This seminar takes up an extended history of atheism and doubt (in the context of a history of religion). It begins with a consideration of anthropology, the Hebrews, and India before discussing the skeptics and the development of disbelief in ancient Greece and Rome. The course then follows the uneven progress of this idea and its consequences in continental Europe during the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Romantic period, and in 19th-century England and America, where disbelief was often allied with radical politics. Finally, we move on to the connections between disbelief and realism, modernism and postmodernism. The main arguments for and against the existence of God are considered. However, the main purpose of this course is to force students to confront and grapple with some of the most sophisticated and profound human expressions of disbelief.

“Come no chimeras! Let us go abroad; let us mix in affairs; let us learn and get and have and climb….Let us have to do with real men and women, and not with skipping ghosts.”

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

“If God is dead, everything is permitted.”

-- Fyodor Dostoevsky

“The deepest, the only theme of human history, compared to which all others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of skepticism with faith.”

-- Goethe

“Questioning is the piety of thought.”

-- Martin Heidegger


Readings: Genesis, Exodus, Ecclesiastes_______________________.
Sâmañña-Phala Sutta_______________________.

Sâmañña-Phala Sutta:

_Reading:_ Cicero_______________________.

Reading response to Cicero due.


_Reading:_ The Gospel According to Matthew_______________________


_Readings:_ Greenblatt_______________________.

Selections from the Letters of Heloise and Abelard_______________________.

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/abelard-histcal.html
(Abelard’s History of My Calamities – read Foreword and Chapters I, II, V, VI, VII and VIII)

http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/heloise.html
(abridged version of Heloise’s first letter back to Abelard after reading his “History of My Calamities"


Galileo – LINK BAD:
http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/galileo/dialogue2.html

NEW LINK: Galileo – 2ND DAY ONLY
http://www.webexhibits.org/calendars/year-text-Galileo.html

Gould:
http://www.stephenjaygould.org/library/gould_noma.html

Reading: “Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier.”

Meslier:  
http://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/meslier/1729/testament.htm


Reading: Hume_______________________.

Reading response to Hume due.


Mill:  
http://www.bartleby.com/130/2.html

Huxley:  
http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/CE5/Agn.html

April 5. Religion and morality.

Reading: Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor," from The Brothers Karamazov_______________________.


Reading: Nietzsche_______________________.
Reading response to Nietzsche due: what does he say about the consequences of the "death of God."


Reading: Woolf_______________________.

April 26.  Creative project on the question of the existence of the gods due.


Readings: Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism” ______________________; Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” ______________________

Sartre:
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm

Camus:
http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/00/pwillen1/lit/msysip.htm

Books
Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods
David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion
Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science
Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Assignments

** In-class reading responses (one paragraph essays, given without warning)
** Home reading responses. Three assigned, plus one, on a week’s readings, of your own choosing. Due at beginning of class. Two pages each.

** Biographical report (for informal presentation in class; notes collected)

** Creative project on the question of the existence of the gods. Again, could be an essay, dialogue, poem, short story, video, audio or collage. But the standard here – with Cicero, Meslier, Hume, Huxley, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Woolf, Camus among the models – will be higher: this project should contribute to the philosophical discussion of belief and disbelief. Must reflect understanding of class themes. Twelve pages or the equivalent.

No late assignments will be accepted!

Grades

Based on creative project (35% of grade), class participation (20%, based on comments or answers to professor’s queries), in-class reading responses (25%) and home reading responses (15%) and biographical reports (5%).

Professor

Office hour: Tuesdays 11:15 to 12:15, or by appointment, or usually before class or after class.
Office: 20 Cooper Square, room 706.
Email: mitch.stephens@nyu.edu
Telephone: office -- 212-998-3792; cell -- 201-410-9632 (between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m.).