

# **Atheism in American Culture**

## **An Undergraduate Course**

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[contact information]

### **Course Description**

This course is appropriate for any undergraduate interested in the role of atheists, freethinkers, doubters, and the nonreligious in America. Blending approaches from history, sociology, cultural studies, and media studies, this course will be of particular interest to students in Religious Studies, American Studies, Sociology, and American History. Although a minority group in the United States (and one perceived as suspect), atheists and nonbelievers have played central roles in the nation's history in many pivotal moments. This course will provide students with knowledge of these historical roles, as well as with a foundation for understanding the social and cultural position of atheists throughout history and in the contemporary moment. This will include discussions of central figures, movements, and organizations, and also of atheism "on the ground." The materials used for this course therefore range from secondary historical and sociological sources to personal narratives and contemporary media products.

### **Course Objectives**

The goal of this course is to impart an understanding of the place of freethinking in American culture from roughly the time of the nation's founding to the contemporary era. Students will gain a working knowledge of different "varieties" of unbelief as well as their emergence or appearance in cultural moments. Together, we will explore questions including: What is the relationship between religion and nonreligion in America? What is special about the social/cultural position of atheists in America? What accounts for this position and how does it change over time? How do atheists organize, and why? How have atheists and atheist groups addressed questions of gender and race in America? What is "New Atheism" and is it "new"? Through a final project and accompanying presentation, students will gain experience with research and writing at the college level as they explore some dimension of nonreligion in America in greater depth.

### **Course Standards, Policies, & Requirements**

#### ***Attendance and Preparedness***

**25%**

Attendance is required. Students are requested to notify me as soon as possible should they foresee needing to miss a class for extenuating circumstances. Absences are dealt with according to the situation, but unexcused or explained absences will directly affect the participation grade (5% for every missed class). Lateness is frowned upon; expect to experience a stink-eye the likes of which will make your skin crawl. Excessive and/or repeated lateness will result in uncomfortable conversations and will start to affect your grade like absences. Finally, students are expected to have completed assigned readings for every class, and should come to class with relevant questions or comments in mind so as to be able to engage and should we have in discussion time.

#### ***Midterm Proposal***

**15%**

The midterm proposal is a 2-3 page paper due [date] that outlines your idea for the final project. It should include a list of potential sources.

**Final Paper** **40%**

The final will be 10-12 pages, due by [date]. Students are welcome (and encouraged) to meet with me to explore and discuss topics.

**Presentation** **20%**

All students will prepare a 10-minute presentation of their final project to share on the final day of class. Multimedia presentations are encouraged.

Due dates and times are firm; papers will only be accepted late if students have discussed circumstances prior with me.

### ***Academic Integrity***

Students must comply with the University's regulations regarding academic honesty; if you are unsure as to what these standards are, please consult the student handbook/website or speak with the instructor prior to completion of assignments. The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty will be loss of credit on the assignment.

### ***Overview of Grading***

Class Participation and Preparedness	25%
Midterm Proposal (2-3 pages)	15%
Presentation (10 min)	20%
Final Paper (10-12 pgs)	40%

### **Course Materials – Required Texts**

Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Joseph Baker and Buster Smith, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* (New York: NYU Press, 2015)

Sikivu Hutchinson, *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Los Angeles, CA: Infidel Books, 2011).

Anthony Pinn, *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014).

Many course readings come from outside these required texts and are available online/in the Coursepack.

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## Course Schedule

### INTRODUCTION TO ATHEISM

#### Week 1

##### Class 1: Definition and Varieties of Nonbelief

- Jack David Eller, “What is Atheism,” in Phil Zuckerman, *Atheism and Secularity: Issues, Concepts, and Definitions* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 1-18.
- “What is Atheism,” *AmericanAtheists.org* < <https://www.atheists.org/activism/resources/about-atheism/>>.

##### Class 2: Introduction to Nonbelief in America

- Edwin Scott Gaustad, “The Heretics: Sinners Against Faith” *Dissent in American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 41-84.
- Baker & Smith, Ch 1, “Classifying Secularities,” from *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 13-24.

### PART I: ATHEISM IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

#### Week 2

##### Class 1: The Age of Reason

- Baker & Smith, Ch 3, “Historical Foundations,” from *American Secularism*
- Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (1794) Part I, Chapter I, XIII, XVII, Recapitulation; Part II, Preface, Conclusion  
[http://infidels.org/library/historical/thomas\\_paine/age\\_of\\_reason/](http://infidels.org/library/historical/thomas_paine/age_of_reason/)

##### Class 2: The End of Reason?

- Amanda Porterfield, Introduction and Chapter 1 “Faith in Reason and the Problem of Skepticism,” in *Conceived in Doubt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

#### Week 3

##### Class 1: Membership and Moral Boundaries

- Will Herberg, Chapters I, II, and III, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955).
- *Oprah* episode featuring Freedom from Religion Foundation founder Anne Gaylor (aired 1984) < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uk1\\_NSuFvQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uk1_NSuFvQ)>

##### Class 2: Atheist in America

- Baker & Smith, Ch 5 “Nonreligious Belief Systems” from *American Secularism*
- Introduction, Part 2: Cultural Contexts in Coming Out as Atheist, from Melanie Brewster, ed., *Atheists in America* (New York: Columbia, 2014).

#### Week 4

##### Class 1: Questions of Church and State

- Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Cartoonist or, The Visible Incivility of Secularism” from *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 73-170.
- “Atheist Monument Critique: Founding Father Freethinkers,” *Patheos Blog*, January 23, 2017, <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/crossexamined/2017/01/atheist-monument-critique-founding-father-freethinkers-2/>>

#### Class 2: Patriotic Atheism

- Stephen Bullivant, “The New Atheism and Sociology: Why Here? Why Now? What Next?” in *Religion and the New Atheism*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012).
- Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 2006).

## **PART II: ATHEIST SECTARIANISM**

### Week 5

#### Class 1: Two Atheisms

- Stephen LeDrew, Introduction and Chapter 1, “The Evolution of Atheism,” from *The Evolution of Atheism*.
- William A. Stahl, “The Church on the Margins: The Religious Context of the New Atheism,” from Lori Beaman, ed., *Atheist Identities – Spaces and Social Contexts* (Springer, 2015), 19-38.

#### Class 2: New Atheism and New New Atheism

- LeDrew, Ch. 2 “New Atheism,” from *The Evolution of Atheism*
- Theo Hobson, “Richard Dawkins has lost: meet the new atheists,” *The Spectator*, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/04/after-the-new-atheism/>.

### Week 6

#### Class 1: Evangelical Atheism

- LeDrew, Ch. 5, “Moral Minority,” from *The Evolution of Atheism*
- Mark Oppenheimer, “The Evangelical Scion Who Stopped Believing,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec 29, 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/magazine/the-evangelical-scion-who-stopped-believing.html>>

#### Class 2: Tensions and Extremes

- LeDrew, Ch. 6, “Purists, Freethinkers, and Bridge Builders: Tensions at the Grassroots,” and Ch. 7, “The Atheist Right.”
- SyeTen Atheist, “Feminists Love Atheists,” *YouTube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecJUqhm2g08>>

## **PART III: ATHEIST INTERSECTIONALITY**

### Week 7:

### Class 1: Feminist Freethought

- Mary Wollstonecraft, “Rational Creatures” (1790)
- Ernestine Rose, “A Defense of Atheism” (1861)
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “The Christian Church and Women” (1888)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “His Religion and Hers” (1923)  
(above excerpts from Annie Laurie Gaylor, *Women Without Superstition: No Gods – No Masters* (Madison, WI: Freedom From Religion Foundation, 1997))
- Madalyn Murray O’Hair, “Rewriting of History by Christians” (1969) <<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/revision.htm>>
- Madalyn Murray O’Hair, “Fundamentalism” (1986) <<http://www.positiveatheism.org/writ/fund'ism.htm>>
- Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “From Selma to Tunis: When Will we March Against the Segregation of Our Own Time?” March 23, 2015, *Huffington Post Blog* <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ayaan-hirsi-ali/from-selma-to-tunis-when-will-we-march-against-the-segregation-of-our-own-time\\_b\\_6915660.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ayaan-hirsi-ali/from-selma-to-tunis-when-will-we-march-against-the-segregation-of-our-own-time_b_6915660.html)>

### Class 2: Atheism and Gender

- Baker & Smith, Ch. 7, “Gender and Secularity,” from *American Secularism*
- Evelyn Kirkley, “‘Like Chickens Around a Dough-Dish’: Freethinkers Analyze the Gender Problem,” from *Rational Mothers, Infidel Gentleman: Gender and American Atheism 1865-1915* (Syracuse University Press, 2000).

### Week 8:

#### Class 1: The Problem of the Woman Atheist

- Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Obscene Atheist,” from *Village Atheists*.
- Amanda Marcotte, “Atheism’s shocking woman problem: What’s behind the misogyny of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris?” *Salon.com*, 3 Oct 2014 <[http://www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new\\_atheisms\\_troubling\\_misogyny\\_the\\_pompous\\_sexism\\_of\\_richard\\_dawkins\\_and\\_sam\\_harris\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new_atheisms_troubling_misogyny_the_pompous_sexism_of_richard_dawkins_and_sam_harris_partner/)>

#### Class 2: Coming out Twice

- Part III, “Two Closets,” from *Atheists in America*, ed. Melanie Brewster
- Chris Stedman, “A Queer Atheist in the Heart of Mormon Country,” *Religion Dispatches*, June 10, 2013 <<http://religiondispatches.org/a-queer-atheist-in-the-heart-of-mormon-country/>>

### Week 9

#### Class 1: Critiquing Religious Constructions of Race and Gender

- Sikivu Hutchinson, *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values War* (Los Angeles, CA: Infidel Books, 2011), Chapters 1 & 2.

#### Class 2: Alternative Constructions

- *Moral Combat*, Chapters 4,7,8.

Week 10

Class 1: An African American De-Conversion Narrative

- Anthony Pinn, *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014).

Class 2: Presentations of Final Projects

Final Paper Due [ ]

Thank you for taking "Atheism in American Culture"! Enjoy your break and stay in touch.