

REVISED Course Description

S11 **Great Questions: Skeptics and Believers**

We know that some ideas and religious beliefs about the origins, nature, and purpose of life, and of the universe, with God as the source of it all, can provide meaning, comfort, community, and expectations for a better life, even an afterlife, for many people. Unfortunately, we know too that different “articles of faith” can lead to unreasonable dogmas and exclusive incompatible claims, some of which are not benign, around which people tend to organize themselves, leading often to hostility and deadly conflict. Witness the historical record and, sadly, the daily news.

Our objective for this course is to provide some understanding and insight into the issues inherent in the diverse and strongly-held beliefs about religion, the nature of God, and God's very existence. In particular, we will examine changes in ideas and opinions, about religions and concepts of God, expressed, over the last 400 years, by a variety of thinkers, especially western philosophers: Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Kant; and we'll consider the more recent biting criticism, of religious-faith claims, made by the “new atheists” Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris. Finally, we'll examine ideas and statistics, from modern scientific research in positive psychology, about the role of spirituality and “wholesome” religious belief for human well-being.

Our guides in all of this are Professor Tyler Roberts, from Grinnell College, here in Iowa, and Professor Jonathan Haidt from the University of Virginia. Both are known for the depth and clarity of their presentations. We'll have a mix of video clips and selected readings from their writings to focus our lively but civil discussions.

USE THIS REVISED COURSE DESCRIPTION

Dated January 21, 2011