

Phil 151/RS151— Internet Course

Dr. Martin Spear

Here is some contact information for your instructor, but the best thing to do is use the tools of the Webcourse for routine contact:

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

Texts:

Eight Theories of Religion
Daniel L. Pals

The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions
Huston Smith

The End of Faith
Sam Harris

A Short History of Myth
Karen Armstrong

Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion
Alain De Botton

In addition there will be reproduced articles posted online and occasional pointers to internet materials of various sorts.

Requirements:

Satisfactory Completion of Reading, Writing and Discussion Assignments.

Mandatory Satisfactory Completion of the formal 'long' writing assignments (this means that a failure to submit any of the three formal long writing assignments will produce an automatic grade of 'F' in the course.)

There are three "long" writing assignments i.e. 3-5 pages due at the end of the fifth week of class, the end of the tenth week, and at the end of the course i.e. the beginning of the fifteenth week.

Each writing assignment will be graded on a scale of 0-20 for a possible total of 60 points. Roughly, F is 10; D is 12; C is 14; B is 16; A is 18; all with appropriate adjustments for plus and minus at each level.

Each student will submit responses to the Required Forum questions each week. (Formal Forum submissions will be graded acceptable +2; unacceptable=0; Total forum submissions equal 12 (there are actually two weeks in which no required forum is due); the student will be notified of unacceptable submissions.)

Each student will participate in the Supplemental and Student discussion forums by reading and responding to posts from the class. (Students will be graded holistically on the quality of their participation as satisfactory or unsatisfactory participants. Excellent = 16; Good = 10; Marginal = 5; Unsatisfactory = 0)

Grading:

A = 89+

B = 79-88

C = 69-78 (i.e. the lowest possible 'C' is 69 points, not 68 or 67, and similarly for the other grade levels.)

D = 59-68

F = 0-58

What to expect

When you look at the syllabus, you will notice that the course proceeds by working through three 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 *Eight 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. The final book is Alain De Botton's very recent "Religion for Atheists", which is an interesting religion-friendly supplement to some of the hostile functional theories of religion you will have studied in the Pals text.

Each week will see reading assignments as listed on the syllabus. Accompanying the reading assignments will be reading/study questions, which raise various sorts of issues about the texts being read and discussed. These questions are designed to focus your attention on certain aspects of the texts. They should not be read as "the questions that 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 reading/study questions, although discussion of them in the student forums is a really good idea.**

Each week, a question will be posted to the Required Submission Forum by the professor. Perhaps the question will be drawn from the list of reading/study questions, but perhaps not. **Each student is required each week to post a formal response to the question in this forum. The suggested length of such response is a substantial paragraph or two; somewhere between 300-500 words. Please remember that these responses are formal submissions and hence must be presented with all the appropriate care such things require.** 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. **You should not expect individual responses to your posting from the professor as a matter of routine. Instead, most weeks will see 'global commentary' from the professor on the full range of student responses to the Forum questions.**

Also each week the professor will post discussion questions to the Supplemental Forum. **These questions are often drawn from the 'Reading and Study questions' for the week's readings. Although formal response to any of these questions 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 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 issues have first been aired in the student supplementary forum. The professor will not interfere with this forum, or evaluate individual postings except when necessary to moderate, or remind posters of the ordinary rules of academic exchange e.g. one writes in formally correct English. 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 various course activities are designed to be useful and educational on their own and also to be preparatory to the long writing assignments. You might reasonably expect that issues that arise in the Reading Questions, and in the various forums, may well appear again in the long writing assignments.

An additional 'private student discussion' forum will be made available for discussion of whatever topics the class finds interesting, or for class exploration of any questions they may have. **Your professor will not read this forum at all; the point is to provide a venue where students can discuss without worrying about professorial eyes peeking over their shoulders.** The professor will not even look at these postings except in response to specific charges of abuse (something which has never only very infrequently.)

Every week the same activities will be engaged in: reading, study questions, formal Required Forum postings, Supplemental and Student forum reading and posting. Success in the long writing assignments is almost always closely tied to a student's level of participation in the forums.