

GOD
FYSM 1000-026
Spring 2017 – Wednesdays 3-5:30 pm
HLMS 181

Professor Elias Sacks

email: elias.sacks@colorado.edu

office hours: Tuesdays 12:30-1:30 pm, Wednesdays 1-2 pm, and by appointment (Humanities 286)

Undergraduate Mentor: Jessee Kilgore

email: jessee.kilgore@colorado.edu

office hours: by appointment

Does it make sense to believe in God, and should believing or not believing in God make a difference for how individuals lead their lives? This course will explore diverse responses to these questions, examining debates surrounding the existence and nature of a higher power in ancient and modern sources. We will devote special attention to topics such as the reasons for evil and undeserved suffering, the nature of revelation and religious experience, and the role of religion in contemporary politics, wrestling with issues such as the possibility of belief in God in the wake of events such as the Holocaust, the relationship between science and religion, and the implications of belief in God for debates surrounding topics such as torture and sexuality. We will focus primarily on Jewish, Christian, and philosophical sources, while also placing this material in conversation with works drawn from other traditions.

This course will be divided into four parts. Part One will explore questions regarding belief in God raised in ancient and medieval sources, and Part Two will consider early modern controversies surrounding the Bible, reason, and faith. Part Three will wrestle with classic modern critics of religion, examining their arguments along with possible responses. Part Four will turn to recent debates in religious thought, exploring questions such as whether it makes sense to believe in God in a world of genocide and violence, and whether modern science undermines religious commitment or encourages belief in some type of deity.

Course Materials

The following book is available for purchase at the CU Bookstore: *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (HaperCollins 2006).

All other readings will be available through Desire2Learn (D2L). Go to “Readings” (in “Content”) and select the appropriate week.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance and Participation – 15% of final grade

The heart of this course is our weekly seminar discussion. These sessions are opportunities to wrestle with challenging texts, ask and address difficult questions, and discover points of agreement

while also honestly expressing disagreement. Punctual attendance is mandatory: you may miss one session with no questions asked, but further absences may require documentation from a doctor or other appropriate source. Make sure to bring hard copies of the assigned readings to class sessions: we'll be devoting much of our time together to figuring out what these readings mean and whether they make sense, so it's crucial that we all have the texts in front of us. Active and responsible participation is also required: you are expected to listen open-mindedly to your colleagues and contribute meaningfully to our conversations, expressing your own views while being open to having those claims challenged with charity and humility. Each of us has a responsibility to help create a space in which we can discuss sensitive matters on which we might hold very different positions—a space in which we can comfortably and confidently articulate our own commitments, while at the same time taking seriously (and being intellectually vulnerable to) views we might find objectionable.

2. Collection of Short Responses – 20% of final grade

We'll be covering a broad range of material, and it's crucial that you keep up with the readings. Therefore, you will be required to create a collection of short responses over the course of the semester. More specifically, you will be required to submit four short (1-2 page) response papers on course readings, each of which is worth 5% of your final grade. These responses are opportunities for you to formulate and test out your thoughts on course material—to offer interpretations, raise questions, draw connections, and develop critiques. Responses must be submitted through D2L by 10 am on the due date indicated in the course outline. One week before each due date, I'll post several guiding questions to help you formulate your response: you will be asked to address one of these prompts. (If you'd like to reflect on a different topic, just send me an email, and we'll decide together whether the proposed topic is appropriate.) These responses are graded out of 10. You will receive a 0 if you do not complete the assignment by the due date or if you fail to show that you have done the reading; a 7 if you demonstrate that you have done the reading but do not understand the material, or if you do not fulfill the requirements; an 8.5 if you mostly offer an accurate summary of what's in the readings; and a 10 if you both offer an accurate summary and share some original insights. Unless you contact me in advance to discuss some special circumstances (such as illness), no late responses will be accepted.

3. Presentation – 20% of final grade

You will also be required to give a class presentation with a few partners. Each presentation should involve introducing the week's readings, highlighting a few key passages for discussion, and guiding a conversation about this material. Beyond meeting these basic requirements, you may choose how you wish to structure your presentation—for example, whether you wish to introduce the readings through a spoken presentation, employ visual media or music, etc. We will divide up weeks during our third class meeting, at which point we'll discuss the guidelines for the assignment in greater detail. As your week approaches, I encourage you and your partners to meet with me to discuss your presentation.

4. Papers – 45% of final grade

Finally, you will be required to submit two papers. The first paper should be 3-5 pages, and is worth 20% of your final grade; the second paper should be 4-7 pages, and is worth 25% of your

final grade. I will provide several prompts, but you are also permitted to write on a topic of your choosing (with my prior approval). I encourage you to meet with me to discuss these papers; if you wish to select your own topic, you are required to meet with me to discuss your proposal well in advance of the due date.

We'll think about these papers in greater detail as the semester progresses. All papers should be submitted via D2L (details will be sent out in advance). Papers submitted after the deadlines listed below without an approved extension will be marked down by 1 grade per day (e.g., an A paper will become an A-). No paper without an approved extension will be accepted more than 3 days after the due date.

Communication

The more opportunities we have to speak with one another—to discuss issues relating to the course material, as well as your broader interests—the more productive our time together will be. I strongly encourage each of you to meet with me at least once during the first five weeks of the semester. My office hours are listed at the beginning of this syllabus. However, if you have a prior commitment during those office hours, don't worry: just send me an email with three alternatives, and we will find a time to meet.

You can always contact me via email, and I will do my best to respond within 36 hours. (If there are any times when I know that it is likely to take me more than 36 hours to respond to messages, I will inform the class in advance.) However, while email can be an excellent way to deal with administrative issues, it's rarely an effective way to discuss substantive questions. For example, while email is a good way to let me know of an illness that will keep you out of class or to clarify the procedure for submitting a response, it's not the best way to discuss questions such as "why do thinkers disagree about whether a good God would permit undeserved suffering," "am I permitted to write a paper criticizing Jewish and Christian views on religion, science, and politics," or "why did I receive this particular grade on my first paper." Therefore, for substantive matters, I ask that you attend office hours or set up an alternate meeting time.

Time in the Classroom

As noted above, make sure to bring hard copies of the required readings to class sessions. Laptop computers may not be used during class, and you should put away (and silence) phones and other electronic devices before each class begins. Of course, if you have a specific need for a computer during class, please speak with me. Similarly, if you have a compelling reason to keep a phone (or phone-like device) turned on during our seminar, just let me know before class, and we'll work something out.

One seminar session—our meeting for Week 13, originally scheduled for April 12—will be rescheduled because of a Jewish holiday. I will be in contact during the first few weeks of the semester to find an alternate time for this session.

Week 1 (January 18): Introduction

PART ONE: ANCIENT QUESTIONS

Week 2 (January 25): Biblical Voices

- selections from the Hebrew Bible
 - *HarperCollins Study Bible (HCSB)*: * Genesis 12:1-12:7, Genesis 17:1-18:33, 22:1-22:19; Leviticus 19:1-19:19; Deuteronomy 5:1-7:15, 31:14-32:43; Isaiah 2:1-2:4
- selections from the New Testament
 - *HCSB*: Matthew 5:1-5:48, 10:1-10:39, 27:27-28:20

Week 3 (February 1): Is the Biblical God Just?

- *HCSB*: Job 1:1-10:8, 38:1-42:17

Week 4 (February 8): Why Evil? Why Suffering?

- Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, selections

➤ **RESPONSE 1 DUE ON THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, BY 10 AM**

Week 5 (February 15): Does God Care About the World?

- Kenneth Seeskin, “Jewish Philosophy,” 381-386
- Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “The Foundation of the Torah,” 1:1-2:2; “Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Heathens,” 1:1-1:2
- Maimonides, *Guide*, 1.54-1.55, 2.32, 3.27-3.28

PART TWO: THE DAWN OF MODERNITY

Week 6 (February 22): Is It Rational to Believe in God?

- David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, selections
- Hume, “Of Miracles”

Week 7 (March 1): Is it Rational to Trust the Bible?

- Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, selections

➤ **RESPONSE 2 DUE ON THURSDAY, MARCH 2, BY 10 AM**

Week 8 (March 8): Defending Religion

- Moses Mendelssohn, selections from *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*

➤ **PAPER 1 DUE ON MONDAY, MARCH 13, BY 10 AM**

* References to texts from the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) follow this format: [BIBLICAL BOOK] [CHAPTER:VERSE]-[CHAPTER: VERSE]. For example, “Genesis 17:1-18:33” refers to Genesis chapter 17 verse 1 through Genesis chapter 18 verse 33. Similarly, “Matthew 5:1-5:48” refers to Matthew chapter 5 verse 1 through Matthew chapter 5 verse 48.

PART THREE: MODERN SUSPICIONS, MODERN RESPONSES

Week 9 (March 15): Is God a Drug?

- Karl Marx, “Marx on the History of His Opinions”; Marx and Frederick Engels, selections from “Manifesto of the Communist Party”
- Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction”
- Marx, selections from “The Communism of the Paper *Rheinischer Beobachter*”

Week 10 (March 22): Is God Dead?

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With A Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, sections 125, 319, 341, 343-347, 357, 373-374
- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, selections

Week 11 (March 29): Spring Break – No Class

Week 12 (April 5): Is God an Illusion?

- Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, selections

➤ **RESPONSE 3 DUE ON THURSDAY, APRIL 6, BY 10 AM**

Week 13 (date to be determined): Reimagining God’s Presence

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, selections
- Marcia Falk, “Toward a Feminist Jewish Reconstruction of Monotheism”

PART FOUR: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

Week 14 (April 19): God and the Holocaust

- Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, selection
- Eliezer Berkovits, “Faith After the Holocaust”
- Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust,” selection
- Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice”

Week 15 (April 26): God and Politics – Case Studies on Torture and Sexuality

- torture: Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Reflection on the Problem of ‘Dirty Hands’”; Jean Porter, “Torture and the Christian Conscience,” selections (to be read with *HCSB*: Genesis 1:26-1:31; Luke 10:25-10:37)
- sexuality: Richard Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies”; Luke Timothy Johnson, “Debate and Discernment, Scripture and the Spirit” (to be read with *HCSB*: Leviticus 18:1-18:24, 20:6-20:27; Romans 1:18-1:32; Acts 10:44-10:48, 15:1-15:21)

➤ **RESPONSE 4 DUE ON THURSDAY, APRIL 27, BY 10 AM**

Week 16 (May 3): God and Science

- Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, selections

➤ **PAPER 2 DUE ON MONDAY, MAY 8, BY 10 AM**

Additional Information

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner (for exam accommodations provide your letter at least one week prior to the exam) so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities. Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or by e-mail at dsinfo@colorado.edu. If you have a temporary medical condition or injury, see Temporary Injuries guidelines (<http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/students/temporary-medical-conditions>) under the Quick Links at the Disability Services website (<http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/>) and discuss your needs with me.

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. In this class, if you have a potential class conflict because of religious observance, you must inform me of that conflict within three weeks of the start of classes. See the campus policy regarding religious observances (<http://www.colorado.edu/policies/observance-religious-holidays-and-absences-classes-andor-exams>) for full details.

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, color, culture, religion, creed, politics, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and gender expression, age, disability, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records. For more information, see the policies on classroom behavior (<http://www.colorado.edu/policies/student-classroom-and-course-related-behavior>) and the student code (<http://www.colorado.edu/osc/>).

The University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder) is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working, and living environment. CU Boulder will not tolerate acts of sexual misconduct, discrimination, harassment or related retaliation against or by any employee or student. CU's Sexual Misconduct Policy prohibits sexual assault, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, intimate partner abuse (dating or domestic violence), stalking or related retaliation. CU Boulder's Discrimination and Harassment Policy prohibits discrimination, harassment or related retaliation based on race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation or political philosophy. Individuals who believe they have been subject to misconduct under either policy should contact the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) at 303-492-2127. Information about the OIEC, the above referenced policies, and the campus resources available to assist individuals regarding sexual

misconduct, discrimination, harassment or related retaliation can be found at the OIEC website (<http://www.colorado.edu/institutionalequity/>).

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy (<http://www.colorado.edu/policies/academic-integrity-policy>) of the institution. Violations of the policy may include: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access, clicker fraud, resubmission, and aiding academic dishonesty. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Code Council (honor@colorado.edu; 303-735-2273). Students who are found responsible for violating the academic integrity policy will be subject to nonacademic sanctions from the Honor Code Council as well as academic sanctions from the faculty member. Additional information regarding the academic integrity policy can be found at honorcode.colorado.edu.