“Philosophy of religion” has become a fairly standard elective course in the curricula of both secular and religious schools both here and in other English-speaking countries. It consists of a fairly unvarying set of topics, mostly either within or related to natural theology, on most of which a Thomist can be expected to have a distinctive insight.

1. Faith and Reason
All truth is God’s truth: there is only one God and one truth. Human rationality and intelligence: natural and supernatural ends. Limits: the need for revelation. The teaching of the Church is a (divinely guaranteed) attempt to preserve and hand on a message of infinite value. Why doctrine cannot change. Development of doctrine: human attempts to understand the divine message. Conflicts between faith and reason, religion and science, are only apparent, and cannot be real. Possibilities: what reason seems to show may be mistaken (e.g., infinite extent of the universe); our understanding of what faith seems to teach may be mistaken (e.g., belief that the Bible teaches that the earth is absolutely fixed); our logical understanding of what conflict is may be mistaken. All such conflicts are resoluble. All mistakes of reason can be shown – by reason – to be mistaken. This is not to claim that faith is merely reasonable. All this applies in the realm of religion.

2. Natural theology and philosophy of religion
Natural theology is philosophizing about God. The philosophy of religion is philosophizing about topics that are important to religious people. Clearly there is some overlap. Topics include: the possibility of discourse about God; arguments for the existence of God, particularly the Ontological Arguments and the Five Ways, also other varieties of “cosmological arguments” and “arguments from design”; a discussion of the possibility of experiencing God and what it might show; the relation between eternity and time; creation; God and evil; God’s almighty power; omniscience; miracles and faith; prayer; the immortality of the soul; God and morality. History of natural theology and philosophy of religion; present state of the study.

3. Discourse about God
Is it possible to talk sensibly and truly about God? Teaching of St Augustine, Maimonides and St Thomas. Ways of negation, affirmation, and supereminenence. Analogy. Contemporary discussions

4. Does God exist? Ontological arguments
The “Ontological argument of Descartes”: why it is fallacious. The “ontological argument of St Anselm” why it may not be an ontological argument and why it may be valid

5. Does God exist? The Five Ways of St Thomas: background and overall structure. Asking for an explanation of the universe. Two objections: the argument from evil and the argument from partial explanations. The five ways all depend on treating the universe as a whole as a single object which displays certain features in virtue of which it is necessary to ask for an explanation in terms of a relation to something outside it.
6. Does God exist? The Five Ways of St Thomas: Viae Ia, Ila: are they two different arguments or do they reduce to one? Is one a special case of the other? Meaning of “moveri” in the Prima. How far as these arguments dependent on medieval science? Meaning of “causa efficiens”. Meaning of “we cannot go on to infinity in this line”.

7. Does God exist? The Five Ways of St Thomas: Viae Illa, IVa and Va
Third way: meaning of “necessary” and “possible”. A temporal interpretation is possible. The difficult step in the third way is not at the step from possible to necessary, but at the step from “dependently necessary” to “independently necessary”. What do these mean? In the fourth way, why does limited perfection require an explanation, and how does unlimited perfection provide it? The fifth way is not an argument from design, but like the other ways, an argument from universal causality. Why does unconscious teleology require to be explained by conscious teleology?

8. Does God exist? Arguments from design and from experience
Arguments from design only prove the existence of a designer, not of Almighty God. They lead to Deism, at best, and falsify God’s relation to the world. God and evolution. Many people appeal to their experience of God. Is this useful? The possibility of delusive experience, and the possibility of absence of experience. This kind of argument also diminishes God. Tolstoy’s story “The Three Hermits”.

9. Eternity and time
God is not in time but is “tota simul”. Logical difficulties of this view. God’s relation to time and to the world. We can only speak about God’s action in the world temporally, because the world of time is real.

10. Creation
Creation is not something which God did, but is something which God is doing. This blurs the line between God’s creation and God’s providence, but also helps with problems about God’s knowledge of the world, which is practical and causal.

11. God’s almighty power
God the creator has power over all things. But this does not mean “God can do anything” – this expression seems to be false for most meanings of “everything”. But nothing competes with God, even unsuccessfully. Difficulties about God and evil arise on any solid understanding of God as Creator. It is a mystery, irresoluble except by faith, but the individual objections raised can be resolved. Ivan’s discussion with Alyosha – “I return the ticket” in The Brothers Karamazov

12. God’s knowledge
God’s knowledge of the world is causal and practical. This avoids the difficulties of Boethius account of God as like a man on a mountain-top watching a procession, but raises difficulties about God’s foreknowledge of sin. Evil as a per accidens (coincidental) existent, and the relation of an intentional agent to the per accidens.

13. Prayer, miracles and faith
1st principle: everything that happens happens because of God’s will. Is it reasonable to expect things to happen because we pray? Freedom and determinism in the natural world. What may we reasonably pray for? What is a miracle? What is a prophecy? What counts as its fulfilment

14. God and morality
In what sense does what is good or bad for human beings depend on God’s will? The “Euthyphro question”: are good things good because God loves them, or does God love good things because they are good? Either answer is unacceptable: why? A two-part answer: what is good for human beings depends on God’s will in creating us in this way, but, given that he has created us in this way, he cannot (see above) contradict himself by making them not good for us. “If God does not exist, everything is permitted” – Ivan in The Brothers Karamazov. It what sense is this true and in what sense false?

15. The immortality of the soul
What is the human being? What is the soul? Can the immortality of the soul be proved? Is the soul the same as the self? Resurrection of the body is the central doctrine of Christianity. What (if anything) can we say of the state of separated souls?

Texts:
also a number of texts from Summa Theologiae I, q.q. 1-25
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, The Brothers Karamazov, Pt II bk 3 Chapter 4 Rebellion
Feser, Edward, The Last Illusion
Geach, P.T., Providence and Evil
Tolstoy, Lev, “The Three Hermits”
Other works drawn from Davies’s bibliography as discussion develops