Course Syllabus

SEMINAR ON ATHEISM

Instructor: C. E. M. Dunlop
Office: 544 French Hall
Office Hrs: T-Th, 10:00-11:30, and by appointment.
Telephone: 762-3380 (direct to Philosophy)
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Web Pages: Class Discussion Web Board: http://www.umflint.edu/php/webboards/phl385/
[Note: This board is password-protected: the password will be provided in class.]
Atheist-related Websites: http://www.umich.edu/~cdunlop/Phl385/websites.htm
UM-Flint Philosophy Department: http://www.umflint.edu/departments/phl/
C.E.M. Dunlop’s Personal Web Page: http://www.umich.edu/~cdunlop/

Although atheism in the United States has always been represented in a small segment of the population, the atheist perspective has – until recently – received remarkably little attention. Recently, however, there has been a spate of atheist publications, several of which have (surprisingly) appeared on the New York Times best-seller list – a fact suggesting that interest in the subject goes well beyond the minority of individuals who explicitly declare themselves to be atheists. This course will examine some of the recent literature. We will consider questions such as these:

- Are science and religion compatible?
- Isn’t science really just a form of (godless) religion?
- Religion is sometimes criticized as being responsible for miseries and evils, but there are good religious people and evil atheists. So why is atheism any better than theism?
- Can God's existence be disproved?
- If God's existence can be neither proved nor disproved, why shouldn't one be an agnostic rather than an atheist?
- If atheism is correct, and religious beliefs are false, then how do religions arise and what sustains them?

We will begin with an overview of the topic. Next we will consider a critique of religion, particularly as it applies to the contemporary world’s political environment. We will then turn to an explanatory account of how religions arise, drawing from anthropology and cognitive science. Our last work will be Richard Dawkins’ sustained argument that religious beliefs are not only false, but harmful.
COURSE TEXTS


Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*

EVALUATION CRITERIA

1/3 Course Journal

1/3 Class Participation

1/3 Final Paper

COURSE JOURNALS

Except for the first seminar session (on 9/4/07) a journal entry is due each week. You may skip two journal entries without penalty; alternatively, if you write all – or all but one – your lowest score(s) will be dropped. Weekly journal entries will be collected randomly throughout the semester, and on the last day of class (12/4/07) your entire journal (including entries previously submitted) is due. Please keep your journal entries in a loose-leaf binder so you can hand in a given week’s entry without having to submit the entire journal.

How to proceed: Please single-space your journal entries to conserve paper. Each journal entry should adhere to the following format: (1) a one or two page summary of the reading. This will provide a basic overview of the reading’s contents, and demonstrate that you are familiar with author’s overall position. (2) Answers to each of the study questions (one or two paragraphs each). (3) Critical reflections. These may address particular study questions, or they may raise other issues. A “critical” reflection does not necessarily imply that you reject what the author is saying; the goal rather is to show that you have thought about the material, not merely summarized it. You could demonstrate this by relating the author’s position to contemporary world events, or to other readings (either from the course or from independent discoveries). Obviously, if you disagree with the author on some points, you should mention that, including the reasons for your disagreement.

CLASS PARTICIPATION

Given the seminar nature of this course, class discussion will be the norm. On most weeks, groups of students will lead the class discussion (see the next section for details), but everyone should be prepared each week to contribute. In addition, you are expected to contribute regularly (i.e., weekly) to the class web board, which will figure prominently into the class participation component of your course grade.

The web board is a very simple “no frills” site, but – unlike some others (e.g., Blackboard), it loads quickly and it is easy to navigate. The URL and password are listed on the first page of this syllabus. Note that both are case-sensitive; do not use any capital letters.

If you have any problems using the web board, please send me an e-mail right away.
PANEL-LED DISCUSSIONS

At the first class meeting you will be assigned to a panel that will lead three discussions throughout the semester (panel configurations may be changed as the semester progresses). The panel’s job is not to make a presentation to a passive audience, but rather to engage the rest of the class in serious discussion of the assigned readings. This may accomplished in a variety of ways, e.g., by (a) proposing a statement for discussion; (b) focusing on a specific passage for interpretation or commentary; (c) asking specific questions about the material; (d) mentioning a current event topic that is relevant to the readings. Other techniques are limited only by your imagination. Feel free to use the provided study questions as a guide, but please do not limit yourselves to them; the primary point of each class meeting is to insure coverage of all the relevant material in a serious, probing fashion. Remember that this is a philosophy class; no author gets a free pass, and every serious claim is open to critical scrutiny and argument.

FINAL PAPER

On the day of the scheduled final exam (December 18), a formal essay is due (15-20 pages, double-spaced). Its title will be either “The Case for Atheism” or “The Case Against Atheism”, depending on which viewpoint you wish to defend. This is intended as a position paper, but it must be based on reasoned argument – it is not merely an opinion piece. Moreover, your essay must demonstrably take account of all of the course readings and relevant class discussion (informal page references to various readings should be liberally included). In short, whatever viewpoint you adopt, you must situate your argument in the context of the seminar’s material. You are free to bring in other considerations as well, provided that you also demonstrate a mastery of the semester’s work. Your essay will be evaluated on the quality of its argument and presentation, not on the particular viewpoint that you elect to defend.

COURSE POLICIES

Late papers will not be accepted under any circumstances; please hand in your assignments on time. Printed copies of journal entries are due in class at the beginning of the class session (no e-mail attachments). Since you are permitted to skip two journal entries without penalty, a couple of missed journal entries will not jeopardize your course grade.

The class format will revolve around discussion, and class participation is expected. Moreover, this course requires a substantial amount of written work, with assignments due each week at the beginning of class. Consequently, faithful class attendance is essential. Irregular attendance will affect your grade adversely, and excessive absences may result in denial of credit for the course. Please bear in mind that each class session represents an entire week of the semester; one absence, therefore, is the equivalent of two or three absences for classes meeting multiple times each week.

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1 There will be no final exam in this course; the described essay will serve as a substitute.
ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

9/4    Introduction to the course / Overview of Atheism. (No journal entry due this week)

       Read: Baggini, Chs. 1 – 2

       Study Questions

       • Ch 1. (1) What is atheism, and how is it connected to (a) physicalism; (b) naturalism?
          (2) What is the point of Baggini’s Loch Ness monster example?

       • Ch 2. (1) What is meant by the claim that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”, and how does Baggini respond to it? (2) What is the difference between atheism and agnosticism, and why does Baggini think that atheism is defensible despite the fact that it makes a stronger claim? (3) How can atheists avoid being dogmatic without trading atheism for agnosticism? (4) Given that theistic explanations could account for the world as we find it, why should atheistic explanations be preferred? (5) If atheism cannot be established with 100% certainty, why isn’t it just a matter of faith?

9/11   Overview of Atheism – II

       Read: Baggini, Chs. 3 – 7.

       Study Questions (note that these continue onto the next page)

       • Ch 3. (1) How does Baggini argue that God cannot serve as a viable foundation for morality (make reference to both (a) the Euthyphro argument and (b) Ivan Karamazov’s claim that “Without God anything is permitted”)? (2) How does the story of Abraham illustrate the point that belief in God does not really simplify morality, or even provide a basis for morality? (3) Discuss Baggini’s account of three attempts to get ethics off the ground without a religious foundation.

       • Ch 4. (1) What does it mean for life to have a “meaning” or “purpose”, and why does Baggini think that God cannot serve as a satisfactory source of a meaningful life? (2) How does Baggini argue that atheists are better positioned than theists to find life meaningful? (3) How does a distinction between pleasure and satisfaction figure into an account of a meaningful life? (4) Discuss the connection (or lack thereof) between immortality and a meaningful existence.

       • Ch 5. (1) How does Baggini respond to the claim that “atheists are too committed to the value of rational explanation”? (2) In what way might historical atrocities be billed as making a “case against atheism”? And why does this argument ultimately fail? (3) In what way could atheism itself take on the dangerous mantle of fundamentalism?
• Ch 6. (1) Baggini suggests that traditional arguments for God’s existence, while they do not succeed as proofs, nevertheless can be used “to show that God’s existence is consistent with reason and evidence”. How can this claim be reconciled with the author’s endorsement of naturalism and rationalism in previous chapters? (2) The philosopher Alvin Plantinga referred to a personal inner conviction as “a special source of knowledge”. What’s wrong with this view? (3) Baggini refuses to say that religious beliefs are irrational, “because there are no standards for judging these questions shared by atheists and believers” (p. 104). Does this concede more to theists than Baggini was willing to concede in earlier chapters?

9/18 Religion and the Contemporary World Stage
Panel #1 Leads Discussion
Read: Harris, Chs. 1 – 2
Study Questions
• Ch 1. (1) What does Harris find objectionable in religious moderation? (2) Although Harris makes criticisms of specific religions in this chapter, his most important point is reflected in the chapter title. Explain. (3) Harris claims that “without death, the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable”. Why? (4) In footnote #18, Harris writes that “there may even be some credible evidence for reincarnation”. Does this undermine his frequent assertion that key religious doctrines are nonsense?

• Ch 2. (1) Explain how Harris’ analysis of the nature of belief leads to the conclusion that “religious beliefs to be beliefs about the way the world is, must be as evidentiary in spirit as any other” (p 63). (2) Given that religious believers would presumably welcome the discovery of scientific evidence that confirmed their beliefs, how are religious beliefs different from any other beliefs (including scientific beliefs)? (3) Given Harris’ critique of religious faith, what does he mean in saying that “the faithful can be expected to believe just like their secular neighbors – which is to say, more or less rationally – in their worldly affairs” (p. 68). (4) If, as Harris claims, our “freedom of belief” if it exists, is minimal” (p. 71), then how can he expect to convert any reader to his point of view?

9/25 Religion and the Contemporary World Stage – II
Panel #2 Leads Discussion
Read: Harris, Chs. 3 – 4
Study Questions
• Ch 3. (1) How did the Catholic Church manage to reconcile the sadism of the Inquisition with the teachings of Jesus? (2) Since the Inquisition took place hundreds of years ago, what relevance does it have to a discussion of contemporary religion? (3) How did anti-Semitism manifest itself in early Christian beliefs?

• Ch 4. (1) Although Harris’ numerous quotes from the Koran amply demonstrate that non-Muslims are represented therein as “infidels”, there are very few passages in this section that actually recommends violence against them. So how does Harris conclude that such passages contain “a link between Muslim faith and Muslim violence”? (2) Exactly what, according to Harris, is “the problem with Islam”? (3) Given that Christian Biblical texts offer many visions of eternal bliss, why don’t Harris’ criticisms of Islam apply equally to Christianity? (4) Evaluate Harris’ response to Zakaria’s
argument quoted on p. 148. (4) How does Harris propose to deal with “the problem with Islam”?

10/2 Religion and the Contemporary World Stage – III

Panel #3 Leads Discussion

Read: Harris, Chs. 5 – 7

Study Questions

• Ch 5. (1) Many people might regard the infusion of faith into politics and law as a good thing, but Harris is not among them. Why not? (2) What does religion have to do with what Harris regards as the United States’ misguided policies on drugs, stem cell research, and support of overseas family planning?

• Ch 6. (1) Explain Harris’ claim that “our notions about mind and matter directly influence our notion of right and wrong”. (2) What is the significance of “moral communities” in Harris’ discussion of ethics? (3) In what way does Harris think there can be ethical facts (vs. mere opinions)? (4) Does Harris’ defense of torture square with his view that there can be a “science of good and evil”? How so?

• Ch 7. (1) What is Harris’ view of the connection between consciousness and the brain, and how does this relate to his views about survival after bodily death (pay close attention to this chapter’s footnotes #1 - #2)? (2) How can Harris’ endorsement of “spiritualism” be reconciled with his critique of religion in previous chapters?

10/9 A Theory of the Origins of Religion

Panel #4 Leads Discussion

Read: Boyer, Chs. 1 – 2

Study Questions

• Ch 1. (1) Boyer claims that religion is not “in the genes”, but that the capacity to acquire religious beliefs is innate. Explain the distinction. (2) What is the central point of Boyer’s survey of diverse religious beliefs? (3) What are the weaknesses of various commonplace explanations of religious belief that Boyer discusses? (4) What does Boyer mean by the claim that “the many forms of religions we know are not the outcome of a historical diversification but of a constant reduction”, and how does meme theory provide an illustration of this? (5) How could the notion of templates figure into a theory of religious belief?

• Ch 2. (1) How do templates help to explain the “two conditions” (p. 62) that typically characterize religious concepts? (2) How can an account of exotic religious beliefs from other cultures shed any light on religion in our culture? (3) If we want to know how other people conceive of God, why can’t we just ask them? (4) How could templates be used to explain the difference between “theologically correct” and “implicit” conceptions of God?
10/16  A Theory of the Origins of Religion – II
Panel #1 Leads Discussion

Read: Boyer, Ch. 3

Study Questions

• Ch. 3. (1) Boyer claims that the brain’s ability to understand the surrounding world depends on a number of specialized “inference systems”. What evidence does he provide for this? (2) In what way does the “inference system” account connect to templates and ontological categories? (3) What is wrong with the distinction between innate and learned concepts? (4) What is meant by “decoupling”? How does this notion connect with (a) human beings’ dependency upon information; (b) religious beliefs?

Panel #2 Leads Discussion

Read: Boyer, Chs. 4 – 5

Study Questions

• Ch 4. (1) What evidence is there that the most important religious concepts are practical rather than theoretical, and what implications do you think this might have for traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of God? (2) If our brain’s “agency detection” systems play a role in generating beliefs in fictional beings, what processes sustain such beliefs? (3) What role does “strategic information” play in belief formation about gods?

• Ch 5. (1) Although people commonly connect religious beliefs with morality, Boyer argues that moral intuitions do not derive from religious beliefs; in fact, he takes the opposite position. What evidence does he provide? (2) How do moral intuitions give rise to the notion of “full access” supernatural agents? (3) What is the connection between explaining events via natural causes and explaining them via supernatural causes? (4) Although supernatural agents are often invoked in explanations of misfortune, Boyer argues that they do not lie at the heart of such explanations. Why not?

10/30  A Theory of the Origins of Religion – IV
Panel #3 Leads Discussion

Read: Boyer, Chs. 6 – 7

Study Questions

• Ch 6. (1) What importance is there to the observation that all societies have prescribed means for dealing with corpses? (2) How do the brain’s separate inference systems interact in the presence of a corpse to produce some sense that the deceased person still exists? (3) How might a belief in souls be accounted for by the inference systems activated by a dead body?

• Ch 7. (1) What explanatory problems are raised by the existence of rituals? (2) How are rituals important to the establishment of social relations? (3) How does Boyer argue that beliefs in supernatural beings are grafted onto rituals rather than serving as the source of rituals?
11/6  A Theory of the Origins of Religion – V

Panel #4 Leads Discussion

Read:  Boyer, Chs. 8 – 9

Study Questions

- Ch 8. (1) How are religious doctrines a consequence of the rise of religious specialists rather than a source of religious specialists? (2) Once a religion has formed a more or less coherent doctrine, what gives rise to fundamentalist offshoots of the “official story”? (3) How can fundamentalist violence be viewed as a response to the concern that defection from a particular group may be perceived as relatively risk-free?

- Ch 9. (1) Why does the “judicial model” fail to explain many of our beliefs, and how does the alternative explanation do so? (2) What does Boyer mean in claiming that “the processes that create ‘belief’ are the same in religion and in everyday matters”? And what are these processes? (3) What is Boyer’s view about the connection between science and religion?

11/13  Dawkins’ Critique of Religion

Panel #1 Leads Discussion

Read:  Dawkins, Chs. 1 – 3

Study Questions

- Ch 1. (1) Why does Dawkins spend time discussing Einstein and other scientists? What point is he trying to make? (2) Is Dawkins right about the “privileging” of religion? What might be the source of this phenomenon?

- Ch 2. (1) In this chapter Dawkins claims that the theists’ hypothesis and the atheists’ hypothesis are not equiprobable. What argument does he offer for this claim? (2) Why, according to Dawkins, is “NOMA” appealing to theologically-minded individuals (consider his analysis of “the great prayer experiment”)? (3) How does Dawkins diagnose the appeal of NOMA to some scientists? (4) If it’s acceptable to be an agnostic about extraterrestrial intelligence, why isn’t it acceptable to be an agnostic about the existence of God?

- Ch 3. (1) Assess Dawkins’ responses to various arguments presented on pp. 77-97. (2) Dawkins’ review of arguments for the existence of God includes a section on the religious beliefs of various scientists. What is the point of that discussion?

11/20  Dawkins’ Critique of Religion – II

Panel #2 Leads Discussion

Read:  Dawkins, Chs. 4 – 5

Study Questions (see next page for Ch. 5 Study Questions)

- Ch 4. (1) How does natural selection fill the false dichotomy between “chance” and “design”? (2) How does Dawkins respond to creationists’ critiques of evolution? (3) How does Dawkins criticize the creationists’ alternative to evolution? (4) Dawkins distinguishes between the origin of life and the evolution of life. What is he getting at here? (5) How does the distinction between simplicity and complexity figure into Dawkins’ rejection of God as the cause/designer of the universe?
• Ch 5. (1) Why would a Darwinian evolutionist feel obliged to explain the existence of religion? (2) Describe and evaluate Dawkins’ “byproduct” theory of religious origins. (3) In attempting to explain religion, what does meme theory add to the Darwinian notion of genetic selection? (4) What are some lessons from the “John Frum” case?

11/27 Dawkins’ Critique of Religion – III

Panel #3 Leads Discussion

Read: Dawkins, Chs. 6 – 7

Study Questions

• Ch 6. (1) If humans are built by genes that are inherently selfish, then how can morally admirable qualities such as altruism be accounted for? (2) Dawkins seems to argue that an absolute morality requires a religious foundation. How might that work out in practice? I.e., how could God serve as the source of moral principles in everyday life?

• Ch 7. (1) What problems arise from attempting to base morality on scripture? (2) What role does the Zeitgeist play in determining moral values? (3) What evidence is there that the evolving Zeitgeist is not based on religion? (4) Evaluate Dawkins’ response to the “argument” that “Hitler was an atheist”.

12/4 Dawkins’ Critique of Religion – IV

Complete Course Journals Due (no exceptions)

Panel #4 Leads Discussion

Read: Dawkins, Chs. 8 – 9

Study Questions

• Ch 8. (1) Isn’t atheism just another form of faith? (How does the Kurt Wise example bear on this?) (2) What problems does Dawkins see with religious absolutists’ views on “the sanctity of human life”? (3) Evaluate Dawkins’ response to the “Beethoven argument”. (4) Why does Dawkins object to all religious faith, and not simply to the faith of religious extremists?

• Ch 9. (1) What does the 19th abduction of Edgardo Mortara have to do with religion today? (2) After dismissing the teaching of “astrology and the literal truth of the Bible”, Dawkins asks, “Isn’t it just as arrogant to insist that children should be taught science?” He doesn’t directly answer this question. How do you think it should be answered from Dawkins’ overall perspective? (3) Given Dawkins’ hostility to religion, how can he consistently advocate religious education?

12/18 Final Course Papers Due in the Philosophy Department by 4:00 pm. No exceptions.

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2 Zeitgeist is a German word, literally meaning “spirit of the time”. A more colloquial rendering would be “the cultural climate or social norms of a given era”.
Reading and Forwarding Your UM-Flint E-mail

Reading your UM-Flint E-mail Online

E-mail has become an essential tool for university communications. Many students, however, do not check their university e-mail regularly, perhaps because they use some other e-mail account (such as Earthlink, Yahoo!, or Hotmail). But reading your UM-Flint e-mail online is no harder than using those other online e-mail accounts. You can access it through Microsoft Outlook or you can read it by using your web browser. In the latter case, just go to https://mail.umflint.edu/exchange and login. (Note that the address starts with https rather than the more familiar http.)

Forwarding Your UM-Flint E-mail to Another Account

If you wish, you can also easily set up your UM-Flint account so it will automatically forward e-mail to the account of your choice. (Note: ITS cautions that some users have experienced problems doing this, so proceed at your own risk. It is possible that you will lose forwarded e-mail, and ITS takes no responsibility for such cases.)

To set up e-mail forwarding, log into your UM-Flint e-mail account using the Internet address given above. Make sure that you use the Premium Client Access Level (that option is already checked by default). Once you are logged in, note the bottom left of your screen, where you will find an icon labeled “Rules”. Click on that icon, and then follow these steps:

1. Click on the Rules icon. A new box will open up.
2. At the top of the newly opened box, click New…
3. If you wish, you can enter a name for the rule in Rule Name (optional)
4. At the bottom, select the option Forward it to and then type in the email address you want your email forwarded to. (Notice that you have the option of also leaving a copy of each incoming message on your UM-Flint account; that option is the default, and I highly recommend that you use this option.)
5. Click on the Save and Close button.

That’s all there is to it. From that point onward, mail sent to your UM-Flint e-mail address will automatically be forwarded to the address that you have specified.

In this course I will assume that you are reachable via your UM-Flint e-mail account. This means that you should either check that account regularly or else forward your UM-Flint e-mail to an account that you do check regularly.

3 Unfortunately, this procedure will only work if you use Internet Explorer; Firefox will not work.