

ATHEISM

Portland State University
PHL 365U 001

"Great Doubt: great awakening. Little Doubt: little awakening. No Doubt: no awakening."
Zen maxim

"What is wanted is not the will to believe, but the wish to find out, which is the exact opposite."
Bertrand Russell

"Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge..." Charles Darwin

Course Title:	Atheism
<p data-bbox="131 338 347 369">Required Texts:</p> <p data-bbox="131 716 347 747">Course Content:</p> <p data-bbox="131 842 402 873">Suggested Reading:</p> <p data-bbox="131 1587 240 1619">Twitter:</p> <p data-bbox="131 1713 386 1745">Suggested Twitter:</p>	<p data-bbox="602 306 1526 369">Harrison, G. P. (2008). 50 Reasons People Give for Believing in a God. Prometheus Books. ISBN-10: 1591025672 (Cost: \$12.23)</p> <p data-bbox="602 401 1526 464">PSU bookstore or amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Reasons-People-Give-Believing-God/dp/1591025672</p> <p data-bbox="602 516 1526 642">A Manual for Creating Atheists (available November 1, 2013). ISBN-10: 1939578094 (Cost: 11.20). PSU bookstore or amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Manual-Creating-Atheists-Peter-Boghossian/dp/1939578094</p> <p data-bbox="602 873 1526 936">Dennett, D. (2007). Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon. ISBN-10: 0143038338</p> <p data-bbox="602 978 1526 1010">Harris, S. (2008). Letter to a Christian Nation. ISBN-10: 0307278778</p> <p data-bbox="602 1052 1526 1115">Hitchens, C. (2009). god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. ISBN-10: 0446697966</p> <p data-bbox="602 1157 1526 1188">Hitchens, C. (1997). The Missionary Position. ISBN-10: 185984054X</p> <p data-bbox="602 1230 1526 1293">Plantinga, A. (1990). God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God. ISBN-10: 0801497353</p> <p data-bbox="602 1335 1526 1367">Plantinga, A. (2000). Warranted Christian Belief. ISBN-10: 0195131932</p> <p data-bbox="602 1398 1526 1482">Shermer, M. (2011). The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths. ISBN-10: 0805091254</p> <p data-bbox="602 1587 1526 1619">Professor: @peterboghossian</p> <p data-bbox="602 1661 1526 1692">TA:</p> <p data-bbox="602 1734 1526 1873">Richard Dawkins Foundation @rdarfs Richard Dawkins @RichardDawkins Dan Dennett @danieldennett Sam Harris @SamHarrisOrg Guy P. Harrison @Harrisonauthor</p>

Suggested Viewing:	Michael Shermer @Michaelshermer D.J. Grothe @DJGrothe Jerry Coyne @evolutionistrue “Jesus Camp” http://www.jesuscampthemovie.com/ Derren Brown’s “Miracles for Sale” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nUrPWLxqJI
Professor:	Dr. Peter Boghossian (please call me “Pete”)
TA:	Matt Hernandez
Class Location:	Location:
Office:	Office Location: Office Hours Professor: Office Hours TA:
Class Days/Times:	T/R 12:00 - 13:50
TA Email Address:	
Vacation Day(s):	Nov 7, 11, 28, 29,

Professor’s Bio

My PSU faculty page is found here: <http://pdx.edu/philosophy/peter-boghossian>

Policies and Procedures

- I don’t respond to email (Twitter, Facebook correspondence, etc.). If you have an issue, please email Matt. If you need to speak with me, please come by my office during office hours. If you cannot come by during office hours, please leave me a message in my box in the philosophy department with your contact information and when you would like to meet. I am unavailable on Fridays.
- *If you have a disability and exams need to be given in PSU’s testing center, then please email the TA one week before the exam date.* Please include the name of the class, your full name and your student ID #.
- Silence your cell phone and please do not text during class. If there’s an emergency, please step out of class.
- You are responsible for signing the attendance sheet. If you do not sign the attendance sheet you will not get credit for attendance.

Academic Honesty

Academic honesty is highly valued at Portland State University. The consequences of academic dishonesty can include removal from the University.

Controversy Disclaimer*

This course deals with many controversial topics related to people’s deepest held beliefs about god and religion, science and technology, politics and economics, morality and ethics, and social attitudes and cultural assumptions. I hope to challenge you to think about your beliefs in all these

areas, and others. My goal is to teach you *how* to think about your beliefs, not *what* to think about them. I have my own set of beliefs that I have developed over the decades, which I do not attempt to hide or suppress...in the classroom my goal is not to convince you of anything other than to think about your beliefs...

*Copied from skeptic Michael Shermer's syllabus.

Description

This course is a systematic examination and analysis of atheism. It is primarily focused upon understanding contemporary secular arguments regarding religion and faith-based belief systems. It is secondarily focused upon exploring what secularism means for metaphysics, epistemology, morality, politics, aesthetics, etc.

Themes by Week

1. *Week One*: Introduction and course overview
2. *Week Two*: Biology, Belief and Ethics
3. *Week Three*: The New Atheists and their detractors
4. *Week Four*: The New Atheists and their detractors (continued)
5. *Week Five*: Critical thinking about reasons for belief in God
6. *Week Six*: Critical thinking about reasons for belief in God (continued); A Manual for Creating Atheists
7. *Week Seven*: A Manual for Creating Atheists (continued 1)
8. *Week Eight*: A Manual for Creating Atheists (continued 2)
9. *Week Nine*: A Manual for Creating Atheists (continued 3)
10. *Week Ten*: Presentations

Note: We will be having several guest lectures throughout the term. I have no control over guest's schedules. Consequently, we may have to switch around some of the material depending on their availability.

Learning Objectives

- *Develop and enhance* critical thinking skills by *analyzing* arguments for God's existence
 - *Examine and evaluate* counterarguments
 - *Understand* secular responses to faith-based morality, epistemology and metaphysics
 - *Investigate* the role evidence ought to play in belief formation
 - *Explore* writings and lectures of contemporary atheist thinkers
 - *Explore* the controversy surrounding "the new atheists"
 - *Engage* debates from leading secular and religious thinkers regarding God's existence
 - *Explore* different faith traditions by visiting local religious services and then sharing your experiences with classmates
 - *Examine* Christian epistemology and warrant through writings of a contemporary Christian apologist
 - *Reflect* on your learning experience and articulate those experiences to your peers
 - *Develop* teamwork skills by working with fellow classmates to *analyze* complicated epistemological problems
 - *Engage* controversial ideas and attempt to come to a consensus
 - *Empower* yourself with the tools to navigate questions about faith, God, and the meaning of life
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Grading

Midterm Exam (open book/open notes)	37.5
Tuesday Oct 29, regular class time	
Final Exam (closed book/closed notes)	37.5
Thursday Dec 12, 10:15 – 12:05	
Attendance and Participation	25
Extra-credit Presentation*	tbd
December 3, 5	
Point Total	100

If you need a testing accommodation please email the TA at least seven days beforehand.

Please bring a blue or green book to the exams.

* Extra-credit presentations consist of a 5-minute presentation on *one* chapter from the Harrison text. In the presentation you will: 1) clearly outline one of the reasons people give for believing in God, 2) clearly state the atheist's objection, 3) clearly state whether or not you think the objections are valid. Presentations will go in order, from chapter 1 until chapter 50. Signups begin Week 4.

WEEKS	DATES
Week 1	9/30
Week 2	10/7
Week 3	10/14
Week 4	10/21
Week 5	10/28
Week 6	11/4
Week 7	11/11
Week 8	11/18
Week 9	11/25
Week 10	12/2

Week One

Introduction

TOPICS

- What this course is and is not
 - Just as the purpose of religious studies is not to convert students to a particular faith tradition, this course is *not* about “converting” students to atheism.
- Definitions: God, Secularism, atheism, agnosticism, blasphemy, faith, religion, theology, skepticism, evidence, etc.
- Bertrand Russell
- Competing epistemologies and epistemological choice
- Harvard Prayer Study and atheist objections
- The role of evidence in belief formation
- New vs. old atheism

Assignments

1. **Read**

- “Harvard Prayer Study,” on the dropbox.
- Russell Blackford, “50 Great Myths About Atheism” on the dropbox.

2. **Watch**

- Sam Harris, “Misconceptions about atheism”:
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xgj1to_sam-harris-misconceptions-about-atheism_news
- Dan Barker “Making the Case for Atheists”:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7y5slOkwaU&feature=player_embedded
- D.J. Grothe on God:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=dAKa4Cxxzq4

3. **Suggested Historical:**

- Hume, “The Natural History of Religion”
- Lucretius, “On the Nature of Things”
- Shaftesbury, “A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm”
- Cicero, “On the Nature of the Gods”
- Plato, “Laws” (Book X)
- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/> (1-5 and 6.3)
 - Steve Goldman:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=I5PXiWnXom4

4. Extra-credit presentations will occur on week 10. Start reading Guy P. Harrison’s *50 Reasons People Give for Believing in a God*. Presentations are first-come, first-served and signups with Matt begin Week 4.

Questions

- What is faith?
- What is God?

- What do *you* mean when you use the word “God”?
 - If there is no general understanding of what the word “God” means, then is it possible to take this entire course only to find every single student saying “That was interesting, but irrelevant to my belief, because that’s not what I mean by ‘God.’”?
 - Is faith important? Why or why not?
 - Is there such a thing as an “atheist worldview”?
 - If faith isn’t based on evidence, then how does one know what to have faith in?
 - If one doesn’t value reason, what reason can one be given to value reason?
 - What is a “performative contradiction” and how does this apply to our inquiry?
 - Is something morally wrong with choosing a belief system that doesn’t lead one to the truth, but does make one feel better?
 - Is it epistemological hegemony to demand that people/citizens/children accept an epistemology that leads them closer to the truth?
 - What’s the harm in believing things that are false? Are there any benefits to believing things that are untrue?
 - It could be argued that this course should not be offered because it can be seen as offensive to some people. What is your opinion?
 - Do people have a right not to be offended?
 - Does the “right” not to be offended extend only to religious beliefs?
 - Can both the Christian and the Muslim be correct in their theological beliefs? Why or why not? Provide specific examples.
 - Can everyone’s religion be correct?
 - Is it bad to brainwash people into doing good things?
 - Should society tell people that there’s a hell so as to frighten them into not doing bad things?
 - Why did many atheists object to the Harvard Prayer Study (HPS)? Are their objections valid?
 - Was the point of the HPS to change people’s minds with regard to the efficacy of intercessory prayer?
 - If so, do you think people who believed in intercessory prayer changed their minds as a consequence of the study? Why or why not.
 - If a religious delusion makes one happy, should one try and shed it? What about a non-religious delusion?
 - Do *you* have a moral obligation to help others to rid themselves of delusions?
 - Is there something “weird,” and maybe harmful, about analyzing a position defined by its absence of making a claim? Logically and epistemologically, atheism is no different than toothfairyism. Why not a course on the latter?
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Week Two

Biology, Belief and Ethics

TOPICS

- The biological basis of belief
- The God Helmet
- The brain as an engine of belief
- Moral questions regarding brains, religion, and belief

Assignments

1. Read

- “Religious belief human nature” on the dropbox.
- “Andrew Newburg” on the dropbox. (It’s just his bio).

2. Watch

- “Why do we need a belief in God with Michael Shermer,” on the dropbox.
- The God Helmet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCVzz96zKA0> Also on the dropbox as “Michael Shermer Out of Body Experiment”

3. Identify

- *Identify* religious services from any *three* different faith traditions. If possible, please try and select services that differ from one another (e.g., Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Baptist, Buddhist, Sufism, etc.). You will be visiting these three services next week. Please feel free to attend with other members of the class, or with friends outside of class.
 - Find other members of the class and discuss the possibility of visiting one or more services together.
 - Be prepared to provide reasons for why you choose each faith tradition.
 - Please visit services from faith traditions that are different from the traditions in which you were raised.

4. Suggested Reading

- Please see suggested reading, above (Shermer).
- The original Harris article is also on the dropbox: Harris_Sheth_Cohen.

Questions

- What does it mean to say that belief has a biological basis?
 - What does it mean to say that we’re “wired for belief”?
 - Are humans wired for spirituality? What’s your opinion? What is the basis for your opinion?
- Is attempting to disabuse people of their biological impulses misguided?
 - Is it immoral?
 - What about disabusing people of their sexual impulses (aversion therapy for homosexuals)?
 - How are sexual impulses and faith-based impulses similar and how are they different?
- If everyone who went into the God Helmet and had feelings of community with a particular deity (e.g., Zeus), what, if anything, would that be evidence of?
- Accept by fiat that at some time in the future scientists can identify a biological center in the brain responsible for faith-based beliefs. What, if anything, are the implications of this?

- If, at some time in the future, we could painlessly remove parts of the brain responsible for faith-based beliefs—and there would be no other biological consequences to doing so—should the government mandate this? Why or why not?
 - Should it be legal for individuals to undergo this procedure?
 - Should it be legal for parents to opt for this procedure on their children? (Assume that the procedure is irreversible).
 - If Person X was religious, and s/he was given overwhelming evidence that the cause of her/his beliefs were neurological, do you think Person X would still believe?
 - How would you respond to someone who replied to the above question as follows: “If I was given overwhelming evidence that the cause of my beliefs were in my brain, I would be led to conclude that God made my brain that way”.
 - Does Shermer say we need a belief in God? Why or why not?
 - Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 - On what basis did you choose the three religious services?
 - Would you be willing to reconsider other religious services?
 - Are you uncomfortable with the thought of going to a house of worship that's not in your tradition? Why or why not?
 - Summarize Sam Harris' findings in the readings for this week. What are the implications of this?
 - Explain covariance. Can you think of any specific examples of covariance, biology, culture and belief?
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Week Three

The New Atheists and their detractors

TOPICS

- Dennett, Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris
 - Backgrounds, claims, books and detractors
- Dennett's "Preachers who are not believers"
- Dennett's Belief in belief
- Your experiences in unfamiliar religious services
- Dawkins: "Darwin's Rottweiler"
- Alvin Plantinga
- Fideism

Assignments

1. Read

- Daniel Dennett's "Preachers who are not believers". On the dropbox.
- "Plantinga reviews Dawkins". On the dropbox.
- Roger Scruton's criticism of Dawkins. "Dawkins is wrong about God". On the dropbox.
- "Coyne on Plantinga". On the dropbox.

2. Watch

- "Daniel Dennett on Freethought Radio" Part 1. On the dropbox.
- "Daneil Dennett on Freethought Radio" Part 2. On the dropbox.
- Sam Harris "Is Islam a religion of peace?". Available: <http://www.blinkx.com/watch-video/sam-harris-islam-is-not-the-religion-of-peace/kSvpeq8e1uVNqgGDU9KYWw>
- Dawkins on Dennett: Belief in Belief. Found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXvHyBNBuR4> On the dropbox as "Dawkins on Dennett"
- Harris vs. Hewitt: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5afgu_hugh-hewitt-vs-sam-harris_tech
- Shermer and Harris vs. Deepak Chopra: <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/sam-harris-deepak-chopra-dont-pretend-10175026>
- "Alvin Plantinga Atheist". On the dropbox under the same name.
- "Alvin Plantinga Truth and Worldviews". On the dropbox under the same name.

3. Attend

- Attend services of the *three* faith traditions that you identified last week.
- Write brief notes/reflections (2-3 paragraphs for each service) about your experiences.
- Bring your notes/reflections with you to class next week. *You will not be submitting your notes.*

4. Listen

- NPR: <https://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=139781021&m=139904642>

5. Suggested Reading

- Please see suggested reading, above (Dennett).

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Fideism.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fideism/>
- Plantinga's "The Dawkins Confusion". On the dropbox.
- Russell Blackford's criticism of Sam Harris. "Harris critic and response". On the Dropbox under the same name.
- Massimo Pigliucci's criticism of Sam Harris. "Harris is wrong". On the Dropbox under the same name.

6. Suggested Viewing:

- Richard Dawkins Interviews Creationist Wendy Wright (7 parts):
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFjoEgYOgRo>
- Richard Dawkins, "The God Delusion" (5 parts):
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lvr9bJ8Sctk>
- "Alvin Plantinga on Reasons for God". On the dropbox under the same name.
- "Alvin Plantinga and the Modal Argument". On the dropbox under the same name.

Questions

- What is Dennett's argument/thesis in "Preachers who are not believers"?
 - What are your opinions on what Dennett has written?
 - In your opinion, why was Dennett unable to find any imams (Muslim leaders) who are atheists?
 - Is there a moral problem with being a religious leader and an atheist?
- "Claims, for example, that one 'should' only believe in physical or visible evidence are not, in and of themselves, empirical claims. Indeed, I have friends who resolutely insist that materialism is 'all there is' while remaining blissfully unaware of the fact that such a statement could not arise from strictly empirical observation." This quotation comes from an Amazon.com book review of Berlinski's book. How would an atheist respond to this? Would the response be convincing? Why or why not?
- For Dennett, why is belief in belief so important?
 - What are the consequences of belief in belief?
 - How could Dennett be wrong (about the consequences and importance of belief in belief?)
- Are all religions equally good, bad, correct, incorrect, dangerous?
 - What would Sam Harris say? Why?
 - What do you think? Why?
- What is the controversy regarding the DSM IV, delusion and religion?
- Plantinga wrote, "Suppose we concede that if I had been born of Muslim parents in Morocco rather than Christian parents in Michigan, my beliefs would be quite different. [But] the same goes for the pluralist...If the pluralist had been born in [Morocco] he probably wouldn't be a pluralist. Does it follow that...his pluralist beliefs are produced in him by an unreliable belief-producing process?" What is he trying to say? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
- Plantinga wrote, "Christian belief is produced by a cognitive process (the "internal instigation of the Holy Spirit" [in Aquinas' words] or the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" [in Calvin's words] functioning properly in an appropriate epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth." What is he trying to say? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? What would the Four Horsemen say?
- Dawkins argues that one should never debate a creationist? Is he correct? Why or why not?
- Summarize Plantinga's reasons for God's existence. Is he correct? Why or why not?
 - Does one need an *argument* for God's existence?
 - Is *feeling* God sufficient to believe that God exists?

- For Plantinga, what role does/should evidence play in belief in God?
 - Plantinga asks, “Why aren’t we all solipsists? We don’t have good arguments for their being other minds...we start from certain ideas, certain beliefs, certain thoughts. Why shouldn’t the existence of God be among those?” How would the Four Horsemen respond to this? Do you agree or disagree? Who is correct and how do you know?
 - According to Plantinga, what is a “properly basic belief”? Provide three examples of properly basic beliefs.
 - Is a belief in God properly basic? Why or why not?
 - What would the Four Horsemen say? Why?
 - “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” What would Plantinga say? What would the Four Horsemen say?
 - John Locke’s “A Letter concerning Tolerance,” argued that atheists should not be tolerated since they could not be trusted to keep oaths or promises. Is this correct? Why or why not.
 - Who would you be more likely to trust, a believer or an atheist? Why?
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Week Four

The New Atheists and their detractors (continued)

TOPICS

- Morality, God, and religion
- Morality in the bible and the Koran
- The 10 Commandments
- Was Mother Theresa really a virtuous woman?
- God debates
- Hermeneutics: Schleiermacher and Gadamer
- Rick Warren

Assignments

1. Read

- “Hitchens on MT”. On the dropbox.
- “Harris Koran”. On the dropbox.

2. Watch

- Sam Harris’ Bible/Koran are the works of God?:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7vYDs6BP2M>
- Christopher Hitchens’ The New Commandments:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_IM61aDyPg&feature=player_embedded
- Sam Harris v. Rabbi Wolpe: <http://atheismtube.com/2011/03/sam-harris-unleashed/>
- Hitchens on surrender and Islam: <http://atheismtube.com/2011/07/you-should-be-ashamed-sneering-at-people-who-guard-you-while-you-sleep/>
- Hitchens on preaching atheism: <http://atheismtube.com/2011/02/hitchens-thinking-on-his-feet/>
- Watch “Rabbis debate Harris Hitchens” on the dropbox. Also available here:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoCFTddNedk&feature=related>
- Hitchens on Socrates, philosophy and Jesus:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMo5R5pLPBE&NR=1> On dropbox as “Hitchens Socrates Philosophy Jesus”
- “Dan Dennett’s response to Rick Warren”. TED talk:
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/dan_dennett_s_response_to_rick_warren.html

3. Signups

- Extra-credit presentation signups.

4. Suggested

- Please see suggested reading, above (Hitchens, The Missionary Position).
- The Old Testament, Deuteronomy:
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+1&version=NIV>
- “Tom Honey on God and the tsunami”. TED talk:
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/tom_honey_on_god_and_the_tsunami.html

Questions

- If God asked you to kill all left handed people, and you were *absolutely positive* it was God, should you do so? Would you do so? Why or why not?
 - “If God doesn’t exist, anything is permitted.” (This quotation is often attributed to Dostoevsky). Do you agree or disagree? Why? In your discussion, reference three (either secular or religious) scholars we’ve been studying and note how they would respond.
 - Jacques Lacan wrote, “If God doesn’t exist, everything is prohibited”. What did he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 - If we’ve lost our belief in God (or accepted the *Euthyphro* argument), then how do we proceed?
 - Is the disenchantment of the world (to go back to Weber) a tragedy, committing us to mechanical means-ends reasoning?
 - Select one of the Four Horsemen and state how they would answer this question.
 - Select one earlier philosopher (Plato, Cicero, Lucretius, Hume, Shaftesbury) and state how they would answer this question
 - Does accepting atheism force us to abandon things we care about? Why or why not?
 - For philosophy majors: If moral philosophy in the Western tradition has largely theistic roots, what happens when their metaphysical foundations collapse?
 - How could one respond to Hitchens’ challenge to the faithful: “Name an ethical action taken, or moral statement made, for a person of faith that an atheist cannot make”.
 - What does it mean for a book to be perfect?
 - Do the 10 Commandments have any shortcomings?
 - Can the 10 Commandments be improved upon? If so, does this undermine their validity?
 - Is the peaceful interpretation of violent and misogynist passages from religious texts possible?
 - Is there a correct interpretation of a religious text?
 - Is there a correct interpretation of a non-religious text or film?
 - Who decides which interpretation is correct?
 - What are some of Hitchens’ claims about Mother Theresa? Do you agree or disagree?
 - If Hitchens is correct in his empirical assertions about Mother Theresa, what, if anything, does this say about her moral authority?
 - Specifically, what did you learn from reading Deuteronomy?
 - Are there any passages in Deuteronomy that you find problematic?
 - In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” Consider this question in the context of Deuteronomy. What are your thoughts?
 - Specifically, what did you learn from watching the debates?
 - Do you think that there was a winner or a loser in the debates? Who won/lost? Why?
 - What argument could the other side have made that would have changed your mind?
 - Do you think that the debates actually changed anyone’s mind? Why or why not?
 - Is there a common theme(s) in debates over the existence of God? If so, what is that theme(s)?
 - Does confirmation bias play a role in these debates? How so?
 - What is Rick Warren’s thesis? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 - What would the Four Horsemen say?
 - How does Tom Honey answer the question, “How could a loving God have done this?” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
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Week Five

Critical thinking about reasons for belief in God

TOPICS

- Danish cartoons, South Park, and depicting Mohammad
- Rick Perry and praying for the economy/rain
- Testing empirical claims
 - Faith and cognitive dissonance
- What counts as evidence for empirical claims?
- The American Philosophical Association's Delphi Report on Critical Thinking

MIDTERM

Assignments

1. Read

- "Hitchen on Perry" on the dropbox.
- Matt McCormick's Defeasibility Test:
<http://www.provingthenegative.com/2011/02/defeasibility-test.html>

2. Watch

- "Danish Cartoons 1" on the dropbox . Also found here:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-yYhq3nOng>
- "Danish Cartoons 2" on the dropbox . Also found here:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4--WelgBcE>
- Rick Perry: <http://atheismtube.com/2011/07/pray-for-the-economy/>

3. Suggested

- "Faith no more" on the dropbox.

Questions

- What is the Defeasibility Test?
 - Is it defeasible?
- What's the problem with starting with a belief first, and then reasoning from there? Can you think of specific examples when this would not steer one in the direction of the truth?
- Revisiting earlier topics:
 - Do people have a right not to be offended? About some things? About everything?
 - Should religion be privileged when it comes to people's "right" not to be offended?
 - What does secularism mean for metaphysics, epistemology, morality, politics, aesthetics, etc.? Is atheism a philosophical response to the partial disenchantment of the world? Why or why not?
 - What role does religion play in different societies/regions around the world today, and how has society been transformed by the enlightenment/rise of science?
 - Do you view the above questions differently now than you did 8 weeks ago? Explain.
- What is cognitive dissonance?
 - What role, if any, does it play when evaluating empirical claims that call elements of one's faith into question?
 - Relate the Harvard prayer study to the above question.
 - In the context of class discuss, your fellow classmate makes the following comment to you: "You can't prove that praying for rain doesn't cause it to rain". How would you comment?

Is s/he correct? Why or why not? (Do any of the APA's critical thinking constructs apply to this question?)

- If someone prayed for X, and X came true, would you be able to tell if there was a causal relationship between praying and X? How?
 - Faith healing: Why doesn't God heal amputees?
 - Which of the constructs of the APA's Delphi Report on critical thinking directly apply to the arguments Harrison makes?
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Week Six

**Critical thinking about reasons for belief in God (continued)
A Manual for Creating Atheists**

TOPICS

- Blasphemy
- Democracy, free speech, and censorship
- Faith
- Doxastic closure

Assignments

1. **Read**

- Boghossian, A Manual for Creating Atheists, chapter 2 and 3
- Indignation is not righteous:
http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/show/indignation_is_not_righteous/

2. **Watch**

- Freedom Under Fire: U.N. Anti-Blasphemy Resolution:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ji-qdC5zYd4>
- Krauss: <http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2013/02/02/krauss-on-the-difference-between-science-and-faith/>
- Peter Boghossian, “Jesus, the Easter Bunny, and Other Delusions: Just Say No!”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlaPXtZpzBw> (starts at 9:00)
- Peter Boghossian, “Faith: Pretending to Know Things You Don’t Know,”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp4WUFXvCFQ>
- Peter Boghossian, “Walking the Talk” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ARwO9jNjyA>

3. **Suggested**

- Please see suggested reading, Dennett.
- Faith in science and methodological naturalism. On the dropbox as “Faith in Science”

Questions

- How do skeptics address the idea that one needs to have “faith in science”?
- Explain this statement: “Who gets to sit at the adult table and who has to sit at the children’s table?”
 - Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 - What role should religion play in the formation of public policy? Why?
 - Formulate a question with regard to prayer in schools and Dearborn, Michigan’s large Muslim population.
 - Formulate at least one public policy question based on the following:
 - Catholic Pharmacists who refuse to dispense birth control pills.
 - Muslim cab drivers who refuse to pick up individuals who have seeing eye dogs.
 - Jehovah Witnesses who refuse to allow doctors to give their children a blood transfusion.
 - Respond to the questions you’ve created.

- Is it blasphemy if one doesn't buy into the system that's being insulted?
 - What are the social and political implications of this?
- Are there secular blasphemies (flag burning, questioning diversity or anthropogenic global warming, stating that there are cognitive differences between races)? What are the implications of this?
 - Is the secular left just as guilty when it comes to wanting to not be offended?
- Some religious and political leaders have claimed that drawing the Muslim Prophet Mohammad is akin to using racial slurs. Do you agree or disagree? Are there any fundamental differences that make this argument dis-analogous?
- John Rawls has argued that "public reason" should exclude religious arguments from discussion about the proper structure of political institutions. He argues that we should try to stick to reasons that everyone could accept (thus he also excludes arguments that rely on the rejection of religion). What do you think about this? Is Rawls correct? Why or why not?
 - How does this relate to the adult and children's table discussion?
- It has been argued that Western democracies are ill suited to deal with religious radicals. Do you agree or disagree? Can you think of examples or policies that support your point?
- How should a democratic society deal with religion? Specifically, how should a democratic society deal with issues of free speech when it comes to religion?
 - What does "free speech" mean? What is "hate speech"?
 - Do bitter criticisms of religion constitute hate speech? (Think of Mill's *On Liberty*).
 - Beyond the question of whether *governments* should censor some speech, what should we as individuals tolerate/not tolerate?
 - What place does religion have, or should it have, in a pluralistic society?
 - What role, if any, should religion have in societies where people have different faiths or no faith at all?
 - Even if you personally reject religion, how ought governments to deal with believers (e.g., freedom of religion and conscience are considered by most to be among the most fundamental human rights)?
 - Please also answer this question in the context of fringe groups, like the Westboro Baptist Church.
- One of the main problems for liberal democracy is: How do we maintain a stable society when people disagree about fundamental matters? How would you answer this question?

Week Seven, Week eight, Week nine

A Manual for Creating Atheists

TOPICS

- Anti-apologetics
- Faith and the academy
- Epistemological relativism

Assignments

1. Read Week Seven

- Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, chapter 7

2. Read Week Eight

- Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, chapter 8

3. Week Nine No Reading

- **Prepare for your presentations, watch:**
“Is God Necessary for Morality?” William Lane Craig versus (American philosopher) Shelly Kagan Debate, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?hl=en&client=mv-google&gl=US&v=SiJnCQuPiuo&nomobile=1>

Week Ten

Conclusion

TOPICS

- Derren Brown “The So-Called Messiah”
- Harrison’s reasons for belief, rebuttals, and rebuttals to rebuttals
- Conclusion
- Final Thoughts

Assignments

1. **Watch**

- Derren Brown’s “The So-Called Messiah” in the folder “Derren Brown 1-8” on the dropbox.

2. **Extra-credit presentations**

- You will deliver a 5-minute presentation on *one* chapter from the Harrison text. In the presentation you will: 1) clearly outline one of the reasons people give for believing in God, 2) clearly state the atheist’s objection, 3) clearly state whether or not you think the atheist objection are valid, including its strengths and/or weaknesses. Note: Presentations will go in order, from chapter 1 until chapter 50.

3. **Suggested Viewing**

- Derren’s Brown’s “Miracles for Sale”

Questions

- Are any of Harrison’s rebuttals unpersuasive? Which rebuttal? Why? How would you respond?
 - In the last ten weeks, is there any topic that you think was not given sufficient time, or that you feel was treated unfairly? Which topic? Why? What would you like to add?
 - Please discuss what you got out of this class. If you got nothing out of this class please clearly state why you got nothing out of class (e.g., you knew it all already, was too difficult, was not challenging enough, etc.).
 - Is there anything about this class that you would change? What? Please be as specific as possible.
 - What was the most interesting thing you learned from this class?
 - What did you learn from the Derren Brown videos?
 - Was what Derren Brown did unethical (particularly in regard to pretending to speak with the dead)?
 - Do you think any of the people involved changed their minds? Why or why not?
 - Is there a relationship between gullibility and critical thinking?
 - What’s the relationship between gullibility and susceptibility?
 - Does skepticism necessarily decrease one’s gullibility? Why or why not?
 - Are you gullible/susceptible? What can you do to make yourself less gullible/susceptible?