

Phil 151/RS151
Dr. Martin Spear

Here is some contact information for your instructor, but the best thing to do is use the tools provided by Canvas for routine contact:

Office: Main Campus, Mint Bldg., Room M3-2 Email: mspear@ccp.edu (please use Canvas internal email during course)

Required Texts:

Eight Theories of Religion by Daniel L. Pals

The World's Religions by Huston Smith

The End of Faith by Sam Harris

A Short History of Myth by Karen Armstrong

Course Requirements

Satisfactory Completion of Reading, Writing and Discussion Assignments

The activities of the course are Reading, Writing, and Discussing. The Reading activities are a precondition of success with the Writing Assignments, and for useful participation in the course discussion forums.

The course is divided into 14 modules, corresponding to the 14 weeks of the instructional term. It is very important that you participate in the activities for each week. During every single week there are discussion forums, which are very prominent and very significant part of the course.

There are seven short formal writing assignments, which are due on a biweekly basis, that is at the end of week two, week four, week six, and so on through the semester. As a matter of justice to the class due dates and times are very firm: 11:59 PM on Sunday at the end of week two, week four, week six, and so on through the semester.

Here's what the process looks like: Each week's module will be posted by Sunday of that week. In the even numbered weeks of the term the module will include a short formal essay assignment which will take the form of a question posed by the professor. These writing assignments each will be graded 0-10 points. The highest possible total for these submissions is 70 points, or 70% of the final grade.

Besides the short formal writing assignments, each student will participate in the weekly discussion forums by reading and responding to posts from the class. At the end of the term each students will be graded holistically on the frequency and quality of their participation. The highest possible evaluation of participation in the discussion forums is 30 points or 30% of the final grade.

What to expect

Each week will see reading assignments, either from the books, or from the other materials – sometimes both. Accompanying the reading assignments will be **Reading and Discussion Questions**, which will guide you through the texts and raise various sorts of issues about them. These questions are designed to focus your attention on certain aspects of the texts. Usually they will be 'running questions' that essentially outline the texts by pointing in sequence to the issues pursued in those texts. They should not be read as "the questions which I have to answer"; especially the questions should not be read as exhausting what is worthy of attention in the reading for the week. The questions are meant to be helpful, and that is pretty much the end of it. **You are specifically not required to submit "answers" to the list of questions, although discussion of them in the student forums is a really good idea. A really good idea.**

Required Bi-Weekly Writing Assignments

In each even numbered week, a question will be posted as a **Required Bi-Weekly Writing Assignment**. Each student is required to post a formal response to the assignment. The length of such response should be substantial: somewhere between **400-600 words**. Please remember that these responses are formal submissions and hence must be presented with all the appropriate care such things require.

Criteria for evaluation of the weekly assignments

The first criterion is “Appropriateness of Presentation”.

This course has no oral component, and consequently demands higher than usual levels of achievement with reading and writing. It is entirely conducted by the written word. “Appropriateness of Presentation” covers the mechanics and rhetoric one would expect in a formal college-level paper for which students have at least several days to prepare, to revise and to edit. The perfectly ordinary minimal expectation is that assignment submissions will be mechanically clean and rhetorically appropriate.

The second criterion is “Mastery of Relevant Material”.

The writing assignments presuppose that students understand the assigned texts and the issues being pointedly questioned, and any theorist being invoked in his/her response. The writing assignment submissions should clearly display that understanding, or at least not display serious misunderstanding or – worse – lack of familiarity. A serious breakdown in understanding is a serious problem.

The third criterion is “Responsiveness to the Question.”

The questions posed for the weekly writing assignments raise particular issues rather than others, and it is absolutely essential that your response be open to being reasonably construed as responding to that question, rather than using it as a launching pad to do something quite different from answering the question. Of course, even on-point responses may be more or less pointed, clear, comprehensive, subtle, and theoretically astute. But the

ordinary minimal expectation is that responses be on-point of the question being asked.

Instructional Feedback and “Global Commentary”

Although each writing assignment will be formally evaluated inside the Canvas environment, you should not expect detailed individual responses to your posting from the professor as a matter of routine.

Instead, at the end of the week, the instructor may post a global response to the various submissions, calling attention to various features of those submissions. The point of this process is for students to try out strategies of interpretation, understanding, and presentation, appreciate the alternative strategies used by other students, and learn how such strategies are interpreted by a professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Weekly Discussion Forums

Each week the professor will post discussion questions to the **Weekly Discussion Forum**. These questions are often drawn from the “Reading and Discussion Questions” for the week’s readings. Although formal responses to any particular question is not required, this forum is designed to initiate discussion of particular important aspects of the reading assignments. **Students are strongly encouraged to use this forum extensively, not only to reply to the questions but also to thread discussions of the issues. It is especially valuable to engage your classmates in discussion. Indeed, the other students in the class are a very very important resource for coming to understand some difficult material.** The professor will not allow students to circle around the student forum to consult directly with him unless the issue has already been thoroughly aired in the Discussion Forum. The professor will not interfere with it, or evaluate individual postings – except when it is necessary to moderate, or remind posters of the ordinary rules of academic exchange e.g. one writes in formally correct English and always in a courteous tone.

Occasionally, if it seems helpful, the professor will post additional questions for consideration, or suggest reformulations of problems or redirection of discussion

that seems dead-ended. **The Discussion Questions that the professor posts are supposed to be helpful only as a beginning i.e. to initiate discussion. If you just go into those forums occasionally, to post a quick reply to one of the professor's questions and don't engage more fully, that would be only a very meagre contribution to the class.**

The Weekly Discussion Forums are a major component of your participation in the course, and consequently figure importantly in your final grade. If it helps, you can think of this in the familiar terms of 'class participation'. The evaluation of such forum participation is holistic and made at the end of the term by an overall review of the student's contribution. However, there is nothing mysterious about it and indeed you should be able to evaluate your own participation in the forums easily enough.

Evaluation of a student's contribution to the Discussion Forums:

1. **Frequency and word count.**

2. **Substance** i.e. contributions that deepen or further analysis of an issue. "Non-substantive" posts would be things such as "Good analysis" or "I agree with Tom."

3. **Interactivity.** Progress in academic disciplines flows from mutual criticism and mutual analysis. It is more helpful to be carefully critiquing, and amending what classmates offer than to proceed as if everyone's very first thoughts are golden. Here's how it would work: Bill makes an offer (perhaps in response to a question raised by the professor.) Jill responds to Bill, raising issues about his analysis, and perhaps amending it to work better. Harry responds to Bill and Jill in the same vein. Bill modifies, or amends his original position, or explains how it can meet the challenges posed by Jill and Harry. And on it goes.

Several hours per week would seem the right level of commitment to the Discussion Forum.

The Discussion Forum Participation is evaluated holistically at the end of term based on the criteria described above.

Excellent = 30 points. (Frequent, Substantive, Interactive)

Good = 20 points. (Less Frequent, or Less Substantive, or Less Interactive)

Marginal = 10 points (Infrequent, Less Substantive, Non-Interactive)

Unsatisfactory = 0 points (Non-participation)

To repeat: Questions the professor posts in the Discussion Forum are for the purpose of initiating discussion only. Students are not required to respond to all of those, nor any of those specific questions, since discussion may go in very different directions. **The course requirement is to participate responsibly in the Discussion Forum as described above.** That participation ought not take the form of dropping in for a while on Sunday night and tossing in a quick few “answers to the questions”. Join the discussion over the course of the entire week, at least several times. As the term proceeds the Discussion Forum should loom larger and larger for you. After all, it’s what replaces the classroom discussion in a regular lecture class.

Private Student Discussion Forum

An additional “**Private Student Discussion Forum**” will be made available for discussion of whatever topics students find interesting, or for class exploration of any questions they may have. This forum will not be read by your professor at all; the point is to provide a vehicle where you can discuss without worrying about professorial eyes peeking over your shoulder. The professor will not even look at these postings except in response to specific charges of abuse (something that happens only very infrequently.)

Grade Computation

Here is a *sample grading pattern* for a hypothetical Student.

Grades in Weekly assignment:

Week 2 – 9 points

Week 4 – 8 points

Week 6 – 7 points

Week 8 – 8 points

Week 10 – 10 points

Week 12 – 10 points

Week 14 – 8 points

Total from Weekly assignments = 60 of possible 70 points

Now add in the Discussion Forum:

If the student performs at the “excellent” level that’s 30 points for a total of 90, or an A.

If the student performs at the “good” level that’s 20 points for a total of 80, or an B.

If the student performs at the “marginal” level that’s 10 points for a total of 70, or an C.

If the student performs at the “unsatisfactory” level that’s 0 points for a total of 60, or D.

Final Grades:

A = 90+

B = 80-89

C = 70-79

F = 0-58

The Course Texts

The course proceeds by working through four books in parallel. These books correspond to aspects of the study of World Religions. The first book is Huston Smith's classic *The World's Religions*, which scans the major world religions from the point of view of doctrine - roughly, what they teach, or "believe". Necessarily, any book of that sort has to go for the big picture, and for what is distinctive about the various religious traditions.

The second book is Daniel L. Pals' nicely done survey *Nine Theories of Religion*, which sketches some of the most prominent theories of the last century and a half, which seek to understand what religion is from a scientific or scholarly perspective (as opposed to the self-understanding of religion i.e. what it says about itself.) Huston Smith has his own take on what to make out of the phenomenon of religion, which he offers at the very beginning and very end of the book, and it may prove a useful exercise for you to try to locate his line amongst the theories described by Pals.

The third book is Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, which is a hugely controversial contemporary reflection on the nature of religion in public life. The fourth text for the class is Karen Armstrong's *A Brief History of Myth*, which is a sort of short version of her famous *The Great Transformation* (a book too long for it to be useful in the course) and which is intended as counterweight to Harris' polemic.