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## Teaching & Learning Guide for: On Spirituality: Natural and Non-Natural

Thomas B. Ellis

### Author's Introduction

Religious conversations – both scholarly and popular – routinely employ the term ‘spirituality,’ a term whose ubiquity is matched only by its obscurity. ‘Spirituality’ is seldom, if ever, defined. Most people seemingly appeal to commonsense when they speak of ‘spirituality’ as ostensibly referring to something immaterial and by a certain extension non-natural. The spiritual is supposed to transcend the historical. For those working in Religious Studies, such a position ought to be, and finally is beginning to be, looked upon with suspicion because the (substance) dualism informing commonsense definitions of spirituality is no longer viable. As such, the commonsense definition of ‘spirituality’ is untenable for scholarly purposes. We need a new definition of ‘spirituality,’ and this new definition demands a new approach. To be sure, contemporary academic consilience counsels methodological naturalism. Religious Studies rightly abides such academic consilience. Eschewing all appeals to the supernatural, a natural definition of spirituality suggests that it is existential self-esteem. Although there may be multiple manifestations of self-esteem, spirituality is a misrecognized form of self-esteem as the ‘sociometer.’ Existential self-esteem mitigates interpersonal death anxiety. There are two types of ‘spirituality,’ the non-natural and the natural. Non-natural spirituality pursues ‘literal’ immortality; natural spirituality pursues ‘symbolic’ immortality. Methodological naturalism disallows the former and at least countenances the latter. This guide outlines an approach to teaching about and ultimately defining spirituality as a wholly natural phenomenon.

### ***Author's Recommendations for Further Reading (limited here to monographs – see sample syllabus for journal articles):***

1. Flanagan, Owen. *The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

A thorough introduction to the applications of contemporary neuroscience and

neuro-philosophy to what many consider perennial questions in philosophy and theology. The author argues for a naturalistic view of the self, free will, and ethics, considering any lingering substance dualisms, e.g., spirit v. body, as no longer viable.

2. Pyszczynski, Tom, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg. *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003.

A summary statement by the seminal authors outlining the theoretical history of, empirical support for, and humanistic ramifications of terror management theory. The authors robustly argue that the fundamental social motivation for the human animal is to deny death through the construction of culture and the maintenance of self-esteem.

3. Bulbulia, Joseph, Richard Sosis, Erica Harris, Russell Genet, Cheryl Genet, and Karen Wyman, eds. *The Evolution of Religion: Studies, Theories, & Critiques*. Santa Margarita, CA: Collins Foundation Press.

The proceedings of the International Conference on the Evolution of Religion held on Oahu, Hawaii in 2007. The chapters are rather short and succinct, but the volume of these chapters allows for a most broad approach to the topic of religion and evolution. The authors address such issues as the adaptive value of religion, 'tribalism,' cognitive foundations for god beliefs, as well as the theological implications of evolutionary studies.

4. Goodenough, Ursula. *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998.

A biologist's perspective on what it means to be non-dualistically tied to the natural world and universe. A primer on evolutionary biology and a call to realize the grandeur of the wholly natural world. Goodenough exhibits 'natural spirituality.'

5. Kirkpatrick, Lee A. *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2005.

An excellent introduction to attachment theory of religion by one of the leading authors in the field. The second half broaches the issue of where attachment theory fits into the larger field of evolutionary studies of religion.

6. McCutcheon, Russell T. *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001.

A collection of essays intended to situate the study of religion in the public arena. The author explores the consequences a public study of religion has on methods and theories in the study of religion. Though many essays are oriented toward social theory and not psychology or biology, they are all the same relevant to all students of religion at the undergraduate and graduate level.

7. Wilson, Edward O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York, NY: Knopf, 1998.

A study detailing the overlapping interests and influences of the sciences and the humanities. As an author infamously tied to sociobiology, Wilson argues that knowledge of our world and universe must ultimately come from the employment of the scientific method and its appeal to empiricism and inductive reasoning rather than deduction and metaphysical speculation. Wilson in effect calls for the vertical integration of all disciplines.

8. Slingerland, Edward. *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

A dense but rewarding text detailing the pitfalls of objectivism and postmodern relativism en route to defending the integration of the humanities with the natural sciences at large. Naturalist in orientation, the author examines the future of Religious Studies as vertically integrated with the sciences. Of particular interest, perhaps, for East Asianists, the author's examples of how science and the humanities integrate vertically are drawn from the Confucian tradition.

9. Smith, Jonathan Z. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

A collection of essays reflecting the many facets of this influential figure's work in Religious Studies. Although some essays are better than others, the whole text comments on the current state of the field and the avenues it ought to take if it wishes to claim continuing relevance. Of particular significance is Smith's call to remember the academic task, a task dedicated not to description but to redescription, that is, explanation.

10. Paloutzian, Raymond F., and Crystal L. Park, eds. 2005. *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. New York: The Guilford Press.

An excellent, not to mention most thorough, introduction to the psychological study of religion and spirituality. An overview of the various psychological approaches as well as the attendant methods. Also includes discussions pertaining to applied psychology and religion. A most useful reference.

### **Online Materials**

<http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/studyingreligion.html>

This site explicitly states that it is not oriented toward providing merely descriptive data on various historical traditions. Instead, it specializes in 'method and theory,' addressing key methodological and theoretical issues pertaining to the academic study of religion. A helpful bibliography of major contributors to the study of religion is included.

<http://www.naturalism.org/>

A website dedicated to explaining and exploring naturalism. There is a specific hot link for a discussion of spirituality and naturalism as well as a hot link for exploring the philosophical basis for and problems with naturalism.

<http://evolution.binghamton.edu/religion/>

A website exhaustively dedicated to considering religion and religious issues from the perspective of evolutionary theory. Points out that religious belief and evolutionary explanations of religion are not mutually exclusive. Also contains a helpful list of prominent scholars working in the field.

<http://www.tmt.missouri.edu/index.html>

A website dedicated to terror management theory (TMT). Contains a list of scholars currently using the theory in empirical psychological research as well as hot links to various psychological testing tools.

<http://www.psychwww.com/psyrelig/>

A general psychology of religion webpage maintained by Michael Nielsen (PhD) with links to many different topics in the general psychological study of religion. Contains links to research opportunities as well as graduate programs in the psychology of religion.

### **Sample, Partial Syllabus**

This sample syllabus provides readings for an upper-level undergraduate course in Religious Studies – author recommends that the instructor of record choose amongst the following suggestions, tailoring the reading load to the students' capabilities.

### **Module 1 – To Define or Not to Define: The Legacy and Future of the Scholar's Agenda in Religious Studies**

Lincoln, Bruce. (1996). Theses on Method, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 8, pp. 225–7.

Segal, Robert. (1983). In Defense of Reductionism, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 51(1), pp. 97–124.

Segal, Robert. (2006). All Generalizations are Bad: Postmodernism on Theories, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(1), pp. 157–71.

McCutcheon, Russell T. (2001). 'Preface' and 'More Than a Shapeless Beast: Lumbering through the Academy with the Study of Religion,' in *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Smith, Jonathan Z. (2004). 'A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion' & 'A Twice

Told Tale: The History of the History of Religions' History' in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wiebe, Donald. (2006). An Eternal Return All Over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74(3), pp. 674–96.

## **Module 2 – Spirituality: Substantive and Functional Definitions / Descriptions**

Boyatzis, Chris J. (2005). 'Religious and Spiritual Development in Childhood,' in R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Parks, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Elkins, D. N. (2001). 'Beyond Religion: Toward a Humanistic Spirituality,' in K. J. Schneider, J. F. T. Bugental, and J. F. Pierson, eds., *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Emmons, R. A. & R. F. Paloutzian. (2003). The Psychology of Religion, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, pp. 377–402.

Hall, T. W. & M. Gorman. (2003). Relational Spirituality: Implications of the Convergence of Attachment Theory, Interpersonal Neurobiology, and Emotional Information Processing, *Psychology of Religion Newsletter*, 28(2), pp. 1–12.

Hill, P. C., K. J. Pargament, R. W. Hood, Jr., M. E. McCullough, J. P. Swyers, D. B. Larson, and B. J. Zinnbauer. (2000). Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 30(1), pp. 51–77.

Zinnbauer, B. J. and K. I. Pargament. (2005). Religiousness and Spirituality. *In Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, edited by R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park. New York: The Guilford Press.

Zinnbauer, B. J., K. I. Pargament, B. Cole, M. S. Rye, E. M. Butter, T. G. Belavich, K. M. Hipp, A. B. Scott, and J. L. Kadar. (1997). Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(4), pp. 549–64.

## **Module 3 – Death Anxiety**

Anthony, S. (1972). *The Discovery of Death in Childhood and After*. New York: Basic Books – excerpts.

Becker, E. (1973). *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press – Preface and Chapter 1.

Conte, H. R., M. B. Weiner, and R. Pluchik. (1982). Measuring Death Anxiety: Conceptual, Psychometric, and Factor-Analytic Aspects, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(4), 775–85.

Florian, V., and M. Mikulincer. (2004). A Multifaceted Perspective on the Existential Meanings, Manifestations, and Consequences of the Fear of Personal Death. In *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, edited by J. Greenberg, S. L. Koole, and T. Pyszczynski. New York: The Guilford Press.

Goldenberg, J. L., T. Pyszczynski, J. Greenberg, and S. Solomon. (2000). Fleeing the Body: A Terror Management Perspective on the Problem of Human Corporeality, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4(3), 200–18.

Kreitler, S. (2005). Fear of Death. In: *New Research on the Psychology of Fear*, edited by P. L. Gower. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Langs, R. L. (2004). Death Anxiety and the Emotion-Processing Mind, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 21(1), 31–53.

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books – chapter 3.

#### **Module 4 – Self-esteem**

Bowlby, J. (1973). Affectional Bonds: Their Nature and Origin. In *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, edited by R. S. Weiss. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Deci, E. L., and R. M. Ryan. (1995). Human Autonomy: The Basis for True Self-Esteem. In *Efficacy, Agency, and Self-Esteem*, edited by M. H. Kernis. New York: Plenum Press.

Florian, V., M. Mikulincer, and G. Hirschberger. (2002). The Anxiety-Buffering Function of Close Relationships: Evidence That Relationship Commitment Acts as a Terror Management Mechanism, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(4), 527–42.

Kirkpatrick, L. A. and B. J. Ellis. (2001). An Evolutionary-Psychological Approach to Self-esteem: Multiple Domains and Multiple Functions. In *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Interpersonal Processes*, edited by G. J. O. Fletcher, and M. S. Clark. Malden: Blackwell.

Leary, M. R. and R. F. Baumeister. (2000). The Nature and Function of Self-Esteem: Sociometer Theory, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 32, 1–62.

Pyszczynski, T., J. Greenberg, S. Solomon, J. Arndt, and J. Schimel. (2004). Why Do People Need Self-Esteem? A Theoretical and Empirical Review, *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(3), 435–68.

#### **Module 5 – Spirituality: Natural and Non-Natural**

Baumeister, R. F. and M. R. Leary. (1995). The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation, *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.

Bering, J. M. (2006). The Folk Psychology of Souls, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 29, 453–62.

Ellis, Thomas B. (2008). On Spirituality: Natural and Non-natural, *Religion Compass*, 2(6), 1117–38.

Flanagan, O. (2006). Varieties of Naturalism. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, edited by P. Clayton and Z. Simpson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flanagan, O. (2007). *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. Chapter 6.

Goodenough, U., and T. W. Deacon. (2006). The Sacred Emergence of Nature. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, edited by P. Clayton and Z. Simpson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kitcher, Philip. (2007). *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 149–66.

#### Focus Questions

1. What constitutes a theory of religion? Are theories necessarily reductive? If yes, is this necessarily bad? If no, how so? Discuss the pros and cons of beginning with a theory in any scholarly pursuit.

2. What is naturalism? Is there a distinction between methodological and metaphysical naturalism? If so, what are the ramifications of each for religious practitioners as well as scholars of religion?

3. What role does the conscious awareness of death play in human culture? What role does death play in the various religious traditions in the world today? Do most religions deny the reality of (ultimately personal) death, or do most religions accept truly the reality of death?

4. What is self-esteem? What role does ‘the other’s’ opinion play, if any, in the self’s maintenance of its esteem? What is the connection between self-esteem and death anxiety?

5. Can spirituality be exhaustively explained by appeals only to naturalism? What are the alternatives? Are these alternatives viable in the contemporary – public or private! – academy?

## ***Seminar Activities***

1. Have the students at the very beginning of the five-module unit outlined above define what they mean by religion and spirituality. Compare and contrast these definitions and see if a common theme emerges. What is this theme(s)? Should this theme be merely described or explained? What are the advantages and disadvantages of description? Of explanation?
2. Have students bring to class popular media stories or representations of spirituality. Have the students form small groups in order to compare and contrast their 'spiritual stories.' Once again, address whether or not there is a common theme or structure to these stories. Have the groups then discuss the benefits – or detriments – of these spiritual experiences and whether these experiences depend on the supernatural or natural world. Have the students try to identify if the benefits/detriments previously discussed are psychological, biological, sociological, anthropological, etc. in nature.
3. In advance of exposing the students to terror management theory, choose any of the terror management experimental tools (from the website) and have the students participate (all voluntarily, of course!); discuss the results.