

ACU Short Course

God

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Overview

- Images and Imagination
- God, Creator of all things
- Does God really exist?
 - Objections, suspicions, and grounds for belief
- The Problem of Evil
- God and the Solution: Faith, Hope, Love

Engaging and Composing Reality

IMAGES AND IMAGINATION

The Swan—Mary Oliver

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air -An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned into the bondage of its wings;
A snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music - like the rain pelting the trees - like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds -
A white cross
Streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings
Like the stretching light of the river?
*And did you feel it, in your heart,
how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?*

Discuss

How were you taught to imagine God?

What kinds of beliefs about God or a higher power did you grow up with?

GOD, CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

Chaos and Order

And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name, and the primeval Apsû who begat them, and chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both, their waters were mingled together, and no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen, when of the gods none had been called into being.

Chaos and Order

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw how good the light was.

The Goodness of Creation

Then God said, “Let...”

“...there be a dome in the middle of the waters

“...the water under the sky be gathered”

“...the earth bring forth vegetation”

“...us make man in our image, after our likeness.”

God saw how **good** it was

God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good

Humanity, Savage and Slave

“I will take blood and fashion
bone. I will establish a savage,
‘man’ shall be his name.
Truly, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the
service of the gods,
that they might be at ease!
The ways of the gods I will
artfully alter.”

Imago Dei:

Stewardship and Harmony

Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”

I believe in God...
Creator of heaven and earth

- God as Creator of all that is
 - *creatio ex nihilo, creation out of nothing*
- God as relational
 - source of order and harmony
 - intimately present to human affairs
- God as giver of gifts, kind and merciful

Objections, Suspicions, and Grounds for Belief

DOES GOD REALLY EXIST?

Three Basic Positions

- Theism: *“I believe in God”*
- Atheism: *“God doesn’t exist”*
- Agnosticism: *“I really don’t know”*

Reflect and Discuss

How would you describe your own stance on the question of God's existence?

- a. A firmly committed person of faith who rarely, if ever, doubts God's existence
- b. A committed person of faith who still has a few doubts from time to time
- c. A person who has struggled with this question and is not sure what to believe
- d. A person who thinks that the question really isn't that important
- e. A person who has come to the conclusion that most likely (or definitely), there is no God

Objections and Suspicions

Masters of Suspicion: Atheism and Antitheism

- But God **makes us subservient**, stifling our creativity and will to assertiveness and self-expression (Nietzsche)
- Belief in God becomes a **psychic crutch**, an infantile recourse to safety and security (Freud)
- Belief in God ideologically **maintains the status quo** in an unjust society. Religion is the “opiate of the masses” (Marx)

Objections and Suspicions

Experiencing the human condition. Not just an intellectual problem...

- The absurdity of existence and the terrible sufferings of the innocent (Camus)
- We define ourselves by our choices and decisions (Sartre)

New Atheism

“It is time we recognized that the only thing that permits human beings to collaborate with one another in a truly open-ended way is their willingness to have their beliefs modified by new facts. Only openness to evidence and argument will secure a common world for us. Nothing guarantees that reasonable people will agree about everything, of course, but the unreasonable are certain to be **divided by their dogmas**. This spirit of mutual inquiry is the very antithesis of religious faith” (Sam Harris, *End of Faith*)

Considerations

- Impossible to disprove the existence of God (or anything really)
- Atheism and Agnosticism can arise for many reasons...
 - concern for social justice
 - moral failures and scandals of believers
 - misunderstandings of religion(s)
 - the social and cultural milieu

Grounds for Belief

The Experience of Mystery

- Paul Tillich: God as the ground of being, the depth in things; being grasped by Ultimate Concern
- Karl Rahner: the Absolute as the horizon of consciousness, the Mystery at the fringes of experience

Grounds for Belief

Our own questioning leads to the question of God

- The trustworthiness of reality
- The power of conscience
- The experience of love and beauty
 - Bernard Lonergan: “being in love unrestrictedly”

Grounds for Belief

The lives and examples of holy people

Experiences of forgiveness

Experiences of being loved

Ontological Argument

St Anselm (1033-1109)

- God cannot not exist
- God is necessary being
- God is “that than which no greater can be thought”
 - *Fails to distinguish essence and existence*

The Ontological Argument

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

- But what we think need not exist
- God's essence far surpasses, transcends the reach of the human mind:
 - "...because we do not know God's essence, his existence is not self-evident to us, but needs to be demonstrated through those things that are more known to us [i.e., God's created effects]"

Aquinas' 5 Ways

1. Motion: “everything that is moved is moved by another”
2. Efficient Causality
3. Possibility and Necessity
4. Degrees of Perfection
5. The Ordering of Things

Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 2, a.3

Science and Natural Knowledge of God

“Theorists may, some day, be able to write down fundamental equations governing physical reality. But physics can never explain what ‘breathes fire’ into the equations, and actualizes them in a real cosmos” (Martin Rees, *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces the Shape the Universe*)

- the real distinction between essence and existence
- the problem of contingency

Reflect and Discuss

Which of the positions (e.g., objection, suspicion, or ground for belief) most closely resembles or aligns with your own position?

Which of the opposite positions do you find the most interesting, compelling, frightening, or difficult...and why?

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)

“Created in God's image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments,’ which allow us to attain certainty about the truth. These ‘ways’ of approaching God from creation have a **twofold point of departure**: the physical world, and the human person” (CCC no. 31)

CCC

“**The world:** starting from movement, becoming, contingency, and the world's order and beauty, one can come to a knowledge of God as the origin and the end of the universe.

“As St. Paul says of the Gentiles: For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (CCC no. 32)

CCC

“**The human person:** with his [sic] openness to truth and beauty, his [sic] sense of moral goodness, his [sic] freedom and the voice of his [sic] conscience, with his [sic] longings for the infinite and for happiness, man [sic] questions himself about God's existence. In all this he [sic] discerns signs of his [sic] spiritual soul. The soul, the ‘seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material,’ can have its origin only in God” (CCC no. 33)

CCC

“The **world**, and **man**, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end. Thus, in different ways, man can come to know that there exists a reality which is the first cause and final end of all things, a reality ‘that everyone calls God’”
(CCC 34).

Why do bad things happen to good people?

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Atheist Objection

Supreme goodness and omnipotence are incompatible with the facts of evil and suffering in the world

Why do we suffer?

- If God causes all that exists in the universe, then why are children born with painful biological deformations and life-threatening illnesses?
 - Why do good people die in car accidents when their lives are contributing so much to so many people around them?
 - Why are there tsunamis and cyclones?
 - Why are people able to become so desperate and confused in their thinking that they are willing to hurt others in terrible and undeserved ways?
- *If God truly governs the universe, why is any of this even possible?*

“Ambush Theology”

1. What goes around comes around. People who suffer deserve what they get in God’s universe
2. God tests people with afflictions, often to bring about a greater good
3. The terrible things that happen to us lead to a “better place.” Rejoice in the face of your suffering

Causes of Suffering

1. Moral failure. Sinful choices.
2. Incomplete state of the universe. Our world develops gradually, with freedom and risk.

✧ God does not will or cause our suffering

God and Faith

- Solution to the problem of evil in history
 - Good news is that God is with us and cares for us
 - God wills our healing and wholeness, not our pain and suffering
 - *Jesus as a lived example*: accepting suffering and absorbing human violence, only to give love in return, to free us from violence...to save us

Discuss

- Have you ever heard “ambush theology” in a situation in your life?
- What do you think of the idea that God wills only our healing and the fullness of life for us?
- What questions do you still have?

transcendence/immanence

IMAGINING THE DIVINE

When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son....It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms but they did not realize that it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness with ties of love I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them....(Hosea 11)

Thank You

THE END