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CORE 100-34 God Comes to America

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Welcome to Core 100 God Comes to America! We will be spending the semester investigating a number of powerful issues concerning some of the deepest questions that human beings pose about themselves and their world. Philosophy will provide us with our disciplinary center, and while many of you may not have read philosophy before, I believe that you will soon discover that you have had many moments of philosophical reflection in your lives before coming to this class.

The questions surrounding religious belief, and its relation to our ethical lives are as old as philosophy itself. Indeed, the attempt to define the meaning of the Good is central, as well as crucial to our cultural lives. We will be reading a masterly treatment of that subject published by William James in 1903. So, who is William James and why his book? William James (1842-1910) was one, if not the most significant philosophers America has produced. His dates indicate that he lived during tumultuous times. During his lifetime, Darwin will publish his Origin of Species, the abolition of slavery will become a national crusade, and the United States will suffer the immense trauma of civil war culminating in its first presidential assassination. In his later years, the rapid growth of industry and technology would remake the country in dramatic fashion, and in the Spanish-American War, America will make its first appearance as an ambitious imperial power on the world stage.

It is not difficult to see how the question of “The Good”, and even “The Greater Good”, weaves its way through these extraordinary events. At times, America succeeds in acting in accordance with what Abraham Lincoln had called “the better angels of our nature”, while at others, such as during the protracted Filipino-American War (1899-1913) we fell far short of our better nature. William James spent his lifetime and career engaging these issues, especially in relationship to the manner in which ideals give our lives a center and a meaning. This latter question is not the monopoly of the professional philosopher either, but rather it falls to each of us, regardless of vocation or career, to stop and ask such questions to ourselves.

It should be noted that William James is most definitely an American thinker. This fact is not insignificant. Every nation’s history has its unique features and experiences that form a sediment in its national character, and this is as true of America as it is of any other country. What are these experiences that have come to shape the American mind and imagination? How might they serve to orient our thinking about these very ancient and persistent philosophical questions? These are some of the questions that will reoccur again and again this fall. Ultimately, all of our efforts this coming semester will only serve to force these questions upon us. To say that the question of what The Greater Good requires is as alive and as central today as it ever was is an understatement. Think of the profound events of the past few months; some of which were deeply tragic and others astonishingly exhilarating.

GOALS & LEARNING OUTCOMES: This seminar is designed especially for first year students making the transition to university level intellectual work. Consequently, its goals go beyond the obvious ones that define that kind of academic experience. Some themes that we will raise resonate with issues that you will discuss in your First Year Co-Curricular Experience as well as in your core classes. In terms of goals, in this seminar, students will...

- Become engaged in intellectually challenging and interesting questions and problems.
- Develop strong mentoring relationships with faculty in and out of the classroom.
• Join the community of scholars at Xavier University.

• Establish a solid foundation on which subsequent Core Curriculum courses will build.

• Engage with a common theme across all semesters: The Greater Good.

**Student Learning Outcomes. Students will...**

• Apply the approaches of multiple disciplines to a significant issue.

• Articulate the evolution of their vocation and aspirations to contribute to the world.

• Identify and critically assess multiple dimensions of an ethical issue in an attempt to reach a conclusion. In FYS, this includes:
  o Interpreting challenging readings.
  o Employing effective library research and information literacy skills.
  o Constructing arguments supported with evidence.

**THE CORE CURRICULUM:** Eventually, all of you will complete at least one major. Some majors are geared to preparing you for a specific professional vocation. These are called “Destination Majors” and examples include Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Education, etc. While most people view college as preparation for a career, one should never forget that it is so much more than that. The core requirements in the Humanities, the sciences and the arts serve to make you an educated person as you prepare for a career. Should you end up in a career related to your major (and you might be surprised to know that many people do not) you will come to see that it was these core courses that made you a better professional in your chosen field. If yours is not a destination major, you will find that the skill set acquired in the core classes give you the intellectual agility to do any number of things after graduation. On the other hand, if you are undecided about a major, then the variety of courses available to you in the core will awaken interests and abilities that you might never knew you possessed. Finally, life after college leaves very little time to indulge oneself in great literature and other works of culture. The next four years will be the only time you can count on to pursue those interests in a serious way with an expert in the field and like-minded fellow students. Savor it!

**READINGS:** there will be several short readings of essay length and one major book-length text for our seminar this semester. The short readings are all available on the Canvas website for this course. They are located under the “Files” tab on that website. The major text for the semester is:

> William James  
> *The Varieties of Religious Experience*  

**CLASS FORMAT:** So, what is a seminar anyway? The standard image that people have about what happens in a university classroom is the lecture. We can easily picture the large amphitheater full of students eagerly writing down every possible word that issues from the professor’s mouth. The professor is this distant authoritative figure on a stage, standing behind a podium and filling every available moment with the sound of his or her own voice. **NOT HERE!** A seminar is based on discussion, everyone has to be actively involved
every class meeting. My colleague put it best: the only teacher in the room is the book that is under discussion. The professor is both fellow student and guide. Student questions will often be answered by another question … the heavy work of thinking about ideas and evaluating their truth is the job of each one of us for ourselves. If you remain silent for several days in succession, you are cheating yourself and your classmates. My responsibility is to make sure that that does not happen. Our thoughts often come to us with confusion and obscurity. Our words often fail to communicate clearly what we have in mind. This is true of all of us, including the authors we shall read. Through collective effort, we shall do our best to assist one another to think more clearly and critically about the topics that our readings suggest to us.

**PARTICIPATION & ATTENDANCE:** Active participation in our daily discussions is an integral requirement of this course. This is true of our class discussions as well as our electronic discussion forum work. Participation means that you are prepared to discuss the material assigned for that day and that you are an active contributor to class discussion. While it is possible to pass this course without ever opening your mouth in class, it will be impossible for you to earn the highest grade for the semester unless you are a regular and active participant in class discussions. My policy on attendance is simple, you cannot participate if you are not here. Similarly, you cannot contribute to class discussion if you are routinely under-prepared. This class thrives on conversation rather than lecture, and it is difficult to contribute to, let alone benefit from, such discussion unless you are equipped to do so. I do not regularly take attendance, yet I too expect you to be in class unless you are ill or have some other valid reason for missing. While I do not take formal attendance, I am very much aware of students who miss an excessive number of classes and reserve the right to lower your final grade for excessive non-attendance and/or excessive lateness to class. Of course, if you are ill, we would prefer not to be infected by you. A brief email to the professor is standard courtesy.

**RESEARCH SKILLS PROJECT:** There will be several short research skills projects early in the semester and a more comprehensive final project due in December. Class time during the week of November 30th will be set aside for in-class work on this project. The specific topic will be your critical evaluation of the role of religious experience in the articulation and attainment of “The Greater Good”. More details will be made available on Canvas during the early weeks of the semester.

**SUMMARY ESSAYS:** On designated Fridays, we will spend time reviewing and evaluating the results of our week’s readings and discussion. For those Fridays, you will work in small groups (see below). Each group will take primary responsibility for leading the discussion on their appointed day. Each student in the class will prepare a single page essay that includes the following: (1) a very brief summary of the main point(s) that were raised in class, and (2) your initial critical reaction to those ideas. Your evaluation should aim at identifying what you believe to be the strength or weakness in the positions that we have been discussing and your reasons why you believe as you do. The group that is responsible for that day’s discussion will collaborate on their paper and will read it out loud at the Friday meeting. This will serve to get discussion going. I will collect the essays prepared by the rest of the class for grading.

1. **John Winthrop & Jonathan Edwards**  
   a. Baker  
   b. Bently  
   c. Flick
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson  Friday, September 25
   a. Gerster
   b. Gibson
   c. Hernandez

3. William James, Part I  Friday, October 16
   a. Keating
   b. Korchak
   c. Luciano

4. William James, Part II  Friday, October 30
   a. Mann
   b. Mbachilin
   c. Nimitz

5. William James, Part III  Friday, November 20
   a. Kara
   b. Strom
   c. Wagner
   d. Worley

**SCHEDULE OF TOPICS & READINGS:**

**Week 1: August 24, 26, 28**

The Judeo-Christian God came to America with a group of English Puritans in several small ships in the Migration of 1630. In mid-crossing, their inspirational leader, John Winthrop, delivers a sermon that clarified what their mission shall be, and in the process, provides one of the earliest and most powerful statements of American self-consciousness. This week shall also give us the opportunity to talk about research and the manner in which primary and secondary sources complement each other in our effort to understand the material. Both readings are on Canvas under “Files”.

John Winthrop,       “A Modell of Christian Charity”
Darrett Rutman,     “A Citty Upon a Hill”

**Friday, August 28 - library research and information literacy**

**Week 2: August 31, September 2, 4**
Jonathan Edwards (1703-1759) can claim the title of the most important thinker in pre-revolutionary America. He was born in Connecticut, attended Yale University, and as a powerful and gifted preacher, he becomes the leading figure in the Great Awakening of the 1740’s. Find the reading on Canvas under “Files”.

Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

**Friday, September 4 – library research and information literacy**

Week 3: September 9, 11 (September 7 – Labor Day Holiday)

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) began his professional life as a Unitarian minister but by 1832 he abandoned the pulpit to follow his own spiritual path that resulted in some of the greatest masterpieces of American Transcendentalism. Find the reading on Canvas under “Files”.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar”

Week 4: September 14, 16, 18 – Emerson continued. Find the reading on Canvas under “Files”.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Oversoul”

Week 5: September 21, 23, 25 - This week, we shall transition into the main part of our course which will be devoted to one of America’s greatest cultural figures, William James (1842-1910). James was the eldest son of a unique American family, and he came of age during the tumultuous middle decades of the nineteenth century; years that witnessed the growth of science in America, the emergence of Darwinism, and of course, the trauma of the Civil War. This week will fill in the details of his early life and times and in the process, will provide a snapshot of American life as the twentieth century approached. Find the reading on Canvas under “Files”.

William James, Entries on Depression, Letters on Choice of Career

George Cotkin, “Judged Not to have Lived”

George Cotkin, “From Hamlet to Habit”

Week 6: September 28, 30, October 2 - James’ psychology is extended into the region of religious consciousness in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a work sometimes referred to as volume three of James’ 1890 landmark work, *The Principles of Psychology*. Here James goes beyond both the problem of religion in an age of science, and the multiplicity of institutional religious creeds to carry out a brilliant and detailed analysis of religious experience itself in all its manifestations. We will be working with Varieties for the next few weeks.

Lecture I Religion & Neurology

Lecture II Circumscription of the Topic
Week 7: October 5, 7 (October 8 & 9 – Fall Holiday) - James' Varieties continued.

Lecture II  Circumscription of the Topic (continued)
Lecture III  The Reality of the Unseen

Week 8: October 12, 14, 16 - James' Varieties continued.

Lecture IV  The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness, Part 1
Lecture V  The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness, Part 2

Week 9: October 19, 21, 25 - James' Varieties continued.

Lecture VI  The Sick Soul, Part 1
Lecture VII  The Sick Soul, Part 2

Week 10: October 26, 28, 30 - James' Varieties continued.

Lecture VIII  The Divided Self and the Process of its Unification

Week 11: November 2, 4, 6 - James' Varieties continued.

Lecture IX  Conversion
Lecture X  Conversion, concluded

Week 12: November 9, 11, 13 - James' Varieties continued. NOTE: we will omit Lectures XI-XV that deal with Saintliness and its Value.

Lecture XVI  Mysticism, Part 1
Lecture XVII  Mysticism, Part 2

Week 13: November 16, 18, 20  James' Varieties continued.

Lecture XVIII  Philosophy

Week 14: November  23 (November 25-29 Thanksgiving Holiday)
Week 15: November 30, December 2, 4 - Find the Bellah reading on Canvas under "Files".

Final library research and information literacy project in class work time

Week 16: December 7, 9, 11 - Find the reading on Canvas under "Files".

William James, “The Will to Believe"