COURSE DESCRIPTION

The world seems more religious than ever these days. But in the midst of all this holiness and piety, there are dissenting voices: people who reject religious doctrines and deny a faith in God. And there have always been such voices, going back to the earliest Greek and Indian philosophers. This course will examine major critiques of religion and theism as posited by significant doubters and skeptics -- from classical thinkers all the way up to the contemporary work of atheists such as Richard Dawkins. We will explore the following questions: why critique religion? What motivates skeptics, secularists and those who reject religion? What are the strongest arguments posited against theism? The weakest? What are the sociological characteristics of secular people? Why is secularity relevant to today’s socio-political-religious situation? How is religious faith – or rather, its absence – linked to larger social and cultural developments?
REQUIRED READING:

Euthyphro, by Plato (will be handed out in class)
The Future of an Illusion, by Sigmund Freud
Why I am not a Christian, by Bertrand Russell
The End of Faith, by Sam Harris
The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins
God is not Great, by Christopher Hitchens
Infidel, by Ayann Hirsi Ali

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

* Class Participation
Class participation includes mandatory attendance, keeping up on the readings and being prepared to discuss them in class, offering your informed opinions in class discussions, asking questions, answering questions, arguing points, and doing in-class exercises that may pop up throughout the term and cannot be made up.

* Three papers:

* Paper #1 on Freud and Russell: due in class 2/27
* Paper #2 on Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens: due in class 4/16
* Paper #3 on Interview/Ali: due in class during week 15

Your final grade/evaluation will thus be based on 4 things: class participation and attendance, and three 7-8 page papers.
COURSE OUTLINE:

Week 1 (1/23): Introduction to class

Week 2 (1/28-1/30): Definition of Terms; Skepticism and Doubt in Antiquity

Week 3 (2/4-2/6): Skepticism and Doubt in Antiquity, continued
  Read: Freud, first half

Week 4 (2/11-2/13): Critiques of Theism and Religion
  Read: Freud, second half
  Be prepared to discuss Freud in class on 2/13

Week 5 (2/18-2/20): Critiques of Theism and Religion
  Read: Russell, first half

Week 6 (2/25-2/27): Critiques of Theism and Religion
  Read: Russell, second half
  Be prepared to discuss Freud and Russell in class on 2/27
  Paper #1 due on Freud and Russell in class 2/27

Week 7 (3/3-3/5): Secularization
  Read Harris, first half
  Be prepared to discuss first half of Harris in class on 3/5

Week 8 (3/10-3/12): Atheism, Secularism, and Societal Health
  Read Harris, second half
  Be prepared to discuss second half of Harris in class on 3/12

Week 9 (3/24-3/26): spring break, no class
  Read: Dawkins, first half

Week 10 (3/31-4/2): Non-believers: a sociological and psychological portrait
  Read: Dawkins, second half
  Be prepared to discuss Dawkins in class on 4/2

Week 11 (4/7-4/9): The Bible Under Skeptical Scrutiny
  Read: Hitchens, first half

Week 12 (4/14-4/16): The Bible Under Skeptical Scrutiny
  Read: Hitchens, second half
  Be prepared to discuss Hitchens, Harris, and Dawkins in class 4/16
  Paper #2 due on Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens in class 4/16

Week 13 (4/21-4/23): The Bible Under Skeptical Scrutiny
  Read: Ali, first half
   Read: Ali, second half
   Be prepared to discuss Ali in class 4/30

Week 15 (5/5-5/7): Summations and Conclusions
   Paper #3 – on interview and Ali due in class this week; be prepared to
discuss your interview with the rest of class.

DESCRIPTION OF EACH PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Each paper must be 7-8 pages, double spaced, 12 pt. font

Paper #1: Compare and contrast the writings of Freud and Russell on religion. In what ways are their critiques similar? In what ways are they different? What are the strongest and weakest arguments of each? Can you relate anything that they wrote to what has been broached and discussed in class?

Paper #2: Compare and contrast the writings of Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens on religion. In what ways are their critiques similar? In what ways are they different? What are the strongest and weakest arguments of each? Can you relate anything that they wrote to what has been broached and discussed in class?

Paper #3: For this final paper, you must interview someone who has lost his or her religious faith. That is, he or she went from believer to non-believer; from a person of faith to a skeptic or doubter. The paper will be based on the content of this interview, wherein you will summarize key details of the person’s story, include significant quotes from the conversation, reflect upon the interview, and compare and contrast this individual’s loss of faith to that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s loss of faith. If you don’t know anyone who was once religious and is now secular – better get crackin’. Saying “I just couldn’t find anyone to interview” will not be an acceptable excuse.
RECOMMENDED READING FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Cambridge Companion to Atheism, Michael Martin
An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism, Gordon Stein
The Bible
Losing Faith in Faith, Dan Barker
The Atheist Manifesto, Michel Onfray
The Jesus Mysteries, Freke and Gandy
The Jesus Puzzle, Earl Doherty
Secret Origins of the Bible, Tim Callahan
Celsus: On the True Doctrine
The Essence of Christianity, Ludwig Feuerbach
Putting Away Childish Things, Uta Ranke-Heineman
Secularism and Secularity, Kosmin and Keysar
Letters From Earth, Mark Twain
On the Gods and Other Essays, Robert Ingersoll
The Case Against Christianity, Michael Martin
Faces in the Clouds, Stewart Guthrie
The Sacred and the Secular, Norris and Inglehart
Invitation to the Sociology of Religion, Phil Zuckerman
The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man, Robert Price
God: The Failed Hypothesis, Victor Stenger
Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon, D. Persuitte
The Secularization Debate, Swatar and Olson
The Death of Christian Britain, C. Brown
The Sacred Canopy, Peter Berger
Atheists, Hunsberger and Altemeyer
Freethinkers, Susan Jaconby
God is Dead, Steve Bruce
Awakening of a Jehovah’s Witness, Diane Wilson
How we Believer, Michael Shermer
The Demon-Haunted World, Carl Sagan
The Born Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible, Ruth H. Green
The Cheese and the Worms, C. Ginzburg
The Quest for the Historical Muhammad, Ubn Warraq
Why I am not a Muslim, Ibn Warraq
The Sociology of Religion, Malcolm Hamilton
No Man Knows my History, Fawn Brodie
One Religion, Marx and Engels
The Natural History of Religion, David Hume
Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume
Natural Atheism, David Eller
Anything by Madeleine Murray O’Hare