



PHIL 20810: Philosophical
theology

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[www.nd.edu/~jspeaks/courses/
2012-13/20810/](http://www.nd.edu/~jspeaks/courses/2012-13/20810/)

If you're in this class, you've taken some philosophy; and, since you're a Notre Dame student, you've probably taken some theology. But what's philosophical theology?

Philosophical theology is a bit like philosophy of science, or philosophy of literature. It is the attempt to use philosophical methods to evaluate the claims of some other, non-philosophical discipline. The discipline that we're interested in the evaluation of, in this class, is theology.

What are the claims of theology? That depends on which theologian you ask, and in particular depends on the religion of the theologian. Christian theologians make different claims than Muslim theologians or Jewish theologians or Hindu theologians. In this class, we will be interested in the central claims of Christian, and in particular Catholic, theology.

What claims are those?

Fortunately, this is a question which has a very easy answer. The central claims of Christian theology are the claims which are stated straightforwardly in the various creeds confessed by different Christian denominations. Our guide in this course will be the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

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This document, which those of you who go to Church say all of the time, makes some extremely surprising claims. To name just a few:

That there is one God, the Father, from whom came Jesus Christ, who is also God; but there is only one God in total.

That God became man, and died. One naturally thinks that it is impossible for God to die; but how is this consistent with the claims that Jesus is God, and died?

That baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. How could babies have sins?

To regular churchgoers, the claims made in the Nicene Creed just roll off the tongue. But that doesn't change the fact that these claims are very bold claims which are quite difficult to understand — and which, upon reflection, can seem very hard to believe.

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Let's consider a few questions you might have at this point:

1. Won't this be extremely boring?

I think that it would actually be kind of boring — at least boring to me — if we came in each day and just talked about what this or that doctrine might mean, and various ways it could be interpreted. But that's not quite what we're going to do.

What we're going to do, instead, is to consider each day an argument (or arguments) for the conclusion that some claim made in the creed is false. The challenge will be to say whether, and how, a defender of the relevant claim might reasonably reject that argument.

At this stage you might wonder: how does one reasonably reject an argument? That is a good question — we'll be discussing the nature of arguments, and logic, next time, as well as on and off for the rest of the course.

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2. Aren't you supposed to believe the doctrines expressed in the Nicene Creed on faith? What do arguments have to do with it?

It is true that, according to Catholicism and other Christian religions, some of the doctrines expressed in the creed – like, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity – can't be known on the basis of reason alone; instead, they're part of what is given in revelation.

But that doesn't mean that reason has nothing to do with them. Even if some articles of faith can't be established on the basis of reason alone, they're also not supposed to contradict reason. Even if we can't establish the truth of religious doctrines on the basis of reason alone, rationality still demands that we be able to answer arguments against those doctrines.

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Let's consider a few questions you might have at this point:

3. What if I don't believe any of this stuff?

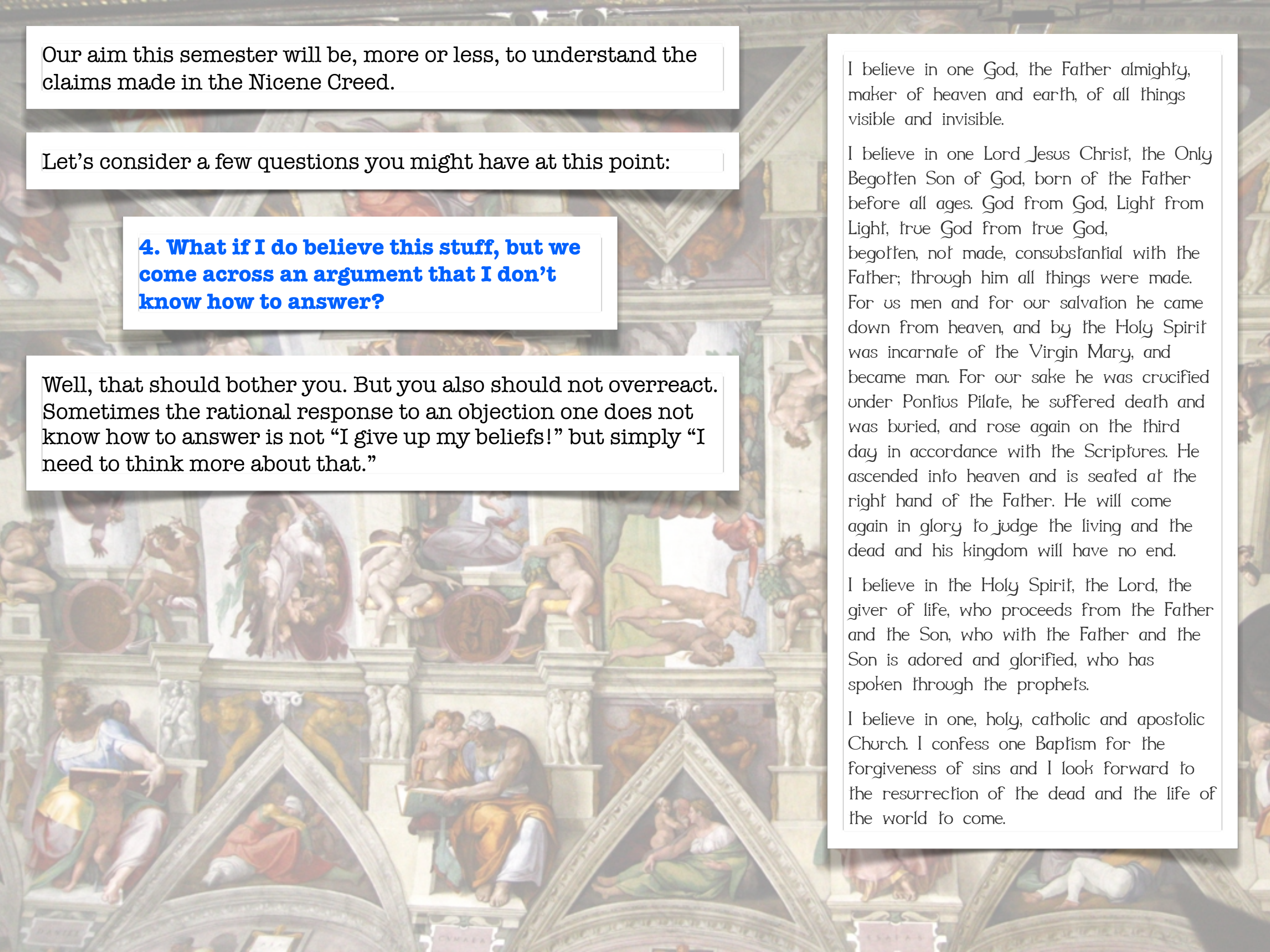
Well, then you are in luck, because the focus of the course will be on a series of arguments for the conclusion that this stuff is all false. Your job in this class is to honestly and seriously evaluate those arguments – if your ultimate view is that these arguments are convincing, and thus that the claims made in the Nicene Creed are not true, that is, from the point of this class, perfectly fine.

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4. What if I do believe this stuff, but we come across an argument that I don't know how to answer?

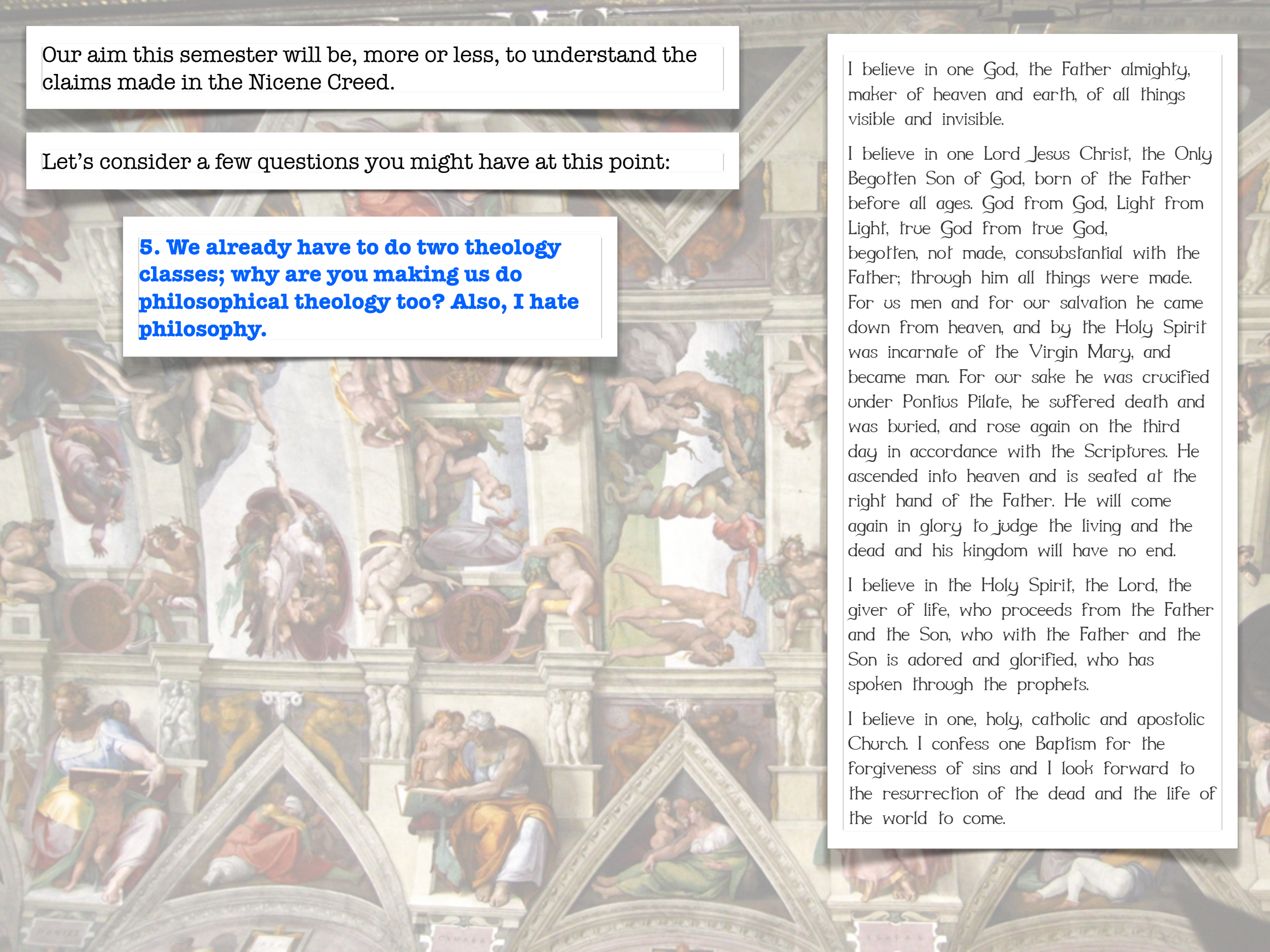
Well, that should bother you. But you also should not overreact. Sometimes the rational response to an objection one does not know how to answer is not "I give up my beliefs!" but simply "I need to think more about that."

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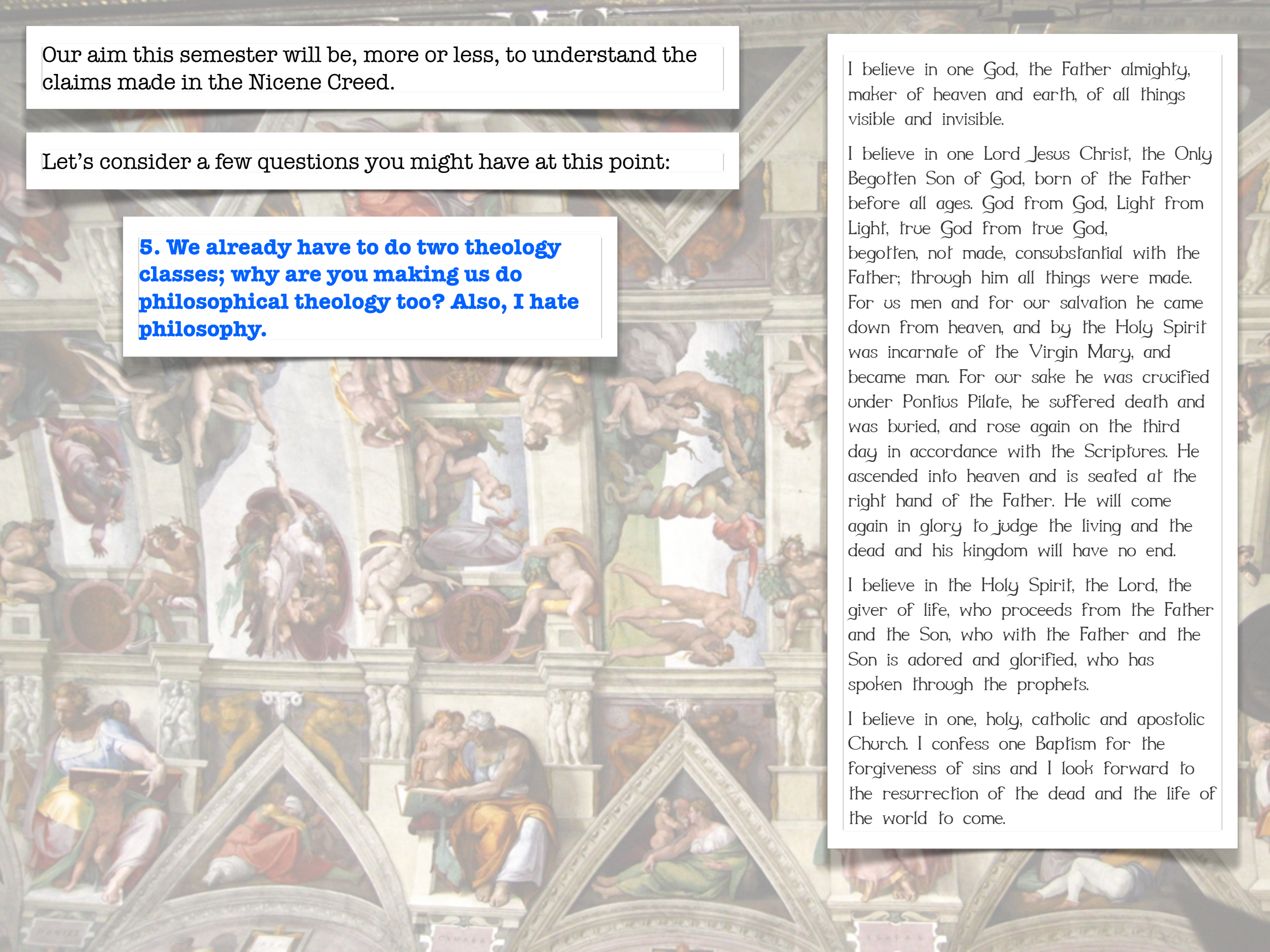
5. We already have to do two theology classes; why are you making us do philosophical theology too? Also, I hate philosophy.

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The background of the entire page is a detailed fresco of the Last Judgment by Michelangelo. It depicts Christ seated on the left, surrounded by figures in various states of resurrection and damnation. The scene is set within a grand, classical architectural structure with arches and columns. The figures are rendered with dynamic, muscular forms, characteristic of the High Renaissance style.

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6. Can you please give me some concrete details about how this course is actually going to work?

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Teaching this class with me will be a group of dedicated and talented young philosophers. They will be leading the Friday discussion sections, and be in charge of helping you with, and grading, your written work.

The written work for the course will consist of three papers, each of which will be pretty short (1500 words). In addition, there will be a midterm and (non-cumulative) final exam.

We will talk more about the papers and exams when they get closer. But preparing for them is pretty simple. You should do three things: (1) do the readings before class; (2) pay attention in class, and in your discussion sections; (3) after class, spend some time thinking about the arguments discussed in the readings and in class, and form your own view about whether those arguments are good arguments, or not, and why.

It is easiest to forget (3). The point of this course is not for you to memorize a bunch of material, but for you to form your own views, informed by the readings, lectures, and discussions, of the topics we will be covering. In class, you should not be scribbling everything I say -- I will post the lecture notes to the course web site. You should be thinking about the arguments, and trying to figure out what you ought to believe about them.

You will also be graded on the basis of your participation in Friday discussion sections. Details about the grading scheme are in the course description, which is linked from the class web site.

The readings for the course, as well as the lecture notes, due dates for the assignments, the formula for determining final grades, and other useful information, are available on the course web site. You need not purchase any textbooks or coursepacks. Any money that your parents gave you to spend on books for this class can be given to me or your TA.