

# RHE 309K: Rhetoric of Religion

University of Texas at Austin

Fall 2016

## Course Information:

Instructor: Fatema Amijee

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Office Hours and Location: Mondays and Wednesdays 2:30-4pm, or by appointment, in WAG 303

Class Meeting Time and Location: Mondays and Wednesdays 4-5:30pm in GAR 0.120

Course Unique: 44070

## Course Description

Religion is a pillar of society. Not only does religion play an essential role in shaping our identities, it also defines many of our personal and political conflicts. It is as much a source of puzzlement as of meaning and purpose: is religion an opiate of the people? How can God give purpose and meaning to our lives? Is religious belief rational? How does a religion differ from a cult, nationality, or culture? What role does the afterlife play in the appeal had by religion? The course will not focus on any particular religion, but will rather engage in a study of the rhetoric of religion more generally (including the rhetoric of secularism). We will explore in detail the nature of the rhetoric of religion, its significance for the survival of religion and sustaining religious identity, and what it tells us about the nature of religion itself. For example, we'll examine the tremendous shift in religious rhetoric that resulted when Western Christians began to depart from the teachings of the Church, and instead established the primacy of the text of the Bible. We'll also look at the significance of the text-first approaches of Judaism and Sunni Islam, comparing them to messenger-focused approaches (such as that coming out of Shia Islam, Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity).

This course carries the Writing Flag. In this class, you can expect to write regularly throughout the semester, and receive feedback from your instructor to help your writing. You will also have to opportunity to revise an assignment, and evaluate a peer's work.

In this course you will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of the nature of religion, and the various controversies that surround it.
- Acquire the skills to read and critically analyze difficult texts.
- Acquire the skills to analyze and evaluate arguments using rhetorical tools.
- Acquire the skills to write argumentative and persuasive pieces.

## Course Texts

Weekly readings will be made available on Canvas, and lecture handouts will be distributed in class.

## Evaluation

*Grading:* I adhere to a blind grading policy, so when you submit your assignments, please only include your student EID. Essay questions and instructions will be made available in class. You will have the opportunity to revise the first or second essay (the choice will be yours). The revision must be submitted within a week of receiving comments. Your final grade in the course will be calculated as follows.

1. First Essay: 15%. Due September 30th
2. Second Essay: 25%. Due October 31st
3. Third Essay: 30%. Due Last Class
4. Short Assignments: 20%
  - You will complete a very short assignment every week. This assignment will be based on one of the required readings for the relevant week. Late submissions will not be accepted. These assignments will be graded very leniently (you will get full marks (1/1) if you complete the assignment accurately, and partial marks (0.8/1) if you complete the assignment, but get the wrong answer). The point of these assignments is to encourage active engagement with readings, and in the classroom.
5. Attendance: 10%
  - Attendance in class is not just a physical achievement, but an intellectual one. As such, the following will negatively affect your attendance grade:
    - Tardiness (two instances of tardiness will count as one absence)
    - Checking your phone in class
    - Wearing headphones/earphones in class
    - Falling asleep
    - Being disruptive (this includes leaving class early without giving the instructor prior notice)
    - Using your laptop (Laptops are not permitted in this class. Research has also shown that note-taking by hand is much more effective for both comprehension and memory. Finally, this is not the sort of class that will require a lot of notetaking: it will be much more important to think and engage in class discussion).

## Course Schedule

*Reading Guide:* I have assigned at least one article (or book chapter) per lecture as required reading. It is possible to do very well in this course without reading all the papers. I think this is a good thing. Better that you should carefully read a hard but classic paper than that you should instead skim two or three papers.

1. Course Introduction
2. The Nature of Religion I

*Reading:* Pascal Boyer, “What is the Origin?” from *Religion Explained*; Reza Aslan, “The Sanctuary in the Desert” from *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*

3. The Nature of Religion II

*Reading:* Daniel Dennett, “Religion as a natural phenomenon”; Ted Chiang, “The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling”

4. Faith and Reason I

*Reading:* Blaise Pascal on Pascal's Wager (reading selection from *Pensees*); William James, "The Will to Believe"; Jeffrey Jordan, "Pascal's Wagers and James's Will to Believe"

5. Faith and Reason II

*Reading:* William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"; William Alston, "Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief"

6. Faith and Reason III

*Reading:* Paul Moser, "Divine Hiddenness Does Not Justify Atheism"; Peter Byrne "It Is Not Reasonable to Believe that Only One Religion is True"

7. Arguments for God's Existence I

*Reading:* St. Anselm on the Classical Ontological Argument; Gaunilo's critique of Anselm's Argument

8. Arguments for God's Existence II

*Reading:* Thomas Aquinas on the classical Cosmological Argument; William Craig, "The Kalam Cosmological Argument"; Mackie's Critique of the Cosmological Argument from *The Miracle of Theism*; C.S. Lewis on moral arguments for God's Existence from *Mere Christianity*

9. Why Does the World Exist?

*Reading:* Bruce Reichenback, "Explanation and the Cosmological Argument"; Derek Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?"; Richard Swinburne, "Response to Derek Parfit"

10. The Problem of Evil I

*Reading:* William Rowe, "Evil is Evidence against Theistic Belief"; J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence"

11. The Problem of Evil II

*Reading:* Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann, "Evil Does Not Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism"; Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense from *God, Freedom and Evil*; Mohammed Ghaly, "Evil and Suffering in Islam"

12. Miracles I

*Reading:* Stephen T. Davis, "Is it Possible to Know that Jesus Was Raised from the Dead?"; David Hume on miracles (excerpt from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*)

13. Miracles II

*Reading:* J.L Mackie, "Miracles and Testimony"; Richard Swinburne, "For the Possibility of Miracles"

14. Religion and Sacrifice

*Reading:* Reza Aslan, "In the Footsteps of Martyrs" from *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*

15. The Afterlife I

*Reading:* Pascal Boyer, "Why is Religion about Death?" from *Religion Explained*; Ted Chiang, "Hell is the Absence of God"

16. The Afterlife II

*Reading:* Stephen Davis, “It Is Rational to Believe in the Resurrection”; Michael Martin, “It Is Not Rational to Believe in the Resurrection”

17. Religion and Meaning I

*Reading:* Plato, “Euthyphro”; Philip Quinn, “Divine Command Theory”

18. Religion and Meaning II

*Reading:* Janine Marie Idziak, “Divine Commands Are the Foundation of Morality”; Dennett, “Morality and Religion” from *Breaking the Spell*

## Course Business

1. *DRW's Attendance Policy.* You are expected to attend class, to arrive on time, to have prepared assigned reading and writing, and to participate in all in-class editing, revising, and discussion sessions. Should you miss the equivalent of five MW class sessions, then excused or not, you will fail the course. If you find that an unavoidable problem prevents you from attending class, you should contact your instructor as soon as possible, preferably ahead of time, to let him or her know. You will not be penalized for missing class on religious holy days. A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day should inform the instructor, in writing, at least one week before the absence, so that alternative arrangements can be made to complete work. If you know you will have to miss class(es) for this reason, provide your instructor with the date(s) as early as possible. Please note that the University specifies very few other excused absences (e.g., jury duty). When you must miss a class, you are responsible for getting notes and assignments from a classmate.
2. *Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct.* The University of Texas at Austin takes plagiarism (and academic misconduct more generally) very seriously. You are responsible for knowing what plagiarism is, and also for knowing the particular plagiarism penalties. Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to) the use of a thinker's ideas or words without proper citation; the purchase of assignments; the use of internet resources without proper citation; and the submission of work written (in whole or in part) by another. Penalties for plagiarism range from a zero on the assignment to suspension from the university. Furthermore, I'm known to be an excellent detector of plagiarism: *if you cheat, I will catch you.* So don't do it.
3. *How to Avoid Plagiarising:* Most students plagiarise because they believe themselves to be without options. But no student will ever be without options in this course. If you find yourself in trouble, and tempted to cheat, contact me *immediately*. If you haven't *yet* cheated, a solution can always be found.
4. *Late Penalties.* This will be a challenging and fast-paced course. It is highly recommended that you attend every class meeting and get your work in on time. The late penalty on the paper is set at 1/3 of a letter grade per day, to a maximum of three days (this includes weekends/holidays), unless accompanied by a documented medical explanation or due to a family emergency. Any work outstanding beyond this point will receive a grade of 0.
5. *Your Course Contact.* I am your primary contact for this course. Course-related emails **MUST** have “RHE309” somewhere in the subject line. I will not answer emails that ask for information readily available through on either Canvas or the course syllabus, so it is always a good idea to begin by checking those two places. Also, I recommend that if you have a substantive philosophical question, you come to my office hours rather than send me an email. I will respond to all other emails within two working days.

6. *Special Accommodations.* I am more than happy to assist with special accommodations for students registered with accessibility services. If you are registered with accessibility services, please don't hesitate to have your accessibility services representative get in touch with me. Any student with a documented disability who requires academic accommodations should contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at 512-471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone) as soon as possible to request an official letter outlining authorized accommodations. More information is available on the Services for Students with Disabilities website at <http://ddce.utexas.edu/disability/>
7. *Email Accounts.* Email is an official means of communication at UT-Austin, and your instructor will use this medium to communicate class information. You are therefore required to obtain a UT email account and to check it daily. All students may claim an email address at no cost by going to the IT Services website at <https://get.utmail.utexas.edu/>.
8. *Emergency Information.* Occupants of buildings on The University of Texas at Austin campus are required to evacuate buildings when a fire alarm is activated. Alarm activation or announcement requires exiting and assembling outside. Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of each classroom and building you may occupy. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when entering the building. Students requiring assistance in evacuation shall inform their instructor in writing during the first week of class. In the event of an evacuation, follow the instruction of faculty or class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless given instructions by the following: The University of Texas at Austin Police Department, or Fire Prevention Services office. Information regarding emergency evacuation routes and emergency procedures can be found on the UT emergency page at <http://www.utexas.edu/emergency>. Other important Emergency Information You can find more information about planning for emergencies on the Emergency Preparedness site at <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/preparedness/>.