

# Course Syllabus

POL 498

## Why No Aliens?

Humanity's Existential Challenges  
(3 credits)

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### Course Overview

Why have no extraterrestrial or alien beings made contact with us? What may seem like a quirky, even trivial question is a conundrum of profound scientific, philosophical, cultural, and even existential importance, raising questions about our very future on Earth. This course covers various insights into the question, including the Fermi Paradox, Drake Equation, Kardashev Scale, and, in particular, the concept of the Great Filter. The major focus rests on students engaging with the challenges facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These challenges include, among others, the rapid advance of technology, widening global inequalities, weapons of mass destruction, financial crises, the growth of armed extremism, climate change, and geopolitical tensions. In a self-initiated and self-guided fashion, but in collaboration with classmates, students will focus on one of these major challenges. They will assemble a portfolio of research materials to generate a perspective and argument of their own. Students can thus creatively engage in critical thinking and Marianist values.

### MARIANIST VALUES AND COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

This course aims to articulate Marianist characteristics and values in the study of the profound challenges facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. By using Chaminade University's Marianist mission to guide our study, we will create a unique perspective. The importance of understanding adaptation and change is informed by a holistic global awareness that educates in family spirit for service, justice, and peace.

**Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)** employ the discipline frames of international studies, political economy, comparative politics, and Chaminade University's general education skills and values.

1. General Education Capstone CLO: Students will present mastery of foundational skills, Marianist and Native Hawaiian values, and a global awareness through a project-based learning approach.

2. Students will appraise global political, economic, and socio-cultural forces shaping our present world order and the profound challenges these create (IS PLO 1; Marianist Value: Integral Quality Education/Global Awareness)
3. Students will compare, contrast, and evaluate theories and perspectives analyzing the profound political, economic, technological, and socio-cultural dangers facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including looming global environmental threats (IS PLOs 2 & 3; Marianist Values: Educate for Service, Justice and Peace & Educate for Adaptation and Change)
4. Final Project CLO: Students will engage collaboratively with classmates to synthesize an individual position statement that advances a cogent argument focusing on the contemporary and potential future risks facing humanity (IS PLOs 4 & 5; Foundational Skills: Writing, Oral Communication, and Critical Thinking; Marianist Values: Integral Quality Education/Global Awareness, Educate for Service, Justice and Peace, Educate for Adaptation and Change & Educate in Family Spirit).

**Teaching Format:** This class is based on a combination of lectures, interactive discussions, readings, audiovisual materials, self-guided research, and presentations by students. A pro-active student-initiated project forms an important part of this course, since it allows students to gain important practical insights and enables them to directly apply the knowledge acquired in this course.

**Technology Resources and Requirements:** The basic online teaching system Chaminade University uses is Canvas. Much basic information, requirements, and other resources can be found on the Canvas site for this course. In particular, readings and other teaching supports can be found under FILES on the Canvas site for this course. For further information on how to navigate Canvas and trouble-shooting, please see their frequently asked questions page.

Technical Assistance for Canvas Users:

- Search for help on specific topics or get tips in [Canvas Students](#)
- [Live chat with Canvas Support for students](#)
- Canvas Support Hotline for students: +1-833-209-6111
- Watch this [video to get you started](#)
- [Online tutorials](#): click on “Students” role to access tutorials
- Contact the Chaminade IT Helpdesk for technical issues: [helpdesk@chaminade.edu](mailto:helpdesk@chaminade.edu) or call (808) 735-4855

**Course Schedule (subject to revision; more detailed information can be found on Canvas under the Modules):**

**Week 1: Introduction**

Introductions and discussion of course objectives, outline, and requirements; initial discussion of student-initiated projects & formulation of topics

**Week 2: The Kapmitz (I)—Earth Beckons**

Read Christopher A. McNally, *The Kapmitz (I)—Earth Beckons*, chapter 1, “The Xyrx”

**Week 3: Why No Aliens?**

Read Christopher A. McNally, *The Kapmitz (I)—Earth Beckons*, chapters 2&3, “Aisha” & “Music! Alien Music!”

Read the materials in the reading packet on Canvas

Study power point

**Week 4: Dr. Strangelove**

Viewing of “Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1964) directed by Stanley Kubrick. Available on Amazon Prime and YouTube for a small fee.

**Week 5: Existential Challenges Facing Humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Read Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, chapters 1 & 2, pp. 1-53

Read the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Global Issues reading packet on Canvas under files

Discussion of the film “Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb”

Discussion of student-initiated projects & formulation of topics

**Week 6: A Short History of Progress**

Read Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, pp. 55-106

**Week 7: A Natural History of Peace**

Read Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, chapter 4, pp. 81-106

Read Robert M. Sapolsky, “A Natural History of Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2006

Read Elke Weber, “Heads in the Sand,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2020

Read William MacAskill, “The Beginning of History,” Sept/Oct 2022

(Foreign Affairs articles are available on CANVAS)

**Week 8: MIDTERM**

Read Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, final chapter, pp. 107-132

View the documentary “Surviving Progress” (2011) Mathieu Roy and Harold Crooks with Ronald Wright; available at <https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/surviving-progress-2011>

**Week 9: The Kapmitz**

Read Christopher A. McNally, *The Kapmitz (I)—Earth Beckons, Acts I & II*

**Week 10: The Kapmitz**

Read Christopher A. McNally, *The Kapmitz (I)—Earth Beckons, Acts III & IV*

**Week 11: Aliens, Real Aliens**

Materials covered in the course so far will be reviewed

Discussion of the Kapmitz and essays related to their civilization and conception

Visual materials from *Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot* will be presented

**Week 12: Student Projects**

Discussion of individual final projects; refinement of topics and arguments; conversation on writing and presentation standards and grading

**Week 13: Student Summary Presentations of Final Project**

**Week 14: Thanksgiving Holiday**

**Week 15: Student Summary Presentations of Final Project**

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**Required Texts:**

1. Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005; ISBN-13: 978-0786715473
  2. Selected readings from *Foreign Affairs* and ALL other materials available on CANVAS (as scanned PDFs or original PDFs); *Foreign Affairs* articles can also be directly downloaded from the CUH library or you can purchase a subscription for a year for around USD 30.
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**Student Evaluation:**

The course will emphasize analytical thinking and include a variety of tasks to be completed. The course grade will be based on tests, oral participation & attendance, self-guided research, and one oral presentation. The following describes each of these tasks:

Opening Essay and Self-Introduction (8 points): See Canvas Module for Week 1

Midterm (17 points): This will be a multiple-choice test, assessing the understanding and knowledge students have acquired concerning key challenges facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Students can only miss this test for an emergency that will have to be proven by sufficient evidence. One-point deduction per day late applies.

Final Project: One major aspect of articulating Marianist values and characteristics is for students to generate a final project. For this project students will present mastery of foundational skills, Marianist and Native Hawaiian values and global awareness. This will be assessed by a project-based approach consisting of an in-depth investigation and effective oral presentation.

Oral Summary Presentation (25 points): In a self-initiated and self-guided fashion, but in collaboration with classmates, students will focus on one of the major existential challenges facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (see Appendix 1). Students will assemble a portfolio of research materials to generate a perspective and argument of their own. In this manner, students can creatively engage in critical thinking, General Education and International Studies capstone goals, and Marianist and Hawaiian values.

Students will be required to individually make a summary oral presentation on their selected topic/case study regarding one of the major challenges facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This includes the generation of a power point presentation on the selected case. Presentations should last at the very maximum 30 minutes. Points are awarded for the quality and style of the actual presentation in class. They encompass three tasks: A.) a thorough review of the selected challenge and its implications; B.) a coherent critique of the main points of view regarding this particular challenge, its importance, and potential future impacts; and C.) a personal analysis of this challenge by the student, elaborating their own individual major arguments in the style of *Foreign Affairs*.

Interactive Essay and Discussion Forum (30 points + Bonus Points):

Short Essay Questions: Essays should be answered in a clear and concise manner of between 150-250 words maximum (this is quite short, so concentrate on highlighting the main analytical points and directly addressing the question at hand). You generally have one to two weeks to complete each essay. Late submissions will incur a one-point deduction per day late.

Interactive Discussion: After completing your essay, you have the option of commenting on your classmates' essays in an open and engaging manner, but with online discussion etiquette in mind. Any type of comment is fine, such as engaging with their essay's main points or adding information that is pertinent. Personal comments that are relevant are also fine. Each peer response/reaction will generate one bonus point for the course with a limit of three (3) bonus points in total during the semester. Any further posts will be much appreciated, but will not generate additional points counting towards your course grade.

Class Participation (20 points): Class participation is an essential part of taking advantage of the materials presented in this course. Students are expected to have completed the required readings before each session to facilitate discussion and create an effective learning environment. While difficult to measure, class participation will be understood to consist of three basic elements: first, class attendance (a prerequisite for actually participating in discussions); second, listening carefully and attentively to classmates and lectures; and third, participating actively in class discussions, presenting creative and thoughtful ideas, and leading discussions, especially when issues pertaining to personal interest or knowledge are involved.

Virtually no participation will likely mean fewer points, while excellent participation, attendance, and attention to class will be reflected in the final course grade by the full participation grade.

Attendance Policy: Please note that one (1) absence is allowed; additional absences will incur a three (3) point deduction from the oral participation grade. Coming more than 15 minutes late to class is considered one absence.

### **Assessment and Grading**

A = 90% or higher; B = 80% - 89%; C = 70% - 79%; D = 60% - 69%; F = 59% or less  
Grades are calculated from the student's daily work, including participation, quizzes, tests, presentations, and the final test. They are interpreted as follows: A Outstanding scholarship and an unusual degree of intellectual initiative; B Superior work done in a consistent and intellectual manner; C Average grade indicating a competent grasp of subject matter; D Inferior work of the lowest passing grade, not satisfactory for fulfillment of prerequisite course work; F Failed to grasp the minimum subject matter; no credit given.

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### ***COURSE GROUND RULES***

General guidelines for student behavior at Chaminade University are provided in the Student Handbook. If you wish to contact the instructor, please do so by using email (Christopher.mcnally@chaminade.edu). Please:

1. Always include a subject line.
2. Be careful in wording your emails.
3. Always be as precise as possible.
4. Use standard fonts and formats.

If it is an emergency, you can contact the instructor via phone (though email is still best, since I check it often).

## ***ACADEMIC CONDUCT POLICY***

Campus life is a unique situation requiring the full cooperation of each individual. For many, Chaminade is not only a school, but a home and a place of work as well. That makes it a community environment in which the actions of one student may directly affect other students. Therefore, each person must exercise a high degree of responsibility. Any community must have standards of conduct and rules by which it operates. At Chaminade, these standards are outlined so as to reflect both the Catholic, Marianist values of the institution and to honor and respect students as responsible adults. All alleged violations of the community standards are handled through an established student conduct process, outlined in the Student Handbook, and operated within the guidelines set to honor both students' rights and campus values

Students should conduct themselves in a manner that reflects the ideals of the University. This includes knowing and respecting the intent of rules, regulations, and/or policies presented in the Student Handbook, and realizing that students are subject to the University's jurisdiction from the time of their admission until their enrollment has been formally terminated. Please refer to the Student Handbook for more details. A copy of the [Student Handbook \(Links to an external site.\)](#) is available on the Chaminade website.

## ***STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES***

If you need individual accommodations to meet course outcomes because of a documented disability, please speak with me to discuss your needs as soon as possible so that we can ensure your full participation in class and fair assessment of your work. Students with special needs who meet criteria for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provisions must provide written documentation of the need for accommodations from Kōkua 'Ike: Center for Student Learning by the end of week three of the class, in order for instructors to plan accordingly. If a student would like to determine if they meet the criteria for accommodations, they should contact the Kōkua 'Ike Coordinator at (808) 739-8305 for further information (ada@chaminade.edu).

## ***TITLE IX COMPLIANCE***

Chaminade University of Honolulu recognizes the inherent dignity of all individuals and promotes respect for all people. Sexual misconduct, physical and/or psychological abuse will NOT be tolerated at CUH. If you have been the victim of sexual misconduct, physical and/or psychological abuse, we encourage you to report this matter promptly. As a faculty member, I am interested in promoting a safe and healthy environment, and should I learn of any sexual misconduct, physical and/or psychological abuse, I must report the matter to the Title IX Coordinator. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources by visiting Campus Ministry, the Dean of Students Office, the Counseling Center, or the Office for Compliance and Personnel Services.

## ***CHARACTERISTICS OF MARIANIST EDUCATION***

The following are characteristics of the approach to education engaged at Marianist schools, including Chaminade University:

Educate for formation in faith

Provide an integral quality education

Educate in family spirit

Educate for service, justice and peace

Educate for adaptation and change

## ***CREDIT HOUR POLICY***

The unit of semester credit is defined as university-level credit that is awarded for the completion of coursework. One credit hour reflects the amount of work represented in the intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement for those learning outcomes. Each credit hour earned at Chaminade University should result in a minimum of 45 hours of engagement, regardless of varying credits, duration, modality, or degree level. This equates to one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester. Terms that have alternative lengths, such as 10-week terms, should have an equivalent amount of faculty instruction and out-of-class student work to meet each credit hour. Direct instructor engagement and out-of-class work result in total student engagement time of 45 hours for one credit. The number of engagement hours may be higher, as needed to meet specific learning outcomes.

### *Specific Credit Situations*

The minimum 45 hours of engagement per credit hour can be satisfied in fully online, internship, or other specialized courses through several means, including (a) regular online instruction or interaction with the faculty member and fellow students and (b) academic engagement through extensive reading, research, online discussion, online quizzes or exams; instruction, collaborative group work, internships, laboratory work, practica, studio work, and preparation of papers, presentations, or other forms of assessment. This policy is in accordance with federal regulations and regional accrediting agencies.

### *How This Course Meets the Credit Hour Policy*

This is a three-credit hour course requiring 135 clock hours of student engagement, per the official CUH Credit Hour Policy. Students enrolled in this course are anticipated to spend 37.5 hours in class; 20 hours researching and writing essays assigned for this



course, including reflections on classmates' essays; 20 hours to prepare for and take the examination in this course; and 20 hours to prepare for and present the final oral presentation in this course. There will be an additional 37.5 hours of work required beyond this, especially reading of the assigned course materials (two books and various shorter pieces), independent research, studying and interactive discussions.

### ***INSTRUCTOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION***

Prof. Christopher A. McNally is a Professor of Political Economy at Chaminade University and Adjunct Senior Fellow at the East-West Center in Honolulu, USA. His research focuses on comparative capitalisms, especially the nature and logic of China's capitalist transition. He is also working on a book project that studies the implications of China's capitalist reemergence on the global order. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington and has edited four volumes, including an examination of China's political economy: *China's Emergent Political Economy – Capitalism in the Dragon's Lair* (Routledge, 2008). He also has authored numerous book chapters, policy analyses, editorials and articles in journals such as *World Politics*, *International Politics*, *The Review of International Political Economy*, *Business and Politics*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, and *Comparative Social Research*.

### ***SYLLABUS AND COURSE MODIFICATION***

This syllabus is only a plan. The instructor may modify the plan and other aspects of the course. The requirements of the course may be altered from those appearing in the syllabus. Further, the plan contains criteria by which the student's progress and performance in the course will be measured. These criteria may also be changed.

## **APPENDIX 1: Examples of Existential Challenges Facing Humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Century**

Please refer to the United Nation's Global Issues here: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues>;

and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals here: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

### **Geopolitical challenges:**

1. The rise of new global powers, such as China and other developing economies
2. The challenge of a resurgent Russia
3. Armed Islamic extremists and terror groups
4. Regional geopolitical tensions, especially across Eurasia and North Africa
5. Weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, biological, cyber-based, etc.
6. Competition over new frontiers in space, cyberspace, under the oceans, at the poles, etc.
7. Governing the global commons (also part of biosphere challenges)

### **Geo-economic challenges:**

1. How to sustain globalization?
2. Recurrent financial crises – booms and busts
3. The governance of the international monetary system – the future of the US dollar
4. Global inequalities and their consequences
5. “Spread” and “Bounty” – skill-biased technological change
6. Demographic challenges, especially large differences in population growth rates globally and their consequences

### **Biosphere challenges:**

1. Threat of global “ecocide” and civilization collapse – as in *Collapse* (8+4 challenges) (Diamond, 2005) and *A Short History of Progress* (Wright, 2005)
2. How to govern the global commons, such as the oceans, watersheds, the atmosphere, and space
3. Bioengineered organisms (beyond GMO?) and their potential impact
4. Resource peaks and future resource availability

### **Geo-technological challenges:**

1. Artificial intelligence
2. The Singularity
3. Global cyber-integration and its vulnerabilities; cyber-war
4. Bioengineered organisms, such as in weaponized viruses
5. New weapons of mass destruction, as well as the spread of technologies for already available weapons of mass destruction

### **Geo-ideational challenges:**

1. Our era and the ethical questions surrounding it
2. Is there a vision for the future of humanity? What are its ethics, propositions, and ambitions?
3. Challenges to old ideologies, especially the ossified (neo-)liberalism versus social democracy debate
4. New extremist and radicalized ideologies, such as Islamic fundamentalism, neo-fascist movements, green extremism, etc.
5. New conceptions of the basic building blocks of humanity in terms of the role of women, family, life, and death

GRADING RUBRIC	1 = Extremely poor performance; or no show	2 = Poor performance; major problems	3 = Average performance; some problems	4 = Good performance; only minor problems	5 = Excellent performance
<u>Oral</u> presentation style and engagement with class					
<u>Language, slide design</u> and visual integration of materials					
<u>Quality of Evidence</u> assembled for presentation					
<u>Analysis and Argument:</u> major points of evidence and arguments pertaining to the topic at hand are well rendered					
<u>Critical Analysis:</u> Thesis and logic of argument portray critical engagement with the topic at hand and awareness of opposing views/ different perspectives					