RLST 28901 (also SIGN 26072):

RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND NATURALISM: IS THERE A PROBLEM?

Spring term, 2021
M/W, 1:50-3:10pm CST

(Meeting remotely, possibly with synchronous and asynchronous sessions)

Instructor: Dan Arnold (d-arnold@uchicago.edu)

Office hours: Weekly, via Zoom, on Wednesdays, 3:30-5:30pm CST (or by arrangement with instructor); Zoom coordinates available on Canvas

Course objectives and protocols:

The idea that “religion” and “science” are fundamentally at odds is familiar, indeed perhaps among the orienting ideas of modernity. Attending to some historically important approaches to the endlessly vexed question of how best to think about religion and science in light of one another, this class will consider such questions as whether the problems seem different if we ask not about religion and science, but rather about religion and nature.

The point is, any discussion of this issue depends on just what “science,” “religion,” and “nature” are all taken to mean – and while nothing we can say in ten weeks can settle any of these matters, among the arguments I want us to entertain is one to the effect that scientific naturalism is basically in tension with religion (whatever that is) only given a scientistic conception of “nature” – and on any such conception, it turns out that mind is just as problematic as “religion” is, which makes for an impoverished understanding not only of religion but also of science itself. What, then, might the tired “religion and science” debate look like if instead the relevant issues are thought to involve religion and nature? Does the very idea of scientific inquiry look a little different if understood in terms of a suitably capacious understanding of “nature”? These will be among our questions.

How we’ll try to go about this:

Given the learning conditions imposed by the current global pandemic, we will be collectively entertaining these historically and philosophically significant works not, as would be ideal, face-to-face in a shared space, but virtually, via Zoom, Canvas, and Panopto. Note, however, that “virtual” is derived from the word virtue; thus, to describe something as virtual is literally to say it possesses some of the “virtues” of an original (hence, the familiar sense of virtual as meaning “almost or
nearly as described”). Spurred, perhaps, by the interpretive and existential challenges posed by our materials, let us work together to identify and nurture the kinds of virtues that, notwithstanding the limitations occasioned by the health crisis, may be conducive to our realizing the experience of really engaging these texts collectively, as part of a community of people (that of the University of Chicago) commonly dedicated to the idea that scholarly understanding is intrinsically valuable. Whatever the conditions under which it is pursued, intellectual inquiry is most fruitful when disciplined by virtues like patience, honesty, and open-mindedness.

In bringing our shared attention to questions of science, religion, and nature, let us strive to cultivate and exemplify, even if only virtually, the same kinds of virtues, which are methodologically epitomized by the principle of hermeneutic charity: the presumption that what one’s interlocutor says makes sense, and that one’s first thought upon supposing any argument or claim frivolous ought therefore to be that we likely do not understand it. This is among other things to allow oneself to risk being changed by the engagement. All the relevant virtues start with good communication; please be in touch with questions, comments, or concerns if any of the following (or foregoing) is unclear, and please keep in touch throughout the term. It goes without saying that carrying on our studies under current conditions is less than ideal – let us all commit to doing what we can to make it work.

Course conduct and requirements:

While considerations such as students in different time zones may make it desirable for us to alternate synchronous with asynchronous sessions, I am hopeful that it will work out for us just to go ahead and meet synchronously twice a week (with the time of one such session perhaps negotiable). With any luck, this will have been worked out early in our first session, perhaps before you even read this (assuming you read this far in). Our synchronous sessions on Zoom will be recorded, making them available to those unable to attend (or for anyone to revisit); availability of recorded content will be announced as it comes online.

While I myself will have a fair amount to say about most of the readings, it is hoped that collective discussion of our readings will benefit from everyone’s spirited participation. Students taking the course for a grade will additionally be required to complete a paper of moderate length (10-15 pages), due at the end of Spring term (i.e., Friday, June 4th, at 5pm). Late papers will not be accepted without prior arrangement. Guidance will be given in advance of the final writing exercise; meanwhile, for extremely helpful advice on writing philosophical papers – good advice, indeed, on writing most any sort of scholarly essay – I urge you to consult philosopher James Pryor’s advice at <https://philosophy.dept.shef.ac.uk/papers/PryorWRITE.pdf>.

Assigned readings:

All required readings are available, mostly as PDFs, on the course Canvas site, where (n.b.) you will find them under “Library Reserves.” There are just three books I have assigned in their entirety, and while e-versions are (or will be) available on reserve, you may want to purchase one or more of these; if so, I would strongly encourage you to buy them (or anything else you read!) from the Seminary Coop Bookstore (https://www.semcoop.com), a truly extraordinary asset to our
community, and one that it behooves us all to sustain during this challenging time. (Students found to have purchased books elsewhere may be subject to disapproving glares.) The three assigned books are:

– Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True*
– His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom*

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS:**

**WEEK 1:** Are we sure we know what *religion* is? *(Mon., March 29 / Wed., March 31)*

Reading for Wednesday: Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”

**WEEK 2:** Is it a question of rationality? *(Mon., April 5 / Wed., April 7)*

Reading for Monday: Dan Garber, “Religion and Science, Faith and Reason: Some Pascalian Reflections”

Reading for Wednesday: Holmes Rolston III, “Methods in Scientific and Religious Inquiry”

**WEEK 3:** Is it a matter of different kinds of *belief*? *(Mon., April 12 / Wed., April 14)*

Reading for Monday: Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lectures on Religious Belief”

Reading for Wednesday: Rudolf Bultmann, “Science and Existence”

**WEEK 4:** Could religious phenomena be *natural*? *(Mon., April 19 / Wed., April 21)*

Reading for Monday: William James, “Religion and Neurology,” “The Reality of the Unseen” *(Varieties of Religious Experience, Lectures I and III)*

Reading for Wednesday: Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “Introduction: Wonder and the Births of Philosophy” *(Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe)*
**WEEK 5:** Is evolution really such a problem? (Mon., April 26 / Wed., April 28)

Reading for Monday: Daniel Dennett, “The Roots of Religion” + “Religion, the Early Days” (from Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon)

Reading for Wednesday: Alvin Plantinga, “The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism” (from Where the Conflict Really Lies)

**WEEK 6:** Does “evolutionary psychology” vindicate Buddhism? (Mon., May 3 / Wed., May 5)

Reading for Monday and Wednesday: Robert Wright, Why Buddhism Is True

**WEEK 7:** Well, what do some Buddhists say? (Mon., May 10 / Wed., May 12): ...

Reading for Monday and Wednesday: His Holiness the Dalai Lama, The Universe in a Single Atom

**WEEK 8:** Is it a problem that ideals are ideal? (Mon., May 17 / Wed., May 19)

Reading for Monday and Wednesday: John Dewey, A Common Faith

**WEEK 9:** What did America’s greatest philosopher-scientist have to say? (Mon., May 24 / Wed., May 26):


Final papers due Friday, June 4th, at 5pm