

Faith & Doubt

PHR-380 / Winter 2019-20
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. 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 how to do, you will have regular opportunities to practice hitting those standards, 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 take or whether you make it on your first attempt so much as I'm interested in whether or not you can consistently put the ball 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. 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 give you many opportunities to meet those standards.

- I will work **with** you to help you meet those standards. My job is, first and foremost, to help you learn!
- 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 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**. 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!

III. Grading/Evaluation - This course utilizes a standards-based approach, which means your final grade will reflect your level of competency in relation to three specific standards of learning, which are articulated below:

- **Overarching Standard (60%)** - More information about learning standards (including the grading scale) will be provided in a separate document.
- **Argumentative Writing (30%)** - The standards for argumentative writing are broken down into four main categories: thesis/argument, evidence/analysis, organization, and mechanics. This standard will be assessed primarily through formal essays, though reading reflections and short prompts may also be used to assess your competency in these categories.
- **Class Discussion (10%)** - The standards for class discussion will be assessed throughout the term. Students will receive regular feedback on their performance in relation to this standard throughout the term.

The grade range is located below, though please visit Canvas for more specific information about what each of these numbers means in respect to the above standard:

6 - 5.5 to 6 **5** - 4.5 to 5.5 **4** - 3.5 to 4.5 **3** - 2.5 to 3.5 **2** - 1.5 to 2.5 **1** - 0.5 to 1.5 **0** = 0

II. 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 within two weeks of the essay's return. 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 re-assessed!

III. 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.

IV. 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 email within 24 hours, though please note that any email sent after 8:00 PM will not receive a response until the following morning. Plan ahead!

V. 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.

VI. 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 lwarn@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 Reality

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5 – INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

- No assigned readings

WEEK 1 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND PLATO’S CAVE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9 – NO CLASS

- Note: Class will not meet

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10 – THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

- Read: Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave,” *The Republic*
- Write: 1-page reading response (posted on Canvas)

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12 – 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.

WEEK 2 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND SANTA CLAUS

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16 – THE SANTA CLAUS DEBATE

- Read: Brian Handwerk, "[From St. Nicholas to Santa Claus: The Surprising Origins of Kris Kringle](#)," *National Geographic* (December 25, 2018)
- Read: Francis Pharcellus Church, "[Yes, Virginia, There Is A Santa Claus](#)," *The Sun* (September 21, 1897).
- Read: David Kyle Johnson, "[Sorry, Virginia...](#)" *Baltimore Sun* (December 13, 2009).

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Short Essay #1

ENJOY THE BREAK!

Unit 2: Faith, Doubt, and the Problem of Evil

WEEK 3 – THE HOLOCAUST: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

TUESDAY, JANUARY 7 – INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST

- No assigned readings

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9 – THE HOLOCAUST: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- Read: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Holocaust: A Historical Summary," *A Resource Book for Educators: Teaching about the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1995), pp. 87-99

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10 – NO CLASS

- Note: Mr. Prescott away at Dartmouth Relays

WEEK 4 – THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

MONDAY, JANUARY 13 – BLIND FAITH AND THE VILLAGE OF Sighet

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

TUESDAY, JANUARY 14 – FAITH AND DOUBT IN AUSCHWITZ

- Read: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Maron Wiesel (Hill and Wang, 2006), pp. 29-46.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND DESPAIR

- Read: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Maron Wiesel (Hill and Wang, 2006), pp. 47-84.

WEEK 5 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND SUFFERING

MONDAY, JANUARY 20 – MLK DAY (NO CLASS)

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21 – THE DEATH MARCHES

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

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23 – DIALECTICAL FAITH

- Read: Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire," in *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, eds. John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp. 319-324.

WEEK 5 – THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLOCAUST

MONDAY, JANUARY 27 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Outline of Essay #2

TUESDAY, JANUARY 28 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Draft of Essay #2

THURSDAY, JANUARY 30 – DUE: ESSAY #2

- Due: Essay #2

Unit 3: Faith, Doubt, and Race

WEEK 6 – FAITH AND RACE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3 – NO CLASS (MID-WINTER LONG WEEKEND)

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4 – CONSTRUCTING (AND DE-CONSTRUCTING) MEMORIES

- Listen: Shankar Vedantam, "[Did That Really Happen? How Our Memories Betray Us](#)," *Hidden Brain* (Podcast Audio, December 16, 2019)

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6 – FAITH, DOUBT, AND IMPLICIT BIAS

- Listen: Invisibilia, "The Culture Inside,"

WEEK 7 – DOUBT AND RACE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10 – RACIAL REALITIES IN COATES' BALTIMORE

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 3-29.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11 – FAITH IN RACE

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 29-50.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13 – NO CLASS

- Note: Mr. Prescott out sick

WEEK 8 – LEARNING HOW TO DOUBT

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17 – HEAD OF SCHOOL DAY!

- Note: No Class

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18 – BLIND FAITH AND RACIAL NARRATIVES

- Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), pp. 50-71.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Essay #3 Outline

WEEK 9 – CULTIVATING HEALTHY DOUBT

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Draft of Essay #3

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25 – TBD

- Due: Essay #3

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27 – OMELAS AND REASONABLE DOUBT

- Read: Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

WEEK 10 – FINALS WEEK

MONDAY, MARCH 2 – CONFERENCE PERIOD DAY

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

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4 – TBD

- Due: Essay #3 Revisions (optional)