

HISTORY OF AMERICAN ATHEISM

KULTURWISSENSCHAFT Summer Semester '13

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Course Description: From Cotton Mather's denunciations to the 21st-century media sensation of best-selling books, atheism has been a much discussed but little understood feature of religious landscape of America. This class will take a historical approach to the subject, analytically examining, querying, and contextualizing the many varieties of atheism in American history. Students will learn about atheisms, plural, the cultural conditions that fostered these American atheisms, and the impact they had on the culture of their times and ours. Students will study the ideas and arguments in historical context, including the arguments for and against the existence of God, gods, and the supernatural; vying conceptions of the meaning of life and the purpose of life; debates over the rules, role, and reliability of rationality in human knowledge; and contestations over the definitions and bases of morality. In this class, atheism will always be rigorously historicized.

Students will also be introduced to the methodological issues in study of intellectual and cultural history.

Grade:

Preparation and participation: 10%
Group project: 15%
Mid-term project: 15%
Short paper: 20%
Research paper: 40%

Class policy: It is my policy to help students in any way feasible and accommodate their needs however I can. I believe in you and I believe in your education. I will do everything in my power to assist and support your pursuit of an education, inside and outside of the classroom. In exchange, I ask for respect. Do the work. Attend class. Be on time. Put your phones away. Close Facebook. Participate. Don't talk while others are talking. Engage your fellow students. Engage the ideas. Be curious. Ask questions. Ask more questions. Look stuff up. Stay to the end of class. Don't pack up your stuff before the end of class. Be honest. Don't plagiarize. Don't cheat. Push yourself to excellence. Take this seriously. Seriously, take this seriously. Don't waste your time, your mind or your life. The consequences for failing to respect your education, your fellow students, or me will be fierce and deeply unpleasant. Show me that you care, on the other hand, and I will be your unrelenting advocate.

SCHEDULE:

15 April

Introduction; syllabus; definitions; review of arguments for the existence of God

22 April

Varieties of Unbelief in Revolutionary America:

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and Joel Barlow (1754-1812)

29 April

Atheism, Abolitionism, Women's Rights: Elizabeth Candy Stanton (1815-1902).

6 May

Atheism after the Civil War: Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899) and Charles Chilton Moore (1837-1906); Assignment due.

13 May

Popular accounts of Deconversion: Letters from An Atheist Nation (1903)

20 May

Social Darwinism: William Graham Sumner (1840-1910)

27 May

American Socialists: Mike Gold (1894 - 1967) and Max Eastman (1883 - 1969)

3 June: NO CLASS; Assignment Due

10 June

Humanist Manifestoes (1933; 1973)

17 June

Objectivism: Ayn Rand (1905-1982)

24 June

American Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair (1919-1995)

1 July

African-American Humanism: Richard Wright (1908-1960) and James Baldwin (1924-1987); Assignment Due

8 July

Atheism and Science: Richard Feynman (1918-1988) and Carl Sagan (1934-1996)

15 July

New Atheism: Daniel Dennett (1942-)

22 July

After New Atheism: Chris Stedman (1987-); conclusion; wrap-up

2 September

Final writing assignment