SOC 3309/RELS 3624
Atheists and Others in the U.S.

Fall 2016
Tu/Th 1-2:15 pm
Blegen 215

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1039 Social Sciences
Office Hours Tuesdays 2:30 – 4:00 pm, or by appointment

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Course Description
What does it mean to be an atheist in the United States today? Atheists comprise a small percentage of the American population, but one with an increasingly visible presence in popular culture, political discourse, and everyday life. How do atheists compare with other non-religious Americans? How do atheists organize into groups oriented toward identity-formation, social connection, and political action? What are Americans' attitudes toward atheists, atheism, and non-belief – and are these attitudes changing? The course will promote a critical examination of the changing landscape of religious non-belief in the United States, placing contemporary American atheism in a sociological and historical context. Throughout the course, we focus on the varieties of religious and non-religious experience and engage with sociological debates about secularization in the late-modern context.

Readings

- Articles and chapters are on the class Moodle site:

- Four books are available for purchase. They are also on reserve at Wilson Library. Students are encouraged to “buddy up” and find someone to share books with to cut back on expenses. The books are:
• Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism by Susan Jacoby
• Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion by Phil Zuckerman
• The Age of Atheists by Peter Watson
• The Ebony Exodus Project: Why Some Black Women are Walking Out on Religion – and Others Should Too by Candace R. M. Gorham
## Assignments & Grading

1) **“Book Group” Assignment 1. 10% of grade. Due in-class Weds. Oct. 6**

   Come to Wednesday’s class with 1 ½ to 2 page written summary of the main things you learned from the Jacoby book, and a list of 5-7 questions meant to spark conversation in a small group discussion. We will break up into small groups and have “book group” discussions of the Jacoby (which you will be prepared for through having done the written assignment).

2) **Midterm Exam. 30% of grade. Weds. Oct. 20, in-class.**

   Covers material from Weeks 1-6. Combination of short answer and short essay.

3) **Critical Summary of Media Account, 1. 5% of Grade. Due in-class Weds., Oct. 27.**

   Choose one of the articles from mainstream media sources listed in the syllabus for Week 8, and write a 2-3 paragraph essay that a) concisely summarizes the article’s main points and b) explains how the material covered in our class (in lecture, readings, or discussion activities) helps you to understand the media account and gives you a critical perspective on the author’s claims.

4) **“Book Group” Assignment 2. 10% of Grade. Due in-class, Weds. Nov. 10**

   Come to Wednesday’s class with 1 ½ to 2 page written summary of the main things you learned from the Zuckerman book, and a list of 5-7 questions meant to spark conversation in a small group discussion. We will break up into small groups and have “book group” discussions of the Zuckerman (which you will be prepared for through having done the written assignment).

5) **Critical Summary of Media Account, 2. 5% of Grade. Due in-class, Weds. Dec 1.**

   For this assignment, you may choose the mainstream media article listed on the syllabus for Week 13 or you may find a similar article in a mainstream press source (e.g. Star Tribune, Pioneer Press, Minnpost.com, NY Times, LA Times, Huffington Post, Slate.com, Politico.com, Daily Beast, and the like). Write a 2-3 paragraph essay that a) concisely summarizes the article’s main points and b) explains how the material covered in our class (in lecture, readings, or discussion activities) helps you to understand the media account and gives you a critical perspective on the author’s claims.

6) **Final Exam. 30% of grade. In-class. Weds. Dec. 13, in-class.**

   Covers material from Weeks 8-14 of class. Combination of short answer and short essay.
7) *Participation.* 10% of grade.

Calculated entirely from attendance at and participation in small-group discussion activities: Weeks 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14. **You lose 1%** for every absence.
Rules of the Game

Many course-related policies are set by the College of Liberal Arts or the Sociology Department. The syllabus supplements (at the end of the syllabus) cover these policies in detail. These policies are instituted to be fair to all students and impose uniform deadlines and procedures, and I follow them in all cases.

In addition:

- I am happy to arrange accommodations for students with disabilities to the extent that I can and given consultation with Disability Services. Please let me know right away if you need an accommodation.

- Every person in this classroom is responsible for helping to establish an open, respectful, supportive atmosphere for discussion. Courtesy is not optional; it is a precondition of participation in this class.

- I do not give make-up exams unless you are seriously ill and have a doctor’s note to that effect or there is a death in your immediate family. If you miss an exam for any other reason (except those specified in college or university policies), you will be penalized one letter grade. If you need to take an exam early due to jury duty, military service, a conflict with a religious holiday, or travel for a sports team, I am willing to arrange that; all such conversations take place in person, in my office hours.

- Assignments are due on the due date, participation in class discussion activities is not optional, and the make-up policy for exams is unwavering. The only exceptions are: if you are ill and have a doctor’s note, if you have military duty or travel with a sports team (in which case assignments are due before you leave, not after you get back), if you are observing one of a list of University-approved religious holidays, if you are attending the funeral of a member of your immediate family, or if you have jury duty.

  - Routine or foreseeable conflicts do not constitute an excused absence or justify missing an assignment deadline.
  
  - Please do not email me to say why you are late to class, or asking where the syllabus is or when assignments are due. I will most likely not answer. In no case does an email constitute an automatically approved extension or absence.
  
  - If you experience some other truly exceptional emergency situation (e.g. automobile accident), then by all means, talk to me – you will find me more than willing to help. All such situations must be discussed in person during my office hours.
COURSE OUTLINE, WEEKS 1-15

Section 1 – Getting Started, Facts and Figures, Conventional Wisdom

Week 1 Getting Started
Sept. 6 Welcome, Course Introduction
Sept. 8 General Discussion – Atheism in America, “Big themes and Core Questions”
Guest leader: Jacqui Frost, Sociology Department

Week 2 American Religion and the “Nones” – Pluralism, Diversity, Change

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):
Secularism and Nonreligion 3(1): 1-16.
Sept. 13 American Religion – Facts and Figures
Sept. 15 The Non-religious in America – Facts and Figures

Week 3 Meta-Narrative 1: American Religion As Ground of Civic Engagement

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)
Sept. 20 Religion, Community, Morality
Sept. 22 Religious Tolerance and Religious Pluralism

Week 4 Meta-Narrative 2: Death of God and Loss of Meaning

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)

Sept. 27 The Modernist Crisis & The Conflict between “Science” and “Religion”

Sept. 29 The Contemporary Landscape – The Brights and Being Reasonable

Section 2 – Historical Background

Week 5 Deists, Humanists, and Other Freethinkers

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)


Oct. 4 The History, and Sociology, of Secularism. Guest Lecture, Jacqui Frost, Sociology Department

Oct. 6 “Book Group” on Jacoby (Book Group 1 Assignment Due)

Week 6 Nonbelief in the United States – Philosophical Origins

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):

Watson, Peter. 2014. The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God, Chapters: Intro, 1, 2, 4, 9, 21, 22, 25, Conclusion

Oct. 11 Intellectual Roots – The Enlightenment and (again) Modernism

Oct. 13 Looking Ahead – Free Thought, Free Citizens – Or, a Preview of the Stakes

Week 7 Midterm – Review and Test

Oct. 18 Review

Oct. 20 Mid-term exam. In-class, covers weeks 1-6
Section 3  Atheist Identities and Movements Today

Week 8  Atheism as Movement

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class)


Print/bring to class or access on laptop:


Oct. 25  Social Movements, Identities, and Mobilization

Oct. 27  Discussion of News Articles – Representing Organized Atheism in the News

Due: Critical Summary of Media Account, 1

Week 9  The (Imagined) Atheist Community

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):


Print/bring to class or access on laptop:


Nov. 1 Communities of Discourse and the Social Construction of Boundaries

Nov. 3 In-Class Discussion of Articles – More on Representation of Atheism in the Popular Media

Week 10 Becoming a “None” – Pathways

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):


Nov. 8 Individual Trajectories, Reconsidered

Nov. 10 “Book Group” on Zuckerman (Book Group 2 assignment due)

Week 11 Atheism at the Intersection of Other Identities I: Race and Sexuality

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):


Print/bring to class or access on laptop:


Nov. 15 Intersectionality and Social Location
Nov. 17  Groups and Representation
Week 12  Atheism at the Intersection of Other Identities II: Gender and Family

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):


*Print/bring to class or access on laptop:*


Nov. 22  Familism, Gender, and Non-Religion

Nov. 24  NO CLASS TODAY – Happy Thanksgiving!!

Section 4 – The Stakes – Atheists and Other Religious Outsiders in the U.S.

Week 13  Attitudes Towards Atheists – Anti-Atheist Sentiment

Required Reading (Complete by Tuesday’s Class):


*Print/bring to class or access on laptop:*

Hafiz, Yasmine. 2014. “Atheists Face Discrimination on a Shocking Level.” Huffington Post
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 29</td>
<td>Atheists Still the Other?</td>
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<td>Dec. 1</td>
<td>Media Depictions of Atheists – Discrimination and Anti-atheist Sentiment</td>
<td>Due: Critical Summary of Media Account, 2</td>
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<td>Week 14</td>
<td>Atheists and Others – At Work and Before the Law</td>
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<td>Dec. 6</td>
<td>Discrimination against the Non-Religious in the Contemporary U.S. – Guest lecture Evan Stewart, Sociology department</td>
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<td>Dec. 8</td>
<td>Wrap-up Remarks, What’s on the Exam?, Course Evaluations</td>
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<td><strong>Section 5 – Wrapup</strong></td>
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<td>Week 15</td>
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<td>Dec 13</td>
<td><strong>Final Exam.</strong> In-class, covers weeks 8-14.</td>
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Supplemental Bibliography

Trends and Demographics


Types and Terminology


**Non-religious Pathways**


**Non-religion as Movement/Building Community**


**Race**


**Gender/Sexuality**


**The Spiritual But Not Religious**


**Discrimination**


**Books and Edited Volumes that Cover Multiple Aspects of Non-religion**


