

The Ethics of Belief
CERS-2025
Starr King School for the Ministry – Graduate Theological Union
Fall Semester 2021

Instructor Information

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Meeting Dates and Times

Wednesdays, 9.40 – 12.30

Course Description

The course aims to explore what means to believe – with specific focus on religious beliefs – and what consequences beliefs have on our conduct, character, and life. The course is divided in two parts. The first part deals with the distinctive features of belief: what is the difference between belief, truth, and knowledge, with particular emphasis on evidence-based knowledge and scientific knowledge, and what is the specificity of religious beliefs compared to other kinds of belief. The second part of the course deals with the impact that having and holding beliefs have on our decisions, our relationships with the others (trust, confidence, empathy...), and the ethical and spiritual framework we (try to) follow. Broadly speaking, the first part of the course concerns the relationship between religious pluralism and science, and the second part of the course concerns the relationship between religious pluralism and ethics.

Learning Objectives

During this course, students will:

- Read and analyze works and ideas of first and second literature always with a critical look, and pass such works and ideas under the scrutiny of their unbiased reason.
- Integrate and enrich the topics of the course with their perspectives, points of view, opinions, and experiences, in order to make everybody's learning experience more meaningful.
- Contribute actively to the discussion of the topics presented in each class, by confronting their

experience, ideas, and positions with philosophical and theological analyses, concepts, and arguments.

- Propose their solutions and their ideas to solve misconceptions (where solvable) and to improve the quality and effectiveness of the dialogue and exchange between different and, sometimes, opposed perspectives on the topic.
- Reinforce the attitude of never being afraid to challenge authors and ideas, even the most respected ones, when their arguments seem unconvincing. Always question a statement before assuming it. *Sapere aude!*

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

- Synthesize different psychological, anthropological, philosophical, theological, and scientific approaches to the issue of belief, the epistemology of belief and the ethics of belief, and connect references and authors to each approach.
- Autonomously reflect on, and question, the adequacy of well-established ideas in the debate, in light of the challenges and diversity of contemporary world, such as religious pluralism, the scientific .
- Realize a double approach: interpreting reality in light of some general ideas, and vice-versa modifying general ideas in light of specific realities.
- Reconstruct the historical and argumentative steps that led to the formulation of currently-used and debated ideas and concepts, and reconstruct the historical and argumentative steps that led or would lead to their improvement and/or overcoming.

Format

The course will be entirely synchronously online; each class will be an open discussion on the topics of the day.

The Zoom address is <https://sksm-edu.zoom.us/j/88689577966>

Course Assignments

The evaluation is: 20 % attendance; 40 % presentation of papers and discussion; 40 % final essay. Concerning the presentation of papers, students will be asked to present a paper in two different classes (see “Course schedule” for the organization of the presentations of papers).

Concerning the final essay, students will be asked to write a short (max 6 pages) reflective essay on the topics of the course, and send it to the instructor by the 19th of December 2021.

Grading

Threshold of attendance positive evaluation is 70 % of classes.

Positive evaluation of discussions consists in the fact that each student should autonomously intervene and ask a question to the whole classroom on course's topics at least once.

The final essay is evaluated in terms of originality, clarity of the argumentation, and pertinence with the assigned topic. The essay must be submitted through Moodle.

Students can request letter grades. If a student is taking a course for a grade, they must notify the instructor.

Thresholds

1) Life in Religious Community and Interfaith Engagement; 5) Spiritual Practice and Care of the Soul; 6) Thea/ology in Culture and Context; 7) Educating for Wholeness and Liberation.

MCF Competencies

3) Spiritual Development for Self and Others; 4) Social Justice in the Public Square; 7) Leads the faith into the future.

Texts

The texts are many, but please don't be scared! The students will *not* have to read all texts. The students will be asked to read only the texts that they will analyze in class. Thus, all texts (for books: some chapters) will be analyzed and discussed in the course. Each student's final essay should include also texts *different* from the text(s) that they have read and presented in class.

Monographs

Agustin Fuentes, *Why We Believe: Evolution and the Human Way of Being*, New Heaven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780300249255. \$16.79

Tanya Marie Luhmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780691211985. \$29.95

Rita D. Sherma and Purushottama Bilimoria (Eds.), *Religion and Sustainability: Interreligious*

Resources, Interdisciplinary Responses, UN Sustainable Development Goals Series, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021 (forthcoming).

Papers

William K. Clifford, “The ethics of belief”, in T. Madigan, (ed.), *The ethics of belief and other essays*, Amherst, MA, USA: Prometheus, 1877 [1999], pp. 70–96.

William James, “The will to believe,” in *The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy*, New York, NY, USA: Dover Publications, 1896 [1956], pp. 1–31.

Jonathan L. Cohen, “Belief and acceptance,” *Mind* vol. 98, no. 391, pp. 367-389 (1989).

Peter Van Inwagen, “It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence”, in J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, freedom and rationality*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996, pp. 137–153.

Richard Feldman, “The ethics of belief,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 60, no. 3, pp. 667-695 (2000).

Neil Van Leeuwen, “Religious credence is not factual belief,” *Cognition* vol. 133, pp. 698-715 (2014).

Neil Levy, “Religious beliefs are factual beliefs: Content does not correlate with context sensitivity,” *Cognition* vol. 161, pp. 109-116 (2017).

Neil Van Leeuwen, “Two paradigms for religious representation: The physicist and the playground (a reply to Levy),” *Cognition* vol 164, pp. 206-211 (2017).

Lara Buchak, “Reason and faith,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, edited by William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Lara Buchak, “When is faith rational?,” in *Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Alex Byrne, Josh Cohen, Liz Harman, Gideon Rosen, eds., 2018.

Lluís Oviedo and Konrad Szocik, “Religious—and other beliefs: how much specificity?,” *SAGE Open*. January 2020.

Larisa Heiphetz, Casey Lee Landers and Neil Van Leeuwen, “Does think mean the same thing as believe? Linguistic insights into religious cognition,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 287–297 (2021).

Course Schedule

Class 1, September 8: Introduction of the instructor and of the students. Presentation of the syllabus: Topic, Learning Objectives, Learning Outcomes, Evaluation Methods.

Class 2, September 15: Introduction to the topics of the course. Preliminary definitions of belief, and discussion on the plurality of belief. Instructor's analysis and discussion with the students of Oviedo and Szocik's paper "Religious—and other beliefs" and Feldman's paper "The ethics of belief".

Class 3, September 22: Anthropological views on belief #1. Analysis and discussions of chapters from Fuentes's book *Why We Believe*.

Class 4, September 29: The ethics of belief #1: belief and evidence, belief and (epistemic and moral) commitment to evidence. Analysis and discussion of Clifford's paper "The ethics of belief" and van Iwangen's paper "It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence".

Class 5, October 6: The ethics of belief #2: the case of non-evidentialism. Analysis and discussion of James's paper "The will to believe".

Class 6, October 13: Religious beliefs and Factual Beliefs #1. The epistemology of belief from a cognitivist perspective. Analysis and discussion of van Leeuwen's paper "Religious credence is not factual belief" and Levy's paper "Religious beliefs are factual beliefs".

Class 7, October 20: Religious beliefs and Factual Beliefs #2. Analysis and discussion of van Leeuwen's reply to Levy in "Two paradigms for religious representation" and Heiphetz's *et al.* paper "Does think means the same thing as believe?".

Class 8, October 27: The ethics of belief #3: Change of perspective: are beliefs intrinsically endowed with ethical cognitive content, in specific concerning the decision-making process? Analysis and discussion of Buchak's papers "When is faith rational?" and "Reason and faith".

Class 9, November 3: The ethics of belief #4: Fideism, and the difference between belief and acceptance. Analysis and discussion of Cohen's paper "Belief and acceptance" (and perhaps Adams' "The virtue of faith").

Class 10, November 10: Religious belief and scientific belief: multireligious approach to ecological sustainability #1. Reading and commentaries on papers from Springer book *Religion and Sustainability: Interreligious Resources, Interdisciplinary Responses*

Class 11, November 17: Religious belief and scientific belief: multireligious approach to ecological sustainability #2. Reading and commentaries on papers from Springer book *Religion*

and Sustainability: Interreligious Resources, Interdisciplinary Responses

Class 12, November 24: Anthropological views on belief # 2. Analysis and discussion of chapters from Luhrmann's book *How God Becomes Real*.

Class 13, December 1: Last questions and exchanges. Presentation and discussion of what is expected from the final essay and the modalities of its evaluation.