

**RE 375: Senior Seminar in Religion
Spring 2011
Instructor: Mary Zeiss Stange, Ph.D.
Ladd 213**

Office Hours: T-Th 1:00-2:00, Wed. 11:00-12:00 & 2:00-4:00, and by appt.

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Catalogue Description:

Exploration of primary and secondary sources in the advanced study of a particular theme or topic in Religious Studies. The focus is on research and critical thinking and writing. Close attention is paid to the development, organization, and production of a major research project. Students present their research to the seminar.

Our theme for this semester is *The Case Against Religion*. That is, we are going to be concentrating on the various ways in which it can be (and currently is being) argued that religion is either a negative force in the world of human affairs or is largely irrelevant in the contemporary world. Our inquiry will include such topics as the following:

- The “New Atheism” (as well as that good old-time atheism)
- The science vs. religion debate
- Religiously inspired violence and/or terror in the name of religion
- Domestic abuse and other forms of religiously sanctioned violence against women, children and minorities;
- The role religion plays in sustaining various forms of oppression
- State-sponsored violence against specific religious groups
- State-sponsored violence on behalf of specific religious groups

The primary texts we will use to structure our discussions will be the following, listed in the order in which we will read them:

Texts:

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

Christopher Hitchens, Ed. *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007).

Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; revised edition, 2002).

Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

Format:

For roughly the first two-thirds of the semester, we will read and discuss the texts above. Seminar participants will share responsibility for leading our discussions. While we are engaged in this collective

exploration of variations on the case against religion, each seminar participant will simultaneously be working on the early stages of her or his semester project: isolating a topic, developing a research strategy, bibliography and working outline, and commencing the reading. For those students also working on a thesis (in Religion or a cognate field), the seminar project will most likely be directly related to that larger work (although *not* itself a part of it). For students not writing a thesis, the semester project will be a substantial paper or other production, involving significant independent research and creative thinking. NB: The semester project does *not* have to relate in any way, direct or indirect, to the theme of the seminar. It must, however, represent a “capstone” project in Religious Studies.

During the last three weeks of the semester, seminar participants will first take turns assigning readings from their own research and leading discussion on these readings, thereby introducing the group to the subjects of their semester projects as works-in-progress. Then, in the last week (in an additional class period), each participant will report on their projects as relatively nearer completion. The questions and constructive criticisms of their seminar colleagues will help them to bring their projects to completion.

Bases for Evaluation:

Short Essays (3).....	30%	
Class Participation (includes leading discussion).....	20%	
Capstone Project (includes work-in-progress presentations).....	<u>50%</u>	
		100%

Religion Program goals for advanced-level courses:

- 1) write an essay that is clear, well-organized, and driven by a specific thesis relevant to the paper’s topic.
- 2) effectively utilize primary and secondary source to develop the paper’s argument
- 3) define and properly use technical terms and concepts
- 4) make distinctions between the presentation of relevant data and/or arguments made by others and the critical analysis of these materials.
- 5) accurately apply theoretical models and/or disciplinary methods to specialized content.

Reading Schedule

Jan 26: Christopher Hitchens, Introduction, *The Portable Atheist* ; Foreword, *Infidel*. Film: *Submission, Part I*.

Feb 02 (rescheduled due to weather, Feb 04): Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, xxi-199. Film: *Osama*.

09: *Infidel*, 201-353. *Portable Atheist*: Salman Rushdie, “Imagine There’s No Heaven,” 380-383; Ibn Warraq, “The Koran,” from *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, 384-444 & “The Totalitarian Nature of Islam,” 445-453. Film clip: “Debate” between Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Tariq Ramadan.

16: **Science vs. Religion:** Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*. *Portable Atheist*: Charles Darwin, “Autobiography,” 93-96; Albert Einstein, “Selected Writings on Religion,” 155-165; Carl Sagan, “The Demon-Haunted World,” 218-225 & “The God Hypothesis,” 226-238; A. J. Ayer, “That

Undiscovered Country,” 270-276; Daniel Dennet, “Thank Goodness, 277.” ****First Short Essay Assignment****

23: **Philosophy vs. Religion:** *Portable Atheist:* Thomas Hobbes, “Of Religion,” 12-20; Benedict de Spinoza, “Theological-Political Treatise,” 21-25; David Hume, “The Natural History of Religion,” & “Of Miracles,” 26-45; Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” 64-74; Emma Goldman, “The Philosophy of Atheism,” 129-133; Bertrand Russell, “An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish,” 181-206. ****First Short Essay Due****

Mar 02: **The “New Atheism:”** *Portable Atheist:* J. L. Mackie, “Conclusions and Implications...,” 246-266; Richard Dawkins, “Why There Almost Certainly Is no God,” “Gerin Oil” & “Atheists for Jesus,” 287-310; Victor Stenger, “From *God, the Failed Hypothesis*, Cosmic Evidence,” 311-327; Penn Jillette, “There Is No God,” 439-350; Sam Harris, “In the Shadow of God,” 454-472; A. C. Grayling, “Can an Atheist Be a Fundamentalist?,” 473-476. ****Final Project Prospectus Due****

09: **Religion & Terrorism:** *Terror In the Mind of God:* Introduction, 1-18; “Cultures of Violence “(Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Sikh & Buddhist), 19-118.

Mar 16: **Spring Break**

23: *Terror In the Mind of God:* “The Logic of Religious Violence,” 121-249. ****Second Short Essay Assignment****

30: **Christian Nationalism:** *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism:* Introduction and Chapters One-Five, 1-153. Film: *Friends of God: A Road Trip with Alexandra Pelosi.* ****Second Short Essay Due****

Apr 06: *Kingdom Coming:* Chapter Six, Conclusion, Afterword & Epilogue, 154-219. Guest Speaker: Michelle Goldberg.

12: *Presentations*

20: *Presentations*

27: *Presentations.* ****Third Short Essay Assignment****

Date/Time TBD (Wednesday May 4th): *End of Year Party & Seminar Wrap-Up*

May 06: ****Third Short Essay Due****

10: ****Final Project Due**** This is an absolute deadline.