Images of journeys, quests, and pathways have served many cultures as apt depictions of humanity's spiritual and religious aspirations. Prior to the emergence of the cultures of modernity in the West, the fulfillment of these aspirations was understood in terms of living and having a proper relationship to a divine realm that transcended the human. In terms of the three traditions of Abrahamic religion, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this spiritual human quest had both its source and its fulfillment in God.

In many realms of contemporary culture, the character of these human aspirations and the possibility of their fulfillment have come into question. They may be seen as illusions (Freud), as masks of “a will to power,” (Nietzsche), or as by-products of natural processes (reductive materialism), with a corresponding skepticism or denial of their fulfillment in a relationship to God. The culture influenced by Western modernity (what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls “a secular age”) no longer presumes that religious faith can satisfy these aspirations, and even considers such aspirations to be distractions from the hard tasks of living in a reality devoid of meaning beyond whatever humans may construct. Yet, a “secular age” increased awareness of the great diversity of human religious expression and has resulted in an expansion of spiritual, moral, and religious possibilities by which many people experience the pull of these aspirations.

In the context of this contemporary cultural reality of “a secular age,” this course will thus explore key questions about these aspirations

• What are they?
• What are their sources?
• What do they tell us about our humanity?
• What do they tell us about the possibility of their fulfillment in terms of a human relationship to the divine
• In short, do these aspirations place us paths that lead to nowhere? Or do they set us on paths that lead to God?

The exploration of these questions will have two main, though related, foci: one will be upon the possibility of belief in a “secular age”; the other will be upon the shape of belief in a religiously plural world.