

SYLLABUS

Cognitive Science of Religion and Morality **PHL 132 [CCI, CZ, EI, R, W]** **Güven Güzeldere**

Study Abroad • Advanced Special Topics in Philosophy **Duke in Turkey Program – Spring 2008**

COURSE DESCRIPTION

PHL 132 [CCI, CZ, EI, R, W]; cross-listed in Cultural Anthropology, Religion, Comparative Area Studies, Turkish] offers a review of the recent theories of the mind in the cognitive science literature as they pertain to the nature of belief in God, religious practices, and moral attitudes.

In the first part of the course, we will look at whether cognitive science and evolutionary psychology can shed light on questions about the prevalence of religious experiences, beliefs, cultures, and institutions. Is the belief in God the result of a natural proclivity that was furnished into the human species within its evolutionary history as a byproduct of some other selected trait? Is there a module in the brain that underwrites the acquisition and maintenance of religious and moral beliefs, on a par with what Noam Chomsky suggested for our linguistic capacities –an innate “language acquisition device”?

In the second part, we will examine how these recent theories in cognitive science bear on deep-rooted questions in the philosophy of religion and ethics, such as the problem of evil, the problem of the plurality of religions, the belief in an eternal soul and an afterlife, specifically within the three monotheistic religions of the Middle East, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. How do these three religions differ in their formulations of such questions, and in the solutions they put forth in response to them? Are they equally amenable to explanations proposed by cognitive scientific accounts or are there essential differences among them? This part of the course will also involve intermittent visits to the historical sites of worship in Istanbul and conversations on these questions with local representatives of the three religions (the deputy chief Rabbi of Istanbul, a Bishop of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy, and the head Imam of the Lalei Mosque complex).

Finally, we will examine to what extent the ingredients of human culture as they pertain to religious practices and moral behavior are shared in the biological world of non-human animals? How, if at all, is the neuroscientific work on extraordinary experiences relevant to religious experience? Does a naturalized account of human moral behavior undermine the religion-based accounts of morality?

This is a research (R) and intensive writing (W) designated course, taught exclusively in the Duke in Istanbul semester program. It will involve several writing assignments through the semester, and a significant research project that makes use of the local resources in Istanbul at the end of the term.

COURSE SITE: blackboard.duke.edu

Always check the Blackboard course site for most up-to-date and detailed information on assignments, deadlines, etc.

COURSE LOGISTICS

This is a Research (R) and writing-intensive (W) designated course. As such, there will be a large research component in it which will culminate in a major final paper. This paper can also be used as the first step towards a senior Honors Thesis, if there is a desire to do so. In addition, there will be weekly writing assignments throughout the semester.

COURSE MATERIALS

Peter L. Berger: *The Sacred Canopy* (1967)

E.T. Lawson & R. N. McCauley: *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (1990)

Pascal Boyer: *Religion Explained* (2001)

Scott Atran: *In Gods We Trust* (2002)

Saba Mahmood: *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005)

J. D. Proctor, ed.: *Science, Religion and Human Experience* (2005)

Daniel Dennett: *Breaking the Spell* (2006)

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Course Reader

Recommended Books on Turkey & Istanbul:

- *Blue Guide to Turkey*. W. W. Norton & Co., 2001.
- *Time-Out Guide to Istanbul*. Time-Out Publications, 2004.
- *Knopf Istanbul MapGuide*. Knopf Publishing, 2003.
- *Lonely Planet Turkish Phrase Book*. Lonely Planet Publications, 1990.

GRADING

- Six positions pieces to readings: 6 x 5 = 30 points.
- Class presentation/debate in one of six designated topics: 15 points.
- Pre-excursion presentations: 5 points.
- General cours and en-route group discussion participation: 10 points.
- Term project/paper & presentation: 40 points.

[Total: 100points]

Please note that attendance to every class meeting is mandatory and no late assignments will be accepted.