Syllabus

Religion 200: Faith, Doubt and Fanaticism

Room: 111 Hall of Languages  
Time: Tuesday and Thursday 9:30 – 10:50 AM

Instructor: Ronald R. Cavanagh  
E-mail: rrcavana@syr.edu  
Office: 431 Hall of Languages  
Office Hours: Tues. and Thurs. 11:00 AM – 1:00 PM  
Or by special appointment  
Telephone: 443-4903

Course Objective: To engage students in a contemporary, existential, introduction to the academic study of religion at the heart of the Humanities in conversation with the Natural and Social Sciences at University, through the critical consideration of religious and secular extremisms as perversions of the dynamics of faith.

Course Requirements:

Each student is responsible for:

(1) the critical reading and discussion of the following texts

Religion and Doubt, Richard E. Creel  
The End of Faith, Sam Harris  
God and the New Atheism, John F. Haught

Weekly Blackboard Listings

(2) prepared attendance and participation in all scheduled class sessions

(3) the legible writing/printing of three (3) scheduled take-home essay tests.  
What I cannot read will be given zero credit.
(4) the submission of an end of term paper summarizing a student’s own personal existential and critical responses to the questions: What is a human being and how might one best become one? and What is the relation of reason to faith and faith to morality? In constructing your responses you should draw upon ideas about the nature of faith and its perversions covered in the readings, lectures and discussions in the class.

**Attendance Policy:** It is expected that all students will attend all classes prepared for critical discussion. Students are expected to be in their seats at the beginning of class through to its conclusion. A student may miss without excuse two classes without penalty. Any additional unexcused absence will result in the reduction, by one +/- letter grade, of the student’s earned final grade for the course.

**Testing Policy:** All examinations will be essay in nature and given as take-home assignments. They must be turned in on time to be graded. Students with physical or learning disabilities requiring a modification of this expectation must secure and present to me documentation to that effect from the Office for Services for Students with Disabilities, 804 University Avenue, Room 309, ex-4498.

**Grading Policy:** The assessment of a student’s work will be weighted in the following manner: 35 % of the final grade for the quality of his or her cumulative classroom participation; 35 % of the final grade for the quality of the three in take-home essay examinations; and 30 % of the final grade for the quality of the end of term paper.

**Academic Integrity:** It is expected that any work submitted by a student is his or her own work. Representing the work of others as your own, even when it involves an inadvertent failure to cite sources (plagiarism), is cheating, a violation of academic integrity, and will be identified to the appropriate College officials for institutional action. There is no circumstance that justifies cheating or that can compensate you for the loss of your integrity.

**Class Etiquette:** It is expected that all class participants will display a disposition of courtesy and politeness in class interactions. To this end everyone will avoid cell phone interruptions (turn them off before class), late arrivals, early exits, using listening devices, doing e-mail, or other
inconsiderate acts. Politeness is essential to learning because it indicates that you are attending to what others are doing, saying and feeling.

CLASS READING, TESTING AND DISCUSSION SCHEDULE

Week I - Introduction to Religion 200 and the scholarly study of religion
August 31-September 2
Reading Assignment: Chapters 1-2, Religion and Doubt
Blackboard entries

Week II – Religion in Human Existence
September 7-9
Reading Assignment: Chapters 3 – 4, Religion and Doubt
Blackboard entries

Week III – The Commitment of Faith
September 14-16
Reading Assignment: Chapters 5-6, Religion and Doubt
Blackboard entries

Week IV – Commitment without Absolutes
September 21-23*
*NOTE: NO CLASS ON THE 23rd
Reading Assignment: Chapters 7-8, Religion and Doubt
Blackboard entries

Week V – Toward a Faith of Your Own
September 28-30
Reading Assignment: Conclusion, Religion and Doubt
Blackboard entries
First Examination: Take-Home Essay due in class 10/05/10

Week VI – What does it mean to have Faith?
October 5-7
Reading Assignment: Chapters 1-4, The End of Faith
Blackboard entries

Week VII – God and Islam
October 12-14
Reading Assignment: Chapters 5-6, The End of Faith
Blackboard entries

Week VIII – Life without Faith
October 19-21
Reading Assignment: Chapter 7-Epilogue, The End of Faith
Blackboard entries
Second Examination: Take-Home Essay due in class 10/26/10

Week IX – What’s new about Atheism?
October 26-28
Reading Assignment: Introduction-Chapter 1, God and the New Atheism
Blackboard entries

Week X - How atheistic is the New Atheism?
November 2-4
Reading Assignment: Chapter 2, God and the New Atheism
Blackboard entries

Week XI – Does it matter if God is a hypothesis?
November 9-11
Reading Assignment: Chapters 3-4, God and the New Atheism

Week XII – Why do people believe?
November 16-18
Reading Assignment: Chapter 5, God and the New Atheism
Blackboard entries

Week XIII – Can humans be good without God?
November 23
Reading Assignment: Chapter 6, God and the New Atheism
Blackboard entries

Week XIV – Is God Personal?
November 30-December 2
Reading Assignment: Chapter 8, God and the New Atheism
Blackboard entries

Week XV – A religious response to the New Atheism
December 7-9
Reading Assignment: Chapter 8, **God and the New Atheism**
*Third Examination*: Take-Home Essay Exam in class 12/09/10

**End of Term Paper** is due no later than the morning of Tuesday December 14th. This project will be, on average, about ten typed pages, providing a student’s personal existential and critical responses to the questions: What is a human being and how might one best become one? What is the relation of reason to faith and faith to morality? Please construct your responses drawing upon ideas about the nature of faith and its perversions, reason, morality and the human covered in the readings, lectures, and discussions in the class. Make sure that you critically discuss the nature and dynamics of faith and indicate how you respond to the challenge of secular atheism to religious expression.