**Philosophy 260 The New Atheism**
Spring Term 2008
10:00am-12:50pm, MTWRF, CLA 301

Dr Jared Bates
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Spring 2008 Office Hours: 9-10 M-F, and by appointment

<http://vault.hanover.edu/~bates/newatheism/>

**Course Description**
This course examines the recent wave of activity surrounding a group of self-styled “New Atheists,” including such figures as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. The course takes as its lead the four “consciousness-raisers” Dawkins discusses in the preface to The God Delusion, and organizes readings around those themes. The course focuses on the theoretical and ethical underpinnings of the New Atheism, and analyzes its relation to philosophical atheism, scientism, other social activist movements, and Enlightenment-era political thought. The course also examines criticisms of the New Atheism from both religious and secular sources.

**Texts**

[RD] Richard Dawkins. The God Delusion. (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

Additional readings on reserve at Duggan Library’s circulation desk or available online:

[SA] Scott Atran. Discussion from “Beyond Belief” Conference, at Edge.org. [link](http://www.edge.org/discourse/bb.html)

[SAR] Replies and counter-replies at Edge.org (linked above)

[BB] Barry Boyce. “Mind, matter, or god?” in *Shambhala Sun* (January 2008). [link](http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3174&Itemid=247)

[BN] <http://www.the-brights.net/>

[RDL] Richard Dawkins. “The future looks bright” in *The Guardian* (21 June 2003). [link](http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0%2C%2C4695302-110738%2C00.html)

[DD] Daniel C. Dennett. Breaking the Spell. (Viking, 2006).

[DDL] \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. “The bright stuff” in The New York Times (12 July 2003). [link](http://www.the-brights.net/vision/essays/dennett_nyt_article.html)

Dinesh D’Souza. What’s So Great About Christianity? (Regnery, 2007). [link](http://books.google.com/books?id=vVXf2PV8pyQC)

[DD3] Ch 3: “The atheist assault on religion”

[DD4] Ch 4: “Saving children from their parents”

[JG] John Gray. “The atheist delusion” in *The Guardian* (15 March 2008). [link](http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0%2C%2C332970820-99939%2C00.html)

[JH] Jon Haidt. “Moral psychology and the misunderstanding of religion” at Edge.org. [link](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/haidt07/haidt07_index.html)

[JHR] Replies and counter-replies at Edge.org [link](http://www.edge.org/discourse/moral_religion.html)

[SHF] Sam Harris. The End of Faith. (Norton, 2005).

[SHR] \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. “Do we really need bad reasons to be good?” in *The Boston Globe* (22 Oct 2006). [link](http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/do-we-really-need-bad-reasons-to-be-good/)

[SHA] \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. “The problem with atheism” at the On Faith blog hosted by *The Boston Globe* (28 September 2007). [link](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/sam_harris/2007/10/the_problem_with_atheism.html)

[JFH] John F. Haught. God and the new atheism. Excerpt in Christian Century (26 February 2008).

[CH] Christopher Hitchens. God is not Great. (Twelve, 2007).

[EW] Erik J. Wielenberg. Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe. (Cambridge, 2005).

**Special Information**

* Americans with Disabilities Act: If you have any special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act and need course materials or tests in alternative formats, notify me immediately. All reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate your special needs.
* Academic Dishonesty: Academic honesty is essential to the intellectual life of the College. Thus, academic dishonesty, such as cheating and plagiarism, is a basis for disciplinary action. No suspected case of academic dishonesty will be taken lightly; all will be handled in accordance with the student conduct code.
* Dropping this course: The deadline for discretionary withdrawal from any class is 5:00pm, Tuesday, April 29.
* Degree Requirements: This course counts as an elective toward the Philosophy major.

**Reading Schedule**

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| **Date** | **Readings** | **Topic** |
| Apr 28 | RD, Preface | Four Consciousness-Raisers |
| **Consciousness-Raiser #1: Religion is bad philosophy/bad science** |
| 29 | RD, Chs 3-4 | Arguments for and against God’s existence |
| 30 | RD, Ch 5; DD, Ch 4 | Natural history of religious belief |
| May 1 | RD, Chs 1-2 | Religion and science |
| 2 | BB; JFH; DD3 | Religious responses |
| **Consciousness-Raiser #2: Being a religious person ≠ being a good person** |
| 5 | RD, Chs 7-8  | Ugliness of religious values |
| 6 | CH, Chs 2 & 13 | “Religion poisons everything” |
| 7 | SHF, Ch 1; SHR | Dangers of religious faith |
| 8 | DD, Ch 10 | Morality & religion |
| 9 | JH; JHR | Atheist responses |
| 12 | RD, Chs 6 & 10 | Consolation, inspiration, and science |
| 13 | EW, Ch 4 (4.1-4.5) | Ethical character in a godless universe |
| **Consciousness-Raiser #3: Children don’t have a religion** |
| 14 | RD, Ch 9; CH, Ch 16 | Are children religious? |
| 15 | “Jesus Camp” | In-class video |
| 16 | DD4 | Christian responses |
| **Consciousness-Raiser #4: Atheism is nothing to be ashamed of** |
| 19 | BN; RDL; DDL | Bright rights |
| 20 | CH, Chs 18-19 | Rationality and enlightenment |
| 21 | SHA  | On the word ‘atheism’ |
| 22 | SA; SAR; JG | Atheist responses |
| 23 | -- | Concluding thoughts |

**Course Requirements & Grading**

* Preparation and participation: Participation in class discussion is essential to your learning the course material, and to your cultivating dispositions to think critically and analytically. It gives you a chance (perhaps your only chance) to engage the course material in a lively, verbal exchange of ideas with others. So it is expected that you will participate in class discussions. Quality participation is always informed by and responsive to the reading assignments. Preparation will be evaluated, in part, through your participation. As a further gauge of preparation, periodic reading quizzes will be administered. Attendance will also be recorded daily.
* Discussion leader: Students will take turns “leading” discussion in class. Readings will be assigned to specific students on the first day of class. Discussion “leaders” for a specific reading assignment will be responsible for: (i) Posting three reading questions – designed to highlight what is most important in the reading assignment – to the MyHanover Forums for this course, and (ii) helping to guide the discussion in class.
* Major Project: This is an open-ended assignment, but each student will work up some project for the term. More will be said about it in class. Project proposals will have to be approved by me by Monday, May 5, and detailed proposals will be presented to the class on Monday, May 12. Written work on your project is due the last day of class, Friday, May 23. Grading criteria will be fit to particular projects, which can be discussed on a case-by-case basis, though both the pre-approval and in-class proposal presentation do factor into the grade.

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| Point Distributions

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| --- | --- |
| Preparation & participation: | 50 |
| Discussion leader: | 50 |
| Major project | 50 |
| **Total:** | **150** |

 | Letter Grade Distributions

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A | 140-150 |  . | B+ | 130-134 |
|  |  |  | B | 125-129 |
| A- | 135-139 |  | B- | 120-124 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| C+ | 115-119 |  | D+ | 100-104 |
| C | 110-114 |  | D | 95-99 |
| C- | 105-109 |  | D- | 90-94 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| F 0-89 |

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**What to get from the Reserve Desk**

Below I summarize what you will need to photocopy from the Reserve Desk at the library.

[DD] Daniel C. Dennett. Breaking the Spell. (Viking, 2006).

*Chs 4, 10.*

[SHF] Sam Harris. The End of Faith. (Norton, 2005).

*Ch 1.*

[JFH] John F. Haught. God and the new atheism. Excerpt in Christian Century (26 February 2008).

*Entire article.*

[CH] Christopher Hitchens. God is not Great. (Twelve, 2007).

*Chs 2, 13, 16, 18, 19.*

[EW] Erik J. Wielenberg. Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe. (Cambridge, 2005).

*Ch 4 (4.1-4.5)*