefs. Prerequisite: PHI 201 or consent of the instructor.

Extended course description:

In a 2007 article published in the American Philosophical Association's *Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, the author claims that:

While religion has been at the center of the African-American experience, substantive philosophical questions and issues about theodicy, the epistemological nature of religious beliefs, and even creationism have been avoided.¹

The purpose of this course is to ensure that this author is mistaken. We will thereby inquire into the "epistemological nature" of religious beliefs, i.e., seek to understand whether religious beliefs – theistic and Christian beliefs, in particular – are supported by *strong evidence*, *good reasons* and *sound arguments* or not. We will evaluate "theodicies," attempts to explain what (if anything) might justify an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good being in permitting certain kinds of evil, *especially* the evils of racism, slavery, lynchings, and discrimination: we will read many African American thinkers who address this issue and evaluate arguments for the view that *the existence of evils like these give good reason to believe that God does not exist*. We will discuss many other philosophical issues that arise from religious belief and practice, such as the existence of hell, the nature of reason and faith, surviving death, and how we should respond to religious diversity and disagreements, whether religious belief is "important" in various senses, and many other issues.

Throughout the course our main methods involve (A) getting very clear on what exact claims we are evaluating (e.g., what is meant by 'God'?) and (B) *patiently, carefully and thoroughly* finding and evaluating the *reasons* given for and against the claim in question (as well as the reasons that might be given in response to those reasons). Philosophy courses require *questioning assumptions, seeking reasons and evidence* and demand *intellectual responsibility*, i.e., being careful with what you believe because you wish to believe the truth and effectively pursue it, even if this requires changing your own beliefs. This course offers the opportunity to develop these intellectual skills in identifying and evaluating arguments and cultivating an intellectually virtuous outlook based in the requirement for *good reasons* for belief and action that can be beneficial for everything you do and *who you are*.

¹ Stephen Ferguson, II, "Teaching Hurricane Katrina: Understanding Divine Racism and Theodicy," *Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, Fall 2007, Volume 07, Number 1, at http://www.apaonline.org/publications/newsletters/v07n1_Black_02.aspx

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Three required texts, all of which are available used, cheaper online (e.g., at Amazon, Abebooks.com, etc.):

1. [A Thinker's Guide to the Philosophy of Religion](#), Allen Stairs and Christopher Bernard Longman; 1st edition (October 7, 2006); please find used if possible.
2. *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, by Anthony Pinn (Continuum, 1999)
3. [A Rulebook for Arguments](#), by Anthony Weston, Hackett Publishing; any edition
4. *Optional, but not ordered by bookstore: Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*, 2nd ed., by William R. Jones (Beacon 1997).

Responsibilities:

To succeed in this class, you must be disciplined: are responsible to understand and meet the requirements outlined below and discussed in class:

- **Attendance:** Always come to class, as Morehouse College policy requires. Sign the role sheet: if it is not passed to you, then you need to find it. An absence is excused *only if* you get the instructor an official Morehouse excuse in writing that he can keep.
- **Punctuality:** Come to class *on time*. Lateness will be penalized on your final grade.
- **Preparation:** Bring *all* your books, handouts and other materials – including materials that you must print off from the internet – and have them out on your desk and ready to discuss at the beginning of class.
 - *Students who do not bring their materials may be asked to leave, as they are not prepared for class.*
- **Doing the Reading:** For every hour spent in class, spend at least *two hours* doing the reading and writing outlines, paraphrases &/or summaries of the readings.
- **Preparation for engaged, production discussion, not passive lectures:**
 - Morehouse College is a liberal arts college, not a university. Classes are small and thus we are able to *discuss* issues and arguments and have a more interactive learning environment. The instructor, therefore, will rarely “lecture” in any traditional sense, since lecturing *encourages* student passivity, disengagement, and not doing the reading.
 - For a critique of the educational value of lecturing see, “To Lecture or Not to Lecture, an Age-Old Question” at <http://www.morehouse.edu/news/archives/001176.html>
- **Honesty:** Any plagiarism or cheating on *any* assignment – including any extra credit assignments – will immediately result in failing the course: no exceptions, no excuses.
- **“Help me help you”:**
 - The instructor should be informed of medical, family, or other problems that necessitate missing class or that interfere with your work. In addition, students are encouraged to visit with the instructor during his office hours if they are having difficulty reading or understanding the materials presented in class. *If you ever have any questions about anything, please just ask!*

Assignments and grading:

1. Weekly writing assignments: 25% of grade

The absolute most important thing you can do to succeed in this class is to do the reading and do the reading well. A (tentative) schedule of readings is below and will be announced in class. To encourage you do the readings well and so be prepared for class discussion, each week you will be required to write something on the readings. Details on each week’s assignment will be provided throughout the semester.

2. Two Exams: 50% total grade, 25% each exam.

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Either in class or take-home. All of lecture, discussion and reading content is testable. Study guides will be available with possible questions for each exam to help focus your studying. Exams will mostly be short answer and short essay questions. *No electronic devices can be used or accessed during tests, nor can you have any books, bags, notes or hats near your desk: all such materials must be left at the front of the room. You are not permitted to leave the classroom and return to keep working on the test, so please plan accordingly (e.g., visit the restroom before the test).*

3. Argumentative Research Paper and Presentation 25% of grade

This provides an opportunity to pursue, in greater detail, a topic in philosophy of religion that you find interesting. Likely the most productive paper for most students will be focused “critical response paper.” This will involve you finding a (ideally recent) article(s) or writing(s) on an issue where an argument is presented and you present, explain and evaluate that argument as sound or unsound and why. 3000 words maximum length. *Your topic must be approved by the instructor to ensure appropriateness for this course: failing to do so may result in a zero for the paper.* The instructor can help you find topics and writings to evaluate, and you should check the various research tools on the blog. You must also give an organized, clear, and well-thought out presentation to the class on your paper.

4. **Attendance and participation: 25% of grade.** Students will, in groups, present and discuss chapters from Pinn, as well as do other presentations. Poor attendance and lateness ensures that you don't do not do *excellently* in this class and so cannot earn an A.

Note: A syllabus is not a contract, but rather a guide to course procedures. The instructor reserves the right to alter the course requirements and/or assignments based on new materials, class discussions, or other legitimate pedagogical objectives.

EXACT READINGS WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN CLASS, THE EMAIL GROUP AND ON THE BLOG

Initial readings:

- **ONLINE ARTICLE or HANDOUT:** Allen Stairs, “A Right To Be Wrong?”
<http://brindedcow.umd.edu/philosophy/opinions.html>
- **HANDOUT:** The Ethics of Belief , W. K. Clifford ,
- **ONLINE ARTICLE or HANDOUT:** William Lane Craig, "God Is Not Dead Yet: How current philosophers argue for his existence," Christianity Today, July 2008. At
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/13.22.html>

In the *Rulebook for Arguments*: Preface, Introduction and the chapter on Deductive Arguments (VI in the current edition)

Please start reading Stairs: the Introduction and first chapter on the concept of God.