

## **Faith, Doubt, and Reason**

**Spring 2021**

**Mark W. Roche**  
**MW 2:20-3:35**

**ALHN33001**  
**Via Zoom**

### **Brief Course Description**

“Faith, Doubt, and Reason” satisfies the University Requirements in Second Philosophy and Catholicism and the Disciplines.

The seminar explores scholarly questions of great existential interest. What various forms of faith exist? What obstacles exist to faith? What thoughts and experiences trigger doubt? In what ways do doubt and reason undermine or reinforce faith? How might we distinguish and evaluate different forms of reason? How far can reason take us? The seminar explores faith, doubt, and reason not only in relation to God and religious questions, but also in relation to one’s sense of self, trust in other persons, belief in institutions, and identification with values and ideas.

When students leave home for college and begin college-level study, questions about the relation of faith and reason arise naturally. As students gain new knowledge, they are confronted with challenges to the unity of faith and reason. Exploring this unity requires tremendous effort and deep thought. At a research university the search is by definition never ending; while some discoveries help us discern that elusive unity, others bring forward new challenges. Also college is a setting where answers to the great questions are not taken for granted, but are subject to reason. Doubt about one’s previous beliefs and traditions easily arises. William Torrey Harris, co-founder of the St. Louis Hegelians and the U.S. Commissioner of Education from 1889 to 1906, a position that later became what we know as the Secretary of Education, viewed “self-estrangement” as “perhaps the most important idea in the philosophy of education” (27). Doubt is as essential to education as the harmony of faith and reason is to Catholicism.

Readings will be taken from, among others, Plato, the Bible, Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. The course also integrates literary and artistic works (including films) as well as sociological data. Toward the end of the semester students will have the freedom to choose the final readings or assignments.

The course will be student-centered, with considerable focus on discussion. In addition to various writing assignments, the course will include student-led discussions, classroom debates, oral interviews, and oral exams, all of which will be designed to help students develop the capacities to formulate clear questions, listen carefully and attentively, explore ideas through dialogue, argue for and against differing positions, and express their thoughts eloquently and persuasively. If the seminar brings as many questions as answers, another course goal, helping students recognize nuance and complexity, will have been met.

The course seeks to provide a context where students can explore religious and existential puzzles in an atmosphere of trust and support, maturity and mutual respect. The student’s search for meaning will be enhanced by intellectual refinement and rigor.