

PHIL 391
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
SPRING 2026

Professor: M.G. Piety
E-mail: mgpiety@drexel.edu
Meeting hours: By appointment.

PROFESSOR PIETY

M. G. Piety, B.A. Philosophy, Earlham College; M.A. Philosophy, Bryn Mawr College; Ph.D. Philosophy, McGill University. Lecturer, Philosophy of Religion, McGill, 1990. Fulbright Fellow, Denmark, 1990-91. Visiting Scholar, Department of Søren Kierkegaard Research, University of Copenhagen, 1990-1998.

Professor Piety has published both popular and scholarly articles on subjects as diverse as business ethics, the philosophy of sport and Russian literature. She has lectured on philosophy in the United States, Canada, England, Germany, Denmark and Norway. She translated Kierkegaard's [*Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*](#) for Oxford University Press (2009). She is also the author of [*Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology*](#) (Baylor, 2010) and *Fear and Dissembling: The Copenhagen Kierkegaard Controversy* (Gegensatz Press, forthcoming).

Professor Piety maintains three popular blogs: [*The Life of the Mind*](#), [*Flash Philosophy*](#), and [*Piety on Kierkegaard*](#).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

There's been a resurgence of religious fundamentalism in recent years. This reflects what some have referred to as "the spiritual crisis of modernity." The modern worldview tries to demystify reality, to reduce human experience to something purely physical. A merely physical view of reality leaves little room, however, for ideas such as good and evil, mystery and moral or spiritual experience. Yet these things have not only been central to human existence throughout history, they appear to be *essential* to it.

The persistence of spirituality has led many to reject the modern world view in favor of much older and, in many instances, simplistic world views that, despite their shortcomings, will at least provide room for spirituality. Fortunately, religion is far more complex than its various fundamentalist instantiations. There are many interpretations of religion that can answer the current spiritual crisis without requiring a rejection of modernity. We will explore some of these more promising and challenging interpretations of religion and religious questions. Our objective

will be to come to a better and richer understanding of the spiritual dimension of human experience and how religion fits into that experience.

This course will involve a high degree of student participation. The course text contains many more readings than a ten-week course could possibly cover, hence the readings covered will be those that most closely correspond to the interests of the students. Readings will be scheduled by the professor for only the first three weeks of the term. After that, students will select the readings for the rest of the term themselves. (I have left space in the reading schedule section of this syllabus for you to write in the readings for weeks 4-10.)

REQUIRED READING

The Life of Meaning, Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World, Bob Abernathy and William Bole (Seven Stories Press, 2007).

LEARNING OUTCOMES

If you complete this course successfully, you will be able to:

- Define both “religion” and “spirituality.”
- Distinguish between religion and religious fundamentalism.
- Distinguish between religion and superstition.
- Understand the relation between religion and ethics.
- Understand the relation between religion and what is known as “the problem of evil.”
- Produce clear and persuasive written defenses of your views on the issues addressed in the course.
- Understand the meanings of technical philosophical and theological terms.

COURSE EVALUATION

Journals.....	20%
Micro-essays.....	30%
Participation.....	20%
Final-exam essay	30%
Total	100%

Journals: You will be required to write a journal entry over the reading for each class meeting. These journal entries can be as short as a couple of sentences, or as long as an entire page. Think of them as basically reading notes. You can summarize what you think are important points that

you want to remember, or use them to record whatever thoughts come to you while you are reading the material, or both. Each journal entry will be due immediately before the class for which the reading in question has been assigned. That is, you do the reading, make your notes either while you are doing the reading or immediately afterward, and then submit the entry to Blackboard just before class. You can do the journals earlier, of course. You just can't do them *after* the class in question. That's because part of the point of the journal assignments is to get you thinking about the reading before we get together as a class to discuss it.

The journals must be written by hand in notebooks provided by the professor. You are not permitted to use an electronic aids in the preparation of these journals. That prohibition concerns not only AI, but even spell and grammar checkers. The writing of these journals should be spontaneous and free. There is nothing wrong with electronic aids to writing, and you will absolutely be able to use them for the micro essays that will also be required for the class, but using electronic aids too early in the development of a person's writing skills can actually impede that development.

These journal assignments are a response to research presented by Drexel's own Kathleen Volk Miller in her excellent book *Teaching Writing Through Journaling*. Volk Miller writes that

experiments demonstrated that brain activations related to memory, visual imagery, and language during the retrieval of specific information, as well as the deeper encoding of that information, were stronger in participants using a paper notebook than in those using electronic devices (both tablets written on with a stylus and iPhones). The results show that the use of a paper notebook affects higher-order brain functions, and this has crucially important implications for education. Paper notebooks may provide richer information from the perspective of memory encoding.

You will need to take a photo of each journal entry convert that photo into a PDF and then upload the PDF through the appropriate link in the Blackboard site for the course. The link for their submission will close immediately before the class for which the reading in question has been assigned.

You will receive five points for each completed journal — period. That is, you get points just for *doing* the journals. I will check random journals periodically, just to make sure that people are actually writing about the assigned reading. I won't read all of them every week, though, nor will I "grade" them in the sense of giving any score lower than five points. You get the five points just for doing the assignment.

We will do the first journal entry in class on the first day so that you can get a good idea of what they will be like. (Also, you can't really do one before that first class because you will be using the notebooks I'll be passing out for your journals.)

Micro-essays:

You will also be required to write three micro-essays. The journal entries will serve as a basis for, and/or aid to the writing of these micro-essays. The essays should be approximately 300-500 words long and unlike the journal entries, they should have a specific structure, with an

introduction, background section, argument, and conclusion. We will devote an entire class to discussing the structure of these essays and how to approach writing them before the first one is due.

The link for the submission of the essays will be due at the end of the day on a Sunday. The link for their submission will remain open, however, until the end of the day on the following Tuesday. Any essay submitted after the due date will receive a late deduction of one point for every day it is late, unless arrangements have been made in advance for you to receive an extension. A request for an extension must be made via e-mail, with supporting reasons, prior to the due date (that's for *your* protection so there's record that you received an extension). **Once the link for the submission of a particular assignment has disappeared, it will no longer be possible to submit that assignment.** You must also retain copies of all assignments for your own records in case there is a problem with uploading an assignment to Blackboard, or in case an assignment is accidentally deleted from Blackboard.

The Grading of the micro-essays: Three criteria will be used in the grading of the essays.

- **The most important criterion is clarity.** If I can't understand what you are trying to say, then you can't get any credit for it.
- **The second most important criterion is accuracy.** That is, if you get the substance of the material wrong, then you are going to lose some points for that. That said, I think you will find the substance very easy to understand and remember because, again, the book for the course is not a textbook, but a popular book, written for a popular audience.
- **The third most important criterion is persuasiveness.** That is, if you are trying to make an argument, then that argument needs to be supported with evidence. The evidence doesn't have to be empirical, it can be commonsensical. Keep in mind, however, that these journal assignments do not require that you make an argument. That is up to you. You are free simply to record your thoughts on the issue, or issues in question.
- **The last and LEAST important criterion in the grading of the journals is depth and originality of thought.** Some people would argue that this should be the most important criterion. The problem is that if your thought isn't clearly expressed or if it is based on a misunderstanding, or the argument you use to support it is weak or outright fallacious, then its depth and originality are simply wasted. Also, I don't want you to worry about being original or profound when you record your thoughts. I want you to feel free to respond to the course material in a way that comes naturally to you without worrying whether your natural responses are original or profound.

Finally, I will sometimes make grammatical corrections on your essays. I'll indicate, for example, that a word should, or should not, be capitalized or italicized. I'll occasionally suggest a different choice of words, or indicate that you need to insert a paragraph division. Those sorts of things will affect your grade only if the problems they relate to are so pervasive that they make it hard to understand what you are trying to say—i.e., if they affect the clarity of

your writing. This isn't an English class, so I am not going to take off for minor grammatical problems. I will generally indicate such problems, however, because you are paying a lot of money for this course and I want you to get your money's worth! I won't always indicate every problem, however, because too many corrections can be demoralizing even if you know that they won't affect your grade.

Participation: Class attendance, in keeping with University policy, is mandatory. Please see the attendance policy on [the Provost's Office website](#) for more specific information concerning attendance. This course is discussion based, so attendance is very important. The maximum number of unexcused absences a student can have and still pass the class is three. The total number of classes a student can miss (that includes both unexcused and excused absences) and still pass the class is seven.

The maximum number of participation points any student can achieve in a week is 5. This class deals with important material, and for it to be successful, you should be actively engaged. This means that participation in the class discussions is mandatory. You will receive one participation point for each contribution they make to class discussions.

Discussion requires active participation: listening carefully to others, being prepared to answer questions, facilitating conversation with your own questions, and taking part in ongoing conversations. Keep these guidelines in mind:

- Always listen carefully to the comments of others.
- Be a facilitator – often a simple question or point of clarification will generate good discussions. Ask others what they think or to explain their view on a topic.
- Ask questions when you don't understand someone else's comments or perspective.
- If you challenge someone else's statement, do so with a good argument and not belittling comments.
- Never ridicule others' beliefs.
- Avoid language that might discourage others from participating in the discussion.

See more about civility below.

You will also be required to arrange at least one Zoom office hour meeting with the professor by the midterm, and then a second office hour meeting at some point after the midterm. You should not feel limited to these two mandatory office hours, however. You are encouraged to arrange office hour meetings with the professor whenever you feel you would like to engage in live conversation to facilitate a better understanding of, and a deeper engagement with, the text.

Final Exam Essay: Philosophy courses do not normally have exams, so instead of a final exam, you will be required to write a short essay on an assigned topic during finals week. More information about this essay will be posted to the course website toward the end of the term.

Scale (points or %)

94-100	A
90-93	A-
87-89	B+
84-86	B
80-83	B-
77-79	C+
74-76	C
70-73	C-
67-69	D+
64-66	D
0-63	F

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week #	Read Prior to Class	Assignment Due
1	<i>The Life of Meaning</i> , “Preface” and “Introduction,” and a short summary of William James’ essay “The Will to Believe.”	Two journal entries, one before each class.
2	<i>The Life of Meaning</i> , Introduction to Chapter 1, and sections 4-7 of Chapter 1 (pp. 5-7, pp. 31-50).	Two journal entries, one before each class.
3	<i>The Life of Meaning</i> , Introduction to Chapter 2, and sections 9 and 10, and 12 and 16 (pp. 58-58, pp. 61-72, pp. 87-88, pp. 105-110)	Two journal entries, one before each class. Plus, first micro-essay.
4	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class.

5	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class.
6	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class. Plus, second micro-essay.
7	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class.
8	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class.
9	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class. Plus, third micro-essay.

10	TBA	Two journal entries, one before each class.
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Late Work Policy: Arrangements for the submission of assignments after the official deadline must be made in advance of that deadline. See the descriptions of the assignments above for more detail.

Email Communication: You are required to use their official Drexel email address. I try to answer all student emails in a timely fashion, but may miss emails that are sent after 5:00pm or on weekends, so please try to send your emails on weekdays during normal business hours.

Blackboard Learn (BBL): The syllabus and all weekly reading assignments will be posted to the Blackboard site for the course.

EXPECTATIONS OF CIVILITY

Diversity and Inclusion: Drexel University is committed to offering a safe, welcoming environment for all you regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, culture, nationality, socioeconomic status, religious or spiritual beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and/or physical ability. We highly value diversity and aspire to create a respectful, safe space for all everyone.

To view further information from the Student Center for Diversity and Inclusion (SCDI), please visit: <https://drexel.edu/studentlife/diversity/overview/>

Student Center for Diversity and Inclusion (SCDI)

30 N 33rd St, Philadelphia, PA 19104

Rush Building, 2nd Floor

Inclusion@drexel.edu

215.895.2662

Religious Observances: <https://drexel.edu/provost/policies-calendars/religious-observances>

Embodying a culturally and spiritually diverse community, Drexel University recognizes that on the occasion of important or solemn religious days, certain of its members will observe practices that preclude them from attending to their regular duties whether as faculty members

or you. On such days, it is important for all who do not share in these same practices to accommodate their colleagues and peers.

UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC POLICIES

Academic Calendar: <https://drexel.edu/provost/policies-calendars/academic-calendars>

Disability Access: <https://drexel.edu/disability-resources/support-accommodations/student-family-resources/>.

Students who seek accommodations for a documented disability will first need to complete an Online Intake Form. For instructions on how to complete the Online Intake Form or for further information on disability services are provided by the university, please visit <https://drexel.edu/disability-resources/support-accommodations/forms/>.

Students who are eligible for accommodations may email disability@drexel.edu to request their Accommodations Verification Letter (AVL). This letter lists the student's approved accommodations and is submitted to instructors once they are requested by the student. Accommodations cannot be granted by instructors until an AVL is submitted to that instructor. The AVL must be renewed at the beginning of every term because the student's courses and instructors will change, and this may necessitate changes in the student's accommodations. You may also contact the Disability Resources department within the Office of Equality and Diversity directly at:

Disability Resources Office

Main Building

3141 Chestnut Street, Suite 2281

Philadelphia, PA 19104

Phone: 215.895.1401

Email: disability@drexel.edu

Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, Dishonesty, and Cheating: <https://drexel.edu/studentlife/community-standards/code-of-conduct/academic-integrity-policy>

Drexel University expects all members of its community to uphold the highest values of academic integrity. In upholding these values, the University is committed to investigating any allegation of violations of academic integrity against a student. Violations include, but are not limited to: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, and academic misconduct.

Sanctions for violations of academic integrity are administered through the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards in conjunction with the Office of the Provost and other University offices as deemed appropriate. It is generally the responsibility of the faculty member overseeing the academic activity to report the violation to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards and to determine the appropriate sanction. A student who believes he/she has been wrongly sanctioned has a right to an appeals process.

In addition to any other sanction, the University reserves the right in its sole discretion to withdraw an earned degree even though it has been granted should it be discovered at any time that the work upon which the degree was based, or the academic records in support of such degree, have been falsified. In that situation, the degree will be withdrawn promptly upon discovery of the falsification and the academic record will be updated to reflect the withdrawal of degree.

Course Add/Drop: <https://drexel.edu/graduatecollege/forms-policies/policies-procedures-guidelines/course-add-drop-withdrawal/>

The course registration adjustment period for adding or dropping courses begins with the opening of a student's time ticket assignment for course registration through Sunday at midnight of the end of Week 1 (Sunday, 11:59 p.m. via the web)

Course Withdraw: <https://drexel.edu/drexelcentral/registration/courses/course-withdraw>

Students may withdraw from a course during the withdrawal period beginning at the end of the course Add/Drop Period through Friday of Week 7. A withdrawal from a course will result in a grade of "W" being reflected on a student's transcript with no impact to the student's term and cumulative grade point average (GPA).

A course withdrawal is not permitted in situations involving academic dishonesty. A course withdrawal that was processed before a final sanction of academic dishonesty is applied will revert to the grade assigned by the instructor in accordance with the Academic Integrity Policy.

Course Change Policy: The course schedule is subject to change, so you must regularly check the Blackboard site for the course for the most up-to-date information concerning the schedule and course assignments.

Grades of "Incomplete": See [incomplete grade \[PDF\]](#) policy from the Office of the Provost.

Appropriate Use of Course Materials: <https://drexel.edu/it/about/policies/policies/01-Acceptable-Use/>.

It is important to recognize that some or all of the course materials provided to you may be the intellectual property of Drexel University, the course instructor, or others. Briefly, this policy states that course materials, including recordings, provided by the course instructor may not be copied, reproduced, distributed or re-posted. Doing so may be considered a breach of this policy and will be investigated and addressed as possible academic dishonesty, among other potential violations. Improper use of such materials may also constitute a violation of the University's Code of Conduct found here: <https://drexel.edu/studentlife/community-standards/code-of-conduct> and will be investigated as such.

Complete list of University policies: <https://drexel.edu/provost/policies-calendars/policies>

DREXEL RESOURCES

Drexel Library: <https://www.library.drexel.edu/>

Drexel Writing Center: <https://drexel.edu/coas/academics/departments-centers/english-philosophy/university-writing-program/drexel-writing-center/>

Office of Counseling and Health Services Counseling Center

Drexel Counseling Center

201 Creese Student Center,

3210 Chestnut St., Philadelphia PA 19104

Phone: 215.895.1415

Appointment Hours: Monday - Friday: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

After-Hours Emergency On-Call Counseling Center: 215.416.3337

Public Safety: 215.895.2222; or Dial 9-1-1.

The Counseling Center offers a range of free, confidential counseling services to currently enrolled full-time undergraduate and graduate students in an atmosphere that is welcoming and comfortable for all students.

The Counseling Center takes a goal-focused and collaborative approach to counseling and mental health treatment. We strive to provide immediate, meaningful care focused on the change each student wants to make to improve their lives from their first contact with our office, and we have a range of follow up options available based on individual needs. We help students reduce psychological symptoms, cope with painful life events and developmental tasks, improve interpersonal skills, increase self-knowledge and develop a resiliency so they are better able to respond to problems and concerns as they arise.

For more information, please visit: <https://drexel.edu/counselingandhealth/counseling-center/overview/>

Nondiscrimination and Sexual Misconduct: Drexel University is committed to providing a working and learning environment free from sexual harassment and it is the policy of the University that sexual harassment in any form is unacceptable behavior and will not be tolerated.

Management and supervisory personnel, at all levels, are responsible for taking reasonable and necessary action to prevent sexual harassment. All members of the University community, faculty, staff and students, are required to promptly report any and all conduct which might be in violation of this policy.

The University will:

- respond to all complaints of sexual harassment pursuant to the published Discrimination and Harassment Complaint Resolution Procedure;
- take action to provide remedies when sexual harassment is discovered;
- impose appropriate sanctions upon individuals who have been found to be in violation of the

University's policy; and

- protect the privacy of those involved in sexual harassment complaints, to the extent possible.

The above actions will apply to the extent permitted by law.

FOR EMERGENCY REPORTS CALL:

Drexel University Police Department

3219 Arch Street

Philadelphia, PA 19104

Phone: 215-895-2222 (or Philadelphia Police: 911)

FOR ALL OTHER REPORTS: Contact the [Title IX Coordinator](#).