

Faith & Doubt

PHR-380 / Fall 2019
Phillips Academy / Chapel 015

Instructor: Mr. Prescott

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

How do human beings seek meaning? Are there shared responses to fundamental questions about God, identity, friendship, and our place in the world? In what ways, if at all, are our responses shaped by race, gender, sexuality, and religious identity? This course will examine narrative, philosophy, and film in its efforts to make sense of various human responses to these questions.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS, LEARNING GOALS, AND OTHER USEFUL INFORMATION

I. Learning Philosophy - Let's say you want to learn how to shoot free throws. The first thing you are probably going to do is practice, and you decide that, initially, the best way to shoot a free throw is to chuck the ball as hard as you can at the rim. Now, if you've ever taken a free throw before, you'll know that this strategy won't be particularly effective. And so, after a few times, you decide to change it up. Maybe you try aiming for the box on the backboard. Maybe you try utilizing a softer touch. Maybe you bend your knees a little bit more. Better yet, maybe you go find someone who already knows how to shoot a free throw and ask them to watch you and offer feedback. And, because they already know what to look for, you find that you improve at a much faster rate than you would have otherwise and, before you know it, you're regularly putting the ball in the basket.

Learning in this class is really not that different. There are standards of learning that you don't yet know (in this case, understanding different aspects of faith and doubt, rather than shooting free throws), you will have regular opportunities to practice hitting those standards (reading, writing, and discussion, rather than taking foul shots), you will make mistakes, you will get feedback on those mistakes, and, ultimately, you will respond to those mistakes. At the end of the day, I'm not interested in how many practice shots you took or whether you made it on your first attempt so much as I'm interested in whether or not the shot consistently goes into the basket.

So what does all that mean for this class?

It means that your final grade in this course will reflect your **understanding** of the subject matter, not how long it took you to learn it. Okay, so what does that mean? It means that the bulk of your grade (85% of it) will be comprised of two summative assessments (one for each unit), where you will have the opportunity to demonstrate what you have learned. Now wait a second, Mr. Prescott. Those seem like pretty high stakes! Are you trying to stress us out!?

Hold on, hold on! There's an important catch here: because it takes some of us longer to develop new understandings, and because making mistakes is a **necessary** component of the learning process, **all** of these papers can be revised as many times as you want with no penalty (see the revision policy below). Again, my goal is to help you learn!

With all that in mind, here is what you can expect of me:

- I will hold high standards. This won't be a breeze: I am going to challenge you because I believe you can meet them.
- I will be honest about where you are in relation to those standards. I'm not going to tell you that you've made a free throw if the ball isn't even hitting the rim. That helps no one!
- I will work **with** you to help you meet those standards. My job is, first and foremost, to help you learn!
- I will not penalize you for making mistakes, but will instead give you opportunities to respond to and learn from your mistakes.

Here is what I expect of you:

- I expect you to be honest about what you do (and don't yet) know.
- I expect you to work **intentionally**, which is not the same thing as working **harder**. Okay, so what does that mean? It means that repeatedly chucking the ball at the basket as hard as you can isn't going to help you learn how to shoot a free throw. Likewise, pulling an all-nighter to complete a major assignment isn't going to yield the outcome we're aiming for. Instead, I expect you to regularly **practice**, which means keeping up with the assigned work and engaging with the subject matter on a regular basis.
- I expect you to make mistakes. And, at the same time, I expect you to reflect on and respond to those mistakes.
- I expect you to read and respond to my feedback when I give it to you.

If we both uphold our end of the bargain, I have no doubt that you **will** learn in this class!

II. Grading/Evaluation - Here are the nitty-gritty details regarding your final grade in the course:

i. Essays (85%) - More specific information about the expectations for each assignment will be provided closer to their respective due dates.

- **Unit 1 Essay: Faith and the Holocaust (30%)** - Due Friday, October 4
- **Unit 2 Essay: Faith, Doubt, and Race (45%)** - Due Friday, November 8
- **Final Reflection (10%)** - Due Tuesday, November 19

ii. Class Discussion (15%) - Classroom conversations are an important component of this course. And, much like any other academic skill, some ways of conversing are productive for our learning than others. You will receive regular feedback from me on discussions, which will give

you a chance to refine and hone your skills in this space (a final grade in this category will not be assigned until the end of term).

III. Revisions - As noted above, making mistakes is a **necessary** part of the learning process. With that in mind, you may revise **any** essay in the course, where the grade of the revised essay will replace the original grade on the assignment. When completing a revision, you must do the following:

- Use the “track changes” feature on Word or Google Docs and submit the revised draft **with the tracked changes visible**(this helps me see what changes you are making)
- Complete and submit responses to the revision reflection questions (posted on Canvas) with the revised draft (these ensure you are using my feedback *and* gives me insight into how you are doing so)

Revisions that do not meet the above criteria will not be accepted! Please note that assignments receiving a 3+ or lower **must** be revised.

IV. Reflective Writing – In addition to formal essays, your work in this class will include a fair amount of reflective writing both in and outside of class. This includes short writing prompts at the beginning and/or end of class, along with occasional homework assignments. In order to centralize this work, you should keep all reflection entries in a notebook, which I will occasionally collect and offer feedback on.

V. E-mail/Technology – Three notes on technology:

- Upon arriving to class, I ask that you drop your phone off at “**Cell Phone Daycare**”. There is good research showing that even the presence of a turned-off cell phone on a person’s desk reduces their cognitive functioning. Take some time to talk to others in the room!
- No laptops in class. While taking notes on computers can be helpful, the distractions of other programs is all too real. Let’s talk to each other face-to-face.
- Please limit e-mail use to requests for in-person meetings or to communicate emergencies. I will respond to these e-mails within 24 hours, though please note that any e-mail sent after 8:00 PM will not receive a response until the following morning. Plan ahead!

VI. Absences - There are many legitimate reasons why you may need to miss class. Andover is a busy place! I first and foremost ask that you communicate with me if you aren’t going to be present. For absences related to religious observances, please contact Ms. Ralston (gralston@andover.edu) to have the absence excused. In the event of illness, please coordinate with Skyes. For college visits, please coordinate with the Dean of Students Office.

VII. Accommodations – I am available to discuss academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Laura Warner, Director of Student Accessibility Services. Her office is located in Pearson, on the first floor. You may email her at lwagner@andover.edu for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. If you are already approved for official accommodations, please communicate with me during the first week of class, whether in person or via email.

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

(SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Unit 1: Faith, Doubt, and the Holocaust

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6 – INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

- No assigned readings

WEEK 1 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND REALITY

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9 – ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

- Read: Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave,” *The Republic*
- Write: Short Reflection (prompt on Canvas)

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11 – THE MANY VARIETIES OF FAITH

- Listen: Krista Trippett, [Interview with Anne Lamott, Sharon Salzberg, Lawrence Kushner, and Omid Safi](#), On Being, podcast audio, April 11, 2003

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13 – NIGHT AND BLIND FAITH

- Read: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Maron Wiesel (Hill and Wang, 2006), pp. 3-28.

WEEK 2 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND NIGHT

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 16 – DISCUSSION: PLATO AND WIESEL

- Due: Reading Reflection

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18 – NIGHT

- Read: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Maron Wiesel (Hill and Wang, 2006), pp. 29-65.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20 – NIGHT

- Read: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Maron Wiesel (Hill and Wang, 2006), pp. 66-84.

WEEK 3 – FAITH AND TRUST

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23 – DISCUSSION: NIGHT

- Due: Reading Reflection

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25 – NIGHT

- Read: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Maron Wiesel (Hill and Wang, 2006), pp. 85-115.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27 – CLASS VISIT: MEGAN PHELPS-ROPER

- Watch: Megan Phelps-Roper, “I grew up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here’s why I left.” Ted Talk, February 2017.

WEEK 4 – WRITING WEEK

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 30 – NO CLASS

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Draft of Essay #1

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND HUMAN NATURE

- Due: Essay #1

Unit 2: Faith, Doubt, and Race

WEEK 5 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND THE BRAIN

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7 – THE ELEPHANT AND THE RIDER (WEDNESDAY SCHEDULE)

- Read: Jonathan Haidt, “The Divided Self,” *The Happiness Hypothesis*, pp. 1-22.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9 – NO CLASS

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10 – THE CULTURE INSIDE

- Listen: Hanna Rosin and Alix Spiegel, “The Culture Inside,” *Invisibilia*

WEEK 6 – FAITH AND RACE

MONDAY, OCTOBER 14 – RACE AND REALITY (WEDNESDAY SCHEDULE)

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 3-20.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16 – NO CLASS

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18 – FAITH IN RACE

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 20-39.

WEEK 7 – RACE, REALITY, AND DOUBT

MONDAY, OCTOBER 21 – NO CLASS

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23 – THE MECCA

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 39-72.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25 – PRINCE JONES

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 75-99.

WEEK 8 – DOUBTING RACIAL NARRATIVES

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28 – DISCUSSION:

- Due: Reading Reflection

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30 – VERIFIED DOUBT: ESCAPING THE CAVE

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 99-132.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND RACE

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 135-152.

WEEK 9 – DOUBTING THE DREAM

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Essay #2 Outline

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Essay #2 Draft

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8 – DUE: ESSAY #2

- Due: Essay #2

Unit 3: Faith, Doubt, and Santa Claus

WEEK 10 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND SANTA

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11 – THE ARGUMENTS FOR SANTA

- Interview: Interview someone about when they discovered Santa wasn't real, then respond to the questions on Canvas.
- Read: Francis Pharcellus Church, "[Yes, Virginia, There Is A Santa Claus](#)," *The Sun* (September 21, 1897).

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 13 – SHOULD WE BELIEVE IN SANTA CLAUS?

- Read: Eric Kaplan, "[Should We Believe in Santa Claus?](#)" *The New York Times* (December 20, 2014)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14 – THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST SANTA

- Read: KJ Dell'Antonia, "To Fib - or Not - About Santa Claus," *The New York Times* (December 23, 2011)
- Read: Lisa Belkin, "[Santa Isn't Coming to Town](#)," *The New York Times* (December 22, 2010)

WEEK 11 – FINALS WEEK

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – CONFERENCE PERIOD DAY

- Note: Mr. Prescott will be available to meet during normal class time

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19 – FINAL CLASS

- Due: Final Reflection