Secularisms and Atheisms

Professor: Dr. Andrew Joseph Pegoda  
Email: ajpegoda@central.uh.edu  
Office: Agnes Arnold Hall 624  
Hours: M/W 12-3:45; Tu/Th 11-11:15; and by appt.

Class: RELS 3396 Sec #25633;  
HIST 3394 Sec #28210;  
WGSS, WOST, GLBT—by petition  
Time: Tu/Th 4:00-5:20  
Location: Agnes Arnold Hall 304

America’s Changing Religious Landscape

Data: GSS 1972-2018

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1 This syllabus is tentative. Dr. Pegoda reserves the right to change any part of the course requirements, policies, deadlines, topics, etc. Students are responsible for keeping track of changes. Exceptions to policies detained in this syllabus are not provided for students who add the class late. I go by “Dr. Pegoda,” “Professor Pegoda,” or “Professor.” “Mr. Pegoda” is always unacceptable. Please read the following, if interested, for information on why professors use such titles: https://DrAJP.com/2017/03/04/11-reasons-why-i-go-by-dr-pegoda-in-the-classroom-and-professionally-depending-on-the-circumstances/

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Welcome

Please note that I care about you. Everything in this course is designed to help you learn. You can trust me to have your best interests at heart. If you attend class, start early and plan, read the required readings, participate in discussions, communicate with me, study actively and deeply, follow the instructions, and demonstrate critical thinking, for example, you will have no problem earning a high grade. Students who make good-faith efforts to complete course assessments and who participate and learn are (almost) guaranteed to pass the class. This course is challenging, but manageable and rewarding, if you apply yourself. You are paying thousands for your education, take advantage of any advice, feedback, and perspectives provided or desired.

Communication is vital especially when struggling or when life happens. You are more than welcome to visit with me during office hours or as time allows, before/after class. You are also welcome to email me to discuss individual/private matters or to send a draft of minor or major assessments. But, please do not email to ask for extra credit, to explain one absence, or to ask a general question that can quickly be answered by posting in the class online chat, by asking in class, by looking at the syllabus, or by looking at Blackboard Announcements. For emails, include your full name and class/section in the body of messages. Emails will be answered within 48 hours (excluding weekends and holidays)—if you have not received a reply within that amount of time, please resend. You are also welcomed to follow me on Twitter, Facebook, Wordpress, etc. If you receive a personal email from me, a prompt reply is appreciated.

Course Description

The United States promotes itself as a seemingly unified Christian nation, even something of a theocracy. Popular rhetoric frequently and regularly suggests that “everyone” is a Christian and the few who are not, lack morality or lack wisdom and are doomed to an eternity of suffering. From evidence, however, we know that there have always been people in the United States and in other nations who were religious “nones” (or who have followed religions other than Christianity), and the number of religions “nones” has been growing in all so-called most industrialized nations. There have also regularly been voices calling for strict divides between State and Church. Secularism and Atheisms is an upper-level, interdisciplinary discussion-based seminar focuses on the United States and explores such “heathens”—“heathens” toward proper, patriotic, civil religion toward the United States, “heathens” toward the dominate theism in the United States.

We will ask: Why are a growing number of people “nones”? What are the beliefs and experiences of such “nones”? What do some people convert to a “none” position? Why do some people convert from a “none” position? Why does society fear “nones”? How do intersectionalities and positionalities factor in, especially those related to sex/gender and sexuality? What is the difference between agnosticism, atheism, secularism, humanism, and what are the historical, philosophical, and religious foundations? What happens when Church is further separated from State?

In general, this course is not designed to discuss the specific merits of any theisms or atheisms per se but to historicize, which is to say, examine how and why people and institutions have believed and behaved as they have. However, we will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various philosophical and political positions in assigned texts. Please keep in mind that all students are welcome. Students of any belief or no belief system will do well in this class provided they commit to understanding and discussing the ideas articulated in this syllabus, as well as their own ideas, and doing the required work.
Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

This course is designed for students seeking major, minor, or elective credit in Religious Studies; in History; in Women’s, Gender, Sexuality Studies; in Women’s Studies, or in GLBT Studies. (WGSS, WOST, and GLBT majors/minors must speak with Dr. Pegoda and make plans to complete a petition.) Because this is an upper-level course, students will delve into a narrower field of study than introductory courses. As such, this course fosters students’ understandings of world belief systems, their primary texts, and their influence on human behavior and affairs; understandings of scholarly secondary texts; understandings of human agency; understandings of human institutions, organizations, and interactions; and understandings of socially constructed identities and the study of such, especially in terms of intersectionality and positionality, of gender and sexuality, and of privilege and oppression. Students will attain—through lectures, discussions, and primary and secondary texts (e.g., fiction and nonfiction, alphabetic and non-alphabetic)—and demonstrate—through a variety of creative, oral, written assessments—knowledge about secularisms and atheisms and all of the related institutions, issues, peoples, traditions, and texts. This course is designed to provide students opportunities to enhance their comprehension abilities, their communication abilities, and their multi-cultural critical thinking abilities.

More specifically, by the end of the semester, students will have honed the ability to:

- write polished, original prose with appropriate analysis, creativity, and/or synthesis;
- read, critique, and discuss primary and secondary texts, while identifying relevant arguments and sub-arguments, as well as supporting evidence;
- understand the role of secularisms and atheisms for individuals and institutions;
- understand/analyze and discuss the intersections of citizenship, class, race, religion, sex/gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability and their function in a multicultural, global society, as well as representations of such;
- understand and discuss the importance of supporting/making statements (whether fact, opinion/subjective, or relative) backed by evidence; how time, place, and point-of-view result in numerous (and valid) perspectives; and the skill of asking complex, yet thoughtful—even unanswerable—questions and the value of “it depends” responses; and
- understand/appreciate and discuss “the learning worth crying about” (Dr. Wesch); the role of failure in learning (Professor Tuttle); the decision of “becoming an active owner of your education” (Dr. Diaz de Sábatès); and the “the emotional demands of college” (Dr. Pegoda).

Assigned Texts and Supplies

- Melanie Brewster, ed., *Atheists in America*
- Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of American’s Nones*
- Susan Jacoby, *Freetinkers: History of American Secularism*
- Jay Wexler, *Our Non-Christian Nation: How Atheists, Satanists, Pagans, and Others Are Demanding Their Rightful Place in Public Life*
- Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*
- Readings Posted in BB
- **Supplies:** regular white notebook paper; a spiral notebook; blue/black pens (no pencil or other colors); and a laptop computer, iPad, or similar device for in-class responses (students can check a

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laptop out at the UH M.D. Anderson Library, if needed) – these are needed every class. Students should also use Dropbox, OneDrive, GoogleDrive, or a similar service for backups—students who use such will never have to worry about computers dying or eating files.

### Selected Recommended Texts

- **The Curious Atheist** (formerly *The Closet Atheist*), [https://thecuriousatheist.blog](https://thecuriousatheist.blog)
- James Fieser, et al., eds., *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online resource)
- Freedom From Religion Foundation, [https://ffrf.org](https://ffrf.org)
- Andrew Joseph Pegoda, ed., *Deep Learning and Critical Thinking* (provided free in Blackboard)

### Course Requirements

1. **Time and Dedication:** For full semester courses, students should be prepared to devote an average of 6-9 hours outside-of-class **per week** to **reading**, **writing**, **researching**, and **thinking**. (An hour per day!)

2. **Reading:** Students are expected to ‘read’ texts **before** the class for which they are assigned, and they are expected to bring a hard copy of readings to class or have access on a laptop or tablet. Films and episodes are available on Amazon, Netflix, and/or at various online retailers, often for free with various “free trials.” All required texts are on reserve at the UH M.D. Anderson Library, too. Students might have additional reading for research projects.

3. **Attendance:** Being “present” counts as: arriving on time and remaining the entire period; coming prepared with copies of assigned readings; access to paper and blue or black pens, etc; actively taking notes; behaving appropriately; having informed contributions; and completing miscellaneous in-class work with satisfactory performance; etc. There are no “excused absences.” Students who accumulate **FOUR or more** absences must meet with Dr. Pegoda during office hours in order to avoid automatic course failure. Except for ongoing situations, students do not need to email if they will miss one class. Students who arrive late should enter quietly and sit need the door to minimize disruption. On occasion, please feel free to bring a child with you, if that is the only way attending class that day is possible. If you are contagious, please do not come to class or to office hours! Students with concerns should ask.

4. **Behavior:** Students are always responsible for knowing and following common sense. Disruptive students will be instructed to leave class. Text-messaging, surfing the Web, answering phones, talking out of turn, and other such behaviors that impede learning are prohibited. Use of any tobacco anywhere on University of Houston System property—including classrooms, parking lots, sidewalks—is absolutely prohibited—including dipping and vaping products. Students who, in Dr. Pegoda’s classroom, violate the no tobacco policy will be withdrawn and will face disciplinary actions. Students are, of course, welcome to bring drinks and snacks to class, as well as use technology to enhance the learning process.

5. **Participation:** This is almost entirely a discussion-based course. Students must come prepared to participate every class—participation is more than “talking” and doesn’t necessarily require talking often. Discussion will be class-wide and in small groups.
6. **Graded Work**: Small assessments—one turn being discussion leader, two presentations, and miscellaneous in-class work. Major assessments—one paper (4-5 pages), one research project, and one timed final exam. Specifics are in Blackboard.

Unless otherwise announced due dates for out-of-class work are always 11:59 PM CST on the specified day. Work is only “submitted” when submitted to the appropriate Blackboard dropbox and in the appropriate format. Please note that late work/makeup work is not allowed for any assessments, whether in-class or out-of-class. Start early. Exceptions to the no late work policy can be considered, especially prior to deadlines, for major assessments.

All assessments must show incremental understandings of course concepts. Likewise, when reviewing graded work, students should apply any comment in any specific place to the entire assessment and to all future assessments. All assessments must use sentences and normative capitalization, punctuation, grammar; although, spelling and grammar does not count on in-class assessments, provided the ideas can be understood. Out-of-class assessments must follow formality and “correctness,” as discussed in “Guide to Writing in Dr. Pegoda’s Classes.”

7. **Blackboard**: Familiarity with Blackboard is vital, as Dr. Pegoda will use it for posting announcements (such will be delivered to a student’s email address on file with the University and will be archived in Blackboard), assessments, grades, handouts, and texts. Students will complete some assessments within Blackboard during class. Do not use the Blackboard App. Technical problems should be reported to the HelpDesk, not Dr. Pegoda. Technological issues will not result in exceptions to the aforementioned no late policy.

8. **GroupMe**: Students should enroll in the course GroupMe chat, which can be accessed through the app or the website. Students should use this for asking/answering general questions, seeking clarification on a concept, sharing interesting articles/videos/etc., or (if desired) letting us know about being late/absent. Students are supposed to abide by all standards of collegiality and should avoid attacking, bullying, or trolling others. The GroupMe, ideally, will extend class beyond the four walls of the classroom.

9. **Academic Integrity**: Students at institutions of higher learning must abide by the absolute highest standards of academic honesty. Any form of cheating or plagiarism—or the appearance of such—violate Dr. Pegoda’s and the University of Houston’s policies. Violations usually result in an automatic, irreversible “F” for the class and a report with Academic Affairs. For extended specifics, see the University of Houston Student Handbook and the handout, “Guide to Writing in Dr. Pegoda’s Classes,” especially the course academic honesty pledge. All such policies will be strictly enforced. Students who complete their own work, who clearly acknowledge the origin of all information, who follow all instructions, who ask questions, and who visit with Dr. Pegoda when needed will have nothing to worry about. This also means don’t manipulate fonts/margins, don’t recycle papers, don’t buy

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3 Any writing students complete in this class is fair game for later class discussions or examples, this semester or in another semester—student anonymity will be maintained.

4 Occasional opportunities for extra credit are typically offered. Students can also receive extra credit for attending relevant events on campus and writing an appropriate response within three days. Only students who complete course requirements are eligible. Students with any academic dishonesty violations or who have excessive absences (four or more) have any earned extra credit voided.
papers, don’t get help from other people, don’t upload or sell your paper, etc. This course uses plagiarism detection software and other resources to ensure academic integrity.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Weighted Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Leader</td>
<td>As assigned</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show and Tell Presentation</td>
<td>As assigned</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monograph Paper</td>
<td>October 11</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges Project</td>
<td>November 11</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges Project Presentation</td>
<td>November 12-21</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semester Exam</td>
<td>November 26</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>P/F &amp; +/- to overall grade</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Students will not receive “number grades.” Given our system, grading symbols have approximate numerical values. Students are always encouraged to ask clear, specific questions about grades but only after 24 hours upon seeing any grade or feedback and only with the understanding that grades are not up for negotiation. Conversations, ideally face-to-face, will focus on future improvement.

### Grading Symbol Approximations

#### For major assessments:
- A+, 97
- A, 95
- A-, 92
- B+, 87
- B, 85
- B-, 82
- C+, 77
- C, 75
- C-, 70
- D+, 67
- D, 65
- D-, 60

#### For small assessments:
- +, 98
- √+, 93
- √, 85
- √-, 73
- - , 60

#### For all work:
- NHI = Not Handed In = 0%
- 0-59, F

### Class Grading Scale

Each student’s overall performance and improvement are manually reviewed before issuing a semester grade. Students who request/demand that they be “given” a higher grade, will have their semester grade lowered by five points.

- 90-92, A-
- 93-100, A
- 80-82, B-
- 83-86, B
- 87-89, B+
- 70-72, C-
- 73-76, C
- 77-79, C+
- 60-62, D-
- 63-66, D
- 67-69, D+

Below 60, academic dishonesty, excessive absences, or failure to complete at least 60% of “small assessments” or any “major assessment,” F.

**Incompletes** are only considered when students have extreme and documented emergencies at the end of the semester, have been passing, and are unable to complete the course for reasons beyond their control.

**Withdrawals** are possible prior to deadlines. Students should always speak with Dr. Pegoda before dropping. The Texas Legislature says that undergraduates may only drop six classes their entire career. Students with emergency situations may also have options, for example, with a Medical Withdrawal, which does not count toward the six. For information, contact provost@uh.edu.
**Accommodations**

In compliance with federal policy, the Center for Students with DisABILITIES (CSD) provides “reasonable and necessary” accommodations for qualified students. Students who want to know more about should visit the CSD (Building #568), 713.743.5400 (voice), 713.749.1527 (TTY), or www.uh.edu/csd.

Specifically, as a queer, crip, feminist educator, Dr. Pegoda is committed to creating equitable opportunities and will attempt to provide reasonable academic accommodations to students who request and require them. Students must first register with the CSD and then present documentation during the first week of class or as soon as a disability arises. Students are responsible for providing paperwork and handling communication between the professor and the CSD, as well as reminding the professor about accommodations.

However, Dr. Pegoda encourages all students to communicate about any difficulties. Granting extra time on an out-of-class assessment before the deadline is usually possible. Most “accommodations” can be made easily. Dr. Pegoda also understands that the Medical Industrial Complex and the flawed “Medical Model of Disability” do not always make healthcare accessible or comfortable and can frequently find ways to help.

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**Important Notes About Course Content**

All course texts have educational merits, which might include it doing something well, bad, new, or different. There should be no implied or assumed agreement between any text and Dr. Pegoda.

We will consistently discuss ableism, ageism, classism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, racism, and sexism, as well as rape and suicide. Class content may include offensive content, language, or nudity. “Trigger warnings,” per se, will not be provided, as they make assumptions about what will or will not “trigger” those for whom such disclaimers are intended to consider. Students who are triggered by certain content should discuss this with Dr. Pegoda. Always operate under the expectation that disclaimer/trigger warnings are always in effect. And on this note, any member of the class may use the “safe word”—“pineapple”—at anytime, if the conversation is legitimately getting entirely too intense and too much for them or if they are feeling too marginalized. Stepping outside for a few minutes is perfectly fine, too. Our reactions to such taboo and explicit content will vary by age, experience, interest, and other such intersectionalities and will provoke anger or disgust or curiosity or sadness and other feelings. Discussing these feelings (and learning from them) in a respectful, open-minded way is vital.

Students should also remember that they will further and further understand and appreciate course content, as well as the methods and theories with which scholars study and share knowledge, as they continue to learn, discover, research, and internalize academic knowledge. In our collective space, a “brave space,” not a “safe space,” we will be sometimes be challenged and a tad uncomfortable while learning from each other. Because of the aforementioned and the personal nature of our conversations, any audio or video recordings of class sessions by students are prohibited.
Gender and Violence

The University of Houston System is very concerned about any type of violence—including harassment or stalking in-person or online, hazing, or rape—that might have occurred to or between members of the University community. Title IX requires that faculty who become aware of students who have experienced any such form of sexual harassment, sexual assault, or relationship violence report such information to the AVC/VP of Equal Opportunity Services, Ms. Toni Sanchez Benoit. Students with questions about this may speak with Dr. Pegoda. They may also speak with Ms. Benoit at 713.743.8835 or at eos@uh.edu. The Women and Gender Resource Center’s Ms. Ashely Griffin is a confidential resource and can be reached at 713.743.1076 or at agriffin3@uh.edu.

Counseling and Psychological Services & Basic Needs Statement

CAPS can help students with managing stress, adjusting to college, or feeling happier. Students may reach CAPS by visiting www.uh.edu/caps or by calling 713.743.5454 during and after business hours for routine appointments or if they or someone they know is in crisis. No appointments are necessary for the “Let’s Talk” program: a drop-in consultation service at locations around campus.

In addition, the following information might be useful: UHPD/Emergency Number 713.743.3333 (students are advised NOT to call 911 while on campus—instead call the UHPD—the response will be quicker); Student Health Center 713.743.5151; LGBTQ Resource Center 832.843.6191; Center for Diversity and Inclusion 713.743.6047; Cougars in Recovery 713.743.5862; UH Wellness 713.743.5430; Dean of Students 832.842.6183; Trevor Lifeline 866.488.7386 or http://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/get-help-now. If students would like to “talk” with someone but would prefer to text, visit: https://www.crisistextline.org/texting-in.

Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students at 832.842.6183. Furthermore, students are encouraged to notify the professor, if comfortable. Students who find themselves in an emergency financial situation might have the option of borrowing $500 from the Dean of Student’s office with interest at a rate of 1% per month. All students in need of food may visit the free on-campus food pantry in Farish Hall 128.

The Writing Center and Other Support Services

The University of Houston Writing Center provides individual consultations for students working on all types of writing. Whether it is the first semester or the last, meeting with an expert student writer can provide another perspective on papers or projects and in navigating the writing process from brainstorming to perfecting a final draft and any state in between. You can make an appointment by visiting www.uh.edu/writingcenter or by calling 713.743.3016. For help on the mechanics of papers (grammar, punctuation, etc.), visit LAUNCH in CV N109.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading/Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/20</td>
<td>Introductions</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/22</td>
<td><em>Baraka</em> (Amazon, 1993 film)</td>
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<td>8/27</td>
<td><em>Living the Secular Life</em> Intro, Ch. 1-2</td>
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<td>8/29</td>
<td><em>Living the Secular Life</em> Ch. 3-5</td>
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<td>9/3</td>
<td><em>Living the Secular Life</em> Ch. 6-7</td>
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<td>9/5</td>
<td><em>Living the Secular Life</em> Ch. 8 and Conclusion</td>
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<td>9/10</td>
<td>“Leaning In” (BB Article)</td>
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<td>9/12</td>
<td><em>Freethinkers</em> Intro, Ch. 1-3</td>
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<td>9/17</td>
<td><em>Freethinkers</em> Ch. 4-6</td>
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<td>9/19</td>
<td><em>Freethinkers</em> Ch. 7-9</td>
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<td>9/24</td>
<td><em>Freethinkers</em> Ch. 10-12</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/26</td>
<td>TBA — <em>online class today</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>10/1</td>
<td><em>Atheists in America</em> Intro and Part 1</td>
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<td>10/3</td>
<td><em>Atheists in America</em> Part 2-3</td>
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<td>10/8</td>
<td><em>Atheists in America</em> Part 4-5</td>
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<td>10/10</td>
<td><em>Atheists in America</em> Part 6-7</td>
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<td>10/15</td>
<td><em>Atheists in America</em> Part 8</td>
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<td>10/17</td>
<td><em>Our Non-Christian Nation</em> Intro and Ch. 1-2</td>
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<td>10/22</td>
<td><em>Our Non-Christian Nation</em> Ch. 3-4</td>
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<td>10/24</td>
<td><em>Our Non-Christian Nation</em> Ch. 5-6 and Conclusion — <em>online class today</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>10/29</td>
<td><em>Choosing Our Religion</em> Intro and Ch. 1-2</td>
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<td>10/31</td>
<td><em>Choosing Our Religion</em> Ch. 3-5</td>
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<td>11/5</td>
<td><em>Choosing Our Religion</em> Ch. 6-7 and Conclusion</td>
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<td>11/7</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Prof. John Gillespie (Ph.D. Candidate), “The New Heresies”</td>
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<td>11/12</td>
<td>Challenges Project Presentations</td>
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<td>11/14</td>
<td>Challenges Project Presentations, cont.</td>
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<td>11/19</td>
<td>Challenges Project Presentations, cont.</td>
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<td>11/21</td>
<td>Challenges Project Presentations, cont.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/26</td>
<td>Conclusions / Semester Exam Due</td>
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</tbody>
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Important University Dates:
- 8/19: Opening of Fall 2019 Semester
- 8/26: Last day to add a class
- 9/4: Official Reporting Day—last day to drop/withdraw without receiving a grade
- 10/31: Last day to drop/withdraw with a “W”
- 11/26: Last day of classes
- 12/3-12/11: Final exam periods
- 12/11: Closing of semester
- 12/16: Professor grades due
9/24: Freethinkers Intro, Ch. 1-3
9/26: Freethinkers Ch. 4-6
10/1: Freethinkers Ch. 7-9
10/3: Freethinkers Ch. 10-12
10/8: Atheists in America Intro and Part 1
10/10: Atheists in America Part 2-3
10/15: Atheists in America Part 4-5
10/17: Atheists in America Part 6-7
10/22: Atheists in America Part 8
10/24: Our Non-Christian Nation Intro and Ch. 1-2 —online class today—
10/29: Our Non-Christian Nation Ch. 3-4
10/31: Our Non-Christian Nation Ch. 5-6 and Conclusion
11/5: Choosing Our Religion Intro and Ch. 1-2
11/7: Guest Speaker: Prof. John Gillespie (Ph.D. Candidate), “The New Heresies”
11/12: Choosing Our Religion Ch. 3-5
11/14: Choosing Our Religion Ch. 6-7 and Conclusion
11/19: Challenges Project Presentations
11/21: Challenges Project Presentations, cont.
11/26: Challenges Project Presentations, cont. / Conclusions / Semester Exam Due