

Philosophy of Religion Honors (PHIL 218H)

Dr. Stephen T. Asma

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Required texts:

- 1.) David Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion
- 2.) Stephen Asma The Gods Drink Whiskey (HarperOne Plus edition)
- 3.) Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz Islam and the Future of Tolerance (Harvard)

Handouts and Online texts (PDFs)

Course Description

This course examines a number of issues connected to religious belief and practice. At the heart of the course is an exploration of religious "ways of knowing" and how these compare and contrast with secular ways of knowing. The course will explore the following: arguments for and against the existence of God (including the problem of evil), the nature and justification of religious experiences, the possibility of miracles, the nature of God's attributes and their compatibility with each other, the connections between faith and reason, the connections between religion and ethics, and the challenges of religious pluralism. Special attention will be paid to the evolution of religion.

Basic Laws

No Computers, phones, tablets etc. allowed during class. Philosophy is the art and science of reflection. Bring your mind into the present moment. Students are expected to attend all classes. The nature of such a course requires impeccable attendance because day-to-day in-class discussion frequently directs the subject matter for exams and papers.

The student is allowed 1 free absence. A 2nd absence indicates weak class participation and will negatively impact the student. **A 3rd absence seriously compromises your ability to pass this course.** Students are expected to be on time. Two instances of tardiness will count as one absence. Students will be expected to come to class (**with the text**) prepared to discuss the readings, **lack of preparation will be counted as an absence.** Written work must be handed in on time. If an assignment is handed in after the due date, its grade will be automatically reduced by one letter (e.g., B becomes C, D becomes F, etc.). **No written assignments will be accepted after a brief grace period.** No make-up exams will be given

Grades will be based on: 1.) midterm exam, 2.) one Pecha Kucha presentation/essay, 3.) a comprehensive final exam. The first exam, pecha kucha presentation, and final are each worth 30%, and class participation is worth 10%. Completion of all requirements (on their respective due-dates) is necessary to pass this course. If I find that class discussion lacks depth, I will initiate pop-quizzes in order to insure that students are carefully reading the textual material.

Pecha Kucha 20/20 (30%)

Pecha Kucha comes from a Japanese presentation format. We will do it in a powerpoint structure. It requires the presenter to talk through 20 slides, each lasting 20 seconds, for a total of 6 minutes and 40 seconds. Your slides must advance automatically, so you will set them with the Powerpoint timer. See sample Pecha Kucha presentations here: <http://www.pechakucha.org/watch>

You are invited to explore any philosophy of religion topic in your Pecha Kucha. I will ask for your topics sometime after the midterm. If you do not get clearance on your topic, you will not present on the presentation day and forfeit the relevant points. **A 3 page typed version** (synopsis) of your Pecha Kucha presentation must be turned in on the day you present (it should include 1 page of research "works cited," so **4 pgs altogether**). The Pecha Kucha is a large part of your grade and it is expected to be of a very high quality. I will provide you some guidelines for this during the semester, but start thinking about your topic immediately. Obviously some topics will be entirely foreign to you at this point, but do a little informal research now on texts and ideas that may come much later in the course. And feel free to ask me for guidance.

Some Pecha Kucha Strategies

Here are five basic strategies for approaching your Pecha Kucha. You are welcome to ignore these, if you have a strong alternative approach. If in doubt, adopt *one* of these strategies when composing your Pecha Kucha. All of these options will require additional research beyond the texts in question (e.g, library and Internet research). These suggestions cannot help you to decide **what** issue you will choose to work on (that's up to you), but they may help you choose a **method** for working on that issue.

a.) *A critical explanation or analysis (exegesis) of a text or idea.* What is the text/idea trying to say? Take some specific argument or theoretical claim and translate it into your own terms (preserving the author's point)--thereby shedding light upon it for your audience. This is not the same as a "book report" where one merely summarizes the reading--simply paraphrasing the reading assignment is not acceptable. You must use your own examples and insights to help us understand one or two of the author's points (not the whole text). (example: What does the Dali Lama mean when he says that all things are empty?)

b.) *An historically based analysis of the text/idea/theory/practice.* Analyze what some of the historical origins might be for a particular event, argument or theoretical claim. Or examine some of the historical effects or repercussions that occurred after a specific event, argument or theoretical claim. (ex: The Buddha's concept of enlightenment was influenced by earlier philosophical debates in Hinduism . . . Or, Darwin's claim that religion is adaptive influenced Freud in the following ways...)

c.) *A compare/contrast analysis.* Examine a specific issue from the philosophy of religion in light of some comparative event, thinker or theory. (ex: How do Vedantic ideas of the soul, compare with Christian ideas?)

d.) *Is the textual claim true or false?* An assessment of the validity and truth of a particular argument, interpretation or theoretical claim. Using compelling arguments, evaluate a specific doctrine or idea for its truth or falsity. (ex: The argument that karma provides justice is wrong because . . .)

(e.) *Illustrate one of our principles/discoveries with a case study.* (e.g., Contemporary monotheism illustrates the "surrogate parent" theory in the following ways...)

Evaluation Principles

Discussion is an important part of this course and a student's intelligent contributions can go some distance in raising his/her grade, but **written work will be of crucial importance**. As a basic requirement, all essays will be expected to have good grammar and punctuation. I am not your proofreader. In addition, essays will be evaluated using the following three criteria: (1) logical organization, (2) mastery of the course material, and (3) creativity--in that order.

(1) LOGICAL ORGANIZATION

This criterion is designed to measure your ability to organize your arguments, ideas and observations into a clear and cogent presentation. Your ability to make claims and systematically back them up with evidence and argument, without wandering aimlessly through vague beliefs, is extremely important.

(2) MASTERY OF THE COURSE MATERIAL

This criterion is designed to measure the degree of your grasp on crucial ideas contained in the assigned texts. The degree to which you understand and articulate the concepts entailed in the readings and the discussions will be vital to your grade.

(3) CREATIVITY

In addition to good structure and evidence of comprehension, you are encouraged to infuse your written work with some creativity. Good writing should include some level of imagination and originality. *Nota Bene*: Cleverness, while appreciated, is not a substitute for logical organization, nor does it substitute for an understanding of the texts.

Plagiarism: *To steal and use (the ideas or writings of another) as one's own. To appropriate passages or ideas from another author and use them as one's own.*

All use of another author's writings and ideas must be properly acknowledged and cited in your own writing. Failure to do so is tantamount to plagiarism and can result in failure of the course and expulsion from the college.

Surviving Dr. Asma's Class

In addition to all of the above points, it is worth mentioning a few general reminders.

* This course is *for* you, but it is not *about* you. Not everything is about you. You might find yourself thinking, "What does Renaissance natural history have to do with me?" Or "What does Buddhism have to do with my major?" Try to overcome such narcissism when it arises. You're better than that. Unlike fast-food restaurants which aim to serve you what you *want*, college is trying to give you what you *need* as a human being. Higher education is a bold and imperfect mission, and it's been going on for 3000 years. You are now part of that adventure.

* Philosophy and the liberal arts generally are filled with complex challenging ideas. If you hear ideas exchanged in class that are unfamiliar or make you feel uncomfortable, you are probably not under attack or being injured or violated. You are probably learning, which (as Plato's allegory of the cave demonstrated) usual requires some discomfort.

* Always take careful notes on the material that you're reading. This seems obvious, yet students rarely follow such a simple strategy. Remember, you're not reading a magazine here; the readings for this class are difficult. Logical arguments can be complicated, confusing and tricky. Taking notes will aid your comprehension, and aid your memory when you're asked to recall things. It's good practice to start a "reading journal" to keep track of your notes, questions, and ideas.

* Take notes on our classroom discussions. Again, this seems obvious, but it's rarely adopted. Many people erroneously believe that: "if we're all "chatting" about a topic, nothing very important is happening; and I'll take notes if the teacher writes something on the board." Rid yourself of this confusion. Even our casual conversation and debate will take us through some important arguments --keep track of them.

* Start working on your Pecha Kucha weeks in advance. This presentation is bigger and tougher than you think it is. High-school preparation techniques (e.g., writing it the night before) produce "F" grades.

* Be sure to do some additional research for your presentation. The Internet cannot be your *only* outside research source. Any troll in his basement can post bogus info on a webpage without the important filter of "peer review." You can't always trust what you're getting (e.g., "Is this webpage a mask for advertising?"; "Are the writers or site publishers adequately credentialed and qualified?" etc.). I will only allow one citation from *Wikipedia*. Read some books for God's sake.

* Students are responsible for all handouts and downloads. If you were absent on the day that something was originally handed out, it is your responsibility to see me and procure and complete the reading. Follow CANVAS carefully.

* Students are responsible for collecting any of their graded work. If you are absent on the day that I return work to you, it is your responsibility to track it down afterwards.

* For your sake and mine, try to enjoy yourself. The intellectual pleasures are very underrated in our culture. When you're in grade school and high school, some people try to convince you that intellectual pursuits are for nerds or geeks or misfits, and 'cool' people don't get excited about abstract ideas. I hope you weren't convinced by such profound stupidity. If you *were* convinced and find yourself way too cool for studying theory and religion and philosophy, then please do the rest of us misfits a favor and try to find a different class to take this semester.

Syllabus is subject to change

Syllabus

<i>Week</i>	<i>Date</i>		<i>Assignment</i>
(1)	1/30	THURS:	<i>Introduction. Philosophical tools. Revealed and Natural Religion</i>
God, Nature and Design			
(2)	2/6	THURS:	Read David Hume Parts I through VI (first 6 chapters)
(3)	2/13	THURS:	Read David Hume Parts VII through XII (chapters 7-12)

Ways of Knowing: Science and Religion

(4) 2/20 THURS: Read Canvas PDF handout of Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins. And Read Canvas PDF "Dennett and Plantinga" (from [Science and Religion](#)).

Ways of Knowing: Feminist Theology

(5) 2/27 THURS: Read Canvas PDF "Feminist Theology."

Buddhism

(6) 3/5 THURS: Read [The Gods Drink Whiskey](#) Preface, Introduction, Chapter 1 and 2.

Pantheism, Polytheism & Animism

(7) 3/12 THURS: Read [The Gods Drink Whiskey](#) Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. Also read Canvas PDF of Freud's "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought" (Totem and Taboo).

EXAM (uploaded to Canvas as PDF or Word doc, by 11:59, 3/14)

Religion as Emotional Management

(8) 3/19 THURS: Read Canvas PDF of Asma's "Why We Need Religion" (Intro)

Culture Clash?

(9) 3/26 THURS: Read [Islam and the Future of Tolerance](#) (first 60 pages)

Spring break

(10) 4/9 THURS: Read [Islam](#) (p. 60 to finish).

Pecha Kuch Proposals due (1 paragraph)

(11) 4/16 THURS: Read Canvas PDF “Challenge of Religious Pluralism”

The Secular as Sacred: Chinese Religion

(12) 4/23 THURS: Read Canvas PDF “Chinese Philosophy of Religion”

Magic, Mysticism, and Art

(13) 4/30 THURS: Read Canvas PDF “Magic as a Classical Tradition and Its Philosophical Foundations” (Copenhaver); Read Canvas PDF “George Inness and the Visionary Landscape” (A. Baxter Bell)

(14) 5/7 THURS: **Pecha Kucha presentations**

(15) 5/14 THURS: Big Questions session

Final Exam (uploaded to Canvas by 11:59pm, 5/15)

Free speech and free thought.

Teachers, students, and citizens generally should have freedom of speech to discuss and debate every possible topic (i.e., First Amendment). The best remedy against ideas and speech that you disagree with is open discussion and counter-argumentation, not inhibition of speech or force. If a person finds a debate too disturbing or uncomfortable, they can freely and respectfully leave the debate space and explain the departure to their instructor afterward. College, however, is filled with uncomfortable discussions and debates, and if a person frequently feels the need to “escape” debate, then college may not be the best path forward. We are not entitled to stop others from freely expressing their controversial ideas.

Moreover, in a liberal education context it is very common to engage in a Socratic style, where discussants “embody” arguments or viewpoints in order to follow out their implications, strengths, and weaknesses. When a person forwards an argument in class, it does not necessarily mean that they embrace and endorse that argument or viewpoint (e.g., advocatus diaboli, gadfly, peer review, etc.). Notice that this is not the same as “trolling” people, because the motive of the good-faith discussant is to arrive at truth, whereas the troll is usually motivated by amusement, pointless provocation, and the cultivation of outrage for its own sake. Our discussions will be motivated by the ultimate goal of developing strong independent powers of judgment, informed by traditional wisdom and the latest available evidence.

Important Notice: The course calendar is intended to give the student guidance in what may be covered during the semester and will be followed as closely as possible. However, instructors reserve the right in their discretion to modify, supplement, and make changes as course needs arise.

This course is in the

Societies and Sustainability Pathway

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and activist, observed that “you cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them.” As humans in the middle of a great American city, we can lose touch with the delicate balance between how we find the physical environment and how we impact it and transform it. Through a range of courses, you will explore the growth of cities and complex societies, and you will learn how our decisions transform the environment. In this pathway, you will build a framework for questioning and contributing as an artist and a citizen to an equitable and sustainable future for all of Earth's inhabitants.

Core Curriculum Information: Undergraduate students **starting in** Fall 2019 should speak with their academic advisor for more specific information about fulfilling the [Columbia Core Curriculum](#) requirements.

Undergraduate students who **started before** Fall 2019 should speak with their academic advisor for more specific information about fulfilling the [Liberal Arts and Sciences \(LAS\) Core Curriculum](#) requirements.

Incompletes: An Incomplete Grade (I) can only be issued for an undergraduate student who has successfully completed all course requirements to date but is faced with unexpected circumstances during the final weeks of the semester resulting in the inability to complete course requirements by the end of the semester. The student must have, in the instructor's estimation, the ability to complete missed course requirements outside of class and by the end of the eighth week of the following semester. The instructor must agree to evaluate the student's work and replace the Incomplete grade before the end of the following semester. A [Student-Faculty Agreement for Incomplete Grade](#) specifying work to be completed and a due date must be signed by both instructor and student and approved by the Department Chair. In the event that an instructor is no longer employed by the College, a program Coordinator, Director, or the Department Chair can evaluate the work and assign the course grade.

Students with Disabilities Statement: Columbia College Chicago seeks to maintain a supportive academic environment for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodations for a disability must register with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office. Once registered, a Columbia College Chicago accommodation letter will be provided to the student each semester. Students are encouraged to present their current accommodation letters to each instructor at the beginning of the semester so that accommodations can be arranged in a timely manner by the College, the department, or the faculty member, as appropriate. Accommodations begin at the time the letter is presented. Students with disabilities who do not have accommodation letters should visit the SSD office, Room 304 of the 623 S. Wabash building, call 312-369-8296, email SSD@colum.edu or visit colum.edu/ssd.

Mandatory Attendance Policy Statement: for undergraduates only: Students are required to attend class regularly. Failure to attend class in the first two weeks of the term will negatively impact financial aid. If your professor reports that you failed to attend and participate in class during the add/drop period, a grade of NS (no-show) will be entered on your record for the course. Please note, you will still be charged tuition and fees for any course for which you receive a NS grade. For more information on non-attendance please visit the Student Financial Services [website](#).

Counseling Services Statement

Counseling Services

731 S. Plymouth Court, suite 112
312.369.8700 counselingservices@colum.edu

Services are designed to help students increase self-awareness and address mental health concerns with the goal of empowering students to manage challenging areas in their lives. All counseling services staff follow professional standards of confidentiality. Information discussed within a counseling relationship is not disclosed without written permission of the individual. Counseling Services are provided free of charge. The most utilized services include individual sessions, group sessions, and linkage to community services. A Columbia College student in a relationship with another Columbia College student, can also receive couple sessions. All currently enrolled students are eligible to receive 12 individual sessions per academic year. Group sessions are unlimited.

College Advising Statement

College Advising Center

623 S. Wabash, Suite 300
312-369-7645 / collegeadvising@colum.edu

The College Advising Center assists undergraduate students with all transitional issues as they navigate their entire college experience. College advisors guide students in creating and implementing an educational and professional plan as they progress from orientation toward graduation. As students take responsibility for their academic and career goals, they should meet with their college advisor on a regular basis. Students at Columbia are expected to meet with their college advisor at least once a semester during their first year.

The Learning Studio Statement

The Learning Studio

618 S. Michigan, first floor
312.369.8130 www.colum.edu/learningstudio

The Learning Studio is an excellent resource for academic progress and success for all students at any level. The Learning Studio provides tutoring in a number of disciplines including Accounting, the Science and Math Learning Center, the Foreign Languages Lab and the Writing Center. Students are encouraged to go to the Learning Studio and work with the tutors. Students can make an appointment through Oasis (using the "Make Appointments" tab) or call the Learning Studio.

