

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 1, Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 1, Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion.

Hello and welcome to our course in the Philosophy of Religion. I'm Jim Spiegel. I'm a philosophy Ph.D. who specializes in the philosophy of religion and ethics, and I've published in both of those areas.

My main interests and scholarly pursuits in the philosophy of religion concern the doctrine of providence as well as the doctrine of hell. Those are two issues that we'll talk about here, among many others. So, let's begin just with a basic introduction to the philosophy of religion.

What is it? Philosophy of religion is the philosophical examination of concepts, ideas, and arguments that are relevant to various religious traditions and beliefs. That involves the critical analysis of concepts and issues that are relevant both to religious belief and practice. It may also be construed to include what's called philosophical theology.

Philosophical theology involves the philosophical or critical examination of concepts and doctrines within a particular religious tradition. Say, within Christianity, there is close scrutiny or examination of the logic of the atonement, for example, or the doctrine of hell or particular divine attributes. So here's an overview of the issues that we'll talk about.

We'll begin by looking at a number of theistic arguments, arguments for God, which have sometimes been called theistic proofs, depending on how confident you are in the force of these arguments. And there are a number of such arguments. The cosmological argument is the argument for the existence of God based on the need for a first cause of the universe.

The teleological argument or the argument from design. The moral argument for the existence of God. The argument from mind or consciousness.

There's one called the ontological argument, which reasons simply from the idea that God is a perfect being and has all of the perfections, including omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Being most perfect, therefore, some have argued, he must also have the perfection of existence. We'll also talk about practical or pragmatic arguments for religious belief, sometimes called prudential reasons for believing in God.

So, we'll have a number of arguments for the existence of God that we'll look at, and we'll also consider objections to those arguments along the way. We'll talk specifically about atheism and the new atheism, which in the last 10 or 15 years has been something of a cultural movement, and some of the leaders of that movement and why it is that they're so confident that God cannot exist or there must not be a God or why, according to Richard Dawkins, it's about 99% likely that there is no God. So, we'll talk about the new atheism.

We'll talk about something called reformed epistemology, which basically takes the view that you don't need arguments to justify your belief in God. You don't need evidence to make your belief in God rational. It's a proper starting point or a basic belief for the believer.

You can begin with belief in God as a basic assumption, and it's still rational, according to the reformed epistemologist. We'll also spend some time talking about the most important and influential objection to religious belief, which is the problem of evil. How is it that an almighty, all-good, all-knowing God could permit such rampant suffering and immorality that we see in this world? That's the problem of evil. What responses can the religious believer give to answer that objection? Is there a solution to the problem of evil? We'll look at a number of so-called theodicies or routes that philosophers and theologians have taken to show that there's good reason to believe that God would want to permit evil in this world.

Related to the problem of evil, some would say subsumed under the problem of evil is something called the problem of divine hiddenness. Why is God's existence, if he does exist, so unclear? Why is it not more certain and evident that God is real? Many take that to be a kind of objection in itself. The fact that God is hidden would seem to be a mark against theistic belief because if he does exist, wouldn't he want everyone to know this for certain? Why would we have to do so much argumentation and inquiry to establish our belief that God exists? We'll also talk about the doctrine of hell from a number of angles.

One, as an aspect of the problem of evil, does the reality of hell constitute a kind of evidence against religious belief? We'll also talk about the problem of hell, or the doctrine of hell, just in terms of what, if there is a hell, how are we to understand the nature of hell, and especially how long the suffering lasts for the damned? Is everyone eventually saved, as the Universalist says, or do people suffer in hell eternally without it? Is it everlasting torture for the damned, as the traditional view has it since Augustine? Or, according to a lesser-known view called conditional immortality or annihilationism, is hell finite in terms of the length of the suffering of those who are in hell, or at least many of those who are in hell eventually go out of existence? Are they eventually annihilated and go back to the nothingness from which they came? We'll also talk about religious pluralism and the question of

whether one religion or religious tradition is exclusively true in the sense that it's the one and only way to God and to find salvation. Or are many different religions potentially adequate to bring believers to God and to ultimate salvation? We'll talk about the doctrine of miracles and the whole idea that God performs miraculous acts in various times and places. How rational is it to believe that a miracle has taken place in a particular situation? Is it fundamentally at odds with science or a scientific outlook to believe that God performs miracles? And when, if ever, are we justified in believing that a particular, say, healing of a person really does involve miraculous divine intervention? And if such things occur, are they ever or always violations of the laws of nature? We'll talk about the relationship between science and theology.

Is there a tension here between empirical inquiry, the scientific method, and theological belief? Are these two things compatible? If they are, is it the case, as some have argued, that, in fact, a theological perspective offers the best kind of perspective or worldview context for the doing of science? Many have argued that, in fact, science is best done; it's most reasonably conducted in the context of religious belief. We'll also talk about the doctrine of providence, which has to do with God's care for creation and his control over the world. How extensive is that? To what extent does God guide history and individual human lives? Is there any play in the system such that God just lets certain things run on their own? Or maybe he just lets the entire universe run on its own, and he doesn't intervene at all, as those with a more, say, deistic perspective would say.

So, we'll look at the doctrine of providence, and then we'll conclude by talking about a couple of key doctrines within the Christian religious tradition: the divine incarnation and the divine trinity. The divine incarnation has to do with philosophical problems that arise in the context of the doctrine of Jesus Christ being both human and divine, right? God became human, and he was incarnate. How is that not a contradiction? How do we reconcile our beliefs, these two beliefs, that Jesus was fully human and fully divine? Can they be reconciled? And then, with regard to the trinity, how can we maintain, in a consistent way, that God is one being and yet three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, simultaneously? Is that a contradiction? As our Muslim friends and others would maintain, that's ultimately really believing in polytheism.

Can we rationally maintain that God is three persons and yet still one God? How does that work out? So those are the issues that we'll cover. Thanks for joining us.

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