



Holy Apostles College & Seminary

Cultivating Catholic Leaders for Evangelization

Course Number: PHTH 619
Course Title: Atheism and the New Atheism
Term: Summer 2012

Instructors

Dr. Ronda Chervin (rchervin@holyapostles.edu)
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I. Course Description

This course explores the phenomenon of atheism and its progression over the past two centuries. The first part of the course deals with the many forms (literary, analytic, scientific, existentialist, Freudian, Marxist, etc.) of atheism that began to flourish in the 19th century and gained ground in the 20th century. This will provide the context for the second part of the course, which will focus on how the new atheism is confronting today's world in the attempt it is making to secure political power in its assault against faith. The course will provide adequate ways in which Catholic leaders might respond to this onslaught.

II. Envisioned Learning Outcomes

1. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the reasons for atheism and how the philosophy explains itself.
2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the new atheism as it manifested itself in the late-20th century and early 21st.
3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the way atheism is refuted and the various methods by which Christians might confront it.

III. Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Lectures:

Welcoming audio by Dr. Ronda Chervin about her conversion from Atheism to Theism in the Catholic Faith – Welcoming audio from Dr. Sebastian Mahfood, OP, about the counter-cultural phenomenon of the Church.

Readings:

From Dr. Chervin's *Battle for the 20th Century Mind: Atheism vs. Theism: Types of 19th-20th Century Atheism* pp.

Activities:

For the Discussion Board provide 1-2 page single spaced answers to 2 questions: one answer to question 1 or 2 and one answer to question 3 or 4.

(If you happen to have taken Dr. Ronda's course in Introduction to Moral Philosophy, do not repeat question 2).

1. What stood out for you in Dr. Ronda's story of her conversion?

2. Have you ever been skeptical about a moral truth others thought was absolute? Did you ever experience surprising enlightenment? Did the refutations of skepticism and relativism seem cogent to you? If not, compare notes with others in the group.
3. Have you ever known personally or read about any atheists of the types that Dr. Ronda described? How did they respond to your theistic ideas or witness?
4. What is your experience of New Age thinking? Have you studied any New Age thinkers or read critiques of any form of New Age?

Week 2: Proofs for God's Existence

Readings:

From Battle... Thomistic proofs Kreeft, pp. 33ff; James/Chesterton/ Russell/Gilson and view the 2-part famous YouTube of Russell/Copleston Debate – [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)

Activities:

On Discussion Board in 1-2 single spaced pages respond to these questions:

1. Of the 5 Ways summarized by Kreeft, which one do find most effective? Express that one in your own words as if you were explaining it to a friend or a class.
2. What lines from the writings of James and Chesterton do you agree with or dispute?
3. How would you apply ideas of Gilson and/or Copleston to Russell's atheism?

Week 3: Psychological and Communist Arguments and Refutations

Readings:

From Battle...pp. 77-93; Freud/Frankl, Mao/Solzhehnitsen

Activities:

On Discussion Board in 1-2 single spaced pages respond to these questions:

1. What was new to you about Freud's ideas? What in Frankl impressed you?
2. How did the article about Mao illustrate how Communist atheism can lead to totalitarian ideologies?
3. What in the witness of Solzhehnitsen would you want to use in your teachings?

Week 4: Science and Theism

Readings:

New Story of Science

Activities:

For the Discussion Board summarize in 1 page the gist of the book. Then write about a question you have coming out of the reading or a highlight.

Week 5: Does the Suffering in the World Prove God cannot Exist?

Readings:

Watch any video you can find of C.S. Lewis on YouTube to get a sense of him, or watch the famous movie *Shadowlands*. Read C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain* – Chapters 1-3

Activities:

Write a one page single-spaced summary of the basic argument. Then write one page on what one idea you would use in talking to a person who disbelieves in God because of suffering.

Week 6: Suffering and God Part II

Readings:

C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* – Chapters 4-10

Activities:

Write for Discussion Board 1-2 pages telling the others why you found one particular idea in each of these chapters to be thought-provoking (the little response should manifest that you read all the chapters assigned.)

Week 7: Essay Exam at end of the week

Posted on Monday, due any time before Saturday midnight.

Week 8: Introduction to New Atheism, The Question of a God

Readings:

The God Delusion, “The God Hypothesis,” pp. 51-99

The God Delusion, “The Roots of Religion,” pp. 190-240

A Reasonable God, “The New Face of Atheism,” pp. 1-6

A Reasonable God, “Science, Religion, and the Claim that God Exists,” pp. 7-30

Answering the New Atheism, “Can God’s Existence be Demonstrated?” pp. 75-91

Activities:

Summarize and interpret what you perceive as the common issue in all five readings (mandatory post - 300 words).

***Only two 300-word posts in this second half of the course are mandatory** – Week 8 and Week 13. Students are required to post 300-word summary/interpretations to any *two* additional weeks in between these two (e.g., Weeks 10 and 12) *for a total of four (4) posts*. For the weeks in which a student is not making an original post, he or she is required to respond in 30 words or fewer to a classmate’s post if one is available.

Week 9: Arguments for God

Readings:

The God Delusion, “Arguments for God’s Existence,” pp. 100-136

A Reasonable God, “Faith, Reason, and Evidence,” pp. 31-56

A Reasonable God, “Three Arguments for God,” pp. 57-88

A Reasonable God, “The Design Argument,” pp. 89-116

Answering the New Atheism, “Dawkins’ Fallacious Philosophy” pp. 52-74

Activities:

Summarize and interpret what you perceive as the common issue in all five readings (optional post - 300 words)

Week 10: Arguments for Atheism

Readings:

The God Delusion, “Why there Almost Certainly is No God,” pp. 137-189

A Reasonable God, “Three Arguments for Atheism,” pp. 141-160

A Reasonable God, “The Fittingness Argument,” pp. 161-176

Answering the New Atheism, “Dawkins’ god, Chance” pp. 10-22

Activities:

Summarize and interpret what you perceive as the common issue in all four readings (optional post - 300 words)

Assignments:

Research Paper Topic Due. Students may choose any idea concerning the content of the second half of the course in relation to the first half for the purpose of researching and articulating it in some form – (e.g., a 5-7 page research paper, a 25-30 slide PowerPoint slideshow, etc.)

Week 11: Morality

Readings:

The God Delusion, “The Roots of Morality: Why are We Good?” pp. 241-267

The God Delusion, “The ‘Good’ Book and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist” pp. 268-316

Answering the New Atheism, “The Problem of Morality” pp. 92-118

Answering the New Atheism, “Dawkins’ Morality” pp. 119-132

Activities:

Summarize and interpret what you perceive as the common issue in all four readings (optional post - 300 words)

Assignments:

Annotated Bibliography Due. Students should have 5-7 resources independent of the texts already provided in the course.

Week 12: The “Problem” of Religion

Readings:

The God Delusion, “What’s Wrong with Religion? Why be so Hostile?” pp. 317-348

The God Delusion, “Childhood, Abuse and the Escape from Religion,” pp. 349-387

A Reasonable God, “Darwinian Stories of Religion,” pp. 117-140

Answering the New Atheism, “Pride and Prejudice” pp. 23-51

Activities:

Summarize and interpret what you perceive as the common issue in all four readings (optional post - 300 words)

Assignments:

Rough Draft of Research Project Due. Students should have a completed draft that can be reviewed by the course professors and returned with comments. Students are to integrate the comments into the final draft due in week 13.

Week 13: Conclusions

Readings:

The God Delusion, “A Much Needed Gap?” pp. 388-420

A Reasonable God, “A Modest Conclusion,” pp. 177-178

Answering the New Atheism, “Dawkins Dismantled,” pp. 133-142

Activities:

Summarize and interpret what you perceive as the common issue in all three readings (mandatory post - 300 words)

Assignments:

Final Draft of Research Project Due. The final drafts should be posted in the public forum provided by the course professors for the purpose of peer review in week 14.

Week 14: Impact

Readings:

Answering the New Atheism, "King Richard," pp. 143-ff

Activities:

Review the projects of those with whom you've been grouped for this purpose (provide a 100-word response for each)

IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Discussion Postings – 50%
- Midterm Exam – 25%
- Research Project and Peer Review – 25%

V. REQUIRED READINGS and RESOURCES:

- Excerpts from Dr. Ronda Chervin's unpublished manuscript *The Battle for the Twentieth Century Mind*. (This will be sent to each student who requests it as an attachment on e-mail. No cost).
- Augros and Stanciu, *The New Story of Science*, \$2.72 used on Barnes and Noble, ISBN 97808095268334.
- C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* Used Barnes and Noble \$5 ISBN 9780060652968
- Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, \$11.24 ISBN-13: 978-0618680009
- Scott Hahn and Ben Wiker's *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God*, \$7 ISBN-13: 978-1931018487
- Gregory Ganssle's *A Reasonable God: Engaging the New Face of Atheism*, \$16 ISBN-13: 978-1602582415

VI. SUGGESTED READINGS and RESOURCES:

Available in course site.

VII. EVALUATION

(Basis of evaluation with explanation regarding the nature of the assignment and the percentage of the grade assigned to each item below). Students who have difficulty with research and composition are encouraged to pursue assistance with the Online Writing Lab.

GRADING SCALE:

A 93-100; **A-** 90-92; **B+** 87-89; **B** 83-86; **B-** 80-82; **C** 70-79; **D** 69-60; **F** 59 and below;

Grading Rubric for the Major Papers and Discussion Board (DB) Postings

0 pts. – Paper 0 pts. – DB Posting;	3 pts. – Paper 2 pts. – DB Posting;	6 pts. – Paper 4 pts. – DB Posting;	9 pts. – Paper 6 pts. – DB Posting;	12 pts. – Paper 8 pts. – DB Posting;	15 pts. – Paper 10 pts. – DB Posting;
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CONTENT

Absence of Understanding	Lack of Understanding	Inadequate understanding	Adequate understanding	Solid Understanding	Insightful understanding
Analysis shows no awareness of the discipline or its methodologies as	Analysis seems to misunderstand some basic	Analysis is sometimes unclear in understanding or	Analysis demonstrates an understanding of basic concepts of	Analysis demonstrates a clear understanding and	Analysis clearly demonstrates an understanding and articulation of

the relate to the topic	concepts of the discipline or lacks ability to articulate them.	articulating concepts of the discipline.	the discipline but could express them with greater clarity.	articulation of concepts with some sense of their wider implications.	concepts of the discipline as they relate to the topic; highlights connections to other concepts; integrates concepts into wider contexts.
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RESEARCH

Missing Research Paper shows no evidence of research: citation of sources missing.	Inadequate research and/or documentation Over-reliance on few sources; spotty documentation of facts in text; pattern of citation errors.	Weak research and/or documentation Inadequate number or quality of sources; many facts not referenced; several errors in citation format.	Adequate research and documentation but needs improvement Good choice of sources but could be improved with some additions or better selection; did not always cite sources; too many citation errors.	Solid research and documentation A number of relevant scholarly sources revealing solid research; sources appropriately referenced in paper; only a few minor citation errors	Excellent critical research and documentation Critically selected and relevant scholarly sources demonstrating extensive, in-depth research; sources skillfully incorporated into paper at all necessary points; all citations follow standard bibliographic format
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WRITING & EXPRESSION

Incomplete writing Analysis is only partially written or completely misses the topic	Writing difficult to understand, serious improvement needed Analysis fails to address the topic; confusing organization or development; little elaboration of position; insufficient control of sentence structure and vocabulary; unacceptable number of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage	Episodic writing, a mix of strengths and weaknesses. Analysis noticeably neglects or misinterprets the topic; simplistic or repetitive treatment, only partially-internalized; weak organization and development, some meandering; simple sentences, below-level diction; distracting errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage	Acceptable writing, but could use some sharpening of skill Analysis is an uneven response to parts of the topic; somewhat conventional treatment; satisfactory organization, but more development needed; adequate syntax and diction, but could use more vigor; overall control of grammar, mechanics, and usage, but some errors	Solid writing, with something interesting to say. Analysis is an adequate response to the topic; some depth and complexity in treatment; persuasive organization and development, with suitable reasons and examples; level-appropriate syntax and diction; mastery of grammar, mechanics, and usage, with hardly any error	Command-level writing, making a clear impression Analysis is a thorough response to the topic; thoughtful and insightful examination of issues; compelling organization and development ; superior syntax and diction; error-free grammar, mechanics, and usage
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COMMUNITY INTERACTION (50-word response)

Inadequate response	Poor response	Weak response	Acceptable response	Individually-conscious contributory response	Community-conscious contributory response
Response merely provides laudatory encouragement for original post, e.g., "Excellent post! You really have thought of something there."	Response misses the point of the original posting	Response summarizes original posting to which it responds	Response makes a contribution <i>to the posting</i> to which it responds	Response makes a contribution to <i>the posting</i> to which it responds and fosters its development	Response makes a contribution to the <i>learning community</i> and fosters its development

VIII. ACADEMIC HONESTY POLICY

Students at Holy Apostles College & Seminary are expected to practice academic honesty.

Avoiding Plagiarism

In its broadest sense, plagiarism is using someone else's work or ideas, presented or claimed as your own. At this stage in your academic career, you should be fully conscious of what it means to plagiarize. This is an inherently unethical activity because it entails the uncredited use of someone else's expression of ideas for another's personal advancement; that is, it entails the use of a person merely as a means to another person's ends.

Students:

- Should identify the title, author, page number/webpage address, and publication date of works when directly quoting small portions of texts, articles, interviews, or websites.
- Students should not copy more than two paragraphs from any source as a major component of papers or projects.
- Should appropriately identify the source of information when paraphrasing (restating) ideas from texts, interviews, articles, or websites.
- Should follow the Holy Apostles College & Seminary Stylesheet (available on the Online Writing Lab's website at <http://www.holyapostles.edu/owl/resources>).

Consequences of Academic Dishonesty:

Because of the nature of this class, academic dishonesty is taken very seriously. Students participating in academic dishonesty may be removed from the course and from the program.

IX. ATTENDANCE POLICY

Even though you are not required to be logged in at any precise time or day, you are expected to login several times during each week. Because this class is being taught entirely in a technology-mediated forum, it is important to actively participate each week in the course. In a traditional classroom setting for a 3-credit course, students would be required to be in class 3 hours a week and prepare for class discussions 4.5 hours a week. Expect to devote at least 7 quality hours a week to this course. A failure on the student's part to actively participate in the life of the course may result in a reduction of the final grade.

NB: An Incomplete may only be awarded to a student who has maintained a passing grade up to the point of the emergency. Incomplete grades will change to a grade of F unless the requirements stipulated on the incomplete form are met by the date listed.

X. ABOUT YOUR PROFESSORS



Ronda Chervin

Dr. Ronda Chervin has a Ph.D. in philosophy from Fordham University and an M.A. in Religious Studies from Notre Dame Apostolic Institute.

She is a convert to the Catholic faith from a Jewish but atheistic background. She has been a professor at Loyola Marymount University, St. John's Seminary of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Our Lady of Corpus Christi, and presently teaches at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Connecticut.

More than fifty books of hers have been published by Catholic Presses in the area of philosophy and spirituality. Dr. Ronda presents on EWTN and Catholic radio. She is a dedicated widow and grandmother.



**Dr. Sebastian
Mahfood, O.P.**

Dr. Sebastian Mahfood, OP, is a Lay Dominican of the Chapter of the Holy Rosary in the Province of St. Albert.

Dr. Mahfood holds a master's in philosophy from Holy Apostles College & Seminary and a doctorate in postcolonial literature and theory from Saint Louis University. Among his publications include his book *Radical Eschatologies: Embracing the Eschaton in the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nuruddin Farah, and Ayi Kwei Armah*.

He lives in St. Louis with his wife, Dr. Stephanie Mahfood, and children, Alexander and Eva Ruth.