

**RELIGIOUS STUDIES 3040:
Religion, Evil, and Human Suffering**

Prof. Philip Barlow

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Class meetings: Ag Sci 137; Noon–1:15pm

Office Hours: T & R: 1:30–3pm; W 2–3pm; & by appointment.

I like to see you outside of class and to know how I can enjoy your insights and help with issues or explorations. You are invited to come by any time during office hours, though often people have made appointments in advance and if you have not, you may need to wait. Try to make appointments during office hours, but if that is not possible for you, I'm happy to work out a different time with you.

Course Description: One inescapable aspect of human experience is our encounter with "suffering" and, directly or indirectly, with "evil," variously defined. This is the world's oldest, broadest, most difficult and impacting problem. Grappling with this encounter occupies part of the lives of all adults. It constitutes a basic category of thought and action in most philosophical schools and in all world religions. Our course will probe ways that religious traditions encounter, interpret, and respond to suffering and evil. We will encounter Mesopotamian religion, Buddhism, Greek philosophy, and selected secular views for comparative perspective, but will focus this term on the Jewish and Christian traditions, including founding scriptures, historical figures, and modern thinkers.

Objectives: The course asks you to study an aspect of the culture around you. It asks you to examine your own values and view of the world by scrutiny of selected religious responses to the deepest human problem: evil and suffering.

Special emphasis is placed here on deepening our abilities in critical thought and, in support of this goal, in clear and cogent oral and written expression of this thinking. The intent is that we will emerge from the course:

- able to explain competing understandings of "evil" and "good";
- more knowledgeable about the perspectives of selected thinkers and religions and about the function of religion as such;
- having honed analytical skills that will facilitate resilience, good judgment, and refined ethics as we confront suffering and evil in our personal lives and in the world.
- more able to understand a major function of religion in addressing the world humans experience.

READINGS for purchase:

Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning.
Beacon Press, 2006. ISBN: 9780807014271.

Elie Wiesel, The Trial of God.
Knopf Doubleday, 1995. ISBN: 9780805210538.

Herman Hesse, Siddhartha.
Shambhala, 2005. ISBN: 9781590302279.

Herbert Mason: Gilgamesh
Any edition, but same for whole class
M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled
Simon & Schuster, 2003. ISBN: 9780743243155.

You will also need a Bible—a good modern translation. Archaic translations, especially the King James Bible, can be excellent for devotional or literary purposes, but less helpful in our academic context because they are harder to understand and depend

upon less accurate Hebrew and Greek texts than are now available. Avoid also "paraphrase" Bibles such as "The Good News" Bible or The Living Bible. Many of you will already have access to Bibles of your own. Several good options exist if you are considering buying a new one, including the Revised English Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, The New Jerusalem Bible, the New International Version, and the New American Bible.

In addition to these books, other reading assignments will be handed out in class or made accessible online.

•Be sure to have a copy of the assigned text in hand during our course discussions.

GRADING:íŒ

•**30%: essays or projects.** I will invite you to craft a series of brief essays or thinking exercises expressed in analogous form in response to some question I pose about the issues we raise. Part of your grade on this dimension of your work will simply be the satisfactory completion of the assignment. In addition, I will formally grade two or three of your essays (or exercises), without announcing which ones in advance.

•10%: quizzes to keep us sharp on our reading

•10%: mid-term exam

•20%: a creative project, due on or before November 30, wherein you will come to terms with some major dimension of the class in some form other than a standard analytic essay. Your project may take the form of a short film, a painting, a dramatic dialogue, a short story, the composition and performance of music, or in other ways. Your topic and method is to be agreed upon by you and me by October 23. It is a good idea to start imagining possibilities from the beginning of the term.

•30%: a final exam. You will have two options for this exam. You may either (A) take the test in the officially scheduled slot during final exam week or (B) opt to write short essays in response to questions I pose to you a week before the paper is due. This will be your culminating opportunity to express your thinking accomplished in our work together.

•The other factor determining your FINAL grade consists of an oral participation dimension, which can lower or raise your Provisional grade. My sense of the quality of your participation will consist of your daily attendance and the extent to which you consistently help the rest of us in our thinking and discussion. This help will include your thoughtful verbal engagement with the readings and the class as a whole, asking good questions and sharing observations based on your reading and your independent reflection before and during class. It also may include showing leadership and creativity in elevating our group enterprise in any way—going beyond the basic requirements to enrich the quality of our group effort. Those who talk the most in class do not necessarily accomplish the most in elevating our group work, but demonstration of active engagement naturally tends to help.

You can only demonstrate these skills, contribute to the class, and achieve the course objectives, if you are present. For every class session you miss beyond 3, your final grade will be docked by 1/3 of a letter grade. Hence for example: If you earn a B+ on your preliminary grade but you miss four class sessions, your final grade will be a B; if you were to miss five class sessions, your grade would be a B-.

As per USU policy, an "**INCOMPLETE**" grade can be given only in special, extenuating circumstances (not poor performance) and only at the instructor's discretion. <http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Incomplete-Grade.pdf>.

Directions for written work. In addition to the specific instructions you will receive for each assignment, all written work is to be:

- typed, double-spaced
- 12-point font
- include page numbers
- physically handed in rather than sent electronically, unless instructed otherwise.
- documented as appropriate in the “humanities” version of The Chicago Manual of Style (easily accessed online by Googling “Chicago Manual of Style”)
- protected with a safe backup copy kept in your possession.
- turned in on time. Due dates according to the Calendar(s) to be handed out in class. Late papers will lose 1/3 grade per day.
- retained by you after you receive it back from me, so that it can be consulted later in the term as we compare growth in understanding.
- After grading it, I will deposit your final take-home exam-essay in the History/Religious Studies Office for you to pick up. If you leave campus at the end of the term before you get it and would like me to mail a copy, please provide, with postage attached, an addressed large envelop.

Criteria for evaluation of work

What I am looking for in particular in your papers, exams, and class participation is:

- a persuasive argument, where appropriate, signaled up-front by a thesis and supported by evidence;
- your knowledge and understanding of the material in the lectures and reading, including a responsiveness to our class discussions and the issues, questions, and observations raised by me, you, and your classmates.
- active, imaginative, and critical questioning and reflection on the issues at hand;
- the courage to and
- clarity, organization, and gracefulness in your written expressions.
- I also may take into account growth during the course of the term: are you responding well to feedback and making appropriate adjustments?; are you increasingly demonstrating that you are beginning to “get the hang” of informed critical thought in the study of religion—in understanding, in application, and in written and oral expression?

Class Meetings: Our class sessions will include some lecturing, but the course is only partly about “facts” and “information.” Even more important for most sessions will be for all of us to engage in dialogue, through raising questions and offering thoughtful reflection on the “issues we identify. One of the objectives of the class (see above) is to appreciate what “thinking critically” really means within the respective religions we will consider and also from without. We will also seek to formulate good questions and ways to address them as we put ourselves in conversation with each other and with thinkers among the traditions. This will require thoughtful preparation before each session—not just reading, but also pondering, then writing down insights or questions you would like to bring up in class. I encourage you to find a partner or form a small group to prepare for these meetings. Perhaps the greatest mistake that can be made in the course is the failure to persist in asking questions until you understand a point or the nature and implications of a problem.

I consider that we share responsibility for the quality of the class. Absences and insufficient preparation will thus affect your performance as much as they would at your professional place of work. Moreover, you naturally will have trouble following what is going on or avoiding superficiality if you miss more than one or two meetings. Other people's notes are not likely to be adequate as a substitute for active attendance, because the nature of the discussions we will develop will lend themselves to more complex exchanges than can easily be reduced to notes.

Academic integrity: If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty, feel free to ask me for clarifications of any issues that strike you as "gray." University's rules and procedures will be followed.
<http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Acad-Integrity.pdf>.

Helps for learning challenges: If you have any special learning difficulties, it is essential that you discuss these with me during the first week of class. I want to be helpful, and it is important that we come to an agreement of how to succeed together from the first. Students with ADA-documented physical, sensory, emotional or medical impairments may be eligible for reasonable accommodations and assistance from and/me or the University. Veterans may also be eligible for services. All accommodations are coordinated through the Disability Resource Center (DRC), <http://www.usu.edu/drc/>. Contact the DRC as early as possible for alternate format materials (Braille, large print, digital). See <http://www.usu.edu/policies/PDF/Accmdtns-for-Disabled.pdf>.