freshman seminar
The History of Disbelief
FRSEM-UA 548
Mitchell Stephens
Spring 2017    Thursday 12:30 to 3

This seminar takes up an extended history of atheism and doubt (in the context of a history of religion). It begins with a consideration of anthropology, the Hebrews, and India before discussing the skeptics and the development of disbelief in ancient Greece and Rome. The course then follows the uneven progress of this idea and its consequences in continental Europe during the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Romantic period, and in 19th-century England and America where disbelief was allied with radical politics. Finally, we move on to the connections between disbelief and realism, modernism and postmodernism. The main arguments for and against the existence of God are considered. However, the main purpose of this course is to force students to confront and grapple with some of the most sophisticated and profound human expressions of disbelief.

“Come no chimeras! Let us go abroad; let us mix in affairs; let us learn and get and have and climb….Let us have to do with real men and women, and not with skipping ghosts.”
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

“If God is dead, everything is permitted.”
-- Fyodor Dostoevsky

“The deepest, the only theme of human history, compared to which all others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of skepticism with faith.”
-- Goethe

“Questioning is the piety of thought.”
-- Martin Heidegger


Sāmañña-Phala Sutta:

Reading: Cicero.


Creative project on personal belief or disbelief due.

Feb. 23. Islam’s “golden age.” God and love. The Renaissance:
Aristotle’s return to Europe. Epicurus and Lucretius return to Europe.


  http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/abelard-histcal.html
  (Abelard’s History of My Calamities)

  http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/heloise.html
  (abridged version of Heloise’s first letter back to Abelard after
  reading his “History of My Calamities)

Spinoza. Vanini. The dance of veils.

Readings: Galileo, Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World
Magisteria.”

Galileo:
http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/galileo/dialogue2.html

Gould:

Deism. Meslier.

Reading: “Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier.”

       Reading: Hume.
       Reading response to Hume due.


       Mill: http://www.bartleby.com/130/2.html

       Huxley: http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/CE5/Agn.html

April 6. Religion and morality.

       Reading: Dostoevsky.


       Reading: Nietzsche.

April 20. Religion and meaning.

       Reading: Woolf.

April 27.

       Creative project on the question of the existence of the gods due.

Readings: Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”; Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus.”

Sartre:
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm

Camus:
http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/00/pwillen1/lit/msysip.htm

Books

Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods
David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion
Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov
Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science
Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Assignments

** In-class reading responses (one paragraph essays, given without warning)

** Home reading responses. One assigned, plus one, on a week’s readings, of your own choosing. Due at beginning of class. One page each.

** Biographical report (for informal presentation in class; notes collected)

** Shorter creative project on personal belief or disbelief: A creative way could be an essay, dialogue, poem, short story, video, audio, collage – of discussing your personal beliefs or lack of beliefs, or, if you do not feel comfortable with that, the belief or lack of beliefs of someone else. This project should say something about reasons, feelings and personal history. Six pages or the equivalent.
** Longer creative project on the question of the existence of the gods. Again, could be an essay, dialogue, poem, short story, video, audio or collage. But the standard here - with Cicero, Meslier, Hume, Huxley, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Woolf, Camus among the models - will be higher: this project should contribute to the philosophical discussion of belief and disbelief. Must reflect understanding of class themes. Twelve pages or the equivalent.

No late assignments will be accepted!

Grades

Based on two creative projects (first 15% of grade, second 30%), class participation (20%, based on comments or answers to professor’s queries), in-class reading responses (15%) and home reading responses (15%) and biographical reports (5%).

Professor

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