

Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy 340

Spring 2026

Term Paper Assignment

Due Tuesday, May 12 4:00 PM

Write an 7-9 page (double-spaced) paper in which you reflect on one of the following topics, or a topic you develop that is approved. An A paper will be a well-written exposition and reflection. There must be some citations from the texts and all sources must be properly cited. Upload as a pdf file to Lāmakū.

Dostoevsky and The Problem of Evil

What is the problem of evil and the distinction made between natural and moral evil? What is meant by the term theodicy? In the story of the "Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* which arguments for theodicy does Ivan Karamazov reject in his conversation with his brother Alyosha? What is the point of the "Grand Inquisitor" story Ivan then tells to his brother? Why does the Inquisitor think that Christ answered wrongly in responding to the three temptations in the wilderness? Why does the Inquisitor say that "nothing has ever been more unendurable to man and human society than freedom"? What is the tremendous burden of freedom that is presented in the story of the three temptations? Who is right about human nature, the Grand Inquisitor or Christ as presented in Dostoevsky's story? What do you think was the point of Christ's only response to the Inquisitor at the end of the story?

Kierkegaard on Reason and Faith

Explain why author Sam Harris in his book *The End of Faith* (as explained in the introduction to Chapter 8 of our text) condemns religion as irrational and dangerous. What are the three ways, outlined in our text, of understanding the relationship between religion and science, and what are the two basic ways of understanding the relation between reason and faith? Explain how Kierkegaard argues for fideism in *Fear and Trembling*, in his account of the difference between Abraham, the knight of faith, and the tragic hero as exemplified in the story of Agamemnon in the tragedy *Iphigenia at Aulis*. In the *Will to Believe*, how does William James defend the importance of faith? To what extent would you agree with Harris, Kierkegaard, or James on the importance of faith?

Religious Experience

What are the three general features common to religious experiences, and the three categories of religious experience outlined in Chapter 9 of our text? What are the four characteristics of mystical experience that William James explains in the chapter on Mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*? How does James deal with the problem of the justification of religious belief based on religious experience? To what extent would you agree with James on the importance of religious experience and the issue of the justification of belief based on religious experience? To what extent is religious experience important in your life?

The Self, Death and the Afterlife

Explain the four conceptions of self discussed in Chapter 10 of our text—dualism, materialism, monistic pantheism, and the Buddhist doctrine of no-self—and the views about death and the afterlife that follow from these views of the self. What are some of the arguments put forth for and against the immortality of the soul? What sort of afterlife is suggested in Thich Nhat Hanh's essay "The Sun My Heart"? To what extent do you think it is important to think there could be life after death?

The Death of God

What did Nietzsche mean by the "death of God"? Why did Nietzsche put forth such a strong critique of Christianity in the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" attached as a preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*? How is Nietzsche's critique of Christianity expressed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? What is the point of Zarathustra's strange teaching of the eternal recurrence? What do you think of Nietzsche's radical interpretation of Christ in *The Antichrist*? What do you think of the postmodern theology influenced by Nietzsche's thought—what Jeffrey Robbins refers to as a "theology after the death of God," a "philosophy of religion without religion," a "return of a religion based in the love of Christ"?

Ecological Spirituality

In the essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," why does Lynn White Jr. say that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the environmental crisis we face today? Why does White suggest the "beatniks" show a "sound instinct in their affinity for Zen Buddhism"? How is this Zen view suggested in Thich Nhat Hanh's essay "The Sun My Heart"? Why does White suggest a more ecologically responsible Christianity could develop based on the radical teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi? How might this development of Christianity be suggested in Pope Francis's encyclical letter on ecology and climate change? How does contemporary theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether develop a critique of Christianity similar to Nietzsche and Lynn White Jr. in her book *Gaia & God*? How does Ruether suggest a more ecologically responsible Christianity could develop, and how does her view differ from the view put forth by Pope Francis? To what extent is it necessary to overcome eschatology, the longing for salvation, in an ecologically responsible spirituality? Can one still believe in an eternal reward in heaven and remain loyal to the earth?