

THEORIES OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION COURSES AT THE FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY: DIDACTIC GOALS AND METAPHYSICAL IMPORTANCE

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ABSTRACT:

This text presents an overview of how the academic field of theories of religion and philosophy of religion is taught at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius”, focusing on the didactic aims and learning outcomes of the courses across the BA, MA, and PhD levels. This overview provides a brief account of curricular design in an area that examines the sacred, the divine, the ineffable, and the metaphysical dimensions of religious life, thus contributing to the metaphysical core of the degree in philosophy, and to the pluriperspective nature of the interdisciplinary profiles.

At the BA level, *Theories of religion* introduces students to major theories on the origin and nature of religion, covering concepts such as the sacred, myth, ritual, magic, and the formation of *homo religiosus*. It emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches by introducing anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. *Philosophy of religion* builds on this foundation by addressing central metaphysical questions concerning the existence and nature of God, the limits of religious language (the field of negative theology), and the problem of evil in religion, while fostering analytical, comparative, and interpretive skills. It is also shown how an adapted elective version accommodates students from non-philosophical disciplines (archeology, art history etc.).

At the MA level, *Theories of the nature of religion* deepens students’ analytical-synthetical and hermeneutical abilities, enabling them to critically engage with paradigms and methodological assumptions. *History of the notion of God* offers a genealogical study of the concept of divinity, training students to analyse and synthesize complex metaphysical ideas. Courses offered within interdisciplinary programs (Interreligious studies, Religiousstudies) provide foundational competencies for students without extensive philosophical background.

The PhD courses, *Philosophy and religion* and *Religion and morality*, expand the study of metaphysics, methodology, and value systems. They cultivate pluriperspective analysis, conceptual reflexivity, and autonomous research skills, addressing topics such as theories of divinity, theodicy, moral heteronomy and autonomy, and the evolution of ethical and symbolic systems.

Together, these courses articulate the central role of philosophy of religion within philosophical education, highlight its interdisciplinary relevance, and demonstrate its importance for understanding human search for meaning across cultural, symbolic, and metaphysical domains.

Key words: *theories of religion, philosophy of religion, metaphysics, sacred, God*

Introduction

The concerns of the disciplines addressed in this paper, through the courses *Theories of religion* and *Philosophy of religion* extend into the realms of the transcendent and the ineffable, the sacred and the divine. They examine the presupposed and the reconstructed, the non-rational and the incommunicable; the mythical, ritual, cultic, and magical; they consider the sacred from a profane vantage point, and the divine from a human (limited) perspective.

The following text does not constitute a research article, but rather an account of how the academic area of philosophy of religion is taught at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University 'Ss. Cyril and Methodius'. It offers an overview of the didactic goals and learning outcomes, based on the thematic structures of the relevant courses. Understood as a systematic inquiry into the concepts, experiences, and practices associated with religious life, an inquiry that inevitably engages metaphysical reflection on notions such as the sacred and the divine, the field is approached via two fundamental curricular pathways: *Theories of religion* (and versions thereof) and *Philosophy of religion* (and versions thereof), present at all three levels of study (BA, MA and PhD).

Within this framework, this overview will present the main didactic objectives and corresponding challenges of the undergraduate courses *Theories of religion* and *Philosophy of religion*, obligatory within the BA degree program in philosophy at the Institute for philosophy. It will then situate the MA (second-cycle) courses *History of the notion of God* and *Theories of the nature of religion* within the broader metaphysical corpus of the program in Theoretical philosophy, and briefly examine the compulsory course *Theories of the nature of religion* from the interdisciplinary MA program in Religious studies. It will also be indicated how the material of *Philosophy of religion*, when offered as an elective, is adapted to the specific academic needs of students from other academic profiles in the humanities.

The main concepts of the two PhD courses, *Philosophy and religion* and *Religion and morality*, offered at the Institute for philosophy as part of the University's doctoral school will be mentioned. The overarching aim is to clarify the fundamental position of these courses within philosophy, to underscore their interdisciplinary relevance, and to demonstrate their importance for contemporary education.

The didactic goals of the BA courses (*Theories of religion*, *Philosophy of religion*, *Philosophy of religion-elective*)

In the BA program in Philosophy at the Institute for philosophy, there are two obligatory (6 credits) courses pertaining to the area of philosophy of religion: *Theories of religion* (IV semester) and *Philosophy of religion* (V semester).¹

¹ Since the introduction of ECTS in 2004 at the Faculty of Philosophy, and thus the need for single-semester courses, *Philosophy of religion* was first being taught as *Philosophy of religion 1* and *2* (in the fifth and sixth semesters); after the first restructuring of the programs, *Philosophy of religion* was relabeled as *Theories of religion*, as this title fully suited the course's contents and objectives. After the second restructuring and the forced merger of two-semester courses into one-semester ones, the two courses were merged into *Philosophy of religion*, which encompassed the

The main didactic goal of the course Theories of religion² is the general acquaintance with the theories of the origin and the nature of religion as one of the fundamental human phenomena. This requires the following learning objectives. The students are expected to acquire and maintain a grasp on the different theories of the origin and the nature of religion (animatism; animism/animistic theory; totemism/totemistic theory, the discarded premise of natur(al)ism). Students are encouraged to identify and discuss the sources and functions of religion, as well as the role of religion in the formation of culture and the foundation of custom law and social institutions. The significance of religion in the formation of the identity of homo religiosus and of man's position in the world as a key anthropological concept is studied through examples of ethnology, cultural anthropology and sociology of religion. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for the appropriate construction of concepts and mechanism in the broader field of Theories of religion as a philosophical discipline and as a university course.

Particular attention is dedicated to the theories of the sacred as the basis for religious experience and cultic organization (in both the positive and the negative cult), covering the sacred-profane dichotomy, the relationship between mana as a sacred force and the concept of taboo, the concentration of the sacred in totemic mana, and the various presentations and mechanism of sacrificial rituals.

Students are required to read up on several approaches to myths, and focus on the theories of the status and significance of myths as sacred tales. They are expected to discuss the importance of myth in archaic religions, identify the key features of sacred mythopoesis, as well as the main motifs in cosmogonic myths, some etiological myths and myths on the end of the world. As a creative practice students are required to construct myths using writing prompts, but remain fully aware that this falls under the category of modern mythopoesis, and not the realm of the sacred. Students are required to identify and discuss the importance of rituals in the religious cult (piacular rituals, mourning rituals etc.), and identify remnants of (sacred) rituals in contemporary events, such as celebrations. Students are to address and discuss the mechanisms of sacred (numinous) experience and the problems of the ineffability of religious sentiments as well as the limits of religious languages (this also serves as a foundation for the in-depth study of negative theology in the Philosophy of religion course). Some attention is paid to the profane equivalents of the experience of the numinous, with references to aesthetics (the category of the sublime), and psychology (the uncanny).

material from both courses in only one, which meant reduced teaching hours, overload for individual study, and the inevitable decrease in results. The next restructuring resulted in the current, much more comprehensive and suitably intensive courses Theories of religion in the fourth semester and Philosophy of religion in the fifth semester. The pace, the workload, and the position of the courses within the degree ensure an efficient overview of the material, drawing also from the students' knowledge from the courses they have already read and passed, such as Ontology, Medieval and renaissance philosophy and Byzantine philosophy.

² To avoid burdening the text with references of the study programs and course programs, the links are all supplied in the Bibliography section of this text. For a focus on the course contents, see Todorovska 2023.

All the courses mentioned in this overview are also offered in English. However, the course contents and didactic goals require that at least 50% of the readings must be in Macedonian.

A portion of the course is dedicated to the persistence of myths and rituals through their transformations. Therefore, students are encouraged to examine the formalistic theories of (ordinary, nonsacred) folktales, acquaint themselves with indexes of folktale motifs and recognize such motifs in the art and the (pop)culture with which they familiarize themselves, including myths in art, rituals in performing arts, and the ritualisation in quotidian, profane life. The decline of the importance of the sacred and the problem of the displacement of the numinous (the sacred) from the contemporary (post)secular world is examined, and students are required to ponder the disenchantment and reenchantment of the world through endeavors that are not necessarily or strictly religious.

Students are required to identify and examine the mechanisms of sympathetic magic; the methods of magic as a sort of protoscience, and examine the relationship between magic and science, and between magic and religion, focusing on the similarities and differences in practical actions of (obvious) causal relationships, and the difference between instant and delayed gratification. Finally, the students are expected to understand and discuss the ways or opportunities of believing and acting religiously in the contemporary world, the ways of communicating faith, and the importance of intra- and interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

The course objectives (competences/learning outcomes) of the course Philosophy of religion are centered around the acquaintance with the foundational metaphysical questions about the existence and the nature of God, as a central notion of most religious systems.

The main lines of inquiry are around several essential metaphysical issues, such as the development of the notion of divinity and the main characteristics of monotheism and of the philosophical idea of God; the approaches to the existence of God; the vast area of God's nature as incomprehensible, uncircumscribable, ineffable, covered by the field of negative theology; the metaphysical problem of evil and the methods of theodicy, including various approaches to the origin and the problem of evil (evil incarnate, ideas on devastating transgression and un/forgiveness, the in/compatibility of evil with the concept of (a good) God etc.).

Students are to gain strategic competences for the identification, analysis, and critical approaches to the different concepts of the divine/God, as well as to deepen and perfect their capabilities for comparative analysis of different philosophical and theological systems, themes, and issues. The course focuses on topics such as the history of the notion of God, from the initial ancient reflections about nature and the divine, to the contemporary philosophical and theological approaches to the nature of God.

The arguments about the existence of God (ontological, cosmological, teleological, the argument from moral order) are studied through some of their main expounders, which aligns with previously attained knowledge from the courses on medieval and byzantine philosophy (benefitting, where possible, from segments of individual study of Arabic and Jewish medieval topics), and the concomitant course on modern philosophy towards German classical idealism. The arguments against the existence of God (or a good God) are analysed through the area of

theodicy, from the world of the *Bible* to the contemporary genocides we witness on a daily basis. Various types or approaches of theodicy are analysed, and the students are expected to be able to confidently explain the sensitive issues about evil in the world to non-philosophers concerned with (unjust) suffering, as well as to aptly argue concepts of theodicy on a higher academic level, combining issues from the geo-political and social climate they are witnessing.

A major part of the course is dedicated to the problems of (un)knowability and ineffability of God, building upon the problems of the limits of religious language and the inability to communicate the numinous and the mystical experience from the previous course, Theories of religion. The negative theology in the Platonist tradition is thoroughly covered by reading and presenting the selected works/passages from the main authors of the tradition who employ apophatic methods, and discussing the intricacies of religious language and counterontological concepts.

This course offers a foundation on the issues pertaining to the area of the theories on the origin and the nature of religion as one of the core human phenomena, adapted to the needs of the profile/program. The course's name is "Philosophy of religion", but the contents much more closely resemble those contained in the course Theories of religion from the program at the Institute for philosophy, as students at other institutes are not expected to have a strong metaphysical basis or knowledge of the history of philosophy. The interdisciplinarity and multiperspectivity of the area of study is suitable for students from other profiles, as it offers a possibility to combine information from different fields, skills from different profiles, and learning outcomes beneficial for the formation of – in this case – art historians and archeologists.

The students are expected to gain some basic knowledge on the different theories of the origin and the nature of religion; understand and contextualize the sources and the functions of religion within the scope of their degree; and ponder the role of religion historically, and as an important metaphysical and cultic endeavor of man in general. Students are encouraged to utilize their knowledge of archeology, art history and the classics (ancient history, mythology, epigraphy, poetics etc.) in order to approach the theories on myth, ritual, and the sacred in a pluriperspective manner. They are also encouraged to ponder the persistence of the mythical and the ritual throughout art and popular culture, and to notice and explain the decline of the (significance of) sacred in the contemporary world.

Depending on the circumstances (number of students and their educational needs and preferences), the program is adjusted upon agreement with the group, in order to make the material as useful as possible for their degree. This includes intensified use of real-life examples from their studies in archeology and art history, a focus on sacred items and meanings in the material culture, and on the status and importance of religious art.

The MA level courses – learning outcomes and methodological significance

The course Theories of the nature of religion (I semester, elective), offers an in-depth acquaintance with the basic approaches to religion and concepts of religion, as one of the

fundamental human phenomena, present throughout the entire history of humankind. The course contents and learning objectives draw from and build upon the BA course Theories of religion. The competences gained from this course align with the general purpose of the graduate degree in theoretical philosophy, thus focusing on the development of analytical-synthetic thinking, critical approaches to primary and secondary literature, hermeneutical sensibility, and social and historical awareness.

The course allows the students to revisit these anthropological foundations from Theories of religion, but now more critically, comparing paradigms, evaluating the methodological assumptions of each theory, and contextualizing the issues in their own (potential) academic development and research. This course provides a pluriperspective foundation for further research, as it introduces and trains students in multiple hermeneutical traditions (anthropological, phenomenological, sociological, theological etc.), and enables them to understand religion in its complexity, as a dynamic field of meaning-production. This pluralism, grounded in theory, should it be further pursued in other areas/disciplines/career elements, enables interreligious dialogue, as it facilitates the understanding of the differences and similarities in various belief systems.

The course History of the Notion of God (II semester, obligatory) offers a specific historical articulation of metaphysical thought in Western philosophy on one of the main problems of philosophy, theology, and generally, human existence, as its essence is historical-conceptual. It traces the intellectual genealogy of divinity, or the evolution of the metaphysical idea of ultimate reality, from mythic archetypes to abstract conceptions of Being.

As with the previous course, the contents and learning objectives of this one are contingent upon the BA course Philosophy of religion, as it requires an excellent level of comprehension of the approaches to the nature of God which have already been covered, in order to construct an independent study plan on chosen concepts of the divine/God. The students are expected to perfect their capabilities for comparative analysis of different philosophical and theological approaches and place them in a broader philosophical context, in order to facilitate critical thinking and independent research on this very elusive and utterly complex metaphysical topic. The students are expected to excel at understanding, comparison, analysis and synthesis of the different concepts of God (personal vs. non-personal; God's transcendence and immanence through mediatory figures; theophanies and other forms of access to God's manifestation). They are encouraged to articulate and critique the different approaches and doctrines, and place them as aptly and as possible within their chosen areas of academic research. The course is such a key part of the Theoretical philosophy degree, because it provides a template for studying how abstract concepts evolve, a skill transferable to any genealogy of ideas.

The course Theories of the existence of God is offered as an elective on the University list of elective subjects. This course covers the various arguments for the existence of God (ontological, cosmological, teleological, etc) and the focus is tailored to the specific needs of the students.

The main aim of the course Philosophy of religion (II semester, obligatory) as part of the MA degree in Interreligious studies (2018, both 60 and 120 credits) is the acquaintance with the theories of the nature of religion, as, although the title is “Philosophy of religion”, the nature of the interdisciplinary program limits the expectations about the metaphysical (ontological and religious) training of the students, and the course corresponds to the Theories of the nature of religion from the Theoretical philosophy program.

Some topics concerning God are approached, but in a manner less profound than at the courses at the Institute for philosophy. Students are expected to gain knowledge about the relation between homo religiosus and the object of belief (however it may present); the development and functioning of religious cults, and about the ideas and rules of various rites (such as sacrifice, passage, mourning etc); as well as about the relation between magic and religion. The students coming from areas of study different than philosophy are encouraged to use their original disciplines as much as possible in their study of philosophy of religion, and to share various, even conflicting views through a pluriperspective approach. The students are expected to form ideas about the development of the concepts of divinity, and to contextualize these ideas within their original profiles (degrees obtained) and their research aspirations at this program. Thus, each specific profile is to use the subject-matter in the most appropriate manner for their own academic progress and future career.

The contents and the didactic goals of course Theories of the nature of religion (I semester, obligatory) as part of the MA degree in Religious studies (2023) are similar to those of the course Theories of the nature of religion at the Institute for philosophy, keeping in mind that not all students have as strong as a philosophical basis as their Theoretical philosophy peers. This course is a key compulsory course for the interdisciplinary program, expected to equip the students with the necessary analytical-synthetical skills, critical thinking approaches, and multidisciplinary openness in order to best build their profile through the subsequent obligatory, and the many available elective courses.

The PhD courses: learning outcomes and metaphysical significance

The objectives (competences/learning outcomes) of the Philosophy and religion course are: acquirement of profound knowledge of the different theories of the nature and the origin of religion and of philosophy; development of abilities for a pluriperspective analysis of the similarities and differences between religion and adjacent phenomena; development of an understanding of the relations and divergences between religion and philosophy, while developing abilities to critically analyse the position of the homo religiosus in relation to homo metaphysicus and homo symbolicus; deepening of the knowledge of certain important problems from the area of the philosophy of religion (concepts of divinity, the relationship between the religious man and the religious object; elements from the history of the notion of God, key aspects of theories of the existence of God, the significance of the problem of evil – with an in-depth research based on individual academic

preferences and the specific program expectations); further development of the capabilities for the proper use of analytico-synthetic, comparative and phenomenological methods in the research of the religious phenomena and the issues of the philosophy of religion.

The benefits of the course Philosophy and religion are manifold. The critical use of analytic–synthetic, comparative, and phenomenological methods that foster nuanced argumentation and interpretive depth further enriches the students' intellectual abilities, which is helpful in the long run. By deepening the knowledge of theories of religion, this course gives students (as researchers) a meta-framework for analysing belief, ritual, or transcendence in any cultural system (useful for anthropology, art history, sociology, literary studies). Through the emphasis of pluriperspective analysis, it models the kind of conceptual pluralism needed to navigate global, intercultural research, suitable for any type or academic, corporate or independent career the students might choose in the future. The nuanced approach to homospeciations such as homo religiosus, metaphysicus, symbolicus encourages anthropological and semiotic self-awareness, and the ability to interpret complex symbolic systems. The topics from the research areas around the notion of God, theodicy, and post-secularism provide templates for learning about the evolution of abstract concept and equips students to think beyond the religion/secularism divide that underpins much of modern theory and points of contention, which is crucial for contemporary cultural analysis.

The objectives for the course Religion and morality are: acquiring knowledge of the different aspects of the relationship between religion and morals; analysis of the development of morality within religion, and of the foundation of religion in morality (heteronomous and autonomous morality in relation to the collective religious functioning); research of the sources of morality and of religious behaviour; acquaintance with systems of Western thought in which morality and religion (or some elements thereof) have an operational role; contextualization of evil in its many forms and manifestations, from early demonology to contemporary atrocities (crimes against humanity, ecocide, nuclear proliferation etc.). By facilitating the understanding of the sources of morality and of religion, the ontological status of ethical categories, and the role of religion in moral decision-making, the course Religion and morality offers foundational skills for research in religion, ethics, jurisprudence, political theory, social and cultural anthropology, cultural studies, and many more areas. The focus on heteronomy vs. autonomy offers an essential philosophical distinction for any further study of normativity, authority, ideology, while the comparative analysis of moral systems trains hermeneutics skills and historical and social sensibility applied across epochs, worldviews and frameworks. The comparative aspect of morality and religion engages the pressing question of value systems in plural societies, which is vital for sociology, cultural policy, and applied ethics. As with the Philosophy and religion course, the independent historico-comparative research further develops the students' academic capabilities. Furthermore, understanding moral and religious structures enhances social and intercultural research competences.

These two courses are intentionally as broad as possible, to allow for as much liberty and space in self-determination in terms of research-topics and in-depth study of chosen themes and

issues. Their general functions are focused on the need to train conceptual reflexivity, essential in philosophy; the need to provide theoretical depth for interdisciplinarity (combining philosophy, theology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, sociology, literature etc.), crucial for PhD students interested in intersectional, pluriperspective issues; the role of methodological literacy, as they foster the intensive use of comparative, phenomenological, analytical, and hermeneutical modes of inquiry, transferable to other research domains; the need to cultivate autonomous research practice, as they are conceived and designed as independent study modules in the most part. In these two doctoral courses, students learn to articulate the reasons why their research work matters in the broader human search for meaning; to situate their research within long intellectual lineages; to build an independent framework; and ultimately, to navigate the moral, symbolic, metaphysical and practical dimensions of knowledge itself.

Conclusion

The Theories of religion course shows the metaphysics of humanity before it becomes systematized into philosophy; the cultic actions of religious communities and the mythical thinking open to the enchantment of the world; it shows a shared predisposition to something greater and more powerful, as well as the common thirst for community, security, meaning, self-affirmation. It shows where metaphysics begins and how to frame being human from the aspect of religious awe and engagement. The course Philosophy of religion shows how metaphysics becomes self-aware; it perfectly illustrates the self-reflexivity of philosophy. These courses contribute to the metaphysical backbone of the degree in Philosophy (on both BA and MA levels), and the multidisciplinary focal point of the graduate degree in religious studies. They address ontological concerns (what exists and how?); gnoseological concerns (how can the sacred or God be known, experienced, communicated?); axiological concerns (why does it matter?); they encompass knowledge of themes and issues from several adjacent disciplines, and map out important aspects of the question about what it means to be human.

The courses on all three levels of study introduce the students to religion as a foundational human phenomenon, a symbolic matrix that produces meaning, order, action and value, and encourage them to investigate complex issues from the areas of religiology, ontology, ethics, aesthetics, psychology, meta-mythology and literature. Philosophy of religion illuminates the unavoidable human search for the universal, the absolute, the extraordinary, as well as the meticulous, methodical engagement to find and create meaning. Through the brief overview of the didactic goals of these courses it was shown that they are structurally central for any metaphysical study of being human, as wonderful and as excruciating it may be.

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