

## Religion 2380: Faith and Doubt in the Modern World



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Spring 2024  
Tuesday & Thursday/2:00-3:15

This course introduces students to seminal writings in modern western thought concerning the meaning, truthfulness, and uses of religious belief. The goal is to develop a multi-storied narrative that conveys the variety of interpretations given to the idea of God in modernity and to clarify the conditions of responsible religious belief in a pluralistic and post-modern, post-theistic, post-something world.

Lectures and discussions will follow such questions as:

Is belief in God a product of wishful thinking?

Is religious belief a symptom of neurotic behavior?

If there is no God, is everything permissible?

Is atheism (new and old) parasitic on the moral convictions inspired by religion?

Is religion a primitive stage in human intellectual development in need of an education to reality?

Does religion promote violent tendencies among individuals and groups? Is it inherently immoral?

How do we account for the fact that some intelligent people argue that belief in God is rational and others that belief in God violates reason?

We will consider such questions by studying the modern critiques of religion and the implications of such critiques for believers and people of faith.

We will build our narrative not only from philosophical and religious sources but from novels, film, music, and psychology as well.

### Required Books

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*  
Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), *Babette's Feast*  
Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*  
David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*  
David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*  
Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal*  
Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*  
Howard Thurman, *Deep River*

### Course Objectives

Our objective is to help the student develop interpretive tools for analyzing accounts of religion with respect to the relation between faith and reason. We will do this by analyzing the major western critiques of theistic religious belief: the genetic critique, the moral critiques, the existential critique. and the anthropological-psychoanalytic critique. We will consider the achievements and the limits of each kind of critique, what inspires such critiques, and whether faith and doubt should, in the end, be understood as parts of a greater unity.

### Course Requirements

1. Reading of all assignments and completion of a weekly 250-word written response circulated to the class via UVA Collab by midnight on Tuesday. These assignments constitute 15% of your final grade.
2. Two 5-6 page essays (1750-2000 words); each essay counts 20% of the final course grade.
3. Two written in class exams; each exam counts 15% of the final grade.
4. A final exam in the form of an annotated syllabus (10% of the course grade).

5. Active participation and attendance, to the extent to which participation is possible—counting 5% of the final course grade.