

Atheisms and Theologies

Wesley J. Wildman — Boston University — Fall, 2009 — STH TT856/TT956

Course Description

The general aim of this course is learn about varieties of atheism—older “classic atheism,” so-called “new atheism” of recent years, and theologically inspired forms of atheism—and to understand the various theological responses to atheism. Questions of particular importance are: (1) How strong are traditional and new atheistic arguments? (2) Where does or should theology stand in relation to the arguments of atheism? (3) What are the origins of modern atheism? (4) Should postmodern mystical theologies and iconoclastic anti-anthropomorphic theologies that reject a determinate divine being be considered atheistic? If so how does this sort of atheism relate to other types?

The class is intended for advanced masters students and doctoral candidates interested in contemporary forms of atheism and their historical, scientific, conceptual, and theological roots. Classes will meet once a week on Wednesdays from 3:00 to 6:00. Each class will be conducted in the seminar discussion format with lectures given by the instructor as needed or requested. The 800-level version of this course counts (1) as an MTS Core Concentration course for Science and Religion, for Theology, and for Area B; and (2) as an MDiv Theology 3 Core Elective. It may also count (3) as a requirement for a BTI Certificate program in science and religion.

The main product of the course will be a research paper on some aspect of the course material (50%; 3,000 words for 800-level students, 5,000 words for 900-level students). There will also be several 1,500-word reviews of books and articles presented in class (30%). The remainder of the grade (20%) will be based on the quality of seminar participation, including attendance, timeliness, and discussion. Incompletes are not allowed—except when they are; paperwork is necessary. Plagiarism is not allowed—ever. Know the rules.

Seminar Schedule

Introduction

Week 1 Varieties of Atheism, Varieties of Theological Responses, Demographics of Atheism (online sources)

Part 1: Classic Atheisms and Theological Responses

Week 2 Theodicy, Coherence, Morality Challenges (Baggini; online sources; recommended: Fabro, Hitchens 2007, Martin)

Week 3 In and Out of Atheism (Flew)

Week 4 The Modern History of Atheism (Buckley)

Part 2: New Atheisms and Theological Responses

Week 5 New Atheism, I (Harris; recommended: Mills)

Week 6 New Atheism, II (Hitchens)

Week 7 New Atheism, III (Dawkins)

Week 8 Reply to New Atheism, I (Flew, Appendix A)

Week 9 Reply to New Atheism, II (Haught)

Part 3: Theologically Inspired Atheisms

Week 10 Death of God Theology (Altizer & Hamilton)

Week 11 Postmodern Mystical Theology (Vattimo & Caputo)

Week 12 Iconoclastic Mystical Theology (Wildman—reading provided by instructor)

Conclusion

Week 13 The Future of Atheisms and Theologies

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Required Books

- Altizer, Thomas J.J.; Hamilton, William. *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966; out of print but you can buy this book used very cheaply).
- Baggini, Julian. *Atheism; A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; pbk 978-0192804242)
- Buckley, Michael J. *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004; hbk 978-0300093841).
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion* (Mariner Books, 2008; pbk 978-0618918249).
- Flew, Antony; with Roy Abraham Varghese. *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008; pbk 978-0061335303).
- Harris, Sam. *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Vintage, 2008; pbk 978-0307278777).
- Haught, John. *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
- Hitchens, Christopher. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve, 2009; pbk 978-0446697965).
- Vattimo, Gianni; Caputo, John D. *After the Death of God* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2009; pbk 978-0231141253).

Recommended Books

- Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile: Modern Atheism*. Paulist Press, 1968; hbk 978-0809100538).
- Hitchens, Christopher. *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*. Da Capo Press, 2007; pbk 978-0306816086).
- Martin, Michael (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2006; pbk 978-0521603676).
- Mills, David. *Atheist Universe: The Thinking Person's Answer to Christian Fundamentalism* (Ulysses Press, 2006; pbk 978-1569755679).

Online Sources for Weeks 1 and 2

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism> (Wikipedia)
- <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/atheism-agnosticism/> (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
- <http://ffrf.org/> (Freedom from Religion Foundation)
- <http://www.positiveatheism.org/tochist.htm> (Positive Atheism—classic writings)
- <http://www.atheists.org/> (American Atheists)
- <http://www.infidels.org/> (The Secular Web; see esp. <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/nontheism/atheism/>)
- <http://www.religioustolerance.org/atheist.htm> (ReligiousTolerance.org)
- <http://www.gutenberg.org/> (Project Gutenberg E-texts; consider Voltaire's *Candide*, Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* entries on "Atheism" and "God", Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*)