

Atheism

Course Syllabus for Young Scholars in American Religion (Fall 2019)

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Institutional and Curricular Setting:

The University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) is a public research university and one of 10 campuses comprising the University of California system. As of 2019, the school enrolled just over 23,000 undergraduates and just under 3,000 graduate students. 85% of those undergraduates are from California, and more than 40% will be the first in their family to graduate from a 4-year college; 36% are white, 30% Latinx, 28% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 5% black. The school is officially designated a Hispanic Serving Institution, which means that at least 25% of its student body is Hispanic. With strong departments across the sciences, humanities, and fine arts, UCSB ranked as the 5th-best public university in the country in 2019 according to US News & World Report. The university is on the quarter system, with three 10-week quarters stretching from late September through early June. Geographically, the university is located on the Pacific coast, 10 miles outside of downtown Santa Barbara.

Formed in 1964, UCSB's Department of Religious Studies has been among the pioneers of the secular study of religion and has built its reputation on its theoretical rigor, its wide range of specializations, its diverse language offerings, and its focus on the fringes of what is traditionally considered religious. It offers Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate degrees, and with 25 tenure-track faculty, is the largest Religious Studies department in the University of California system. Among Religious Studies departments at public universities in the United States, it has the second-largest faculty, behind only that of the University of Virginia.

Faculty in Religious Studies teach four courses per year, typically including one large undergraduate lecture course, two upper-division undergraduate seminars, and a graduate seminar. With eight tenure-track faculty focusing on American religious traditions, faculty members are encouraged to teach seminars in their areas of expertise, and collectively, they offer students a broad range of topical coverage. Rates of religious affiliation are relatively low in California and even lower among young people and the college educated. Courses focused on subjects like spirituality and atheism offer students critical ways of examining who they and their peers are, and such courses fit well in a curriculum designed to help students think through what we mean when we talk about religion. The syllabus below offers students an advanced introduction to atheism, which it presents as both religion-like and not religious.

Pedagogical Approach:

This seminar is designed for 25 or fewer students to meet for 75 minutes twice a week for 10 weeks. In-class time is focused on discussion, with an emphasis on comprehension and analysis over criticism. Students are encouraged to keep up with the reading by submitting 1-page reading-response papers through the course website at least 3 hours before the start of class. These papers are a mix of summary and reflection, and they provide the professor with 1) a means of assessing whether students are keeping up, 2) a way to use grades to motivate them to keep up, 3) a tool for organizing in-class discussion by identifying insightful responses that can guide the conversation, and 4) a tool for encouraging shy students to raise points in class that they can feel more confident in because they have thought through them in advance. In class, students are expected to ground their comments in the text and encouraged to preface their contributions by directing the class to passages that provide evidence for their claims. References to outside readings are discouraged unless they can be summarized quickly for the benefit of everyone present. An in-class midterm exam reinforces the importance of careful reading by asking students to analyze a primary source they have not seen before using the approaches they have practiced during the first several weeks. The course's final assignment shifts from emphasizing reading skills to writing skills. Students spend the weeks after the midterm building a final paper incrementally, first with an outline, then a draft for peer review, and then a final draft.

The course narrates two related arguments: atheism rejects belief in a personal God and the supernatural, and atheism affirms beliefs that belong to a secular tradition that can be traced back for many centuries. Atheism is thus both a rejection of religious belief (and often all aspects of religion) and a religion-like tradition of its own that has in certain times and places been institutionalized and even called religious. Nearly all of the texts on the syllabus are primary sources written by nonbelievers of one sort or another, but they do not all agree. This encourages students to avoid mistaking the arguments they find in the readings for a stable or "correct" perspective, and instead, to recognize a robust internal debate. Students encounter the history of atheist thought as a range of disagreements that arise out of a shared set of assumptions, with the most basic challenge being the paradox that atheism is both not religious and in many ways religion-like. Readings are organized mostly chronologically, and each week's reading focuses on a problem that atheist thinkers have tried to resolve or that their writing has raised for those who want to understand atheism. Given that atheism's paradox is likely unresolvable, students are shown how problems that resist resolution generate prolific debates and how understanding does not always demand a clear conclusion, but can also be a diagnosis of the conditions that prevent it.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

What is atheism? Is it the absence of belief in God? Is it the absence of belief in the supernatural? Or is it a worldview and a way of life? Does atheism always oppose religion, or can the two co-exist or even embrace one another? This course traces the historical development of the set of ideas we now call atheism and takes account of its varieties in the world today. In addition to the history of atheism, we will look at related contemporary topics, such as religion-like secular communities, Islamophobia, and the possibility of an atheist spirituality. This course emphasizes reading and discussion, and students are strongly encouraged to complete the readings and to read with care.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:

Attendance, Reading, and Class Participation are required. Because we have so few sessions over ten weeks, more than two unexcused absences will result in the loss of a third of a letter-grade for every additional class missed. Students are expected to contribute to class discussions. Please come to my office hours, especially if you find the readings or discussions challenging, but also just to chat about what interests you. It's great to get to know all of you outside of class, and that's why I set that time aside. (25%)

Response Memos: One-page, single-spaced response papers to the day's assigned readings are **due by TBD the day of each class**. I grade these so that I can motivate you to keep up with the reading, so we can have additional conversation outside of class, and to encourage you to take notes while you read. Each memo should be about half summary and half reflection or critical analysis. These can be pretty informal, though please observe the rules of grammar and make them coherent, since I will be reading them and giving you feedback. As long as you take notes as you go, they should be easy to write. These memos should be submitted on GauchoSpace via the corresponding Assignment link. Late memos will not be accepted. (25%)

Midterm: The exam is an in-class essay that asks you to demonstrate what you've learned so far in the course. The week before the exam, I will provide you some advice on how to study, and your essay will respond to a prompt that I distribute at the start of class. (20%)

Final Paper, Outline, and Peer-editing: The final paper is due **finals week** and is worth 20% of your grade. You will write the paper incrementally, first by distributing an outline

of your paper to me in **week 7**, worth 5% of your grade. The outline should be written in prose and should clearly state your thesis and your argument and describe the evidence you plan to use. The more thorough your description the better, as this is a chance for me to provide you with feedback. You can meet with me any time during the quarter to discuss your paper, and we will discuss potentially good arguments during class in **week 6**. During **week 9**, you will distribute a full draft (7-8 double-spaced pages) of your essay by email to a partner you have chosen. Please Cc me on the email. During **week 10**, you will provide feedback (1-2 single-spaced pages) on your partner's draft, worth 5% of your grade. Please Cc me again. Final drafts of papers are due to me and to your partner during **finals week** and are worth 20% of your grade. (30%)

POLICIES

NO LAPTOPS OR SMARTPHONES OUT IN CLASS! Your devices are designed to be distracting because we live in an attention-based economy, and most of the internet runs on advertising. The companies that make your devices and platforms are very good at what they do! For your sake and for mine, let's keep them put away during class. This means you have to take notes by hand, but the trade-off is worth it. **Beware:** I will call you out if you're using a device. It really interferes with learning, so I take it seriously. I make exceptions for disabilities registered with DSP, so please come talk to me if you need an accommodation.

ACADEMIC HONESTY: In brief, if I catch you cheating in any way, I will be totally unforgiving in meting out punishment, and I will pursue the maximum penalty the university allows. Be assured, you will get a zero on that exam or assignment, and you might face further sanctions from the Office of Judicial Affairs. If I can, I will make sure there is a note made in your file. It takes time and effort to cheat, and that's time and effort you should spend actually learning. It also wastes my time, and it requires that I enter into an arms race of cheating and counter-cheating tactics. Cheating undermines the whole reason we're here—or at least that we should be here. We're very fortunate people to get to learn at a university like UCSB, and this degree is not a rubber-stamping process on your way to a job, and eventually, death. If you're going to do this thing, do it right. Don't cheat.

READINGS

All readings should be read by the day on which they're assigned, and **you must bring print copies of the day's assigned readings to class**. Most readings are available on GauchoSpace, either as uploads or via link. Printed readers are much more expensive than printing the readings yourself, and local printers forbid professors from sharing readings electronically if they assemble a reader. It's either/or, and this is the least expensive option. There are places to print for free on campus without using your quota, and I encourage you to share printing tips with one another.

You'll also need to purchase three books for the course. They're easy to find used, though please purchase the same translation listed here for the Freud and Nietzsche texts so that we're all reading the same words:

- Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by James Strachey
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann
- Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*

If you repeatedly forget to bring printed readings, I'll take away attendance points to motivate you. My aim is to push, never to punish.

WEEK 1: The Origins of Atheism

What is Atheism?

- No reading

Ancient Antecedents

- Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader*, pp. 3-40 (biography, letters, maxims)

Recommended: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*; Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011); Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (2015)

WEEK 2: The First Atheists

Atheists Persecuted and in Hiding

- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (1310), Canto 10
- Jean Meslier, *Testament: Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier* (1729), "Note on the Text" and Chs. 1-4, 28, 59, 61, 63, 66, 80, 82, 96

Recommended: David Hume: *The Natural History of Religion* (1757); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651); Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics* (1677); Michael Hunter and David Wootton, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (1992); Georges Minois, *The Atheist's Bible: The Most Dangerous Book that Never Existed* (2012); Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (2014)

Atheism Defended and Avowed

- Pierre Bayle's entry for "Atheism" in the *Critical and Historical Dictionary* (1702), pp. 162-180
- Julien Offray de la Mettrie, "Machine Man" (1747), 3-39
- Baron d'Holbach, "[On Revelation](#)" (1750) and "[On Religious Cruelty](#)" (1769)

Recommended: D'Holbach, *The System of Nature* (1770); Alan C. Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (1976); Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*; Kors, *Epicureans and*

Atheists in France, 1650-1729 (2016); Kors, *Naturalism and Unbelief in France, 1650-1729* (2016)

WEEK 3: Nineteenth-Century Secularism and Freethought

Secularism and Agnosticism

- George Jacob Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (1896) pp. 9-67, 121-132
- Thomas Huxley, "[Agnosticism](#)" (1889)
- Robert Ingersoll, "[Why Am I Agnostic?](#)" Parts I & II (1889)

Recommended: Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (2012); Todd Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Fourth Confession* (2014); Bertrand Russell: "What Is an Agnostic?" (1953); Madalyn Murray O'Hair, "[Agnostics](#)"

Freethinkers and Free Religion

- Frances Wright, excerpts from lectures (1829)
- Ernestine L. Rose, "A Defence of Atheism" (1861)
- William J. Potter, "The Free Religious Association: Its 25 Years and Their Meaning" (1892), pp. 5-31
- Francis Ellingwood Abbot, "The Unfinished Window" (1876)

Recommended: Frances Wright, *A Few Days in Athens* (1822); Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address" (1838); Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion* (1852); John Stuart Mill, "Utility of Religion" in *Three Essays on Religion* (1874); John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (1934); Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850* (1943); Sidney Warren, *American Freethought, 1860-1914* (1943); Stow Persons, *Free Religion: An American Faith* (1947); Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (2004); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (2016); Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism* (2006)

WEEK 4: Correcting Religion's Misunderstanding

German Anthropological Atheism

- Ludwig Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) Preface and Chs. 1, 19, 20, 27

Recommended: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined* (1860); Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity* (1968); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World* (1997)

Marxism

- Karl Marx, brief excerpt from his dissertation (1841)
- Marx, “The German Ideology—Ideology in General” (1844-46), pp. 93-101
- Marx, “The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism” (1844), pp. 101-107
- Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844), pp. 170-182
- Marx, “Concerning Feuerbach” (1845), pp. 182-184
- Marx, “Social Principles of Christianity” (1847), pp. 184-186
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto” (sans prefaces) (1848)

Recommended: Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Dialectic and General Philosophy” (1844); Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867); Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government* (1840); Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State* (1882); Joseph Blankholm, “Remembering Marx’s Secularism” (2020)

WEEK 5: Curing Religion

Religion as a Neurosis

- Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927)

Recommended: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930); Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

MIDTERM

WEEK 6: Atheism as a Way of Life

Existentialism

- Jean-Paul Sartre: “Existentialism” (1945) (you can skip the introduction to the essay and the discussion that follows)
- Jean-Paul Sartre: “No Exit” (1944)

Recommended: Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927); Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946); Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” (1949); Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (2010)

Secular Humanism

- Paul Kurtz: [Secular Humanist Declaration](#) (1980)
- Norm Allen, Jr., “An African American Humanist Declaration” (1990)
- Leo Pfeffer, “The Religion of Secular Humanism” (1987)

Recommended: Phillip E. Hammond, "The Courts and Secular Humanism," (1984); Mathew Engelke, "Christianity and the Anthropology of Secular Humanism" (2014); Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening* (2014); Joseph Blankholm, "Secularism, Humanism, and Secular Humanism: Terms and Institutions" (2017)

WEEK 7: Atheology

Christian Atheism?

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), First and Second Essay

Recommended: Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (1949); Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, (1966); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (1965); Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966); Mark C. Taylor, *Erring* (1984); John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (2007); Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (2016)

Post-Christian Atheism

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Third Essay

Recommended: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952); Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (2007); Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (2005); John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (2018)

Final Paper Outline Due

WEEK 8: Is the Not so New Atheism Anti-Islam or Anti-Muslim?

Atheism, Old and New

- Bertrand Russell, "Why I Am Not a Christian" (1927)
- Sam Harris, excerpts from *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006)
- Kathryn Lofton, "[So you want to be a new atheist](#)" (2009)

Recommended: Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (1945); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (2004); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (2006); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (2007); Penny Edgell et al, "Atheists as Other" (2006)

Islamophobia:

- "[Fighting Allah, Defending Muslims](#)," video of panel at Georgia State University (2018)
- Glenn Greenwald, "[Sam Harris, the New Atheists, and anti-Muslim animus](#)" (2013)

Recommended: Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire" (2006); Simon Cottee, *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (2015); Nathan Lean, "Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens: New Atheists Flirt with Islamophobia" (2013); Amarnath Amarasingam and Melanie Elyse Brewster, "The Rise and Fall of the New Atheism: Identity Politics and Tensions within US Nonbelievers" (2016); Phil Torres, "From the Enlightenment to the Dark Ages: How "new atheism" slid into the alt-right" (2017)

WEEK 9: Why Is Atheism so White and Male?

Black Without God

- Hubert Harrison, "Letter to Mrs. Frances Reynolds Keyser" (1908), "Paine's Place in the Deistical Movement" (1911), "The Negro a Conservative" (1914) (pp. 35-46)
- James Forman, "God Is Dead: A Question of Power" (1972)
- William R. Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religious Culture" (2001)

Recommended: Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*; Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism* (2009); Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, *The Origins of Black Humanism*; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963); Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945); William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (1973); Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998); Sikivu Hutchinson, *Moral Combat* (2011)

Women Without Superstition

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Excerpts from *The Woman's Bible* (1895)
- Gloria Steinem, [Interview](#) in *The Humanist* (2012)
- Mayanthi Fernando, "Save the Muslim Woman, Save the Republic: Ni Putes Ni Soumises and the Ruse of Neoliberal Sovereignty" (2013)

Recommended: Annie Laurie Gaylor (editor), *Women Without Superstition: "No Gods—No Masters": The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1997); Evelyn A. Kirkley, *Infidel Mothers and Rational Gentlemen* (2000); Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (2005); Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion, and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (2013); Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (2013); Joan W. Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (2017)

Distribute Final Paper Drafts

WEEK 10: Religious Atheism

Atheist Spirituality and Poetics

- Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (2014), "Chapter 1: Spirituality" and "Conclusion"
- Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, [How We Gather Report](#) (2015)

Recommended: James Croft and Greg Epstein: "[The Godless Congregation: An Idea Whose Time Has Come](#)," *Free Inquiry*; Andre Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* (2007); Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists* (2012) and "[Atheism 2.0](#)" TED Talk (2011)

What Is Atheism?

- No reading

Distribute Final Paper Draft Feedback

FINAL PAPERS DUE on TBD during FINALS WEEK