Varieties of Religious Naturalism

Wesley J. Wildman — Boston University — Spring 2012 — STH TT861/TT961

Course Description

The aim of this course is to learn about various varieties of religious naturalism and how they have been, and can be, incorporated into philosophical and theological reflection. The seminar will read a variety of works in contemporary religious naturalism, from twentieth-century classics to current contributions, and from theoretical analyses of the meaning of naturalism to surveys attempting to map out the territory of plausible viewpoints. We will also track the close relationship between religious naturalism and both ecologically-rooted forms of spirituality and nature-centered forms of mysticism.

The class is intended for advanced masters students and doctoral candidates interested in contemporary forms of philosophical and theological reflection on nature and God, and in forms of spirituality rooted in the natural world. Students registered at the 900-level have readings and a bibliographic task to complete over and above the obligations of students registered at the 800-level. Classes will meet once a week on Wednesdays from 8:00 to 11:00 in STH 319. Each class will be conducted in the seminar discussion format with lectures given by the instructor as needed or requested. The 800-level version of this course counts (1) as an MTS Core Concentration course for Science and Religion, for Theology, and for Area B; and (2) as an MDiv Theology 3 Core Elective. It may also count (3) as a requirement for a BTI Certificate program in science and religion.

The main product of the course will be a research paper on some aspect of the course material, topic to be approved in advance by the instructor (50%; 3,000 words for 800-level students, 5,000 words for 900-level students). There will also be several 1,500-word reviews of books and articles presented in class, brief reviews of excerpts from Gottlieb (2004) or other sources, short analyses of usages of the terms “naturalism” and “religious naturalism” suitable for web posting, and annotation of links to relevant web sites, all to appear on a public website for the class (30%). The remainder of the grade (20%) will be based on the quality of seminar participation, including attendance, timeliness, and discussion. Incompletes are not allowed—except when they are; paperwork is necessary. Plagiarism is not allowed—ever. Know the rules.

In addition to the public website, the class will have a private website at blackboard.bu.edu. This site will contain announcements, a discussion board, and places to claim assignments to avoid overlap with other students.

Short Description

The aim of this seminar is to learn about varieties of religious naturalism and how they have been, and can be, incorporated into philosophical and theological reflection. The seminar will read a variety of works in contemporary religious naturalism, from twentieth-century classics to current contributions, and from theoretical analyses of the meaning of naturalism to surveys attempting to map out the territory of plausible viewpoints. We will also track the close relationship between religious naturalism and both ecologically-rooted forms of spirituality and nature-centered forms of mysticism.

Learning Goals

By the end of this class, students should:

- understand the variety of religious naturalisms along with their characteristic strengths and weakness,
- understand how religious naturalism connects to the history of philosophy and theology, especially in western intellectual culture but also in other philosophical and religious traditions, and
- be able to express their own theological and philosophical outlook more clearly in relation to the variety of religious naturalisms.

Special Considerations

The STH Academic Code of Conduct may be found on the STH website at: www.bu.edu/sth/academic/academic-conduct. All students are required to familiarize themselves with this code, its definitions of misconduct, and its sanctions. Students should especially familiarize themselves with the section on plagiarism.
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Students with Disabilities—Any students who believe they have a disability should meet with BU Disability Services as soon as possible at the beginning of the semester to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that may be necessary to ensure your successful completion of course requirements. That office is at 19 Deerfield Street and can be contacted at 617-353-3658. Request for accommodations are then sent by that office to the Academic Dean who forwards them to the Instructor.

Students taking the course for doctoral credit are required to do all work at a doctoral level. In addition, students should submit one review of a recent book related to the course content for publication in an appropriate journal. The length should be between 500-1000 words.

Required Books (800-level and 900-level)

Berry, Thomas. The Great Work (Three Rivers Press, 1999; 978-0609804995)
Clark, Thomas W. Encountering Naturalism: A Worldview and Its Uses (Center for Naturalism, 2007; 978-0979111105)
Hogue, Michael S. The Promise of Religious Naturalism (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010; 978-0742562615)
Raymo, Chet. When God is Gone, Everything is Holy: The Making of a Religious Naturalist (Sorin Books, 2008; 978-1933495132)

Required Books (900-level only)

De Caro, Mario; Macarthur, David (eds). Naturalism in Question (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008; 978-0674030411).
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Recommended Books for Further Reading


Buchler, Justus. Metaphysics of Natural Complexes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008; 978-0791401835)


Crosby, Donald A. Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008; 978-0791475201)


Goetz, Stewart; Taliaferro, Charles. Naturalism (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008; 978-0802807687) — against naturalism in the sense of materialism, not religious naturalism

Habermas, Jürgen. Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays (Polity, 2008; 978-0745638256)


Nielson, Kai. Naturalism and Religion (Prometheus Books, 2001; 978-1573928533)


Reich, Lou. Hume’s Religious Naturalism (University Press of America, 1998; 978-0761809821)

Rue, Loyal D. Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail (Rutgers University Press, 2004; 978-0813539553)


White, Carol Wayne. The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631-1679): Reverberations from a Mystical Naturalism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008; 978-0791474662)


Seminar Schedule

Introduction

Week 1  Naturalism, Religious Naturalism, and Ecological Spirituality

  >  Required Reading for ALL: Raymo; read it after class if you can’t get to it before class; all other readings in this course should be read prior to class.
  >  Task for ALL: Read three diverse selections from Gottlieb 2004. Write a two-paragraph review of each selection. The first paragraph should be a summary of the piece. The second should be a personal response. Don’t worry about overlaps with other students; the more the merrier for this exercise. Voice: For each review, the summary should be impartial and brief. The response can be as wild and colorful as you like; nothing conforming to basic rules of public decency is
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out of bounds. Target the review to curious students like yourself. Be yourself. Writing quality matters. Deadline: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Friday after class.

> **Task for ALL:** Find one online source about naturalism (not necessarily religious naturalism; that will be for next week). Rate (out of 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3, 3.5, or 4 stars) and write a 100-word review of the site. Confine the scope of your review to the usefulness of the site for understanding religious forms of naturalism. Reserve your review site using the class website’s discussion board designated for that purpose. Voice: Aim the review for web browsers like yourself. The review should be formal, fair, and helpful. Writing quality matters. Deadline: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Sunday after class.

**Part 1: Mapping the Territory—Without Mistaking Map for Territory**

**Week 2**  
**Map #1**

> Required Reading for ALL: Stone.
> Required Reading for TT956 only: Corrington, Introduction and ch 1.
> **Task for ALL:** Read three more diverse selections from Gottlieb 2004 (that makes 6 so far). Write a two-paragraph review of each selection, as described above. Deadline: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday before the next class.
> **Task for ALL:** Find one online source about about specifically religious naturalism. Rate and review as described above. To avoid duplication, reserve your review site using the class website’s discussion board designated for that purpose. Deadline: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday before the next class.

**Week 3**  
**Map #2**

> Required Reading for ALL: Ritchie.
> Required Reading for TT956 only: Corrington, ch. 2.
> **Task for ALL:** Read three more diverse selections from Gottlieb 2004 (that makes 9 so far). Write a two-paragraph review of each selection, as described above. Deadline: via email to the instructor by 11:59pm Tuesday before the next class.

**Week 4**  
**Map #3**

> Required Reading for ALL: Clark.
> Required Reading for TT956: Corrington, ch. 3-4.

**Part 2: Philosophical Dimensions of Religious Naturalism**

**Week 5**  
**Whiteheadian Naturalism**

> **Required Reading for ALL:** Whitehead.
> **Required Reading for TT956:** Four chapters of your choice from De Caro.

**Week 6**  
**Hartshornian Naturalism**

> **Required Reading for ALL:** Griffin.
> **Required Reading for TT956:** Four more chapters of your choice from De Caro.

**Week 7**  
**Religion of Nature**

> **Required Reading for ALL:** Crosby.
> **Required Reading for TT956:** Peden.
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Part 3: Theological Dimensions of Religious Naturalism

Week 8  Naturalism and the Abrahamic Faiths
  > Required Reading for ALL: Johnston.
  > Required Reading for TT956: Cohen (out of print so you’ll have to track it down)

Week 9  No Class: Spring Recess

Week 10  Naturalism and Christianity
  > Required Reading for ALL: Peacocke.
  > Required Reading for TT956: Shook & Kurtz.

Part 4: Ecological and Spiritual Dimensions of Religious Naturalism

Week 11  Naturalism, Spirituality, and Evolution
  > Required Reading for ALL: Peters.
  > Required Reading for TT956: Four chapters of your choice from Peden.

Week 12  Naturalism, Spirituality, and Ecotheological Responsibility, I
  > Required Reading for ALL: Hogue.
  > Required Reading for TT956: Four chapters of your choice from Peden.

Week 13  Naturalism, Spirituality, and Ecotheological Responsibility, II
  > Visiting Professor: Dr. Mike Hogue
  > Required Reading for ALL: Reread Hogue.
  > Required Reading for TT956: none.

Week 14  Naturalism, Spirituality, and the Depths of Nature
  > Required Reading for ALL: Goodenough.
  > Required Reading for TT956: none.

Week 15  Naturalism, Spirituality, and the Future of Life on Earth
  > Required Reading for ALL: Berry.
  > Required Reading for TT956: none.

Conclusion

Week 16  Naturalism and Religious Naturalism, Spirituality and Ecology
  > Required Reading for ALL: none.
  > Required Reading for TT956: none.
  > Task for ALL: Submit essay on a topic approved by instructor. Deadline: via email to instructor before class.