

# Ph 224: God and the Medieval Mind

Online session: Fall 2019

Dominican College

Instructor: Nathan Metzger, Ph.D. ([nathan.metzger@dc.edu](mailto:nathan.metzger@dc.edu))

Welcome to the study of philosophy, and welcome to the world of online learning! In this syllabus, I'll first talk about what this class is all about. Then, I'll explain what you need to do in order to perform well in this course.

## **How to contact me**

Since this class is online, all of our correspondence will be through email. Here's mine: [nathan.metzger@dc.edu](mailto:nathan.metzger@dc.edu) I'm also happy to Skype. Just give me an email and we can set up a time.

## **Here are the goals of this course**

- 1) To be able to understand a myriad of philosophical arguments from the medieval world on a variety of topics—especially those that concern the philosophy of nature and the existence and nature of God.
- 2) To be able to argue the merits of these medieval philosophical views through discussions and formal papers.
- 3) To consider ways in which medieval views on God, nature, and the soul challenge our modern ideas.

At the conclusion of this course, you'll not only have a better understanding of medieval philosophy, but also a better understanding of the (often unsaid) philosophical assumptions that shape the modern world.

Moreover, like every philosophy course, this one will hone your analytic skills, your reading ability, and your ability to state your ideas clearly.

## **What books do you need?**

You need three books for this course:

1. Edward Feser: Aquinas (Beginner's Guide) (ISBN: 1851686908)
2. Stratford Caldecott: Beauty for Truth's Sake: (ISBN: 1587432625)
3. Thomas Aquinas: The Shorter Summa, Peter Kreeft, ed. (ASIN: B003TO5EFU)
4. Remi Brague: Curing Mad Truths: Medieval Wisdom for the Modern Age ISBN: 0268105693

These books are available as regular, old-fashioned paper books (which I recommend getting), or as e-books.

**This is a GEC II Course**

As a course in GEC II, God and the Medieval Mind focuses on a significant theme characteristic of both the time period under study and our contemporary world by employing the perspective of at least one other discipline in addition to the principal one of the course.

### **What this class is all about?**

It is convenient to think of the medieval man as a backwards, credulous, illiterate, and naive imbecile, wallowing in his own filth, and cowering superstitiously and unwittingly before a powerful yet anti-rational Church that wielded total and maniacal control. And it is helpfully self-aggrandizing to think of the medieval city as a place that reeked of sewage and even the charred human flesh of scientists and 'free-thinkers'. And it is flattering to us moderns to think of medieval life as painful, cold, cruel, nasty, brutish, and short (and smelly). And it might additionally be comforting to think of the medieval world generally as one that had yet to find the glories of Reason (or at the very least, iPads).

But here's the thing: none of that is true. History is often much different than how we we'd like it to be.

The usual story of 'human progress' that we are told—one that inevitably involves describing the medieval world as far inferior to our own 'modern' world—is just so much propaganda. It's not true in the least. The Middle Ages were a time of immense intellectual advancement, scientific inquiry, technological prowess, and invention. The Medieval Era was also an age of fecund artistic expression and incredible musical, architectural, and literary creativity.

Yet all of these aspects of the enlightened medieval world came from the medieval man's ideas about God and the nature of reality. The medieval man shaped his world through particular philosophical and theological concepts, much like we shape our world through our 'modern' and secular concepts—even if we are unaware of them. For the medieval man, this meant, among other things, that the transcendent and the divine were not hobbies or afterthoughts or private affairs. Instead, their conception of God and their ideas about created reality informed their calendar, their worship, their morality, their workweek, their economy, and —more generally—how they thought about nature itself.

In this class, we are going to unpack some common medieval ideas about the nature of God and reality, and we'll use the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest philosophers of all time, to do so.

### **Online Study**

This is online course. You'll be able to find the course through Blackboard. The lectures of this class will be offered asynchronously, meaning that you won't ever be required to be online at a specific date or specific time to retrieve them. You'll also have a live (synchronous) discussion section every week. Depending on what section you are in,

you'll either do this on Tuesday at 1 pm or Wednesday at 6 pm. We'll using Skype for Business for these meetings. At the beginning of class, I will show you all how to join these discussions.

You have no commute for this class, and you can do very well in this course while sitting in a café in the Latin Quarter of old, medieval Paris (provided the café has good wifi!), lounging on the beach, or traveling with your friends and family. But this is not an independent study, and it's not a correspondence course. It's very important to remember that. This is a regular class, with students other than you taking it.

## **Format**

The course has 30 classes. They will launch every Monday and Thursday, right around noon. I will always post an announcement regarding the launch of a class. The first class will launch on Monday, August 26th. This is what every class will contain:

- 1) Introduction: To start every module, you'll see a video by me, wherein I give a short list of the goals for the class.
- 2) Video Lecture/Podcast: Every module will include some lecture materials. I'll put up the video up on youtube on a private setting. You'll be able to see them, but the rest of the world will not. Some of the lectures will be narrated powerpoint presentations (by me), and others will be informal talks (by me). Still others will consist entirely of lectures on youtube from famous medieval scholars. Most of the time, you'll be able to download a transcript of the lecture.
- 3) Other Videos: In addition to the video lecture, you'll sometimes have to watch various video clips (from youtube and such) that illuminate the ideas from the readings.

## **Discussions**

Every week, we'll have a live discussion. In the discussion sections, we'll have a chance to go over in more detail the material offered in the readings and lectures, and you'll have a chance to ask questions and offer your comments on the material. The discussion sections are meant to be informal: the agenda of any discussion will be dictated by the needs of the group.

## **Assignments**

Here are your assignments and how you are graded:

- 1) Weekly Discussion. Discussion forums serve as the attendance portion of your grade. If you are late to a discussion session, that's like being late to class.
- 3) Four Papers. This class is writing intensive. On purpose. The writing assignments are the most important part of this course, and the most relevant part of your overall grade. These papers should be at least 1,500 words long, and in response to a particular question (or questions) posed. I'll expect these papers to be properly proof-read, and I'll only be grading on the substantive issues addressed in the paper. Your grade will be based on how well you analyze, explicate, engage with, and argue with the arguments

of the philosophers discussed, as well as how well you argue for the thesis you present. This will require not just stating your own argument well, but also dealing charitably with counterarguments. You will have a chance to revise your papers, if you wish, for a better grade.

4) Midterm exam and Final Exam: The midterm will be given about halfway through the year (maybe a little before). The final exam will be given on December 9th. Both the midterm and the final will consist of multiple choice questions and short essays. The midterm will cover all of the material up until the last class, and the final exam will cover all of the material for the entire semester.

Breakdown of Your Grade:

Discussion (Class Participation): 10%

Midterm: 15%

Four Papers: 15% each = 60%

Final Exam: 15%

Please note that I root for everyone to do well in this class, and I look forward to working with you to make that happen. Also note that I use the Dominican Ledger when grading: I consider an A to represent outstanding work, and a B to represent good to very good work.

## **Statement on Academic Integrity**

Needless to say, plagiarism will not be tolerated. All plagiarized papers will result in the automatic grade of F. Please refer to Dominican College's Handbook to read in detail about the nature of plagiarism, as well as what constitutes academic integrity.

## **Late Policies**

Papers: We all have busy and stressful lives, and things come up at the last minute. It's always a bad idea to turn things in late, but if you need a couple extra days to turn in a paper during the thick of the semester, by all means take the extra time. However, papers that are more than a couple of days late will be penalized by a whole grade reduction.

Discussion: Successful conversations hinge on every student promptly responding by deadlines. Thus, frequent tardiness (or no-shows) on the discussion boards will result in a poor mark on that portion of your final grade.

End of the Year: All papers and revisions must be turned in by the evening of Monday, December 9th. This includes all papers and any revisions you might want to do, and your final exam. There is much to read and write during the course of the semester, so I do not recommend falling behind!

Everyone, let's have fun! Philosophy is difficult stuff, but it's also quite enjoyable, once you get the hang of it! Please don't hesitate to email me with any questions large or small.