

Denying the Gods: The Religious Roots of Atheism

RE230C-002

Instructor: W. Ezekiel Goggin
Office: Ladd 210
Email: wgoggin@skidmoe.edu
Class Meetings: W/F 8:40-10:00 (Tisch 301)
Office hours: WF 10:15-11:45am

Course Description

A historical and systematic investigation of the religious sources of ancient, modern, and contemporary atheisms. “New Atheists” such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and the late Christopher Hitchens are often invoked in contemporary discourse as intellectually authoritative voices for atheism. For these “New Atheists,” the difference between religion and unbelief is straightforward: rationality is superior to superstition, freedom should be valued over submission, critical inquiry should replace blind faith. However, the historical relationship of atheism to religion and religious belief is considerably more complex than such neat, binary oppositions allow. Far from being a contemporary phenomenon, atheism has religious roots as deep and ancient as the theism which it purports to reject. While “New Atheism” tends to be dismissive of religion and religious beliefs, many ancient and modern atheisms emerged from a willingness to take religion seriously on its own terms. Through comparative analysis of the appearance of atheism and antireligious thought within, between, and adjacent to several religious traditions (e.g., Ancient Greek religion Christian Mysticism, Hinduism, and Judaism), this course will contextualize and evaluate a range of atheistic positions. By the end of the course, we will see, it is perhaps better to speak about “atheisms” than “atheism.”

Objectives

In pursuit of these themes, students will achieve five major objectives:

- 1.) Think critically about atheisms within the hermeneutic frameworks of religious studies
- 2.) Gain familiarity with key theoretical and historical questions and figures in the history of atheism
- 3.) Develop an appreciation of the complex historical relationship between religions and the atheisms to which they give rise.
- 4.) Hone their analytical and expository writing skills.
- 5.) Increase their proficiency at public speaking

Required Texts:

Dialectic of Enlightenment – Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (SUP, 2007)
Inner Experience – Georges Bataille, trans. by Stuart Kendall (SUNY, 2014)
The Nietzsche Reader, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006)
Night – Elie Weisel (FSG Books, 2006)

NB: Other required texts will be distributed electronically as PDFs as online resources.

Assignments & Evaluation

Four reflection papers (25 points each x 4 *minus* lowest grade = x/75 points total): Over the course of the quarter, students will compose short reflection papers (**approx. 500-750 words**). Each reflection paper should discuss a theme, question, objection, criticism, or offer a close reading of a passage or passages from the assigned readings. These essays should contain very little in the way of summary and very much in the way of careful analysis and contextualization of assigned course materials. While I conceive these as somewhat more loosely organized and exploratory than an essay, they should include, if not a specific thesis-statement, at least a programmatic-statement indicating the thematic focus of the paper. As noted, the lowest of these grades will be dropped (e.g., if you receive a 22, a 17, a 15, and a 24, the 15 point assignment would be dropped and your total for reflection papers would be a 63/75). Does this mean that you can skip a reflection paper if you are feeling overwhelmed with other work? Yes, yes it does. I don't necessarily advise this (especially early on in the term) as it involves a significant gamble on your part—but it is a perfectly acceptable strategy! I know you have a lot to balance over the term.

A detailed rubric for reflection papers will be made available in advance of the first assignment, but generally speaking, reflection papers should do the following:

- 1.) Fall within word limits and list word count at the bottom of the document.
- 2.) Thoughtfully engage assigned materials and reflect on questions, problems, or novel ideas raised by those materials (NB: there will be no prompts for these reflections—they are designed for you to tell me what you think about the readings, and to begin developing themes and ideas that might be useful for your research paper).
- 3.) Be turned in by hard copy at the beginning of class on the date they are due.

Midterm Examination (125 points)

Midterms help students in forming a self-assessment of how well they are assimilating the themes and problems explored in the course. It is with that end in mind that this course will include a mixed-format midterm examination including some combination of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions.

Final Examination (175 points)

A cumulative final examination will be administered in accordance with final exam schedule. Like the midterm it will be a mixed format (multiple choice, short answer, fill-in-the-blank), as well as a choice of essay.

NB: All writing assignments are to be turned in by the deadline on the syllabus; late assignments will be penalized by -10% of the total grade per day past due (thus, RPs will lose 3 points per day late, CWP will lose 10 points per day late, FE will lose 25 points per day late).

Class Participation (50 points) Attendance, punctuality, preparation, and participation will all contribute to the class participation grade:

- 1.) Attendance: **All students are required to attend every class meeting** (Students who incur unexcused absences will receive **zero participation points** that day).
- 2.) Punctuality: **Habitual tardiness will result in a loss of participation points.** The amount of points lost will be determined by the frequency and severity of the problem.
- 3.) Preparation: **Students are expected to prepare for each class by completing all the assignments for that day and bringing the relevant readings/materials with them to class meetings.** If you are not prepared for class you are not only doing yourself a disservice, but also your peers –lack of preparation precludes effective participation in class, thus diminishing our capacity to learn.
- 4.) Participation: Students should engage the material and **join in class discussions of the reading assignments.** Students are expected to be respectful, charitable, and rigorous in discussion. **Failure to respectfully and thoughtfully engage in discussion will result in a loss of participation points.** Cell phones should be silenced or turned off and stowed away prior to class, and should remain so during the entirety of class time. Please refrain from any texting, snapchatting, tweeting, and other forms of digitally broadcasting/consuming information during class time, please. **If you don't jump into the conversation be advised I may cold-call you! Evidence of a lack of preparation in class will result in a loss of points for the day.**

Grading Policy

Grades for the course will follow the point scale below:

Point Scale

500-491 = +A
490-465 = A
464-455 = -A
454-445 = +B
444-420 = B
419-410 = -B
409-400 = +C
399-350 = C
349-330 = -C
329-300 = D
299 & below = F

A note on grading: Grades are an assessment of the students' efforts and abilities. Only exceptionally sophisticated work will receive an 'A,' Good work will receive a 'B.' Satisfactory work warrants a 'C.' Unsatisfactory work will receive a 'D.' Work which does not meet the basic course requirements will receive an 'F.' I have clearly laid out the points scale so that you may easily keep track of your progress through the course. I am a difficult but fair grader, and I stand by the marks I assign. You are welcome to discuss any grade with me (e.g., why you received it, what you could have done differently), though chances are slim that the mark will change, unless I have made a glaring error in assessment (in which case please bring it to my attention!).

Plagiarism

No plagiarism of any kind is acceptable in this class (or any other, for that matter). **Any occurrence of plagiarism will result in an automatic grade of zero for the assignment and immediate referral to the University administration, who may recommend disciplinary action.** Students should consult the Academic Integrity Handbook for a full explanation of College expectations and policy.

https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/AcademicIntegrityHandbook_Web.pdf

Any material, from any source, must be cited according to standard citation procedures. This includes books, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, television, internet, lectures and even personal conversations. *Papers may be submitted to Turnitin.com.* If you are unsure of how to properly cite materials, check out: <https://www.library.ucsb.edu/help/citing-sources>

Writing Center and Academic Support

The development of clear, communicative, and effective writing skills is essential to a liberal arts education. Students who may be struggling with any phase of the writing process (drafting, research, editing, etc.) are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of the academic support resources provided by the college's Writing Center. The Writing Center also offers specialized support for English language learners and academic coaching and counseling services to help students develop skills necessary for academic success (e.g., time-management, organization skills, etc.). Consultations are available by appointment through the Writing Center's website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/writingcenter/>

Accessibility

Skidmore is committed to an inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning community. Students who require special accommodations for should contact Meg Hegener (mhegener@skidmore.edu) at the Office of Students Access Services at the beginning of the term in order to facilitate their full participation in course activities and full access to course materials.

Further information can be found at the Office of Student Access Services' website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/>

Title IX Statement

Skidmore's Title IX statement as approved by the Student Government Association and endorsed by the Curriculum Committee is as follows: "Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available."

Course Schedule

How New? How Atheistic?: Expanding Our Sense of Atheistic Possibilities

Week 1:

1/22

Introductions; Syllabus review

1/24

Sam Harris

“An Atheist Manifesto” (Samharris.com Dec 7, 2005)

<https://samharris.org/an-atheist-manifesto/>

(Available as PDF)

Michael Palmer

“The Meaning of Atheism” from *The Atheist's Primer* (Available as PDF)

Week 2

1/29

John Gray

Seven Types of Atheism

“The New Atheism: A Nineteenth-Century Orthodoxy”

John F. Haught

God and the New Atheists: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens.

Chapter 2, “How Atheistic is the New Atheism?”

(Available as PDF)

1/31

John Gray

Seven Types of Atheism

“A Strange Faith in Science”

Mythos, Logos, and Theomachy: Ancient Hellenic “Atheisms”

Week 3

2/5

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno

Dialectic of Enlightenment

“Chapter 1: The Concept of Enlightenment”

2/7

Tim Whitmarsh

Battling the Gods

“Part I. Archaic Greece: 1.) Polytheistic Greece 2.) Good Books 3.)

Battling the Gods; 4.) The Material Cosmos” (Available as PDF)

Reflection Paper Due

Week 4

2/12

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno

Dialectic of Enlightenment

“Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment”

2/14

Tim Whitmarsh

Battling the Gods

“Part II: Classical Athens: 7.) Cause and Effect

“Part III: Philosophical Atheism: Epicurus, *Theomakhos*

(Available as PDF)

Epicurus

Letter to Meneceus (Available as PDF)

Lucretius

On the Nature of Things, selections (Available as PDF)

Affirmers, Deniers, and Atheists: Ancient Indian Atheisms

Week 5

2/19

Rig Veda, Nasadiya Sukta

(Available as PDF)

Wendy Doniger

On Hinduism

“Hinduism By Any Other Name” (available as PDF)

Purushottama Bilimoria

“Hindu Doubts About God: Towards a Mimamsa Deconstruction” in *Indian*

Philosophy vol. 4 (Available as PDF)

2/21

Richard P. Hayes

“Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition” in *Journal of Indian*

Philosophy (16:1,1988) (Available as PDF)

Trauma and the Limits of the Covenant: Jewish Atheisms

Week 6

2/26

Elie Weisel
Night (1-65)

2/28

Elie Weisel
Night (66-117)

Week 7

3/4

Robert L. Platzner
“Judaism and the Challenge of Secular Humanism” from *Religion and the New
Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*

Richard Rubenstein
After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism
“Symposium on Jewish Belief”
(Available as PDF)

3/6

Reflection Paper Due

LIBRARY SESSION

Class will meet in Scribner 118 (straight toward the back, past the reference desk, and to the right)

Week 8

3/11

NO CLASS (Spring Break)

3/13

NO CLASS (Spring Break)

Week 9:

3/18

[Film: *God on Trial*]

3/20

MIDTERM EXAMINATIONS

Apophaticism, Aniconism, and the Critique of Revelation: Atheistic Tendencies in Islam

Week 10

3/25

Samuli Schielke

“The Islamic World” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*
(available as a PDF)

Ma’Ruf al-Rusafi

Selections from *The Book of Mohammedan Personality*
(Available as PDF)

3/27

Isma’il Mazhar

“With al-‘Aqqad: A Critique of the Book on God” from *On Literary Criticism*
(Available as PDF)

Ali A. Rizvi

“Why I Call Myself An ‘Atheist Muslim’” (HuffPost, May 13, 2013)
(Available as PDF)

“Reformation and Secularism” from *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey From Religion to Reason*
(Available as PDF)

The God Who Dies and the Death of God: Christian Atheisms

Week 11

4/1:

John Gray

Seven Types of Atheism

“Secular Humanism: A Sacred Relic”

Friedrich Nietzsche

Ecce Homo in *The Nietzsche Reader*

“Why I Am A Destiny” (514ff)

4/3

Paul

Letter to the Galatians
(Available as PDF)

Friedrich Nietzsche

Daybreak in *The Nietzsche Reader*
Book I, Section 68

Human, All Too Human
Section 1, 2, 9

Daybreak
Book II, Section 102, 103, 115, 119

Week 12

4/8

Friedrich Nietzsche

The Gay Science in *The Nietzsche Reader*
Book I

Book III, Section 108, 120, 121, 124, 125, 127, 283, 290, 341

Beyond Good and Evil

Section 3. "The Religious Disposition"

Section 9, "What is Noble?"

4/10

Friedrich Nietzsche

The Anti-Christ in *The Nietzsche Reader*

AND

The Anti-Christ section 35 (Available as PDF)

Reflection Paper Due

Week 13

4/15

George Bataille

Inner Experience

Foreword

"Critique of Dogmatic Servitude (and of Mysticism)"

"Experience, Sole Authority, Sole Value"

"Torture"

[Suggested reading: Pseudo-Dionysius, Selections from *The Divine Names* (Available as PDF)]

4/17

Georges Bataille

Inner Experience

"Post-Scriptum to the Torture (or the New Mystical Theology)"

[Suggested reading: Angela of Foligno, Selections from *Memoriale* (Available as PDF)]

Existentialism

Week 14

4/22

John Gray

Seven Varieties of Atheism

“Atheism Without Progress”

George Santayana

“The Elements and Function of Poetry” from *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*

(Available as PDF)

4/24

George Santayana

“How Religion May Be an Embodiment of Reason” from *Reason in Religion*

(Available as PDF)

Reflection Paper Due

Misotheism

Week 15

4/29

John Gray

Seven Varieties of Atheism

“The God-Haters”

Dostoevsky

The Brothers Karamazov

“Rebellion”

(Available as PDF)

5/1

Course Review

Finals

5/4-7