

# SENIOR SEMINAR: NEW ATHEISM

PHILOSOPHY 4800

SPRING 2010

**Course Description:** In recent years, so-called "New Atheism" has garnered increased attention. Names like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett have emerged as the most energetic and outspoken defenders of this program, and the sales of their books have routinely earned high-ranking spots on national bestseller lists. Who are the targets of these books? A recent Gallup poll has shown that only 12% of Americans believe in Darwinian evolution, and 53% believe in creationism. In other words, ours is still a very religious country, and the majority of our citizenry denies the worldview that the scientific community has articulated since Darwin.

In this senior seminar, we will read and evaluate the arguments of the new atheists. What are their principal objections to religion? Are the objections filed against a real or imaginary audience? Is it possible to dispel religious belief? Would that even be good? As a senior seminar, this topic allows us to incorporate queries from a range of philosophical disciplines: philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Note that this seminar does not purport to be a *defense* of new atheism, but rather an *evaluation* thereof; students of any religious proclivity are encouraged to participate.

**Professor:** Dr. Fritz Allhoff  
3006 Moore Hall; Tuesday 2:00p-4:00p and by appointment  
[fritz.allhoff@wmich.edu](mailto:fritz.allhoff@wmich.edu), 387-4503 (w)

**Seminar:** Tuesday, 4:00p-6:30p, Moore 3014

**Texts:** Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Vintage, 2008). ISBN# 0307278778.  
Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve, 2009). ISBN# 0446697966.  
Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Mariner, 2008). ISBN# 0618918248.  
Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin, 2007). ISBN# 0143038338.

*Note:* There are different versions of some of these texts. Please get *exactly* the ones with the ISBN#s indicated above in parentheses so that we can all share the same pagination. Many of these are available quite inexpensively used on Amazon.com; just enter the ISBN# and you will see availability. They have also been requested at the WMU bookstore.

<b>Grading:</b>	Attendance/participation	20%
	Presentations	20%
	Annotated research bibliography (Week 11)	10%
	Research paper (6000-9000 words)	50%

**Attendance/Participation:** You are required to attend each seminar and to participate. If you miss a seminar, you may—no more than twice—turn in a 1500-word reaction to the assigned readings (half exegetical, half critical) at the beginning of the following seminar to avoid a zero for the previous week.

**Presentations:** This will very much be a student-led seminar with some number of students being responsible for presentations each week. I expect *very good* preparation for these presentations: in particular, presentations should *not* simply trace through the text with a bunch of quotations (though these should be there as appropriate), but should rather seek to explicate the project in some integrative manner and to provide substantive questions for discussion. PowerPoint is required.

**Annotated research bibliography:** Before writing your research paper, you will compile a research bibliography which will support the research for that project. There should be at least twenty sources in this bibliography, at least half of which should be from after 2005. For each source, you should provide full bibliographic information as well as a 100-word précis. Comments will be offered on the bibliography as will be useful for developing the research paper.

**Research paper:** Students will incorporate the annotated research bibliography into a research paper, which will be in the 6000-9000 word range. My preference would be for something approximately in the middle of this range as I suspect shorter papers will lack some of the depth of longer ones and that longer ones will lack some of the focus of more intermediate ones. All papers are due to my mailbox (not by email) by Friday at 1200p of exam week.

**Statement on Academic Honesty:** You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding the policies and procedures in the Graduate Catalog (pp. 25-27) that pertain to Academic Honesty. These policies include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity and computer misuse. If there is reason to believe you have been involved in academic dishonesty, you will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. You will be given the opportunity to review the charge(s). If you believe you are not responsible, you will have the opportunity for a hearing. You should consult with me if you are uncertain about an issue of academic honesty prior to the submission of an assignment or test.

**Tentative Reading Schedule:**

W1	Harris	<i>Letter</i>
W2	Hitchens	<i>God, 1-6</i>
W3	Hitchens	<i>God, 7-12</i>
W4	Hitchens	<i>God, 13-19</i>
W5	Dawkins	<i>Delusion, 1-2</i>
W6	Dawkins	<i>Delusion, 3-4</i>
W7	Dawkins	<i>Delusion, 5-6</i>

W8	Dawkins	<i>Delusion, 7-8</i>
W9	Dawkins	<i>Delusion, 9-10</i>
W10	Dennett	<i>Spell, 1-3</i>
W11	Dennett	<i>Spell, 4-6</i>
W12	Dennett	<i>Spell, 7-8</i>
W13	Dennett	<i>Spell, 9-11</i>
W14	Catch-up and discussion	