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

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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):


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.


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.


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.


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.’


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.


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.

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.


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.


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.


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.
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


Module 2 – Spirituality: Substantive and Functional Definitions/Descriptions


Module 3 – Death Anxiety


**Module 4 – Self-esteem**


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


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.