Concepts of God in Jewish Philosophy
Overview

Gabriel Citron (gabriel.citron@yale.edu)
Fall Semester 2013

Tue & Thu, 2:30-3:45pm, LC 211

Office Hours (C107), Tue & Thu, 4-5pm (or by appointment)

Description:
God stands as the central pillar of almost all Jewish – and indeed almost all theistic – philosophies. But what kind of being is God (if any kind of being at all)? Theologians and philosophers have given a vast array of very different answers to this question; and their different answers have shaped – and been shaped by – their different approaches to religion as a whole.

This course will investigate the different conceptions of God that have been put forward by Jewish philosophers and theologians from Philo of Alexandria onwards. These conceptions will range from God conceived as a qualityless transcendent Nothing (negative theology), to God conceived as an unlimited whole encompassing everything (panentheism); from God conceived as an unchanging and unaffected spiritual being (‘classical’ theism), to God conceived as a passionate and empathetic personal being (anthropopathic theism) – and many more... We will then broach the question of whether modernity poses any special challenges for the formation of conceptions of God, and we will consider the answers given by contemporary existentialist – or ‘relationist’ – thinkers.

In looking at these conceptions we will be drawing on such philosophers as: Sa’adia Ga’on, Moses Maimonides, Gersonides, Solomon Maimon, Benedict Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Abraham Isaac Kook, Emmanuel Levinas, and others.

For each of the conceptions of God that we study, we will ask: What is its content? What is its rationale? What kind of life does it call forth? What is its religious or spiritual significance? And how does it relate to the other possible conceptions of God? This course aims to broach one of the most fundamental issues in the philosophy of religion, while also introducing students to some of the key figures of the Jewish philosophical canon. It ought to be of interest to anyone concerned with the notion of God in any of the monotheistic traditions.

Readings:
No relevant textbook exists, and we will be traversing many different thinkers and works – so I will post PDFs of the readings online, a few lectures in advance, as the lectures progress (find them under the ‘Resources’ section, on ‘Classes*v2’). I will usually assign only between 15 and 20 pages of reading per lecture – but these texts will usually demand more than one reading.
Concepts of God in Jewish Philosophy
Syllabus

PART I – INTRODUCTION

Lecture 1 – Thu Aug 29th
Philosophising about God? Setting the scene...
No readings

Lecture 2 – Tue Sep 3rd
Ways to construct concepts of God
Brian Leftow, ‘Concepts of God’

Thu Sep 5th – No Lecture (Jewish New Year Festival)

Lecture 3 – Tue Sep 10th
Different kinds of belief in God & their lived significance
Antony Flew, RM Hare, & Basil Mitchell, ‘Theology and Falsification’

Lecture 4 – Thu Sep 12th
Materials used in constructing concepts of God
Sa’adia Ga’on, from The Book of Beliefs and Opinions

PART II – NEGATIVE THEOLOGY: GOD AS NOTHING

Lectures 5 – Tue Sep 17th (First Short Writing Assignment Assigned)
Sa’adia Ga’on’s negative theology – Part I
Aristotle, from Topics, and from Categories
Sa’adia Ga’on, from The Book of Beliefs and Opinions

Thu Sep 19th – No Lecture (Jewish Festival of Tabernacles – Part I)

Lectures 6 – Tue Sep 24th
Sa’adia Ga’on’s negative theology – Part II
GWF Hegel, from The Science of Logic
Sa’adia Ga’on, from The Book of Beliefs and Opinions

Thu Sep 26th – No Lecture (Jewish Festival of Tabernacles – Part II)
Lectures 7 – Tue Oct 1\textsuperscript{st} (First Short Writing Assignment Due)

\textbf{Maimonides’ negative theology}

Moses Maimonides, from \textit{The Guide for the Perplexed}

Lectures 8 – Thu Oct 3\textsuperscript{rd}

\textbf{God’s actions, and saving negative theology from atheism}

Moses Maimonides, from \textit{The Guide for the Perplexed}

Franz Rosenzweig, ‘A Note on Anthropomorphisms’

Lectures 9 – Tue Oct 8\textsuperscript{th}

\textbf{God’s actions and the Kabbalistic notion of ‘Sephirot’}

Moses Cordovero, from \textit{Orchard of Pomegranates},

and from \textit{Sefer Elimah Rabbati} (my translation)

\textbf{PART III – PANENTHEISM: GOD AS EVERYTHING}

Lecture 10 – Thu Oct 10\textsuperscript{th}

\textbf{God as the material out of which the universe is made}

Aristotle, from \textit{Physics}

Solomon Maimon, from \textit{The Hill of the Guide} (my translation),

and from \textit{The Yearning of Solomon} (my translation)

Lecture 11 – Tue Oct 15\textsuperscript{th}

\textbf{Spinoza’s panentheism}

Benedict Spinoza, from \textit{Ethics}

Lecture 12 – Thu Oct 17\textsuperscript{th} (Second Short Writing Assignment Assigned)

\textbf{A God so all-encompassing that nothing else exists}

Chaim Vital, from \textit{Etz Chaim} (my translation)

Schneur Zalman of Liadi, from \textit{The Gate of Unity and Faith}

Lecture 13 – Tue Oct 22\textsuperscript{nd}

\textbf{Can panentheism leave any room for moral distinctions?}

James Jacobson-Maisels, ‘Non-dual Judaism’

Jay Michaelson, from \textit{Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism}

Thu Oct 24\textsuperscript{th} – No Lecture: October Recess
PART IV – INTERLUDE:
WHAT IS THE POINT OF ‘PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY’?

Lectures 14 & 15 (double length) – Tue Oct 29th
What is the point of ‘philosophical theology’?
Arthur Lovejoy, from ‘On Some Conditions of Progress in Philosophical Inquiry’
Bertrand Russell, from ‘The Value of Philosophy’

PART V – THE ‘CLASSICAL’ REACTION:
GOD AS A KIND-OF PERSONAL BEING

Lectures 16 – Thu Oct 31st
An immutable and unaffected personal God
Gersonides, from The Wars of God

PART VI – THE ANTHROPATHIC REACTION:
GOD AS A VERY PERSONAL BEING

Lecture 17 – Tue Nov 5th (Second Short Writing Assignment Due)
A passionate and affectable, perfect personal God
Abraham Joshua Heschel, from The Prophets

Lectures 18 – Thu Nov 7th
An imperfect personal God
Yoram Hazony, ‘An Imperfect God’

PART VII – THE CORPOREALIST REACTION:
GOD AS A MATERIAL BEING

Lecture 19, 20, & 21 (triple length) – Tue Nov 12th
Manifestationalism, Incarnationalism, & Corporealism
Steven Schwarzschild, ‘Shekhinah and Eschatology’

PART VIII – INTERLUDE: THE CRISIS OF GOD IN MODERNITY?

Lecture 22 – Tue Nov 19th
Non-supernatural theism?
Mordecai Kaplan, from Judaism Without Supernaturalism
and ‘The God Idea in Judaism’
PART IX – EXISTENTIALISM: GOD WITHOUT THEOLOGY?

**Lectures 23** – Thu Nov 21st

*God as the Eternal Thou*

Martin Buber, from *I and Thou*

Tue Nov 26th – No Lecture (November Recess)

Thu Nov 28th – No Lecture (November Recess)

**Lecture 24** – Tue Dec 3rd

*God and the face of the Other*

Rowan Williams, from ‘Who Can We Trust?’

Jonathan Sacks, from ‘Finding God’

Emmanuel Levinas, from *Totality and Infinity*

and from ‘A Religion for Adults’

PART X – REFLECTION

**Lecture 25 & 26 (double length)** – Thu Dec 5th

*The significance of Judaism’s theological pluralism*

John Hick, from *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*

Wed Dec 11th – (Final Writing Assignment Due)