

Atheisms and Theologies

Wesley J. Wildman — Boston University — Fall, 2011 — STH TT816/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 8:00 to 11:00am. Each class will be conducted in the seminar discussion format with lectures given by the instructor as needed or requested.

Grading

The main product of the course will be a research paper on some aspect of the course material. The paper should be about 3,000 words for TT816 students and 5,000 words for TT956 students, and the topic is to be approved in advance by the instructor. This research paper will earn the largest share of the grade (40%), with the remainder being based on detailed 1,000-1,500 word reviews of books and articles presented in class (20%), short reviews of selections from Hitchens 2007 (10%), and annotation of links to relevant web sites (10%); these items will be designed to appear on a public website for the class (<http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/attheo/>). The remainder of the grade (20%) will be based on the quality of seminar participation, attendance, and timeliness.

In addition to the public website, the class will have a private website at <http://blackboard.bu.edu>. This site will contain announcements, a discussion board, and places to claim assignments to avoid overlap with other students. Students registered for TT956 have reading (especially Martin) and tasks to complete over and above those completed by students in the TT816 section.

Policies

Incompletes are not allowed—as a matter of fairness—except in cases of serious emergencies. Don’t leave your emergency to the last minute. Paperwork is necessary.

Students with Disabilities—Any students in this course who have a disability that might prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should meet with the instructor as soon as possible to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that may be necessary to ensure your full participation in the successful completion of course requirements.

Students taking the course for doctoral credit are required to do all work at a doctoral level. In addition, students should submit one 1000-word review of a recent book related to the course content for publication in an appropriate journal. This review is in addition to regular coursework.

The STH Academic Code of Conduct may be found at: <http://www.bu.edu/sth/academic/academic-conduct>. All students are required to familiarize themselves with this code, its definitions of misconduct, and its sanctions. Students should especially familiarize themselves with the section on plagiarism.

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Seminar Schedule

Introduction

Jan 18 *Varieties of Atheism, Varieties of Theological Responses, Demographics of Atheism*

- > **Required Reading for ALL:** Baggini, all (great fun, very short); read it after class if you can't get to it before class; all other readings in this course should be read prior to class.
- > **Required Reading for TT956 only:** Martin ch. 3.
- > **Recommended Reading for ALL:** dig around in Hitchens 2007 and Martin.
- > **Task for ALL:** Find out one fact about the demographics of atheism in the USA and one fact about the demographics of atheism from somewhere else in the world. Bonus for finding facts not already in Martin ch. 3, or facts that contradict Martin. *Deadline:* class on Jan 25.
- > **Task for ALL:** Read three diverse selections from Hitchens 2007. Write a two-paragraph review of each selection. The first paragraph should be a summary of the piece. The second should be a personal response. Don't worry about overlaps with other students; the more the merrier for this exercise. *Voice:* For each review, the summary should be impartial and brief. The response can be as wild and colorful as you like; nothing conforming to basic rules of public decency is out of bounds. Target the review to curious students like yourself. Be yourself. Writing quality matters. *Deadline:* via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Friday Jan 22.
- > **Task for ALL:** Find one online source about atheism (this site should not be in the list of sites on the public web site; start your search at <http://atheism.about.com/> if you get stuck). Write a 100-word review of the site. Confine the scope of your review to the usefulness of the site for understanding atheism and theological responses to it. Rate each site out of four stars. Reserve your review site using the private class website's discussion board designated for that purpose. *Voice:* Aim the review for web browsers like yourself. The review should be formal, fair, and helpful. Writing quality matters. *Deadline:* via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Sunday Jan 24.

Part 1: Classic Atheisms and Theological Responses

Jan 25 *Theodicy, Coherence, Morality Challenges*

- > **Required Reading for ALL:** Voltaire's *Candide* (Project Gutenberg text is available on the class website; audio is also available at Project Gutenberg).
- > **Required Reading for TT956 only:** Martin chs. 5, 9, 10, 11, 12.
- > **Recommended Reading for ALL:** Read Jean Meslier's *Common Sense* (a.k.a. *Superstition in All Ages*) for a Catholic Priest's surprising last will and testament (available on the class website and at Project Gutenberg). The quick way in is to read Voltaire's abstract, which is at the end of the document.
- > **Task for ALL:** Read three more diverse selections from Hitchens 2007 (that makes 6 so far). Write a two-paragraph review of each selection. The first paragraph should be a summary of the piece. The second should be a personal response. Don't worry about overlaps with other students; the more the merrier for this exercise. *Voice:* For each review, the summary should be impartial and brief. The response can be as wild and colorful as you like; nothing conforming to basic rules of public decency is out of bounds. Target the review to curious students like yourself. Be yourself. Writing quality matters. *Deadline:* via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday Jan 31 (*before* the next class).
- > **Task for ALL:** Find one online source containing theological responses to atheism (this site should not be in the list of sites on the public web site). Write a 100-word review of the site.

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Confine the scope of your review to the usefulness of the site for understanding atheism and theological responses to it. Rate the site out of four stars. To avoid duplication, reserve your review site using the class website's discussion board designated for that purpose. *Voice*: Aim the review for web browsers like yourself. The review should be formal, fair, and helpful. Writing quality matters. *Deadline*: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday Jan 31 (*before* the next class).

Feb 1 *In and Out of Atheism*

- > **Required Reading for ALL**: Flew parts I, II (this is a controversial book; find out about the controversy online).
- > **Required Reading for TT956 only**: Martin chs. 4, 6, 18.
- > **Recommended Reading for ALL**: Track down some early Flew such as "Theology and Falsification" or *The Presumption of Atheism* to enrich the context for the book we are reading today.
- > **Task for ALL**: Read three more diverse selections from Hitchens 2007 (that makes 9 so far, with no more required for TT816 students). Write a two-paragraph review of each selection. The first paragraph should be a summary of the piece. The second should be a personal response. Don't worry about overlaps with other students; the more the merrier for this exercise. *Voice*: For each review, the summary should be impartial and brief. The response can be as wild and colorful as you like; nothing conforming to basic rules of public decency is out of bounds. Target the review to curious students like yourself. Be yourself. Writing quality matters. *Deadline*: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday Feb 7 (*before* the next class).

Feb 8 *The Modern History of Atheism*

- > **Required Reading for ALL**: Buckley chs. 1, 2, 4, 5.
- > **Required Reading for TT956**: Buckley chs. 3, 6; Martin chs. 1, 2.
- > **Recommended Reading for ALL**: Track down Buckley's well-known book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* and get a sense for the detailed historical argument in that book.
- > **Task for TT956 only**: Read three more diverse selections from Hitchens 2007 (that makes 12 in total for TT956 students, with no more required). Write a two-paragraph review of each selection. The first paragraph should be a summary of the piece. The second should be a personal response. Don't worry about overlaps with other students; the more the merrier for this exercise. *Voice*: For each review, the summary should be impartial and brief. The response can be as wild and colorful as you like; nothing conforming to basic rules of public decency is out of bounds. Target the review to curious students like yourself. Be yourself. Writing quality matters. *Deadline*: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday Feb 14 (*before* the next class).

Part 2: New Atheisms and Theological Responses

Feb 15 *New Atheism, I*

- > **Required Reading for ALL**: Harris, all (witty, short).
- > **Required Reading for TT956**: Martin chs. 15, 17; Galton, "Efficacy of Prayer" (available on the class website).
- > **Recommended Reading for ALL**: read some of Mills (highly entertaining); read more from Hitchens 2007; read Galton.

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Feb 22 *New Atheism, II*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Hitchens 2009 chs. 1-12, 19 (aggressive, long).
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): Hitchens 2009 chs. 13-18.
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): read more of Mills; read more from Hitchens 2007.

Feb 29 *New Atheism, III*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Dawkins chs. 1-4, 9-10 (long but reads quickly).
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): Dawkins chs. 5-8; Martin chs. 7-8
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): finish Mills; read more from Hitchens 2007.

Mar 7 *Reply to New Atheism, I*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Haught, all; Flew, appendix A.
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): Martin chs. 4, 6, 7, 8.
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): finish Hitchens 2007.

Mar 14 *Spring Recess*

Mar 21 *Reply to New Atheism, II*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Cunningham, all
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): none
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): none

Part 3: Theologically Inspired Atheisms

Mar 28 *Theologically Profound Atheism*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra* (available on the class website and at Project Gutenberg).
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): Martin chs. 13, 14.
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): read more of Nietzsche's works, such as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Gay Science*.

Apr 4 *Death of God Theology*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Altizer & Hamilton, Preface, American Theology, America and the Future of Theology, The Death of God Theologies Today, Theology and the Death of God.
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): remaining chapters from Altizer.
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): Prof. Ray Hart's favorite book on atheism is Fabro but it is almost impossible to find. One copy should be on reserve. If you are interested in theological forms of atheism, you should appreciate the book.

Apr 11 *Postmodern Mystical Theology (Caputo & Vattimo)*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Caputo & Vattimo, Introduction, parts I, III.
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): Caputo & Vattimo, part II.
- > [Recommended Reading for ALL](#): Caputo & Vattimo, part II.

Apr 18 *Iconoclastic Mystical Theology*

- > [Required Reading for ALL](#): Wildman, "Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality," *Philosophia* 35/3-4 (2007): 407-425 (provided by instructor).
- > [Required Reading for TT956](#): none.

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- > **Recommended Reading for ALL:** none.

Apr 25 No Class: BU Monday Schedule

Conclusion

May 2 *The Future of Atheisms and Theologies*

- > **Required Reading for ALL:** none.
- > **Required Reading for TT956:** none.
- > **Recommended Reading:** none.
- > **Task for ALL:** Submit essay on a topic approved by instructor. *Deadline:* via email to instructor before class on May 2.

Required Books

- Altizer, Thomas J.J.; Hamilton, William. *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966; out of print but it is available on the class website and also at <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=537>).
- 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).
- Caputo, John D.; Vattimo, Gianni. *After the Death of God* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2009; pbk 978-0231141253).
- Cunningham, Connor. *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010; 978-0802848383)
- 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).
- Hitchens, Christopher, ed. *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*. Da Capo Press, 2007; pbk 978-0306816086).

Recommended Books

- Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile: Modern Atheism*. Paulist Press, 1968; hbk 978-0809100538; this book is out of print).
- Martin, Michael (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2006; pbk 978-0521603676; this book is available online for registered and properly networked Boston University students at <http://cco.cambridge.org.ezproxy.bu.edu/uid=1648/collection?id=complete>).
- Mills, David. *Atheist Universe: The Thinking Person's Answer to Christian Fundamentalism* (Ulysses Press, 2006; pbk 978-1569755679).