

## PHI 222: Survey about Themes/Issues

I'd like to organize the course around themes or issues that students would find engaging and educational. To that end, I've listed below some themes and issues that I know enough about to be able to use for organizing the course. I'm seeking your reaction to these. Also, you may have some other ideas that you want to suggest; there is an opportunity to do that at the end of the survey. After I read through the responses, I'll try to summarize the results for the class. Maybe there will be agreement enough at that point to proceed without further discussion, or maybe not. We'll just have to wait to find out.

– Kenton Machina

Please respond thoughtfully. You might actually get what you ask for.

1. Faith. What is it to have Christian faith? Is rational questioning of faith contrary to maintaining faith? What lies behind the current popularity of referring to religion as “faith-based”?

This theme has already been determined to be our first major theme this semester. We have to get started somewhere, and it seemed like this was a good place to start. If you have a comment about this theme, feel free to write it here:

In responding to the remaining themes and issues please indicate your level of enthusiasm for including each in the course, using the scale:

1 = high enthusiasm

3 = slight enthusiasm

2 = moderate enthusiasm

4 = Please, no!

2. Heaven. What are some central Christian views about what happens when we die? Do we have immortal souls? What is a soul, anyway? What are the main objections to the very idea of immortality or souls? Why do some Christian theologians claim that the popular conception of heaven is way off base?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

3. Jesus saves. Jesus is often referred to as “Savior”. What does this mean? How have traditional Christian belief systems explained the idea that Jesus saves us? What serious internal conceptual problems for Christian theology are caused by common accounts of how Jesus saves us?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

4. Science and Christianity. The New Testament is written in the language of a pre-scientific culture, in which mythological ways of thinking were deeply embedded. What are mythological ways of thinking? How can this kind of language be meaningful in today's culture? What pressures and difficulties are caused for Christianity as it attempts to express its theology in modern language? What are possible Christian responses to these pressures? How does all this affect the interpretation of the Bible? Of the stories about Jesus?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

5. God as creator of the universe. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam share the same story of God as creator, which generates one of the most important ideas about who/what God is. But... What do the creation stories in the Bible really mean? Why do some Christians associate the idea of God as creator with the idea that the universe is not very old? The actual central theological tradition of mainstream Christian groups claims God is not only creator but also sustainer of the universe. What is this "sustainer" talk about, and why might it be crucial to understanding the conception of God as creator?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

6. The problem of evil and suffering. There are really two problems here: First, if God really is responsible for how the world is, and for our being here, then why does God allow people to sometimes be so awful toward each other, and so uncaring about God? (In short, why does God allow sin?) Second, if God is such a loving and powerful being why does God allow or even set things up so that innocent animals and human babies suffer so much? These questions – especially the second one – might pose an insurmountable philosophical challenge to many traditional conceptions in Christian theology about God.

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

7. Patterns of theological response to modern pressures. What is the Christian fundamentalist pattern of response to modern pressures? What are the traditionalist responses? What are the liberal responses? Where do the so-called "evangelical" Christians fit in? What are current patterns and trends in Christian theological development? How does any of this matter to ordinary church members? To our society at large?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

8. Other religious traditions. What elements in Christian theology drive toward the conclusion that only Christians can be “saved”? What elements contradict this idea? Do people from differing religious traditions (Hinduism, Islam, African traditional religions, ancient Greeks, etc.) worship the same divinity? How could one tell? What approaches might a Christian theology take toward solution of these issues, or are they just insoluble?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

9. The Trinity. An ancient Christian claim that has caused enormous confusion is the claim that God is a “trinity” – that God is three “persons” but only one divine being. What is the theological/philosophical motivation for this seemingly bizarre claim? What does it mean? Is it coherent? How is it connected to other central ideas in traditional Christian theology (such as the idea that Jesus is able to save us)? How is it connected to the mythological way of conceptualizing the world that was common in the Christian world at the time this doctrine was formulated?

Your level of enthusiasm is \_\_\_\_\_

Your comments:

10: Your suggestions for issues or themes that might be added to the list: