Unbelief in Western Thought
Core Curriculum: Texts and Ideas
UA 400-070
Tues. & Thurs. 2-3:15
GCASL _C95

Instructor: John Guillory
Office Hours: Wed. 2-4, and by appointment
244 Greene St, Room 311
email: john.guillory@nyu.edu

Description of the Course:
For most of Western history, people have believed in gods or God. Not until the
nineteenth century was it socially or intellectually acceptable to express disbelief
publicly, as in the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s notorious assertion, “God is dead.”
Yet the acknowledgment of unbelief can be traced to the founding moments of Western
philosophy, most famously in the execution of Socrates by the Athenian state for
supposedly teaching atheism to his disciples. Socrates’s defense is recorded in Plato’s
dialogue, The Apology. Beginning with this text, we will examine what Nietzsche calls
the “shadow” of Western thought, the condition of unbelief. How and why have people
come to doubt the existence of gods or God? What kinds of arguments have thinkers
made in defense of unbelief? Can human society exist without religious belief? Or is it
ture, as a character declares in Dostoevsky’s novel, The Brothers Karamozov, that
“without God, everything is permitted”? In this course, we will try to shine some light
into the long shadow of unbelief in the Western tradition, examining arguments both for
and against the existence of God, as well as moments in literature and philosophy where
the condition of unbelief is explored.

Requirements:
There will be one mid-term quiz and a final exam in this course. You will be required to
write three papers, with instructions to follow. Written assignments will be based on a list
of prompts.

Classroom decorum:
1) Attendance is mandatory in all lecture and section meetings. Attendance will be
taken in all lecture and section meetings. Absences without excuse will affect
determination of your final grade.

2) You must bring the text, notebook, and pen or pencil to every class. Your
recolletion and comprehension of the readings will greatly depend on your taking
good notes during lecture and recitation sections.

3) All COMPUTERS, TABLETS, and CELL PHONES must be turned off and put
away during lectures and recitation meetings.
4) There will be a 3 to 4 minute break about 40 to 45 minutes into every lecture. Please plan to use the restroom either before class, at the break, or after class is over. **Do not leave the room during lecture, except in the event of illness.**

**Grading:**
Papers and exercises will count for 60% of final grade, quiz and exam for 30%, participation in discussion 10%. Attendance will be accounted separately in assessing the final grade.

**Required Texts (available in bookstore):**
Augustine, *City of God* (Penguin Classics)
Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (Oxford World’s Classics)
Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Simon and Schuster)
Pascal, *Pensées* (Oxford World’s Classics)
Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Oxford World’s Classics)

**Note:** Other assigned works will be provided in the form of PDFs or website URLs. All books are inexpensive editions. If you have difficulty purchasing books for the class, please contact me.

**SYLLABUS**

**September**

**Tues. 4:** Introduction  
**Thurs. 6:** Plato, *Apology*

**Tues. 11:** Plato concluded; Xenophon, *Apology*  
**Thurs. 13:** Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Books 1, 2, 3

**Tues. 18:** Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book 5  
**Thurs. 20:** Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1, chapters 1-7, 29; Book 2, chapters 3-16, 29; Book 3, chapters 1-2, 31; Book 4, chapters 25, 26, 27, 31

**Tues. 25:** Augustine, *City of God*, Book 5, chapters 9, 10; Book 6, all chapters; Book 7, chapters 6, 9, 17, 18, 30; Book 8, chapter 3.  
**Thurs 27:** Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (pages TBA)
October

**Tues. 2:** Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*
**Thurs. 4:** Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

**Tues. 9:** October recess--no class
**Thurs. 11:** Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

**Tues. 16:** Mid-Term Quiz
**Thurs. 18:** Shakespeare, *King Lear*

**Tues. 23:** Shakespeare, *King Lear*


November

**Thurs. 1:** Pascal concluded

**Tues. 6:** no class

**Thurs. 15:** Dostoevsky, selection from *The Brothers Karamozov* (pages TBA)

**Tues. 20:** Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*
**Thurs. 22:** Thanksgiving holiday

**Tues. 27:** Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Book 1; selection from *The Gay Science* (pages TBA)
**Thurs. 29:** Nietzsche concluded
December

**Tues. 4:** Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*
**Thurs. 6:** Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*

**Tues 11:** Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
**Thurs. 13:** Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*