Can you choose how to behave? For most people today, the answer is obvious: of course you can! It may not be easy to stay home and read *The Great Gatsby* for your freshman comp class when all your friends are headed to Assembly Hall for Midnight Madness, but it’s clearly a choice. That’s why the image of a good angel on one shoulder and a bad angel on the other is so popular. Are you going to do what reason or conscience tells you to do? Or are you going to give in to temptation?

Nearly 75% of Americans today believe we are born with the ability to make this choice between “good and evil.” But there are lots of reasons to think they are wrong. Maybe our choices are socially conditioned or shaped by parenting and education. That’s what sociologists and psychologists study. Maybe genetics and brain chemistry deeply influence everything we do, in ways we don’t realize. That’s what neuroscientists study. Or maybe human actions are determined by forces outside human control, such as fate, karma, or sin. These are examples of religious theories of human nature. The Christian doctrine of Original Sin, for example, teaches that all human beings are innately inclined to behave badly (i.e. to be violent, selfish, or self-destructive). This notorious teaching, first articulated by the fourth century Christian bishop, Augustine of Hippo, remains a powerful example of one way that religion, like psychology, neurobiology, or sociology, challenges the assumption that human behaviors are freely chosen. One premise of this course is, consequently, that religion is not just a way of influencing how people behave: religion also offers a theory of human behavior. A second and related premise is that a religious doctrine developed two thousand years ago captures something about the problem of human freedom that is still being debated today, by secular as well as religious people. This course explores these debates by focusing on how one influential Christian doctrine has been variously defended, challenged, rejected and reconceived by theologians, poets, novelists, and scientists.