UNDERGRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTION

Term: Spring 2016
Instructor: Rev. Philip Rossi, S.J.
Course #: THEO 4300 5300
Section: 101
Course Title: Contemporary Atheism/Theism

Description:

The nature and the existence of a divine reality--i.e., "what everyone calls God," according to an expression from Thomas Aquinas--has long been a topic for human speculation and argument. Belief in one transcendent God was the "default position" for Western culture for more than a millennium since the start of the Common Era. A number of influential thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (e.g., Hume, Diderot, arguably Hobbes, Spinoza) however, began to contest this belief in a sustained and systematic way. They began to articulate what in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became the modern forms of atheism. These forms have been based on a range of theoretical and practical arguments against belief in God, put forth by writers such as Marx, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, Bertrand Russell, Sartre, and now by the so-called "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

More recent accounts of the development of modern atheism, however, place its origin within a cultural horizon that includes more than just the intellectual arguments advanced by its advocates. This wider cultural horizon is constituted by the rise of new understanding of the human place in the world. The name commonly give to this new understanding is "secularity"; one of the most influential accounts of the origin of secularity and its significance for understanding belief and unbelief in the contemporary world is Charles Taylor's A Secular Age (2007), which is the text we will be studying. Taylor argues that, in "a secular age," the possibilities and options for both belief and unbelief in a transcendent God have expanded, in what he calls a "nova effect," well beyond those represented by the classical modern contrast between atheism and theism. The work of this course will thus involve engaging Taylor's work and the arguments it puts forth with the objective of seeing and assessing the importance that these new circumstances for belief and unbelief have for understanding the differences that have demarcated the debates between atheism and theism.

The specific objectives of this course will be that, by the end of the course, students will be able:

• To articulate an accurate understanding of the key concepts utilized by Charles Taylor in his account of emergence of the cultural situation he terms "a secular age"
• To employ those concepts in providing an analysis and critical evaluation of the conditions for belief and for unbelief that are present in the workings of human culture in the early part of the 21st century