

Difficult Dialogues concerning Religious Beliefs (CLWR 221)  
Course Description, Winter 2008-9

Faculty and Staff for this class

Lead Faculty:

Steve Hays (Instructor of record); Ellis 210C; 597-2105 (office); 448-4202 (home); [hays@ohio.edu](mailto:hays@ohio.edu).

Office Hours: 8-10 TTh. If that isn't convenient, email me and we'll arrange a good time for you.

Discussion Leaders:

Al Lent (Philosophy); Sally Weekly (Philosophy and Psychology); Matthew Ozea.

Grader: Sally Weekly (Philosophy and Psychology).

Technical assistant: Matthew Ozea.

Logistics for this class

Place and Time: MW 3:10-5:00, South Pole, Nelson Commons.

Syllabus (list of assignments):

online via Blackboard. I may tweak the syllabus at various times during the quarter. I will notify you via Blackboard announcements when the syllabus has been updated. If you want to know how much work is required for this course, you should give careful attention to the syllabus.

Workload expectations:

The standard expectation for university courses is 2 hours of study out of class for each hour in class. I think that is approximately what you should expect for this course: 4 hours of intense study for each two-hour class. Some weeks the reading load will be a bit more; some weeks, less. I advise you to look ahead a week or two to get a sense of how much time you will need to commit. You should, of course, anticipate several additional hours of preparation for major exams.

Textbooks to purchase

Required Texts available at Little Professor:

*The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins

*Plato: Complete Works*, John Cooper

*Surprised By Joy*, C.S. Lewis

*The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis

Many additional required readings will be provided online.

Required Technology

Clickers:

You will need to obtain a student response device ("clicker")—a little device rather like a TV remote. These devices will be available beginning the week before classes in the technology store (Baker Center 112) for \$32. My impression is that you can sell your clicker back to the store at the end of the quarter if you won't need it for future courses.

*You will need to bring your personal clicker to class every day. Attendance is calculated from clicker responses. If you forget your clicker, you will be counted absent.*

Videotaping notice: Some classes may be videotaped. If there is some reason that you are unwilling to be videotaped, you should drop this class.

Grades

Online quizzes: 20%

Portfolio of reflective essays: 30%

Midterm exam: 25%

Final exam: 25%

Absences: You can miss 2 hours (1 class) without penalty. We will try to take attendance both at the beginning and the end of each class. Absences beyond that limit will be penalized at the rate of 1 percentage point per hour (2 per class).

Academic dishonesty of any sort will result in a grade of 0% on the assignment and referral to the University judiciaries.

In general, you can expect good grades based on effort from your portfolios—assuming that you make a demonstrably good effort. Quizzes are open-book, and many will include extra-credit possibilities. So, if you read well and carefully, you should be able to obtain a good cumulative quiz score. Major exams are real exams, and grades will probably reflect your general academic skills, preparation, and discipline. If you have weak reading comprehension skills or if you don't prepare carefully, you probably won't do well on the exams.

I expect many students to get A's or B's, but some students will get C's, some D's, some F's. Some of you are smarter than others. Some of you are better prepared than others. Some of you will work harder than others. Some of you will be luckier or healthier than others. That's simply the reality of university grading.

I would like to make a realistic (but probably futile) plea for you to keep your eye on the real goal—learning and understanding. Far too many students seem to arrive in university classes with a sense of entitlement or desperation: *I worked hard (by my own measure), and therefore I deserve an A or a B*; or, *I've got to get an A or B or my scholarship is in jeopardy*. The *I deserve it* argument is absurd and self-indulgent. Grow up. The *I've got to keep my scholarship* argument may be true (though regrettable), but you can't really expect a professor to give you a higher grade than you earn. Every year students enthusiastically participate in readings and discussions *until* they get their grades from the midterm exam. Then, many of them turn sullen—*shocked, shocked I tell you* by the very idea that an exam would determine that they were not as smart or accomplished as they would like to imagine. And so, a certain number of students complete the course with minds and attitudes poisoned by resentment. I challenge all of you to keep your eyes on the real value of the course—learning and understanding—and not to allow unreasonable or self-indulgent expectations for a grade to poison your experience of the course. Taking grades too seriously is perverse and stupid. Work hard and try to get good grades, but don't let your concern for grades deprive you of the real benefits of education.

## Course Content

### Rationale:

This is one of two Difficult Dialogues courses offered by the Department of Classics and World Religions to encourage thoughtful and productive discussion of historically contentious topics. Discussions concerning religious beliefs have often devolved into disputes, which have divided families, sundered friendships, and even fueled wars. To avoid such disputes, many people try to ignore religious topics by claiming that they are merely a matter of personal taste: There is no need for serious arguments as to whether vanilla or chocolate ice cream is better; so, why should we fuss about religious beliefs? Pragmatically, this sort of trivializing of theological claims is not useful over the long term, and as a matter of intellectual principle, there is something both dishonest and needlessly cynical about it.

Within the Academy there is a long tradition of vigorous and productive discussion of religious ideas. This class is designed to help you join that tradition, which should benefit you and your communities for decades to come. You have probably already realized that (contrary to some popular notions) good, productive, respectful, enlightening dialogues are not always "accepting," non-confrontational, or politically correct. Productive dialogue in the sciences requires participants who, precisely because they really care about the topic under discussion, subject their own ideas and those of others to rigorous scrutiny so as to move towards truer conclusions. Similar rigorous scrutiny is required in discussions of religious beliefs.

Please notice that the title of this course is *not* "Survey of Religious Beliefs," or "Survey of World Religions," but "Difficult Dialogues concerning Religious Beliefs." This course will *not* introduce you to the beliefs of the various world religions. Instead, it is designed to encourage "difficult dialogues"—to guide you into the intellectually and personally difficult task of thinking, listening, and talking honestly and critically about religious beliefs.

Dialogues get difficult only when they concern ideas that are important to the people in the discussion. No doubt we could have some very *interesting* discussions about the beliefs of exotic South Sea Island tribes, but that discussion would not become personally challenging (difficult) until someone who held to those beliefs entered the discussion. Whether you realize it or not, almost all your religious notions have been heavily influenced by the teachings of Western philosophy and literature and the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). If you do believe in God, your conception of God has almost certainly been shaped by these intellectual sources. If you don't believe in God, your conception of the God you don't believe in has almost certainly been shaped by these traditions—and, by modern science.

This is a humanities course (as opposed to a course in the natural or social sciences). Our concern is with *beliefs*: *ideas* that people believe. This course is not concerned with social structures, power structures, or questions of mechanical causation (science) except as they may relate to *beliefs*. We will, for example, try to understand what serious thinkers might have had in mind when they spoke of *God, soul, judgment, sin, or purpose*. And, we will try to figure out whether or not we find their thinking valuable or persuasive. We will not all come to the same conclusions, of course, but we will all try to be rigorous and honest in assessing the strengths and the weaknesses both of our own and others' ideas.

Most of the readings for this course are drawn from a few smart authors who disagree profoundly on foundational religious questions: the contemporary atheist Richard Dawkins; the mid-20th-century Christian apologist C.S. Lewis; and the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. We won't use these writers as authorities who will tell us the right answers, but as guides to help us identify important issues and the complexities they involve.

I have chosen these particular authors because they contribute the kind of thinking that I have found most helpful in my own internal dialogues.

I chose to use these few authors rather than fabricating an anthology of very short readings from many authors of widely differing traditions and views for two reasons. First, because I'm not trained as a comparativist and simply have not encountered the brilliant writers I assume are available in the many religious traditions I am unfamiliar with. Perhaps, as this course proceeds, people will acquaint me with such writers and I will include them in future reading lists. Second, reading several chapters or essays by each author helps to get us more deeply into their ways of thinking and so helps acquaint us not merely with the factual content of their writing, but also with the more subtle "habits of heart and mind" that help us understand how and why they believe as they believe. The point, again, is not to make us experts in Dawkins, Lewis, or Plato, but to give us the experience of understanding how a few great thinkers think.

#### Procedural plan:

- In preparation for each class, you will read some texts and take an online quiz (via Blackboard). These quizzes *should* be completed by 10 a.m. on the day the assignment is due so that we can reset the quiz if you have problems. The quizzes *must* be begun before 2:00 on the day they are due. They will disappear from the site at 2:00. You are welcome to consult your books and readings as you take the quizzes, but accepting information of any sort (questions or answers) about the quiz from anyone else constitutes cheating.
- In the typical class meeting, I will lead the first hour as lecture/large-group discussion. During the second hour you will carry the ball in small-group dialogues.
- After each class you will write a 1-2 page reflective essay. You will submit these assignments through Blackboard. (More specific instructions are found in Blackboard > Assignments > Portfolios.) Save

electronic copies of your portfolios in an orderly fashion. They will comprise a journal of your thinking throughout the quarter.

- In addition, I call your attention to the Difficult Dialogues website ([www.ohiodialogues.org](http://www.ohiodialogues.org)). I hope that students and faculty will use the various kinds of communication there to share questions, ideas, etc.

Learning Objectives: This course is designed to encourage you

- to learn the skill of careful, honest, accurate reading/listening. This skill involves accurately reporting (like a good journalist) the ideas and reasoning presented in the required readings and in discussions in class. This skill often requires asking clarifying questions, using dictionaries, and trying to penetrate beneath the surface of vocabulary and strange ideas in an attempt to understand what the other person is saying and thinking.
- to develop the skill of consciously distinguishing your responses to the psychology or personality of the speaker/writer from the merits of the ideas s/he espouses. This skill precludes you from prejudging, approving, or dismissing someone else's idea because you like or dislike the person or his hair or shoes.
- to develop the skill of rising above habituated response or partisan bias in assessing the value and wisdom of ideas. This skill involves a willingness to oppose comfortable ideas held dear by people you identify with if you conclude that those ideas are defective. It also involves a willingness to speak in support of ideas held by people you do not identify with if you conclude that their ideas are right.
- to develop the skill of consciously distinguishing good thinking or wisdom from comfortable, trendy, "modern" thinking. This skill involves the recognition that all ideas were "modern" when they were, well, modern, but in time all ideas become "old": "Modern" and "old" are not equivalent to "true" and "false."
- to personally grapple with fundamental questions of the meaning and value of human life. This personal intellectual struggle involves a healthy confidence in your own thinking and judgment. It may involve confronting some very unsettling (perhaps even terrifying) ideas, but intellectual honesty requires that we face such ideas, and we probably turn out to be better people by following what we believe is true than by following what we know is easy.