

The Unsaid in Theism-Atheism Dialogue

CERS-8250

Starr King School for the Ministry – Graduate Theological Union

Fall Semester 2020

Instructor Information

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Appointments upon contact via email.

Meeting Dates and Times

Wednesdays, 9.40 – 12.30

Course Description

This course aims to analyze the subtext, the unsaid, and the presupposed, in the dialogue between believers and non-believers; between the defendants of a theistic worldview and the defendants of an atheistic worldview. We will focus on the so called “new atheism” movement, its arguments, and its clashes with the (mainly, but not only Christian) apologetic replies, both in written and video forms. Students will discuss the subtext of these clashes: the aim is not to debunk the arguments of one side against the other, but to discover and unveil the implicit elements that sustain the two positions, such as a colonialist attitude, a patronizing attitude, or distorted ideas about reason, faith, and science. This course will be strongly characterized by a *shared* leadership: the students will have a fundamental role in the discussions, and any perspective and contribution coming from the students will be a fundamental element of the class.

Learning Objectives

During this course, students will:

- Read and analyze works and ideas on theism, atheism, and their interrelation and contrasts, always with a critical look, and pass such works and ideas under the scrutiny of their critical engagement.
- Understand the different contexts that originated the texts and the function they may have had

for the primary readers.

- Integrate the topics of the course by proposing alternative voices in the debate between theism and atheism.
- Enrich the topics of the course with their perspectives, points of view, opinions, and experiences, in order to make the learning experience more meaningful.
- Contribute actively to the discussion of the topics presented in each class, by confronting their experience, ideas, and positions with philosophical, theological, and scientific concepts and arguments.
- Propose their solutions and their ideas to solve misconceptions (where solvable) and to improve the quality and effectiveness of the dialogue and exchange between different and, sometimes, opposed perspectives on the topic.
- Reinforce the attitude of never being afraid to challenge authors and ideas, even the most respected ones, when their arguments seem unconvincing. Always question a statement before assuming it. *Sapere aude!*

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

- Synthesize different philosophical, theological, and scientific approaches to the issue of the debate between theism and atheism, belief and unbelief, and connect references and authors to each approach.
- Enrich their engagement to create just communities by detecting forms of oppressions vehiculated (either implicitly or explicitly) by some positions and attitudes that belong to both atheistic and apologetic positions.
- Autonomously reflect on, and question, the adequacy of well-established ideas in the debate, in light of the challenges and diversity of contemporary world.
- Realize a double approach: interpreting reality in light of some general ideas, and vice-versa modifying general ideas in light of specific realities.
- Reconstruct the historical and argumentative steps that led to the formulation of widely-used and debated ideas, and reconstruct the historical and argumentative steps that led or would lead to their overcoming.

Format

The course will be entirely synchronously online.

Course Assignments

The evaluation is: 25 % attendance; 25 % discussion; 50 % final essay.

Concerning the final essay, students will be asked to write a short (max 6 pages) reflective essay on the topics of the course, and send it to the instructor by the 15st of December 2020.

Grading

Threshold of attendance positive evaluation is 70 % of classes.

Positive evaluation of discussions consists in the fact that each student should autonomously intervene and ask a question to the whole classroom on course's topics at least once.

The final essay is evaluated in terms of originality, clarity of the argumentation, and pertinence with the assigned topic. The essay must be submitted through Moodle.

Students can request letter grades. If a student is taking a course for a grade, they must notify the instructor.

Thresholds

Life in Religious Community and Interfaith Engagement; History of Dissenting Traditions and the Thea/ological Quest; Thea/ology in Culture and Context; Educating for Wholeness and Liberation.

MCF Competencies

Spiritual Development for Self and Others; Social Justice in the Public Square; Leads the faith into the future.

Required Texts

Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. New York: Bantam, 2006. ISBN: 978-0618680009. Price: \$14.20

Bryan F. Le Beau. *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. ISBN: 978-0814751725. Price: \$16.71

Christian Smith. *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Cannot Deliver*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-0190880927. Price: \$19.95

Required Videos

Videos and Debates with Richard Dawkins:

1. On Evolution: <https://youtu.be/jNhtbmXzIaM>
2. With John Lennox on the God's delusion: <https://youtu.be/zF5bPI92-5o>
3. Documentary on the God's delusion: <https://youtu.be/uQ7GvwUsJ7w>
4. Interview on Fresh Air:
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87949769&t=1598446965593>

Videos on Atheism in the Black Diaspora:

1. Debbie Goddard on American Atheists: <https://youtu.be/Nqqz9MtbHO4>
2. Debbie Goddard on African Americans in the Secular Movement:
<https://youtu.be/GbspdZxvY1o>
3. Recent joint conference of the Association of Black Humanists and Black Nonbelievers:
<https://youtu.be/BkthFLRDoeo>
4. Video from the Atheist Experience: <https://youtu.be/kJeZg2g-Sks>

Videos and Debates with Matt Dillahunty:

1. On God's existence: <https://youtu.be/ASpBVVhC9Kk>
2. On the rationality of faith: https://youtu.be/QHg_NL4EUAE
3. On faith, explanation, and evidence: <https://youtu.be/IW9w6c2RWmA>
4. On Jesus's sermon of the mountain: <https://youtu.be/i2V5ZWVUpn8>

Videos of the God Debate at Oxford Union (playlist of videos)

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOAFgXcJkZ2zu-Gwwl46RhymSIVgDNU1o>

Videos on positive interactions between religion/theology and science:

1. On a possible consonance between theology and science: <https://youtu.be/ASexr0Vt7jQ>
2. Interview to Tom McLeash: <https://youtu.be/PeyF35fZq2Q>
3. Interview to Martin Rees: <https://youtu.be/JbXt-BQUWro>
4. Interviews to C. Isham: 4.1. <https://youtu.be/a5y3z17WHQs> 4.2. <https://youtu.be/9Ils9zNwaaw>
5. Roger Penrose on the existence of mathematics: <https://youtu.be/ujvS2K06dg4>

Course Schedule

Class 1, September 9th: Introduction to the topics of the course. Preliminary definitions of theism, atheism, antitheism, and agnosticism. Discussion on the development of the debate between theism and atheism.

Class 2, September 16th: Deepening of the first definitions of atheism, antitheism, and theism. Discussion of the evolution of these definitions, and problems with the clarification of difference nuances in the debate (implicit/explicit atheism, negative/positive atheism...)

Class 3, September 23th: First round of atheistic arguments: the criticisms to varieties of the teleological argument, including problems related to the application of the anthropic principle.

Class 4, September 30th: Second round of atheistic arguments: the a-scientificity of the theistic position. Discussion on the principles “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidences” and “What can be asserted without evidences can be dismissed without evidences”. Varieties of application of the epistemological principle called “Ockham’s razor”. Deepening of the extent and possible limits in the applicability of scientific criteria to religious discourses and beliefs.

Class 5, October 7th: Third round of atheistic arguments: arguments based on logical inconsistencies. Criticisms of varieties of the ontological arguments.

Class 6, October 14th: Analysis of some apologetic responses. Discussion of the book by Christian Smith (see Required Texts).

Class 7, October 21st: Analysis of some apologetic responses. Discussion of some of the debates in videos (see Required Videos).

Class 8, October 28th: Unveiling and debating the elements that are unsaid and implicit in the debates between theism and atheism. These elements include: “strawman fallacy” applied to the ideas of believers and unbelievers purported by (respectively) atheistic and apologetic positions; risks of Eurocentrism and white supremacism in mainstream atheist positions; presence of educational, economic, and social biases in the debate.

Class 9, November 4th: Continuation of the previous class. Focus on the ideas of freedom of thinking, freedom of believing, and freedom of investigating. Debate on the interactions and limitations of these freedoms in the theism-atheism debate.

Class 10, November 11th: Continuation of the previous class. Focus on Atheism in the Black Diaspora, and debate on how it helps to clarify limits and flaws in mainstream atheism.

Class 11, November 18th: Focus on atheism and feminism. Focus on the figure of Madalyn Murray O’Hair, and the foundation of American Atheists.

Class 12, November 25th: Discussion on videos presenting and debating positive aspects of interactions between religion and science, and theology and science (see Required Videos). Specific focus (if relevant for the students) on the mind-independent existence of mathematical objects.

Class 13, December 2nd: Presentation and discussion of the modalities of evaluation.