

# Nonreligious Cultures and Communities in the United States

## *3000/4000 Level Course in Sociology*

Instructor: Jacqui Frost

### **Course Description**

What does it mean to be nonreligious in the United States today? There has been a rapid rise in those who identify as nonreligious over the past 30 years, and atheists, agnostics, and other “Nones” now comprise over 20% of the U.S. population. What are the various types of nonreligious identities and reasons for being nonreligious in the U.S. context? How do nonreligious individuals organize into groups oriented toward identity-formation, social connection, and political action? What are Americans' attitudes toward atheists, atheism, and non-belief, and are these attitudes changing? This course will promote a critical examination of the changing landscape of religious nonbelief in the United States, placing contemporary American atheism, agnosticism, and humanism in sociological and historical context. Throughout the course, we will focus on the varieties of religious and non-religious experience and engage with sociological debates about secularization in the late-modern context.

### **Learning Outcomes**

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the causes and consequences of increased religious disaffiliation in the United States.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of key sociological concepts, terms, and theories related to religious and nonreligious identities, beliefs, and practices.
3. Evaluate current research and popular texts related to nonreligion using sociological concepts, theories, and perspectives.
4. Critically evaluate written arguments by assessing their evidence, methods, and assumptions.

### **Readings**

Four books are required for this course. They are also on reserve at Wilson Library. The remaining articles and book chapters can be found on the course website.

- *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* by Susan Jacoby
- *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion* by Phil Zuckerman
- *The Age of Atheists* by Peter Watson
- *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children* by Christel Manning

## Assignments & Grading

### 1) *Articles for Discussion Assignment*. 10% of Grade.

- Find **two** articles from mainstream news sources on the general topic of nonreligion in America (including nonreligious groups, movements, or identities; secularism and politics; atheism and discrimination or stigma; more general articles on non-belief and secularism in the United States, and related).
- For each article, write a 2-paragraph summary on how course materials help you understand the article or give you a critical perspective on it.
  - “Mainstream news sources” examples:
    - *Star Tribune, Pioneer Press, Minnpost.com*
    - *New York Times, The Atlantic, Huffington Post, Slate, Daily Beast, The Guardian*

### 2) “*Book Group*” *Assignment 1*. 10% of grade.

- Come to Wednesday’s class with 1 ½ to 2 page written summary of the main things you learned from the Jacoby book, and a list of 5-7 questions meant to spark conversation in a small group discussion. We will break up into small groups and have “book group” discussions of Jacoby.

### 3) *Midterm Exam*. 20% of grade.

- Covers material from Weeks 1-6. Combination of short answer and short essay.

### 4) “*Book Group*” *Assignment 2*. 10% of grade.

- Come to Wednesday’s class with 1 ½ to 2 page written summary of the main things you learned from the Zuckerman book, and a list of 5-7 questions meant to spark conversation in a small group discussion. We will break up into small groups and have “book group” discussions of Zuckerman.

### 5) *Final Exam*. 20% of grade. In-class.

- Covers material from Weeks 8-14 of class. Combination of short answer and short essay.

### 6) *Project*. 30% of grade.

- For the course project, you will investigate a nonreligious group – either online or in person – and write a paper that draws on course materials to analyze the mission, rhetoric, and activities of the group. This group can be atheist, humanist, secular, or freethinking in nature, but must be centered around explicitly nonreligious perspectives. More details will be provided later in the semester.

# Course Schedule

## Section 1: The Religious and Nonreligious Landscape in America

### Week 1      Getting Started

Sept. 3      Welcome, Course Introduction

### Week 2      Pluralism, Diversity, and Change

*To Read:*

1. Ariela Keysar. "Shifts Along the American Religious-Secular Spectrum"
2. Michael Hout and Claude Fischer. "Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012."
3. Lois Lee. "Secular or Nonreligious? Investigating and Interpreting Generic 'Not Religious' Categories and Populations."

Sept. 8      American Religion – Facts and Figures

Sept. 10     The Non-religious in America – Facts and Figures

### Week 3      Meta-Narrative 1: American Religion as Ground of Civic Engagement

*To Read:*

1. Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell. "Religious Polarization and Pluralism in America."
2. Robert Bellah. "Civil Religion in America."

Sept. 15     Religion, Community, Morality

Sept. 17     Religious Tolerance and Religious Pluralism

### Week 4      Meta-Narrative 2: Death of God and Loss of Meaning

*To Read:*

1. Anthony Giddens. "The Contours of High Modernity."
2. John Evans and Michael Evans. "Religion and Science: Beyond the Epistemological Conflict Narrative."
3. Victor Stenger. "The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason."

Sept. 22     The Modernist Crisis and The Conflict between "Science" and "Religion"

Sept. 24     The Contemporary Landscape – The Brights and Being Reasonable

## Section 2: Historical Background

### Week 5      *Deists, Humanists, and Other Freethinkers*

*To Read:*      1. Jacoby, Susan. 2004. *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, pp. 124-290

Sept. 29      The Politics of Secularism throughout U.S. History

Oct. 1      “Book Group” on Jacoby (**Book Group 1 Assignment Due**)

### Week 6      *Unbelief in the United States – Philosophical Origins*

*To Read:*      1. Watson, Peter. 2014. *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God*, Chapters: Intro, 1, 2, 4, 9, 21, 22, 25, Conclusion

Oct. 6      Intellectual Roots of Secularism

Oct. 8      Looking Ahead – Free Thought, Free Citizens – Or, a Preview of the Stakes

### Week 7      *Midterm – Review and Test*

Oct. 13      Review

Oct. 15      **Mid-term exam.** In-class, weeks 1-6

## Section 3: Atheist Identities and Movements Today

### Week 8      *Atheism as Social Movement*

*To Read:*      1. Joseph Blankholm “The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular.”  
2. Stephen LeDrew. “Atheism Versus Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics.”  
3. Vlad Chituc. “Atheism: The Next Civil Rights Movement?”  
4. Laurie Goodstein. “To Fight Religious Monuments, Atheists Plan their Own Symbols.”

Oct. 20      Social Movements, Identities, and Mobilization

Oct. 22      Tensions Between Atheist and Other Secular Movement Groups

**Due: First news article summary**

Week 9      Nonreligious Communities, Traditions, and Rituals

- To Read:
1. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith. *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America*. Chapters 1 and 4.
  2. Jesse Smith. "Can the Secular Be the Object of Belief and Belonging? The Sunday Assembly."
  3. Alfredo Garcia and Joseph Blankholm. "The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States."

Oct. 27      Communities of Discourse and the Social Construction of Boundaries

Oct. 29      Ritualizing Nonreligion, Sacralizing the Secular

Week 10      Becoming a "None" – Pathways

- To Read:
1. Zuckerman, Phil. 2011. *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*. Chapters: Intro, 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, Conclusion
  2. Jesse Smith. "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism."
  3. Stephen LeDrew. "Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism."

Nov. 3      Individual Trajectories, Reconsidered

Nov. 5      "Book Group" on Zuckerman (**Book Group 2 assignment due**)

Week 11      Nonreligion at the Intersection of Other Identities I: Race and Ethnicity

- To Read:
1. Sikivu Hutchinson. *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars*. Chapters 1 and 2
  2. R. Khari Brown, Robert Taylor and Linda Chatters. "Race/Ethnic and Social Demographic Correlates of Religious Non-Involvement in America."
  3. Sikivu Hutchinson. #AtheismSoWhite: Atheists of Color Rock Social Justice

Nov. 10      Intersectionality and Social Location

Nov. 12      #AtheismSoWhite and New Atheist Racial Rhetoric

Week 12      Nonreligion at the Intersection of Other Identities II: Gender and Family

- To Read:
1. Joseph Backer and Buster Smith. 2015. *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*. Chapters 7 and 8
  2. Christel Manning. *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children*. Chapters 5-7

Nov. 17      Gender, Family, and Nonreligion

## **Section 4: The Stakes – Nonreligious Stigma and Discrimination**

### **Week 13**     *Attitudes Towards Atheists, 1 – Anti-Atheist Sentiment*

- To Read:*
1. Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann. "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society."
  2. Penny Edgell, Jacqui Frost, and Evan Stewart. "From Existential to Social Understandings of Risk: Examining Gender Differences in Nonreligion."
  3. Jacqui Frost and Penny Edgell. "Rescuing Nones from the Reference Category: Civic Engagement among the Nonreligious in the United States."

Nov. 24     Atheists Still the Other?

Nov. 26     Why Social Science Measures of Nonreligion Matter

**Due: Second news article summary**

### **Week 14**     *Atheists and Others – At Work and Before the Law*

- To Read:*
1. Michael Wallace, Bradley R. E. Wright, and Allen Hyde. "Religious Affiliation and Hiring Discrimination in the American South A Field Experiment."
  2. Ryan Cragun, Barry Kosmin, Ariela Keysar, and Joseph Hammer. "On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-Religious in the United States."
  3. Joseph Hammer. "Forms, Frequency, and Correlates of Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination."

Dec. 1     Discrimination Against the Nonreligious

Dec. 3     Stigma and What's at Stake

### **Week 15**     *Review and Wrap UP*

Dec. 8     Review. **Project Due** in class

Dec. 10     **Final Exam.** In-class, weeks 8-14.

## **Late Submissions**

I will accept late work only when you have obtained permission in advance. We will consider late submissions if you have a legitimate reason for requesting an extension – legitimate reasons include a physical illness, a mental health issue, or a pressing family matter. Unless you've made arrangements with the instructor or TAs, exams can only be taken in class on the day they are scheduled. Unexcused missed exams will result in a 0 on the exam.

## **Attendance**

While there is no official attendance grade for this course, the course will be difficult to pass if you miss lecture or discussions. There is no standard textbook for the course, which means a lot of the basic concepts and ideas you'll need to know for the exams will be covered in lecture. You may not make up in-class participation exercises without a valid university excuse (see Assignment Descriptions on page 5). If you do miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain class notes from a classmate and/or meet with the instructor or your TA to go over missed materials.

## **Resources**

### ***Disability Services:***

Please notify me in the first week of classes if you need any accommodations. I will do everything I can to make sufficient accommodations for students with disabilities. Students who have, or think they may have, a disability (e.g. mental health, attentional, learning, vision, hearing, physical or systemic), are invited to contact Disability Services to arrange a confidential discussion at 612- 626-1333 (V/TTY) or [ds@umn.edu](mailto:ds@umn.edu). Students registered with DS, who have a letter requesting accommodations, are encouraged to contact all of their instructors early in the semester to discuss accommodations outlined in their letter. Additional information is available at the DS website <http://diversity.umn.edu/disability>.

### ***Writing Support:***

Student Writing Support: Student Writing Support provides free writing instruction for all University of Minnesota students at all stages of the writing process. In face-to-face and online collaborative consultations, SWS helps students develop productive writing habits and revision strategies. A writing consultation is a conversation between a writer and a consultant. During that conversation, the participants will set an agenda for the session, talk about the work in progress, and work together to meet the writer's goals. In addition to writing consultations, SWS offer a variety of videos, printable handouts, and web resources. Visit the SWS website at <http://writing.umn.edu/sws/> for more information.

Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence: Several forms of academic support are sponsored by this center. See their site for details: <https://diversity.umn.edu/multicultural/>.

### ***Stress Management and Mental Health Support:***

As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. University of Minnesota services are available to assist you with addressing these and other concerns you may be experiencing. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus at <http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu>.