

Losing My Religion: Religious Skepticism in the United States First Term Seminar

Instructor: Sarah Ruble

Email: sruble@gac.edu

Office Phone: 507-933-6163

Office Address: 304A Old Main

Office Hours: M 12:30-1:20, T 10:30-11:15 ,W 9:00-9:50 and by appointment.

FTS Mentor: Anna Looby

Email: alooby@gac.edu

Course Description:

The United States is a profoundly religious country. Some polls indicate that as many as 90% of Americans believe in God. The vast majority of Americans claim that they pray, believe in the afterlife, and experience miracles.

Yet not all Americans fit this description. Many thoughtful men and women have wrestled with significant doubts about religious faith. Some struggle with doubts their entire lives. In some cases they remain part of religious communities while in others they leave “organized” religion. Some of these men and women move beyond doubt to a new set of certainties, namely, certainty that God does not exist, that prayer has no efficacy, and that miracles never occur.

This course examines religious skeptics and skepticism in America. Although we will survey the broad scope of U.S. history, we will give much of our attention to the late nineteenth-century and the contemporary scene. We will also look beyond U.S. borders to consider some of the thinkers who influenced religious skeptics in America. We will explore how and why religious skepticism became possible and, more importantly, compelling. Why did some people stop believing in God or, at least, stop believing that anyone could be certain about God’s existence? To answer these questions, we will consider developments in science, such as evolution, and we will ponder theological issues such as theodicy (the question of evil) and the “problem” of pain. Turning to the contemporary scene, we will explore the “new atheists” and current debates about the role and morality of religious belief and unbelief in America.

This Course as a First Term Seminar:

As a First Term Seminar, this course has multiple tasks. It will introduce you to a content area, in this case, religious skepticism. First term seminars also develop your oral communication, writing, and critical thinking skills. These skills will be central to your success at Gustavus and, I would argue, to your ability to be informed, active, and valuable participants in civic life. You will not learn everything you need to know about oral communication, writing, and critical thinking in this seminar. You will not learn everything you need to know in the next four years. But you will be introduced to intellectual habits that, if developed, will enable you to explore and serve the world in profoundly rich and meaningful ways.

This course also provides a context in which you will be introduced to college life at Gustavus. You may assume that “college life” is what happens outside of the academic curriculum. Over the course of this semester, I will make a case that a full college life is one that integrates what happens in the classroom, in the Caf, in the dorms, and in the gym. During the class you will be introduced to people, organizations, and offices that can help with that integration and who, if you will let them, can open new avenues for exploration. Please do not assume that visiting an office or having a guest speaker is a time to turn off your brain. Rather, consider how various organizations and people can help you as you become a more fully engaged participant in this community.

In order to help you navigate your new intellectual community, FTS also has an advising function. I will be your academic advisor this term. I will meet with you at least twice in an advising capacity. I will schedule meetings during the first three weeks of the term in order to talk about your current interests and expectations for your time at Gustavus. We will meet again in the two weeks preceding registration for Spring semester to think again about your interests and what courses you should take to develop your current interests and to discover new interests.

Finally, this FTS is part of a program that brings together orientation and your first term experience. We are fortunate that your Greeter, Anna Looby, will continue to be part of our course. She will be an important resource for you as you navigate your first semester at Gustavus.

Desired Outcomes:

By the end of this seminar you should:

1. Be able to explain why some thoughtful people have come to disbelieve in the existence of God.
2. Be able to identify the conversations in which an argument participates and be able to put your own arguments into scholarly conversations.
3. Be able to contribute to class discussion by asking clarifying questions and building on previous comments.
4. Be able to formulate and develop an argument.
5. Be able to incorporate peer and faculty comments in the revision process.
6. Be able to articulate how you could integrate college resources into your Gustavus education.

Reading:

Please purchase the following books at the Book Mark

Frederic, Harold. *The Damnation of Theron Ware*.

Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say, I Say*. Second Edition

Harris, Sam. *Letters to a Christian Nation*.

Lax, Eric. *Faith, Interrupted*.

Lundsford, Andrea A. *The Everyday Writer*. Fourth Edition

Other readings will be available on Moodle. You are responsible for the assigned reading. If you can't find a reading or are unclear about what you are required to read, ask **before** the reading is due. It is easier to ask for clarification than for forgiveness.

You must bring your assigned readings to class. Coming to class without your assigned texts is the same as coming to a music rehearsal without your score or an athletic practice without your equipment—it renders you unable to participate.

Academic Etiquette:

The following are good guides for any class you take in college. They enable you and your colleagues to focus on the task at hand. They indicate your seriousness to your colleagues and to your professors.

Repeated infractions of these rules of etiquette will result in a lowered grade as well as my lowered estimation of your seriousness as a student.

1. Arrive on time and do not pack up until class is over.
2. Turn off your cell phone, beeper, Blackberry and any other electronic devices that take your attention from our work together. If you bring these devices out during class, I will mark you absent.
3. Stay awake. If you are falling asleep in class owing to boredom, we need to talk about how to make the class more engaging for you. If you are falling asleep because you are not getting enough sleep, we need to talk about your schedule. Falling asleep in class is yet another way of indicating that you are not truly present and I will, accordingly, mark you absent for the day.
4. Engage in respectful dialogue. Respect does not mean that you cannot disagree. I assume you will disagree with me and with each other. Respectful dialogue focuses on understanding other people's positions (including the positions of the people we read) and treating those positions with the same respect with which we would want other people to treat our positions.
5. Drinking in class is fine; eating, unless you bring enough to share, is not.

I also encourage you to think about how your body language and facial expressions contribute to a comfortable classroom environment and to your own learning. Don't worry: I won't grade you on your smile. Still, think about what your body language conveys to your colleagues and professors. Do you convey interest? Boredom? The need to be getting more sleep? Sit up, make eye contact, and see how it changes your learning experience!

Assignments and Expectations:

1. Engaged Participation (15%): I expect you to come to class with the assigned reading and writing completed. Engaged participation means that you must bring your materials to class. Not having your class materials is like going to a football practice without your gear—you can't play. On the other hand, coming with your materials but not participating is like remembering your uniform and then standing on the sidelines. By "engaged" participation, I mean that you contribute thoughtfully, appropriately, and consistently in class. We will discuss what thoughtful,

appropriate, and consistent participation mean. I will give you periodic assessments on your participation. I will also ask you to self-evaluate participation.

Attendance is the most basic requirement of this or any course. You are allowed four absences without penalty. Every absence after the fourth will lower your final grade a third of a letter (an B becomes a B-). I do not differentiate between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. I strongly recommend that you save your absences for true emergencies. If you have an extended illness or family emergency, please let me know so that we can make other arrangements.

There will also be two required evening events. On September 11, you must attend the lecture by Wes Moore, our Reading in Common book author. Later in the semester we will have a movie night (TBD) that you must also attend. Missing either will count as one of your absences.

2. Short Writing Assignments (15%): Throughout the semester, you have short writing assignments (usually between a paragraph and two pages). They are listed in the syllabus. These assignments are designed to help you practice skills, work through texts, and prepare for longer papers. Most of these are due on Moodle by 12:30 p.m. (an hour before class). I will grade them on a check plus, check, check minus, minus system.

Although these are short assignments, they are still college writing assignments. You need to use proper grammar, spelling, and citations. For short writing assignments, you may use in-text citations. For such citations, put the name of the author and the page number in parentheses before final punctuation. For example:

While they note that starting a paper with the conversation is a good way to begin, they do note that there are other "powerful ways to begin" (Graff and Birkenstein 22).

Because these assignments will help guide our discussion the day they are due, they will not be accepted late. If you are going to miss class a day for which you have a short writing assignment, make certain that you turn it in before it is due.

3. Formal Writing Assignments (60% total): You will have three formal writing assignments in this course. Each writing assignment will take you through the process of formulating a thesis and constructing an argument. We will also be developing the habit of revising. Each assignment will include peer and professor review. You will then integrate those comments into your final draft. I will distribute detailed assignment sheets for the formal writing assignments in class. Briefly, the formal writing assignments are:

1. A 3-4 page paper responding to the question "should faith be among a college's values" (15%).
Draft Due on Moodle on September 22 by 12:30 p.m.
Final Draft Due on Moodle on October 6 by 12:30 p.m.
2. A 4-5 page paper on *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (20%).
Draft Due on Moodle on October 24 by 12:30 p.m.
Final Draft Due on Moodle on November 10 by 12:30 p.m.
3. A 7-8 page paper on Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* (25%).
Draft Due on Moodle on November 26 by 12:30 p.m.
Final Draft Due on Moodle on December 15 by 12:30 p.m.

All formal writing assignments must be typed, double-spaced and in 12 point Times New Roman font. You may have one to one and a quarter inch margins. A paper is “late” if it is turned in any time after its due date. A paper due at 12:30 p.m. is late at 12:31 p.m.. I take a third of a letter grade off for each day (including weekends) that a paper is late.

All formal writing assignments have a mandated process. Failure to turn in any part of the process on time will be deducted from your final grade. This includes peer review. If you do not *bring* your colleagues' papers to class with places that you have questions marked, the final grade for your paper will be reduced.

4. Oral Presentation (10%): Throughout the semester, each student will introduce a term related to an upcoming reading. These presentations must be 2 ½ to 3 minutes and will also have a small writing component. A handout will be given out in class related to these presentations.

Grading Scale:

What Grades Mean

A-range: Exceptionally strong work; a creative thesis, well-supported by evidence; insightful analysis; solid transitions; lucid prose; few, if any, problems with style, grammar or citations. "A" work shows sophistication far beyond the expectations for beginning college students. Such work is possible but it is also rare.

B-range: Thorough work; a strong thesis not adequately supported by evidence or an overly-broad thesis adequately supported by evidence; solid analysis; serviceable prose; some problems with style, grammar or citations. "B" work exceeds expectations for beginning college students. B work is work of which you should be proud!

C-range: Acceptable work; a broad thesis; a lack of evidence; reliance on generalizations rather than analysis; poor prose; poor grammar, style or citations. "C" work is the basic expectation for beginning college students.

D and F-range: Unacceptable work; fails to meet the requirements of the assignment.

Disability Services:

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) work together to ensure “reasonable accommodation” and non-discrimination for students with disabilities in higher education. If you have a physical, psychiatric/emotional, medical, learning or attentional disability that may have an effect on your ability to complete assigned course work, please contact Laurie Bickett, Disability Services Coordinator, in the Advising Center. She will review your concerns and decide with you what accommodations are necessary. I will be happy to work with, upon your request for accommodation and receipt of documentation from the Disability Services Coordinator.

Writing Center

I recommend taking advantage of our Writing Center. At the Writing Center, you'll work with a peer tutor one-on-one: you can talk frankly about your writing concerns and receive on-the-spot feedback. The Writing Center is not a proofreading service; rather, it is a peer teaching facility that helps you to clarify your thinking, structure your papers, develop evidence, hone your style, and practice self-editing skills. Call x6027 for hours and location, or long on to www.gustauvs.edu/writingcenter. You can make appointments online.

The Writing Center has on staff a part-time tutor with professional training in ELL and multilingual instruction. ELL and multilingual students can schedule work with this tutor, Andrew Grace by contacting him at agrace@gac.edu.

Academic Integrity

As Gustavus students, you have signed the following honor code: "As a community of scholars, the faculty and students of Gustavus Adolphus College have formulated an academic honesty policy and honor code system, which is printed in the Academic Bulletin and the Gustavus Guide. As a student at Gustavus Adolphus College I agree to uphold the honor code. This means that I will abide by the academic honesty policy, and abide by decisions of the joint student/faculty Honor Board."

Any instance of academic dishonesty in this class will result in a "0" for the assignment and will be reported to the Academic Dean. A second instance of academic dishonesty will result in failing the course.

Plagiarism is a common form of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism involves using someone else's words and/or ideas without giving that person credit. All of the following are examples of plagiarism:

1. Turning in another student's work as your own.
2. Cutting and pasting or copying any sections of text from another student's work, an internet source, or a published source into your work without marking that text as a quotation and citing it properly.
3. Using another author's words without attribution in the text, even if you list that author in a bibliography.
4. Changing only one or two words in a sentence that another author wrote, even if you footnote that author.

Claiming another person's words or ideas as your own (whether by omission or commission) constitutes both theft and lying. Remember that in college, your professors are not only concerned with your ability to find good information but also with your ability to think well. Cutting and pasting someone else's words tells us nothing about your ability to think and, in fact, indicates that you have decided not to. Changing one word in a sentence does not indicate whether you truly understand the information. Presenting yourself as someone who has birthed an idea or made information understandable when you have not is dishonest.

If you have questions about what you need to cite, how to summarize or how to quote, please ask me. Ignorance ("I didn't know that was plagiarism") is not a viable defense against a charge of plagiarism at the college level.

In my experience, most students commit plagiarism because they panic about an assignment. You can avoid the panic by working ahead and by asking for help. Remember: a bad grade or even a late assignment is better than committing an act that will result in (at a minimum) failing an assignment and starting a record of your academic dishonesty in the Associate Provost's Office.

Closing Note:

A final note. Please feel free to discuss any issues pertaining to this class or your adjustment to college, whether they are academic or personal with me or with Anna. We want to help you as you make the transition to college. We are also looking forward to getting to know each of you throughout the semester.