

**College of Charleston**  
**Department of Religious Studies**  
**Spring 2013**

**HONS 381: RELIGION AND SCIENCE—CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN NORTH AMERICA**

**Instructor:** Dr. Todd LeVasseur

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**Office Hours:** Wednesdays 1pm to 2:45pm, T/TR 12:45pm to 2:45pm, or by appointment (email works best)

**Email:** [levasseurjt@cofc.edu](mailto:levasseurjt@cofc.edu) (I typically respond to emails within 24 hours, but expect longer on weekends)

**Lectures:** Maybank 320 T/TR 3:05pm-4:20pm

\*\*\*Any student may email me for a copy of my teaching philosophy.\*\*\*

**Course Description and Instructional Format:** This course serves as a comprehensive introduction to the study of the interface between religion and science. It is both thematic and historical in scope and trajectory, focusing mainly (but not exclusively) on Western, and especially North American, intellectual, political, philosophical, scientific, and theological lineages of the religion/science interface. Classes will largely be based on a **seminar format**, meaning we will spend a majority of most classes discussing the assigned readings. This discussion will occur in small groups and amongst the class as a larger whole. Students should not expect structured daily lectures, but rather should expect to be called upon to vocalize their thoughts about the readings and are expected to be able to articulate key points in the readings. It is important to note from the outset that the course is not (a) an attack on religion, and especially Christianities, and/or (b) an attack on science, and (c) the course does not privilege any particular epistemological or ontological standpoint, although neo-Darwinian evolution is taken as a common starting point.

**Course Goals and Objectives:** Specific goals of the course are as follows:

1. To introduce the student to the diverse and growing field of “Religion and Science,” to a sample of its methodologies, some of its key debates, and to some of its key scholars
2. To introduce the student to naturalistic approaches to understanding the phenomenon of religion
3. To explore the religion/science interface in Western thought, from Europe to contemporary North America

Specific objectives of the course are as follows:

1. To facilitate the development of critical thinking skills regarding religion and science issues by having in-depth discussions about assigned readings and contemporary events
2. To systematically analyze and synthesize various naturalistic theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of religion, and critiques of these approaches
3. To study key events in the historical trajectory of the development of science (and to thus define science) and the response of religious leaders and institutions to this development

- a. To discuss some of the key questions that have motivated the human search for knowledge and how religious and scientific cosmologies make claims about reality
  - b. To focus on Western dialogues in this trajectory
  - c. To focus on North American dialogues in this trajectory
4. To gain a working knowledge of why the religion/science debate is both a political and religious issue in the United States
5. To develop interdisciplinary acumen in regards to understanding religion-science interactions
6. To develop comfort in working with small groups and in participating in class discussions by requiring active engagement in both forms of discussion during every class meeting

**Some views that will mark and guide our exploration:**

“[O]ne can only speak of [religions] of particular times and places, or one can speak of [religious] texts, or perhaps of specified [religious] traditions and their material, intellectual, and social productions. From my point of view, there is no [religion] that speaks on its own, no capacious [“tradition”] that contains things within itself.” –Raoul Birnbaum, “Socially Engaged Buddhism and the Trajectory of Buddhist Ethical Consciousness,” 2009

“The scientific temper is one that looks for the appropriate method in each field, that carefully distinguishes different sorts of questions for differing treatment. To become obsessed with a method for its own sake and try to use it where it is unsuitable is thoroughly unscientific. And the purpose of all *explanation* must be, ultimately, to illuminate the chaotic world with which we are actually surrounded. That is what we have to explain.” --Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, 1978

“The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile, but that it is indifferent.” – Stanley Kubrick

“[The Holocaust] confronts us with unanswerable questions. But let us agree to one principle: no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.” –Rabbi Irving Greenberg

“If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.” –Meister Eckhart, Catholic mystic from the Middle Ages

“If one could conclude as to the nature of the Creator from a study of creation, it would appear that God has an inordinate fondness for stars and beetles... The Creator would appear as endowed with a passion for stars, on the one hand, and for beetles on the other, for the simple reason that there are nearly 300,000 species of beetle known, and perhaps more, as compared with somewhat less than 9,000 species of birds and a little over 10,000 species of mammals.”--J.B.S. Haldane

**Required Texts:** Available at the CofC and University bookstores (and most likely used copies on-line that are cost-friendly):

- 1) *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* eds. Clayton and Simpson, 2008 (RS in syllabus)
- 2) *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Dennett and Plantinga, 2011
- 3) *Letter to a Christian Nation* Harris, 2008

There will also be required readings that will be made available online on OAKS. These readings are to be printed out and brought to class for discussion. You should bring all assigned readings (book, course packet, or on-line) to class for the day they are assigned, as this is when you should raise questions about any content you did not understand. It is the student's responsibility to approach the instructor outside of class if class discussion or class readings were not clear, while keeping in mind that not everything assigned to be read will be discussed in class.

Recommended websites:

- <http://thankgodforevolution.com/> Thank God for Evolution, Michael Dowd
- <http://consc.net/guide.html> clearinghouse for entries on philosophy of mind
  - <http://www.iep.utm.edu/red-ism/> entry on reductionism
- <http://www.hecc.ubc.ca/> Centre for Human Evolution, Cognition, and Culture
- <http://richarddawkins.net/> Richard Dawkins
- <http://www.ibcsr.org/> Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion
  - <http://www.spectrumsproject.org/>

### **Requirements, Expectations, and Resources:**

1) *Attendance:* Attendance is mandatory. Roll will be taken at the beginning of each lecture. If you are more than 5 minutes late to class, you will be counted as absent for that day. Notes or discussion of class material that have already been covered will not be provided by the instructor for any student. Only excused absences render the above moot—it is the student's responsibility to approach the Office of Student Affairs and present them with valid excuses for missing class, at which point I receive an email that says either “documented” or “undocumented.”

Undocumented excuses count as an absence. After 2 unexcused absences, your grade drops by 1/3 letter (i.e. A to A-, C- to D+, etc.) for each successive absence. After 5 unexcused absences (i.e. your 6<sup>th</sup> absence), you will receive a WF and be dropped from the course. ***Please observe the totality of this attendance policy.***

2) *Common Courtesy:* As stated by the Code of Conduct in the CofC Student Handbook, cell phones and other electronic devices must be turned off during the whole class period. Computers are not allowed in the classroom except for research purposes and accessing online readings. The instructor also reserves the right to ask any student engaging in disruptive behavior (i.e. whispering, reading a newspaper, texting messages, etc.) to leave the class. If the instructor repeatedly observes a student using their computer/phone for activities not related to class, that student will receive an F for class participation for the semester. Please observe this policy with diligence.

3) *Honor Code:* On all work submitted for credit by students at CofC, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in

doing this assignment.” The legal code of the College specifically prohibits plagiarism, cheating, bribing, conspiracy, misrepresentation, and fabrication. If it is proven that any student has committed any of the above infractions of the honor code, then that student will automatically fail the course with an XF. In addition, violations of the Academic Honesty Guidelines shall result in judicial action. Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration (working together without permission) is a form of cheating.

4) *Accommodation for Disabilities:* To request classroom accommodation, you must first register with the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. This office will provide you with documentation that you will then provide to me when you request accommodation. For more information, please see <http://www.cof.cedu/~cds/index.htm>

5) Counseling Resources, a writing lab, and a career resource center are all available to CofC students and are staffed with trained professionals.

6) *Assignments:* Your grade will be determined based on the performance you exhibit for the following:

1. Class participation—This includes attendance; how often and how well you contribute to class discussions and small group discussions; and evidence you have completed and grappled with the assigned readings. 16% of grade.
2. Reading Quizzes—There will be periodical reading quizzes emailed to the class. These are open book quizzes to be completed before arriving to class, uploaded to OAKS. 8 quizzes over the semester, 3% each, for 24% of grade. Keep in mind, as you read, you will want to take notes on the following, as this will help you study for exams:
  - (1) a summary of the main argument/s and point/s of the article;
  - (2) an explanation of why these points are important to the author (i.e. why does the argument matter)
  - (3) a brief summary and exploration of the evidence presented by the author
  - (4) and mention of what other authors/articles the reading is in dialogue with, and why/how.
3. Research paper—You will write a 2,000 word research paper on a contemporary religion and science issue in America. Full details will be discussed in class, due Sun, 4/21 at 5pm, uploaded to OAKS. For each part of every successive 24-hour period after the due date 10 points will be deducted from the paper. 15% of grade.
4. With 2 other students, you are to interview and film at least 10 **random people** you meet on the street about their views of religion and science—how they define each, if they think they are compatible, and other relevant questions you create. This video should be edited and be submitted by the final exam, when it will also be viewed by the class. Each student should also turn in a 300 word summary of the experience, including an analysis of the views using skills gained during the semester. 10% of grade.
5. Mid-term and Final Exam—held in class. The final exam will most likely be take-home essay questions, with an in-class component. 15% mid-term; 20% final, for 35% of grade.
6. Extra Credit—There will be options for extra credit as the semester develops. Most likely these will include attending guest lectures, watching movies, writing book reviews, analyzing coverage from a variety of sources about a current environmental issue, and then turning in a 1 to 2 page analysis of the event/item. .5 points will be awarded for

each event that will count towards your final grade. Each student may earn a total of 2.5 possible extra credit points that are added onto their final score. The final day to turn in extra credit work is April 24<sup>th</sup> by 5pm. Any student with perfect attendance will automatically receive .5 point on their final grade (documented excuses count as an absence against this point).

Grading Scale: A: 94-100; A-: 90-93; B+: 88-89; B: 83-87; B-: 80-82; C+: 78-79; C: 73-77; C-: 70-72; D+: 68-69; D: 63-67; D-: 61-62; F: 60.49 or below (all grades ending in .5 or higher are rounded up to the next point)

### **Course Schedule**

\*the course is structured so that ideally there is an average of 30 pages to be read between T and TR, and 60-70 pages between TR and T (so 1 article or chapter during the week, and 2 over the weekend)

Unit 1: Introduction; Exploration of Key Terms (anthropic principle; naturalism/naturalistic; reductionism/reductionistic; supernatural; mind; brain; emergence/holism; religion; cosmology)  
TR 1/10: receive syllabus; class exercise—what is religion?

T 1/15: Pals on Eliade; RS—Introduction;

- <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Quizzes/BeliefOMatic.aspx> take this quiz and come ready to discuss it (keep your results private, you will not be asked to share them)

TR 1/17: What is evolution? Selections from Darwin and Goodenough

Unit 2: Naturalistic approaches to theorizing/understanding “Religion”

T 1/22: Park and McNamara, “Religion, Meaning, and the Brain;” Pinker, “The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion”

TR 1/24: selections from Guthrie *Faces in the Cloud*

T 1/29: Wilson, “Testing Major Evolutionary Hypotheses about Religion with a Random Sample;” Wilson, ERN entry on religion and environmental stewardship

TR 1/31: RS chapter 25—Atran, “The Scientific Landscape of Religion”

T 2/5: Kirkpatrick, “Religion is not an Adaptation;” Pyassianen, “Amazing Grace: Religion and the Evolution of the Human Mind”

TR 2/7: RS chapter 31—Esbjorn-Hargensand and Wilber, “Toward a Comprehensive Integration of Science and Religion”

T 2/12: Newberg, “Religious and Spiritual Practices: A Neurochemical Perspective;” Roth, “Against Cognitive Imperialism;” Wallace, “A Response to ‘Against Cognitive Imperialism’”

TR 2/14: Schneider, “What Happens to Religion When it is Biologized?;” Sands, “The Science of God: Natural Origins of Religion in an Evolutionary Perspective”

T 2/19: mid-term

Unit 3: Philosophy of Religion and Science; Theological Debates

TR 2/21: RS chapter 42—Dembski, “In Defence [sic] of Intelligent Design”

T 2/26: Numbers, “Creationism, Intelligent Design, and Modern Biology;” McGrath, “The Ideological Uses of Evolutionary Biology in Recent Atheist Apologetics”

TR 2/28: RS chapters 43—Pennock, “The Pre-modern Sins of Intelligent Design”

**Spring Break—go outside and have fun!**

T 3/12: Dennett and Plantinga *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?*

\*read the whole book; keep in mind the first chapter is philosophically dense, but they build on it and unpack it with subsequent exchanges so it becomes clearer as you read

#### Unit 4: Religion and Science in the West and in America

TR 3/14: Gingerich, “The Copernican Revolution;” Lindberg, “Galileo, the Church, and the Cosmos;” Osler, “Mechanical Philosophy”

T 3/19: Livingstone, “Re-placing Darwinism and Christianity;” Hewlett, “Evolution: The Controversy with Creationism;” Larson, “The Scopes Trial in History and Legend”

TR 3/21: Wuthnow, “Old Fissures and New Fractures in American Religious Life;” Falwell, “The Imperative of Moral Involvement”

T 3/26: Press, “Separation of Church and State” and “God in the Classroom”

TR 3/28: Lakoff, ““Metaphor, Morality, and Politics” found at

<http://www.wgcd.org/issues/Lakoff.html>

T 4/2: Begin *Letter to a Christian Nation* preface to pg. 79

TR 4/6: finish Harris

T 4/9: Schimmel, selections from *The Tenacity of Unreasonable Beliefs*

TR 4/11: Stenmark, “Ways of Relating Science and Religion”

#### Unit 5: Other Issues and Concluding Views

T 4/16: Rubenstein, “Cosmic Singularities: On the Nothing and the Sovereign;” Harrison, “‘Science’ and ‘Religion’: Constructing the Boundaries”

TR 4/18: RS chapter 54—Cole-Turner, “Biotechnology and the Religion-Science Discussion”

T 4/23: RS chapter 53 and 55—Rolston III, “Environmental Ethics and Religion/Science” and Howell, “Relations between *Homo sapiens* and Other Animals”

Final Exam