

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

Spring 2023
Towne 313
Mon/Wed 1:45-3:15

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“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 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 and bad times. 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 Feb 22)	30%
Dialogue (due Apr 21)	15%
Final Exam (due May 4)	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 at 6:00 pm on Feb 20. The mid-term is due on Feb 22, 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 Friday, April 21, no later than 11:59 pm.**

Final 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 **Monday, May 1, at 10 am. It is due on Thursday May 4, no later than 5 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

Jan 11 Introduction

Jan 16 Martin Luther King Day: No Class

Jan 18 The Coming of the Enlightenment

“The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment,” 635-652

Jan 23-25 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

Jan 30 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

Feb 1 Spinoza, contd

Feb 6 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

Feb 8 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”

Feb 13 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

Feb 15 Catch Up

Feb 20 Catch Up (if necessary!) Take-Home Midterm will be posted in Canvas at 6 pm

Feb 22 No Class. Midterm is due by 11:59 pm

Feb 27 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

March 1 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

March 6-8 Spring Break!!!

March 13 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;

March 15 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"

March 20-22 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*, 18-47

March 27-29 Thinking with a Hammer

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

April 3 Religious Existentialism

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

April 5-10 Religious Existentialism

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

April 12-17 Atheistic Existentialism: Sartre

Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," 290-308

April 19 Atheistic Existentialism: Camus

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

Dialogue: Due Friday, April 21, no later than 11:59 pm

April 24 Catch Up

April 26 Conclusion

Breckman, "Secular Revival," 203-212

TAKE-HOME FINAL posted on Monday, May 1, at 10 am
FINAL EXAM is due on Thursday May 4, no later than 5 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, 13th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 635-652.

Francis Bacon, "The Great Instauration," in *Heritage of Western Civilization: Select Readings*, vol. II, 2nd 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, 4th ed., Beatty and Johnson, ed. (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 43-58.

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

Baruch Spinoza, "To Henry Oldenburg (September 1661)" in *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, Roger Ariew and Eric 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*, 2nd ed., Robert 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*, Asher 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*, Timothy Robinson, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 192-201.

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