Beyond the ‘God Hypothesis’

FALL SEMESTER 2014 – PHIL 451 / PHIL 651 / JDST 838

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Mondays, 3:30-5:20, HGS 401

Office Hours (C107): Tuesdays, 1pm-2:30pm (or by appointment)

Description:
Belief in God – taken as a kind of hypothesis about the existence of a super-empirical entity – has most recently come under attack by the likes of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and the other ‘new atheists’. But these attacks aren’t new – and they have just as often come from within theistic circles as from without.

This course will begin (in Part I) by looking at some of the reasons why theists have thought it deeply misguided to understand faith as a hypothesis and God as a supernatural being whose existence is hypothesised. We will then turn (in Part II) to examine a series of Christian and Jewish attempts to re-envisage what faith might be if not a hypothesis and what God might be if not an entity. Might faith, for example, be better understood as a pervasive sense of awe, or perhaps as the existential stance of ultimate concern, or perhaps as a certain religious manner of comportment in the world? And might God, for example, be better understood as the mystery of being itself, or perhaps as the ‘wholly other’, or perhaps even as a sacred absence? Finally (in Part III) we will consider what form certain central elements of religious life would take in this re-envisaged theism. If God is no longer understood as an entity, does prayer still make sense? What would it mean to put one’s trust in God? and could there still be such a thing as salvation?

We will approach these issues and questions through readings from modern Christian and Jewish thinkers – including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Simone Weil, and Martin Heidegger (on the Christian side), and Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, and Abraham Isaac Kook (on the Jewish side).

Each of these thinkers takes themselves to be recovering a kind of theism and religiosity far more profound than the ‘scientific religion’ that they are rejecting. At stake, therefore, is the question of the nature of true religion, or religion as it ought ideally to be. Almost invariably these writers see theism and religiosity as constituted not just by our beliefs and opinions, but by our whole mode of being. Therefore – with the help of some of the great theologians of the last few centuries – we will be thinking not only about the nature of God, faith, and religion, but equally about different fundamental ways that we might be oriented in the world and in our lives.

Readings:

We will be traversing many different thinkers and works, and no appropriate anthology yet exists – so I will post PDFs of the readings online, a few classes in advance, as we progress
The readings will range between about 40 and 60 pages per class (towards the shorter end of the range when the readings are difficult, and towards the longer end when they are easier).

Provisional summary of assignments and grading:

20% – for participation in the class discussions and/or in office hours

30% – for short written reflections on the week’s reading – in preparation for the class discussion – to be e-mailed to me by the evening before the relevant class each week. (These should only take about 30 minutes).

50% – for a final paper: 4,000 words, on a topic to be agreed with me; due at the end of the reading period.

Provisional Syllabus

PART I:
KANT’S CHALLENGE:
PROBLEMATIZING FAITH-AS-HYPOTHESIS & GOD-AS-ENTITY

Seminar 1 – Fri Aug 29th (moved forward from Mon Sep 1st, due to Labor Day)
Introduction: what is the God hypothesis?
No readings

Mon Sep 1st – Class moved to previous Friday due to Labor Day

Seminar 2 – Mon Sep 8th
Medieval foreshadowings of critiques of the God hypothesis: apophaticism
Moses Maimonides, Meister Eckhart, & The Cloud of Unknowing

Seminar 3 – Mon Sep 15th
Kant’s critique of the God hypothesis: the founding challenge of modern theology
Immanuel Kant

PART II:
RESPONDING TO KANT’S CHALLENGE:
RE-ENVISAGING FAITH & GOD

Seminar 4 – Mon Sep 22nd
Faith as a practical postulate
Friedrich Karl Forberg & Johann Gottlieb Fichte
Seminar 5 – Mon Sep 29th
Faith as a feeling of absolute dependence
Friedrich Schleiermacher

Seminar 6 – Mon Oct 6th
Faith as ultimate concern
Paul Tillich

Seminar 7 – Mon Oct 13th
Faith as receptivity to awe
Hillel Zeitlin & Abraham Joshua Heschel

Seminar 8 – Mon Oct 20th
Faith as being attracted and repelled by the mysterium
Rudolf Otto

October Recess – falls squarely between seminars 8 and 9, so no break in classes... Sorry!

Seminar 9 – Mon Oct 27th
Faith as the authentically lived religious life
Augustine of Hippo & Martin Heidegger

Seminar 10 – Mon Nov 3rd
Faith as love of the perfect one
Ludwig Wittgenstein

PART III:
LIVING THE RESPONSE:
RE-ENVISAGING RELIGIOUS LIFE

Seminar 11 – Mon Apr Nov 10th
Prayer
Simone Weil, Abraham Isaac Kook, & Thomas Merton

Seminar 12 – Mon Nov 17th
Trust and gratitude
Bachya ibn Paquda, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, & Rush Rhees

November Recess – Sat Nov 22nd to Sun Nov 30th

Seminar 13 – Mon Dec 1st
Salvation
Mordecai Kaplan & Dietrich Bonhoeffer