Catalog Description:

*Prerequisite: acceptance to the University Honors Program, or consent of instructor.*

This course examines the history of thought on agnosticism, atheism, and skepticism by studying a selection of classical writings from some of the most celebrated thinkers in the West – from Lucretius to Carl Sagan. (Offered as needed.) 3 credits.

Restrictions: Acceptance into the University Honors Program, or consent of instructor.

Essential Equipment and Facilities: Seminar-style classroom with computer equipment.

Course Goals, Objectives and Learning Outcomes:

1. Goals and Objectives:
   A. To introduce basic reasons for questioning the existence of ultimate reality.
   B. To explore some possible ontological, empirical, cosmological, anthropological, and ethical reasons for such questioning as well as the theoretical and practical consequences of such questioning.
   C. To articulate both our own reasoned positions on questions about ultimate reality
   D. To think through our fundamental beliefs – theistic, atheistic, or agnostic – and present our conclusions to the class.

Content:

Classical statements of disbelief and uncertainty on the existence of ultimate reality will be critically studied. These statements, which come from writers in various disciplines, will be considered in light of questions, such as, ‘Does the universe have a beginning?’, ‘What is the meaning of life and death’, ‘What is the basis of morality?’, ‘Is ultimate reality necessarily an illusion?’
Current Required Texts:

Instructional Strategies:

1. The class will include both lectures and group discussions. The main purposes of lectures will be to establish the context and theoretical framework of our readings so as to enhance in-class group conversations.
2. Students are expected to arrive at their own conclusions about the issues, to be able to give reasons for those conclusions, and to sympathetically understand why others might disagree.
3. Students are expected to engage in the art of conversation. Conversation requires active listening – that is, openness to what others have to say, asking questions, risking opinions, and the willingness to engage in the back-and-forth of open-ended dialogue. Such conversations are not only essential for a successful seminar but also for ethical life in a pluralistic world.

Methods of Evaluation:

1. Class Attendance: Class attendance is required. You are expected to attend all class meetings and to have assignments prepared when they are due. More than three absences or three index cards not turned in will result in zero points for class participation. Each absence beyond that will result in a 5% deduction from your possible semester grade.
2. Class Participation: Participation does not mean mere presence in the classroom. Instead, it means active listening – that is, the willingness to engage in the back-and-forth of open-ended and reasoned conversations by being open to what others have to say, risking our opinions, asking questions, and surfacing disagreements. Such “active listening” is essential to being a community of scholars.
3. Laptops and Other Communication Devices: Please note that the use of laptops and other communication devices can only be used during review days and on the two days of class presentations. On all other days they are not allowed to be used in class.
4. Reading Assignments: You are asked to study carefully all required readings by the day on which they appear on the projected course schedule. It is important to note that you are asked not merely to read all assigned materials but to study them. Such study may require several readings of the material.
5. Class Time: Class meetings will be, for the most part, a mixture of lecture and discussion. All class meetings will allow time for your questions.
6. Index Cards: In order to aid class discussion, you are required to submit an index card to me at the beginning of each class. On one side of the card, you are to write one or two important questions which you have about the assigned reading material for the day. On the other side, you are to write a response to the prior
class; you may write, for example, about either something important you learned, your critical reaction to something said in class, or an issue that you would like the class to revisit. Cards are to be turned in at the beginning of class.

7. **Exams**: There will be two in-class exams (midterm and final) during the semester. Review questions will be distributed at least one week prior to each exam.

8. **Quizzes**: These quizzes will be unannounced and will cover the reading material for the day. No makeup of these quizzes will be allowed.

9. **Final Paper**: A research paper thinking through the issue.

10. In the National Public Radio series “This I Believe,” people write thoughtful statements on what they basically believe. Students are to write a similar statement and present their conclusions for discussion in class. This statement is to be both academic (i.e., addressed to the scholars read during the semester) and personal.

**Chapman University Academic Integrity Policy:**
The course syllabus should include the following statement:
Chapman University is a community of scholars which emphasizes the mutual responsibility of all members to seek knowledge honestly and in good faith. Students are responsible for doing their own work, and academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated anywhere in the university.

**Students with Disabilities Policy:**
The course syllabus should include the following statement:
In compliance with ADA guidelines, students who have any condition, either permanent or temporary, that might affect their ability to perform in this class are encouraged to inform the instructor at the beginning of the term. The University, through the Center for Academic Success, will work with the appropriate faculty member who is asked to provide the accommodations for a student in determining what accommodations are suitable based on the documentation and the individual student needs. The granting of any accommodation will not be retroactive and cannot jeopardize the academic standards or integrity of the course.

Bibliography (optional):

**Prepared by:**
Carmichael C. Peters, Spring 2009

**Last revised:**
Carmichael C. Peters, Fall 2012