

## **History 1250-401: Belief and Unbelief in Modern Thought**

“Just as no one can be forced into belief, so no one can be forced into unbelief.”  
– Sigmund Freud

**Fall 2024**

**Location TBA**

**Mon/Wed MW 10:15-11:45**

**WARREN BRECKMAN**

**College Hall 206E**

**Office Hours: Tues. 10:30-12:00, or by appointment**

215-898-8518

breckman@ sas.upenn.edu

“God is dead,” declared Friedrich Nietzsche, “and we have killed him.” Nietzsche's words came as a climax of a longer history of skepticism, criticism of, and dissent toward, the religious foundations of European society and politics. The critique of religion had vast implications for the meaning of human life, the nature of the person, and the conception of political and social existence. The course will explore the intensifying debate over religion in the intellectual history of Europe, reaching from the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment to the twentieth century. There is no straight line from belief to atheism, however. Indeed, the age of Enlightenment witnessed a proliferation of new conceptions of religion as skeptical thinkers confronted the apparent conflict between faith and reason. Orthodox Christians dug in their heels in resistance to these seemingly dangerous currents, yet some religious thinkers responded with nuanced arguments that did not simply reject the currents of modern thought. Modernity is not synonymous with unbelief, but rather with the dialectical tensions that were spawned between the impulse to liberate humans from the gods and the imperative to reimagine religion in light of the skeptical challenge.

### **This course fulfills the following requirements for students in the College:**

#### **Sector 4: Humanities & Social Sciences**

This sector comprises courses that combine methods and approaches at work in at least two of the first three sectors.

Students will engage with diverse approaches to society, history, tradition and the arts more deeply than a single course from each domain can allow. Greater depth of experience is gained by bringing to bear several humanistic and social scientific perspectives upon a single issue or topic or by engaging directly in academically-based service or performance informed by these perspectives.

In this sector, students seek to broaden their perspective by taking a course in the humanities or social sciences that has been approved as a general education course but that

cuts across two or more of sectors I, II, and III. Some courses approved for this sector will seek a more integrative approach by addressing a problem or topic from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Others will combine disciplinary study with community service or activism, and constructively and reflectively connect the theoretical with the actual. Finally, some courses in the arts that combine creative or performance experience with reflection and grounding within a discipline may be found in this sector.

### **Foundational Requirement: Cross-Cultural Analysis**

In our increasingly interconnected world, the Cross-Cultural Analysis Requirement aims to increase students' knowledge and understanding of socio-cultural systems outside the United States.

College students are required to take at least one course to develop their ability to understand and interpret the cultures of peoples with histories outside of the United States. The focus may be on the past or the present and it should expose students to distinctive sets of values, attitudes and methods of organizing experience that may not be obtained from U.S. cultures. This exposure to the internal dynamic of another society should lead students to understand the values and practices that define their own cultural framework.

**This course is open to all students. There are no prerequisites.**

### **Structure of the Course:**

In accordance with Penn's guidelines, this course will meet in person and have no regular virtual component. If the guidelines change, then we will make necessary adjustments.

Masks are optional in the classroom.

Occasionally, I may post brief recorded elements to complement and facilitate our regular classroom sessions.

We will use Canvas for class communication and distribution of assignment prompts and supplementary course readings.

Please use **Course Action Notices** to officially document absences.

Keeping on top of the reading material and engaging actively in your learning are essential to your success in the course. The same goes for attendance and participation in our sessions.

Needless to say, in this and every course, you should view your professor as a resource in both good times and bad. I'm committed to helping you have as successful and rich a semester as possible!

### **Appropriate Use of Recordings and Other Online Content:**

**Your use of any recordings generated in this course is limited to this class,** meaning you should not share these recordings with anyone outside the class or otherwise reproduce their content. This policy exists to ensure the confidentiality of our classroom discussion

and thereby facilitate the free exchange of ideas. It also honors the creativity and labor that I invested in creating course content.

For the same reasons, I ask that you not copy or distribute the content of any material from our Canvas site.

### **Assignments:**

Mid-Term Exam (due Oct 16)	30%
Dialogue (due Dec 3)	15%
Final Exam (due Dec 16)	40%
Participation	15%

**PLEASE SUBMIT ALL ASSIGNMENTS TO CANVAS AND TO ME VIA EMAIL AS WORD.DOC FILES (NOT PDF)**

### **Mid-Term Exam**

You will choose one from several questions and write a 5-page paper on it. These are really more prompts than questions. There is no single right answer, but rather numerous possible directions. Typically, such questions will ask you to consider a certain problem or theme from the perspective of two of the figures (or movements) we have discussed. Be sure to touch on all aspects of the question. The mid-term will be posted on **Canvas in the early afternoon on Oct 14. The mid-term is due on Oct 16, no later than 11:59 pm.**

### **Dialogue**

Since at least Plato, one of the most important genres of writing philosophy is the dialogue. Such dialogues are usually fictionalized. They may stage a pedagogical encounter between a teacher and a student (think Socrates) or they may imagine an encounter between different schools of thought (think David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*). Because such dialogues are almost always the product of a single author, they are rarely a true encounter; rather, they tend in one direction or another, depending on the author's preferences. In your dialogue, I want you to do some role-playing. Two of you (or three, if our numbers are odd) will pair off and each of you will channel a figure from our readings. Imagine Nietzsche drinking tea with Sartre; Voltaire arguing with D'Holbach; Wordsworth and Kierkegaard at the tavern; Spinoza and Descartes sharing the podium at the Philomathean Society. You get the idea. Unlike the mid-term and final exams, the writing can be informal, echoing the cadences and forms of real speech. The dialogue should be around 5 pages double-spaced (8 pages if there are three participants). **The dialogue is due on Tuesday, Dec 3, no later than 11:59 pm.**

### **Final Take-Home Exam**

The final exam will have two parts. In the first part, you will choose one from several questions and write a 5-page paper on it. The format is the same as with the mid-term. Your paper should be 5 pages. The second part will involve somewhat

more focused questions, from which you will choose one. The questions will ask you to compare and contrast two figures. This paper should be 3 pages. The final will be posted on Canvas on **Thursday, Dec 12, at 10 am.** It is due on **Monday, Dec 16, no later than 11:59 pm.**

### **Participation**

Attendance at lectures is **mandatory**. I will not take attendance every class, but I will do so occasionally. If you cannot attend a *specific* session, please notify me through **Course Action Notices** with a reasonable explanation **in advance** of the class. Participation includes regular, active contributions to discussion. Please come to our meetings having read the assigned readings. **While I typically pose questions to the entire class, I will also call directly on individual students.** Good participation can include responding to questions and weighing in on discussions. And remember too that a good question can be as valuable as a good answer!

**Note: Most of the assigned reading in this course is primary. Lectures will provide information about the social and political context of these figures, as well as interpretations of the texts. You cannot do well in the exams if you do not attend lectures.**

### **Course Materials:**

The following books are available for purchase in paperback at the Penn Bookstore:

Isaac Kramnick, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*

Warren Breckman, ed. *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents*

Charles Guignon, ed. *Existentialism: Basic Writings*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The above books are also available in the Rosengarten Reserve Library

All other readings are posted on Canvas

### **Aug 28 Introduction**

### **Sept 2 Labor Day -- No Class**

### **Sept 4-9 Premodern Worldview and The Coming of the Enlightenment**

"The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment," 635-652

### **Sept 11-16 Reason and Faith in the Age of the Scientific Revolution**

Francis Bacon, "The Great Instauration," 82-90; Galileo Galilei, "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," 43-58; Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," 119-122

### **Sept 18-23 At the Origins of the Radical Enlightenment**

René Descartes, "I Think, Therefore I Am," *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 181-185;

Spinoza, "To Henry Oldenburg (September 1661)," 122-123; Spinoza, "Ethics

Demonstrated in the Geometrical Manner," 318-322

### **Sept 25 Empiricism, God and Toleration**

Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 185-187; John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 81-90; Voltaire, "On Mr. Locke," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 190-194

### **Sept 30 Voltaire's Deism**

Voltaire, "Reflections on Religion," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 115-133; Voltaire, "On Descartes and Newton," 60-65

Optional Reading: Margaret Jacob, "The Social Meaning of Newtonianism"

### **Oct 2 Skeptics and Atheists**

Pierre Bayle, "On Superstition and Tolerance," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 75-81; David Hume, "Of Miracles and the Origin of Religion," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 109-115; Edward Gibbon, "The Progress of Superstition," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 150-155; Baron d'Holbach, "No Need of Theology ... Only of Reason," in *Portable Enlightenment Reader*, 140-150

### **Oct 7 The Varieties of Romantic Spirituality I**

Breckman, "A Revolution in Culture," in *European Romanticism*; Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, "Of Two Wonderful Languages and their Mysterious Power," in *European Romanticism*, 43-47; Novalis, "Christianity or Europe: A Fragment," in *European Romanticism*, 47-61

Optional Reading: Breckman, "The Nineteenth Century: Introduction," *Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. 1

### **Oct 9 The Varieties of Romantic Spirituality II**

William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," in *European Romanticism*, 71-75; François-René de Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, in *European Romanticism*, 84-94

**Oct 14 Catch Up – Take-Home Midterm will be posted in Canvas in the early afternoon**

**Oct 16 No Class – Take-Home Midterm is due by 11:59 pm**

### **Oct 21 Radical Critique of Religion: Young Hegelianism**

Breckman, "The Young Hegelians: Philosophy as Critical Praxis"; Hegel, "Reason in History," 12-18; Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xxxiii-xliv, 1-32;

### **Oct 23 Radical Critique of Religion: Karl Marx**

Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," 53-54

Optional Reading: Breckman, "Marx and Romanticism"

**Oct 28-30 Kierkegaard and the Origins of Religious Existentialism**

Søren Kierkegaard, “On Himself,” in Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 83-99; Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 26-47 (in the first edition of *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, the pages are 18-39)

**Nov 4-6 Thinking with a Hammer**

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book I, Book III, Book IV, §283, §285, Book V, §343, §354, §355

**Nov 11 Religious Existentialism**

Edward Baring, “Existentialism,” in *Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. 2; Karl Jaspers, “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche,” 158-184

**Nov 13-18 Religious Existentialism**

Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” 86-107; Martin Buber, “I and Thou,” 181-188

**Nov 20 Atheistic Existentialism: Sartre**

Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” 290-308

**Nov 25 Atheistic Existentialism: Camus**

Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 312-315; Camus, “Absurd,” 192-201

**Nov 27 No Class: Thanksgiving**

**Dec 2 Catch Up**

**Dialogue: Due Tuesday, Dec 3, no later than 11:59 pm**

**Dec 4 Catch Up**

**Dec 9 Conclusion**

Breckman, “Secular Revival,” 203-212

.....  
**TAKE-HOME FINAL posted on Thursday, Dec 12, at 10 am**  
**FINAL EXAM is due on Monday, Dec 16, no later than 11:59 pm.**

**Bibliography for all readings posted on Canvas  
(in order of appearance in syllabus)**

Robert E. Lerner, Standish Meacham, Edward McNall Burns, “The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment,” *Western Civilizations. Their History and Their Culture*, vol. 2, 13<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 635-652.

Francis Bacon, "The Great Instauration," in *Heritage of Western Civilization: Select Readings*, vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., John Louis Beatty and Oliver A. Johnson, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966, 82-88.

Galileo Galilei, "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," in *Heritage of Western Civilization: Select Readings*, vol. II,, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Beatty and Johnson, ed. (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 43-58.

Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," in *God*, T. Robinson, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 119-122.

Baruch Spinoza, "To Henry Oldenburg (September 1661)" in *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, R. Ariew and E. Watkins, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 122-123.

Baruch Spinoza, "Ethics Demonstrated in the Geometrical Manner," in *Main Currents of Western Thought: Readings in Western European Intellectual History from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Franklin Baumer, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 318-322.

Margaret Jacob, "The Social Meaning of Newtonianism," in *The Many Sides of History: Readings in the Western Heritage*, Steven Ozment and Frank M. Turner, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 40-53.

Voltaire, "On Descartes and Newton," in *Philosophical Letters*, Ernest Dilworth, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 60-65.

Hegel, "Reason in History," in *The Philosophy of History*, Leo Rauch, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 12-18.

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, George Eliot, trans. (New York: Harper, 1957), xxxiii-xliv, 1-32.

Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., R. C. Tucker, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 53-54.

Kierkegaard, "On Himself," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans. (New York: Meridian, 1969), 83-99.

Karl Jaspers, "Kierkegaard and Nietzsche," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 158-184.

Gabriel Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," in *The Existentialist Reader: An Anthology of Key Texts*, Paul S. MacDonald, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 86-107.

Martin Buber, "I and Thou," in *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings*, A. D. Biemann (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 181-188.

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 312-315.

Albert Camus, "Absurd," in *God*, T. Robinson, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 192-201.

Warren Breckman, "Secular Revival," *Lapham's Quarterly*, vol. III, no. 1 (Winter 2010), 203-212