

Perspectives on Atheism

COMM 4399 (02), Spring 2012

M&W 5-6:15, Fleck Hall 106

Instructor: Dr. Innes Mitchell



ST. EDWARD'S
UNIVERSITY

Contact Information

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Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 1:00-2:00
Friday Noon-2:00 p.m., and by appointment.

Required Texts

- Dan Barker, *Godless* (2008)
- J. Anderson Thomson, *Why We Believe in God(s)* (2011)
- Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position* (1995)
- Sean Faircloth, *Attack of the Theocrats* (2012)
- Robin Morgan, *Fighting Words* (2006)
- A.C. Grayling, *Meditations for the Humanist* (2002)

Course Description

American mythology claims the United States is a Christian nation, increasingly accepting of all denominations and faiths. What about non-belief? Should atheism be written into, and become part of the American story? Has it already?

From a rhetorical perspective we will address a variety of related questions:

- What are the narratives of atheism? Whose voices tell the stories and what are their interests?
- What are the arguments for atheism?
- How is atheism framed, both positively and negatively?
- Why has “New Atheism” appeared recently as a social movement? What are the aspirations of the movement, the strategies used for altering perspectives, and who are their audiences?

We will examine four different perspectives (angles if you will) to view these issues:

- The personal perspective of “Letting Go of God”
- The critical perspective taking religion as its object
- The social perspective examining secularism in a free society
- The ethical perspective addressing the tenets of secular humanism

There is an alternative American myth claiming the United States is a beacon of Liberty, carrying the torch of progressive values, scientific endeavor, and human rights ignited by the Enlightenment. Which American myth appeals to us? This overarching question will guide our journey.



Please Note: Detailed instructions for the assignments listed below, and policies for the course, are posted on *Blackboard*. Access *Blackboard* from the St. Edward’s University homepage.

Required Activities

1. Blog Posts:

- You will write twelve (12) blog posts in response to the course material.
- The “Perspectives on Atheism” blog (perspectives-on-atheism.posterous.com) is a private course blog.
- Each blog post should range from 500-800 words in length.
- Your blog post should hyperlink to all outside sources and references.

2. Essays:

- You will write two “Personal Reflection” and one Response paper.
- Each essay/paper should be 4-5 pages in length, typed and double spaced.
- Your reflection essays will describe your personal perspectives on the issues raised in the course, as well as any relevant outside reading.

- Your response paper will address issues presented in Sean Faircloth’s book, *Attack of the Theocrats* (2012).
- You will present in class a synopsis of one “Personal Reflection” essay and your “Response Paper”—See Course Schedule.

3. Group Book Report:

- You will be assigned to one of three groups (A-C).
- As a group, you are required to prepare a class presentation and discussion of a book related to either Part 1 or Part 2 of the course:
 - Group A: Either Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (2007);
or William Lobdell, *Losing My Religion* (2009)
 - Group B: Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe* (2004)
Also include references to Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003)
 - Group C: Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (1995)

4. Group Field Trip:

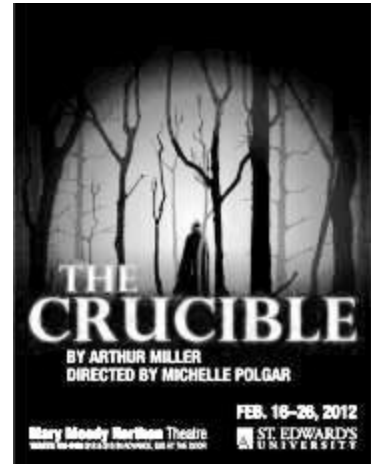
- During the course of the semester, as a group, you will be responsible for attending an educational event organized by one of the Atheist/Freethinking organizations in Austin.
- Examples of Atheist/Freethinking organizations in Austin include:
 - Atheist Community of Austin
 - Center for Inquiry Austin
 - Secular Student Alliance at The University of Texas at Austin
 - First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin
- You will write a group (combined) blog post describing your responses to the event (800-1000 words).
- Upload three photographs of your group at the event.

5. 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, and arguing points.
- It is *very important* that you keep up with the reading. Lectures and discussions will build on, not necessarily duplicate, reading material.

6. Extra Credit:

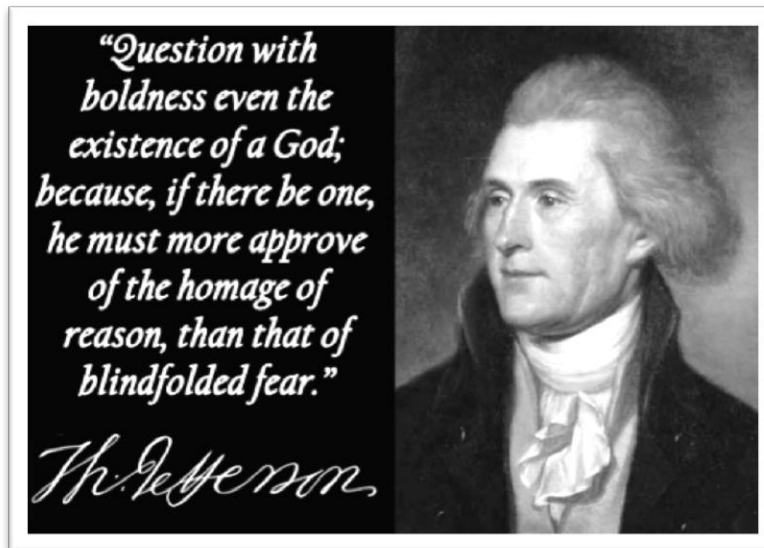
- Arthur Miller's classic play, *The Crucible*, will be performed at Mary Moody Northern Theatre from February 16-26. Miller's play dramatizes several themes and issues relevant to our course.
- Attend a performance of the play and write a blog post briefly describing your response to the performance for 20 points extra credit. Your ticket stub will provide proof of attendance.



Evaluation

1. Twelve Blog Posts (x 30 points each)	360	
2. Reflection/Response Papers (x 120 points each)	360	
3. Group Book Report	120	(Includes 40 Peer)
4. Group Field Trip & Event Blog Post	60	
5. Participation	<u>100</u>	
	Total	1000

1000-900	=	100-90%	A
899-800	=	89-80%	B
799-700	=	79-70%	C
699-600	=	69-60%	D
599 below	59% >		F



Course Schedule

Reading Note: Articles available on *Blackboard*.

January 18 Course Introduction: Atheism—A Rhetorical Perspective

Before next class:

Watch: *Secular Believers* (BBC2 program hosted by Julian Baggini, 2007). Access on *YouTube*

Read: “Faith No More”
“The New Naysayers”

Write: Blog Post #1

23 New Atheism—Genesis of a Social Movement

- Discussion of *Secular Believers* & Reading
- Blog Post #1 due

Part 1: Personal Perspectives—Letting Go of God

25 Rejecting Conformity to Religious Belief

- Reading: Barker, *Introduction* & 3-83.
- Julia Sweeney, “Navigating Around the Dinner Table”
- Film: Julia Sweeney, *Letting Go of God*

30 Guest Speaker: Matt Dillahunty
President *Atheist Community of Austin*
“(De)Conversion & Community”

- Write Blog Post #2 on Matt’s presentation



February 1 Scientific Perspective—Why We Believe

- Reading: J. Anderson Thomson, *Why We Believe in God(s)* (2011)
- Write Blog Post #3 on book

6 Apocalyptic Perspective—End Time Anxiety

- Reading: Stephens and Giberson, “Trust Me, the End Is Near”

8 Group A Book Presentation:

Either: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (2007)

Or: William Lobdell, *Losing My Religion* (2009)

- Group A Book Report Outline due
- Group A Peer Evaluations due

- 13 *Personal Reflections* / Essay
 - *Personal Reflections* / Essay due
 - Oral In-Class Presentations: Groups B&C

Part 2: Critical Perspectives—Critiques of Religion

- 15 Refuting God
 - Reading: Barker, 87-156

- 20 Religion Poisons Everything?
 - Film: *Root of All Evil?* (Channel 4, 2006)
 - Write Blog Post #4 on film
- 22 What's Wrong with the Bible?
 - Reading: Barker, 161-250
 - Film: Dr. Robert Beckford, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (2004)

- 27 Historical Perspective: Did Jesus Exist?
 - Reading: Barker, 252-304
 - Write Blog Post #5 on historical Jesus debate
- 29 What's Wrong with Mormonism?

Group B Book Presentation:
Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe* (2004)
Also refer to: Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003)

 - Group B Book Report Outline due
 - Group B Peer Evaluations due

March

- 5 What's Wrong with Islam?

Group C Book Presentation:
Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (1995)

 - Group C Book Report Outline due
 - Group C Peer Evaluations due
- 7 What's Right with Christianity?

Guest Speaker: Dr. Robert Jensen, Professor
UT School of Journalism

 - Reading: Jensen, "Introduction," *All My Bones Shake* (2009)
 - Write Blog Post #6 on Professor Jensen's presentation



12-16 Spring Break

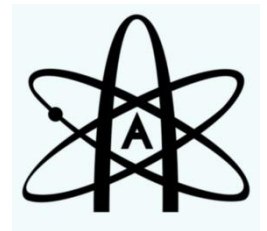
- 19 The Catholic Church
- Reading: Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position* (1995)
 - Write Blog Post #7 on *The Missionary Position*

Part 3: Social Perspectives—Secularism in Free Society

- 21 Roots of Liberty: Enlightenment Humanism and American Secular Heritage
- Reading: Dawkins, “Foreword” in *Attack of the Theocrats* (2012)
 - Sean Faircloth, Preface & Chapters 1 & 2 in *Attack of the Theocrats*
 - Robin Morgan, *Fighting Words* (2006)
 - Write Blog Post #8 on Reading
- 26 Legal Perspectives—A Wall of Separation
Film: *The Lord is Not on Trial Here Today* (2010)
- Write Blog Post #9 on the film
- 28 Scientific Perspectives—Evolution vs. Creationism
- Reading: Eugenie C. Scott, “Beliefs: Religion, Creationism, and Naturalism”

April

- 2 Religious America, Secular Europe?
- Reading: Berger, Davie, and Fokas, “Religious America, Secular Europe?”
 - Bagg and Voas, “The Triumph of Indifference: Irreligion in British Society”
- 4 No Atheists in Foxholes?
Guest Speaker: Kathleen Johnson, Vice President and Military Director *American Atheists*
- Reading: Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, “Fighting for Country, Not for God”
 - Write Blog Post #10 on Kathleen’s presentation
- 9 Easter Break—no class
- 11 Political Perspectives—The God Strategy
Film: *With God on Our Side* (2004)
- Reading: Putnam and Campbell, “Religion in American Politics”
 - Write Blog Post #11 on the film



Part 4: Ethical Perspectives—Secular Humanism

- 16 Black Infidels: African American Secular Humanism
- Reading: Sikivu Hutchinson, “Black Infidels: Secular Humanism and African American Thought”
 - Emily Brennan, “The Unbelievers”
- 18 *Envisioning a Secular Future* Response Paper due
- Oral In-Class Presentations: Group A
- 23 Parenting Beyond Belief: Raising Freethinkers
- Reading: Dale McGowan, “The Inquiring Mind”
 - Write Final Blog Post #12
- 25 Work on Final Paper—no class
- 30 *Personal Reflections* // Essay
- Oral In-Class Presentations: Groups B&C
- May 2 *Personal Reflections* // Essay
- *Personal Reflections* // Essay due (All Groups)
 - Oral In-Class Presentations: Group A
 - Course Evaluation

