

This course will be unified around the theme of the justification of religious beliefs, in particular the justification of believing that there is a God who, as theologian John Macquarrie put it, is properly “both the focus of human worship and aspiration, and ... the source, sustainer, and goal of all that is.” We shall begin by considering representatives of two families of arguments which attempt to show the existence of God on the basis of obvious premises known through experience—the cosmological argument from the obvious fact that the world exists and the teleological argument from the equally obvious fact that the world is ordered. We shall be particularly interested in the anthropic teleological argument—that the universe appears fine tuned for the emergence of life. We shall next consider the strongest argument against the existence of God, the argument from evil. Is it contradictory to claim that an all-powerful, wholly good God exists in the face of evil? Does the amount of evil in the world outweigh all evidence for a good God? In particular, we shall examine Hume’s argument that these considerations show that the existence of a good God cannot be demonstrated philosophically.

Hume, however, was exploring a limit of traditional natural theology. Recently, several philosophers have proposed a new style natural theology, considering revelation philosophically. In light of their arguments, we shall consider answers to the problem of evil within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The most adequate of these answers presupposes belief that at least one miracle has occurred. Hume purported to show that one could never have a justified belief in a miracle report. But what of Hume’s argument? Many miracle reports are astonishing reports. We conclude the course by examining when, if ever, is one justified in believing such a report and when if ever is one justified in believing that such a report is a revelation of a good God?

The text for the course will be an anthology of specially selected readings, available either as a special edition of an existing text or as a specially designed course pack. The grade will be determined by an in-class mid-term, a final, and a term paper prepared through a series of steps due over the course of the semester.