

HIST 395

“If there is no God, then everything is permitted?” Moral Life in a Secular World

WINTER 2021

Instructor: Professor Victoria Smolkin

Time: 10 am – 12 pm and 1 pm – 2 pm (synchronous) & additional assignments (asynchronous)

Location: Zoom

Office Hours: By appointment

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Course Description

In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri Karamazov famously poses the question of what would happen to mankind “without God and immortal life,” asking whether this means that “all things are permitted.” Made famous by Dostoevsky, the question of whether we can be moral without God has always haunted secularism, and has consistently been the most vocal criticism of atheism and unbelief. From Papal condemnations of secularism and “godless Communism,” to the contemporary consensus that belief in God is evidence of moral goodness and its absence a sign of a broken ethical barometer, the assumption has been that transcendental authority is all that stands between us and moral abyss. When the atrocities committed by “totalitarian” regimes are cited as evidence of this, it is only the most radical articulation of a broader narrative of secular modernity. Whether we can be good without God, then, is a question that has long haunted human society. In the contemporary world, it has become central to how we judge political, social, and individual action. Our focus will be on historical cases where religion and the secular was explicitly engaged by the state. We will examine individual and collective articulations of morality in three prominent models of secularism: American “civil religion,” French *laïcité*, and Communist “official atheism.” What constitutes the moral foundation of a world without God? Can religion’s moral and spiritual function be performed by a different kind of belief system?

Major Readings

1. Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford, 2011).
2. Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (Vintage, 2008).
3. Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007, 2010).
4. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Belknap, 2012).
5. Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, 2018).

Course Requirements and Student Work

Seminar attendance and participation: 30%

- This course is held entirely online, and is a hybrid synchronous and asynchronous format.
- You should be prepared to spend at least 5-7 hours/day on class work.
- There is class every day: will meet **synchronously** on Zoom Monday through Friday 10 am–12 pm and 1pm – 2pm. Additional writing assignments on the forum will be asynchronous.
- You are expected to participate in each class having read and reflected on the assigned material.
- Each day you are expected to post *at least* one original comment of your own, and to respond to *at least* one comment by a classmate.
- Your active engagement in the seminar – both on the forum and in the synchronous sessions – is absolutely essential. Be prepared to engage with the sources critically—to raise important issues, ask for clarification, and/or propose alternative interpretations, and to bring your own questions into the discussion. When possible, point to specific examples in the text and reference sources/page numbers to make the discussion easier to navigate for the class.

Two pre-session papers: 20% (10% each)

Students will write two short papers (around 3-4 pages, or 600-800 word) responding to a set of readings. These are not formal papers, but critical summaries: they should review the author's questions in a broader historical context; the author's conceptualization and sources; and your own analysis of and reflection on the material as it connects to the day's topics. These response papers will be due before class (see below) and the assignment/directions will be sent separately, by mid-December. **The due dates for the response papers are:**

Paper 1: December 29, 2020

Paper 2: January 4, 2021

Discussion leadership and presentations: 20% (10% each)

Everyone will choose two classes during which they are responsible for leading discussion of the assigned readings in a group (usually 3 people). Discussion leaders introduce the material to the class, addressing interesting or problematic points, and formulate questions for discussion.

Final Paper: 30%

The final assignment will be a research and analysis paper that expands on one of the topics discussed in class. It will expand the source base by bringing in at least three (3) more sources chosen by the student, and engage with the analysis we developed in the course of seminar and forum discussions. Students will inform the instructor of their paper topic and additional sources by January 18, 2021. **The final paper is due by January 25, 2021.**

Course Policies and Expectations

Attendance: Attendance is required, and lateness and absence will seriously affect your participation grade in the course.

Late Papers: No late assignments will be accepted without prior permission from the instructor. Permission will be given only in extreme emergencies and will affect the grade of the paper.

Writing Center: Wesleyan has excellent resources for writing mentorship, and I strongly encourage all students to use the Writing Center for help with writing course papers. For more information, see: <http://www.wesleyan.edu/writing/workshop>

Academic Integrity: An important part of academic training is learning to distinguish between a reliable and an unreliable source. Though the Internet has opened up many excellent opportunities for research, it has also clouded the distinctions between appropriate, useful resources, and those considered inappropriate in academic work. ALWAYS provide a citation for all works consulted in your writing, even Wikipedia entries (in Chicago-style format), and when in doubt about the reliability of a source, always check with the instructor. Violations of academic integrity, such as plagiarism, will result in formal disciplinary action. For Wesleyan's academic policy, see: http://www.wesleyan.edu/acaf/policy/sc_plagiarism_complete.html

Disability Resources: Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible: Dean Patey in Disability Resources, located in North College, Room 021, or call 860-685-5581 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations.

All required texts can be purchased online. The rest of the readings are on the course Moodle page.

I may sometimes alter the syllabus. When I do so, I will notify the class and update the syllabus on Moodle.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Day 1, 1/5: Christendom and Political Theology

Readings/Assignments

- Thomas Hobbes, "Of Religion," from *The Leviathan* (1660)
- John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689)
- Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (Vintage, 2008): Parts I & II

Day 2, 1/6: Political Religion and Totalitarianism

Readings/Assignments

- Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 2017), Part 1 ("Anticipation"), pp. 1-118.
- *Divini Redemptoris: Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Atheistic Communism*
- Erich Voegelin, *Political Religions*, pp. 1-15.

Day 3, 1/7: Communism and Atheism

Readings/Assignments

- Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978).
- V. I. Lenin, "Socialism and Religion" (1905)
- Gareth Stedman Jones, "Religion and the Origins of Socialism," in *Religion and the Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 171-189.
- Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton UP, 2018).
- Sonja Luehrmann, "Was Soviet Society Secular?" in Tam Ngo and Justine B. Quijada, eds. *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 134-151.

Day 4, 1/8: American Civil Religion and the Cold War

Readings/Assignments

- Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955), selections.
- Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970 [1967]), pp. 168-87.
- Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford, 2011), Parts 1 and 3.

Day 5, 1/11: The 1960s - Religious Crisis and the Culture of Unbelief

Readings/Assignments

- *The Culture of Unbelief: Proceedings from the First International Symposium on Belief, held at Rome, 1969* (University of California, 1971), selections.
- Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Chs. 1 & 2
- Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2010).

Day 6, 1/12: The 1970s – Religion, Ideology, and Human Rights

Readings/Assignments

- *The Helsinki Final Act*, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (1975)
- Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Belknap, 2012).

Day 7, 1/13: Laïcité, Multiculturalism, and Secularism

Readings/Assignments

- John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, 2007), selections.
- David Feldman, "Why the English Like Turbans: A History of Multiculturalism in One Country," in *Structures and Transformations in British History* (Cambridge, 2010).
- Talal Asad, "What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?," in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 21-66.

Day 8, 1/14: Desecularization: Religion's Return

Readings/Assignments

- Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 1-18.
- David Martin, "The Evangelical Upsurge and Its Political Implications," in *The Desecularization of the World*, pp. 37-49.
- Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (Oxford, 2018): Introduction (pp. 1-13), Ch. 3 (pp. 56-69), Ch. 6 (105-116).

Day 9, 1/15: A Secular Age?

Readings/Assignments

- Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard UP, 2007): Introduction, pp. 1-22.
- Callum G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (Bloomsbury, 2017), selections.
- Joseph Blankholm, "Secularism and Secular People," *Public Culture* 30, no. 2 (2018): 245-268.

Day 10, 1/18: Religion, Secularism, and Populism

Readings/Assignments

- Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (Yale, 2015), Chapters 1 and 3.
- Daniel Steinmetz Jenkins and Anton Jaeger, "The populist right is forging an unholy alliance with religion," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2019.
- Philip Gorski, "Why do evangelicals vote for Trump?," *The Immanent Frame*, October 4, 2016.
- Rogers Brubaker, "A new 'Christianist' secularism in Europe," *The Immanent Frame*, October 11, 2016 and Rogers Brubaker, "The New Language of European Populism: Why Civilization is Replacing the Nation," *Foreign Affairs*, December 6, 2017.

Day 11, 1/19: Reading Day (Synthesis and Review)

Day 12, 1/20: Finals Day

***** FINAL PAPER DUE – January 25, 2021*****