

# Secularism, Skepticism, and Critiques of Religion

M and W, 1:15  
Spring 2008

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*The rejection of religion...is, in fact, almost as old as human thought itself.*

- James Thrower

*The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice.*

- Emma Goldman

*Civilization will not attain to its perfection until the last stone from the last church falls on the last priest.*

- Emile Zola

## **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 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*

Week 14 (4/28-4/30): Personal Journeys from Faith to Reason

*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  
*Who Wrote the New Testament?* Berton Mack  
*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*, Swator 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