

SYLLABUS
Religion and Nature in America
THL 5820, Fall 2017
Villanova University, Prof. Brett Grainger

Institutional Context

Villanova University is an Augustinian institution located in Villanova, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. Founded in 1842, it currently enrolls 6,469 undergraduates, 3,057 graduate students, and 786 law students. The majority of those students come from the Delaware Valley region. Approximately 20 percent of students come from historically underrepresented groups, while approximately 76 percent of students identify as white. While the university has been working concertedly in the past decade to cultivate a more diverse student body and faculty (84 percent of faculty identify as white), the student body remains disproportionate with regard to socioeconomic privilege and class.

Most faculty in the School of Arts and Sciences teach a 3–2 load, although faculty in my department teaching in the newly launched doctoral program were recently allowed a baseline of 2–2, in recognition of their additional responsibilities to the program. Most undergraduate courses are capped at either 25 or 35 students.

Villanova is a very “mission driven” university. University materials make frequent reference to “St. Augustine’s vision of learning as a community ethos governed by love.” Much mention is made of the need to connect “head and heart”—a union of speculative and practical knowledge—a goal pursued through “disciplined conversation,” a collaborative endeavor supported by values of interiority, humility, and friendship. Indeed, much of the national media attention generated by the 2016 NCAA basketball championship focused on efforts within the school’s athletics programs to cultivate the “whole person” rather than simply to develop athletic excellence. While Villanova is undergoing a period of immense growth and development (recently moving to the Doctoral Universities category in the Carnegie Classification system), my sense around campus is that such talk is more than a platitude.

Curricular Context

Villanova’s core curriculum for undergraduates includes two mandatory courses in Theology and Religious Studies: an introduction to the study of theology and religion, “Faith, Reason, and Culture,” and one upper-level elective. Villanova students, who tend to be very focused on career-focused programs, often report resenting these requirements. For many students, this resentment may be connected to their own experiences learning about theology in parochial private schools. (Approximately 70 percent of the student population identify as Catholic.) Faculty in the department spend a great deal of time discussing the challenges of designing and teaching a course that breaks through student expectations of what a course on “theology” might involve. For this reason, faculty tend to prefer the opportunity of teaching upper-level courses, which allow teachers to teach to their strengths and to attract students by the particular topics listed in the course

description. Many of these courses tend to be “Religion and...” courses, which refract questions in the study of religion and theology through a narrow theme.

Like other upper-level courses, this course is capped at 35 students.

Pedagogical Approach

This course took shape originally as an expression of my desire to teach an introduction to American religion using the thematic focus of nature. It also was an experiment in structuring a course with a diverse array of methods: religious studies, history, literary studies, environmental studies, and theology, among others. Because I rarely find myself teaching majors, I designed a course that assumed no previous exposure to the study of religion. We open with a few simple theoretical models in the study of sacred space and then move into a consideration of different cosmological models operating in the early colonial period. I tend to spend no more than one or two classes on a specific topic before moving on. This case study approach focuses discussion around a core “question of the day,” which is usually a broad, open-ended query that seeks to identify and explore an underlying tension in human cultural experience. The particular case studies will shift slightly each time I teach the course, without affecting the overall structure.

I have designed the course to focus on class discussion. There are no separate sections, so I try to find ways of shifting between small- and large-group discussions, by using a variety of class exercises. I avoid lectures, limiting myself to opening comments of about 10 minutes that help to situate the readings and topic in the larger frame of the course.

The assignments for this class are fairly traditional. In addition to attendance and participation, students keep a weekly journal to help prepare them for class and write a midterm and final exam. I am thinking of substituting the final exam with an alternative “creative” assignment that would ask them to explain and interpret a series of contemporary articles in popular media using the major themes, material, methods, and theories from the course.

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“So this is the famous environment everyone’s so hyped up about?”

Course Description

This course offers a survey of American religions from colonial times to the present, using the theme of “nature” and the “natural.” Using methods and theories from the academic study of religion, we will explore how American religions have made meaning out of their encounters with non-human nature, and in turn, how natural environments have shaped religious belief and practice. Rather than cover every religious movement in American history (a fool’s errand), we will look at a series of case studies that open up recurrent themes, issues, and tensions in American religious history.

The course is divided into four sections. The first introduces relevant methods and theories used by scholars in the study of religion (a field that differs in important ways from theology). In the second section, we will put ourselves on the ground in colonial America. In an effort to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, we will attempt imaginatively to inhabit three dominant “cosmologies” in early modern America: Native American, African American, and Euro-American. The third section of the course considers the transformations wrought upon these cosmological systems during the nineteenth century, with special attention to the Transcendentalist movement. We end the course by considering the impact of the ecological crisis of the 1970s upon Christianity and new religious movements such as the New Age and Neopaganism, and the contemporary flourishing of non-institutional forms of nature spirituality.

The style of instruction will be directed conversation. I will regularly introduce the readings and raise questions for discussion, making periodic interventions and offering additional historical context where necessary. *But this is not a lecture course.* Think of it as a big seminar. Our success will depend upon your commitment to the

conversation. Don't look to your classmates to carry you. It is crucial that you complete the readings ahead of class and come prepared to discuss any thoughts or questions they raise for you. Stay curious.

Objectives

1. Understand basic concepts and methods used in the scholarly study of religion.
2. Apply these methods to engage religious traditions with critical sympathy and attend to the ways in which living traditions change over time.
3. Compare and contrast the variety of ways that American religions have made meaning from experiences of nature and that natural environments, in turn, have shaped religious belief and practice.
4. Discern the impact of the ecological crisis on mainstream religions, new religious movements, and novel forms of nature spirituality.

Course Components and Grading Policies

1. Participation: 25 percent

- Successful participation in this class requires regular attendance in class *and* active participation in class. You must bring all assigned texts (in hard copy) to class and contribute questions and observations to class discussions.

2. Online Blog Posts: 25 percent

- You will keep a weekly blog on the course website, open to your peers, comprised of your reflections on the readings and your responses to the posts of your classmates (details to come). Successful entries will offer critical analysis, raise questions for discussion, and make connections to previous readings and larger course themes. Plan to use these entries as opportunities to develop your thoughts and questions for class. Please take this exercise seriously—together, the blog and class participation count for 50 percent!

3. Midterm Exam: 25 percent

- Held the final session before fall break, the midterm will consist of short definitions (drawn from readings and class sessions) and a choice of longer essays.

4. Final Exam: 25 percent

- While the final exam will focus on course materials from the second half of the semester (i.e., those not covered by the midterm), you will be responsible for discussing major movements, themes, and issues raised over the entire course.

Policies and Resources

Academic Integrity

Any work you turn in with your name on it signifies that it is your work. Words or ideas that are not your own must be cited according to the MLA or Chicago method.

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty (e.g. cheating) will not be tolerated, and offences will be addressed according to university policy. Please see Villanova's Academic Integrity Code for further details:

http://www.library.villanova.edu/academic_integrity

Special Needs and Accommodations

Students with disabilities who require reasonable academic accommodations should make an appointment with me to discuss specifics. It is the policy of Villanova to make reasonable academic accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. You must present verification and register with the Learning Support Office by phone at 610-519-5176 or e-mail learning.support.services@villanova.edu. For physical access or temporary disabling conditions, contact the Office of Disability Services at 610-519-4095 or email Stephen.mcwilliams@villanova.edu. Registration is needed in order to receive accommodations. For more information, see <http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/studentlife/disabilityservices.html>.

Policies and Resources (cont'd)

Campus Resources for Student Support

All of these resources are freely available and designed to help you succeed:

- Writing Center, Falvey Library, Room 210, phone: 610-519-4604
- Office of Academic Advising, Saint Augustine Center, Room 107
- Counseling Center, Health Services Building, Room 206, phone: 610-519-4050

Other Policies and Expectations

- **Communication Technology:** The study of religion enables the cultivation of attention and concentration. The use of communication technology during class hinders this development. Texting or browsing during class is grounds for being considered absent for that class period. It will also adversely affect your class participation grade.
- **Attendance Policy:** Attendance is mandatory. More than two unexcused absences will result in a student's final grade being lowered by one point per additional absence. Exceptions may be made in the case of documented illness, documented family emergencies, and student athletes. *Five absences will result in failure of course.*
- **Texts:** If you do have the texts for the day's discussion, you cannot fully participate. You may be marked absent in this case and it will adversely affect your class participation grade. After the add/drop period, you will be required to have all the course readings printed out and organized.
- **E-mail:** Students are responsible for checking their Villanova e-mail regularly and for being aware of any communication sent by the instructor over e-mail.
- **Deadline Policy:** Journal entries and responses must be submitted on time. I will be keeping track of your posts throughout the semester. No extra credit will be offered.

Grading Scale

A	95-100	Superb in all respects: Original, analytical, in command of material.
A-	90-94	Very good in most respects: Creative, clear, correct.
B+	85-89	Good and insightful: Some command of material, organized.
B	80-84	Satisfactory: Some insight, but inadequate organization and support.
B-	75-79	Barely satisfactory, with little to no insight.
C+	70-74	Poor: Insufficient ideas, organization, and analysis; unclear.

C	65-69	Inadequate in many respects: Insignificant analysis, lacking direction.
C-	60-64	Inadequate in most respects: Little grasp of material, unclear.
D	50-59	Inadequate in all respects: Extremely unclear, no grasp of material.
F	49 or below	Failure

Required Texts

- Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997). ISBN: 9780826317810.
- Suzanne J. Crawford, *Native American Religious Traditions* (Routledge, 2007). ISBN: 9780131834835

Class Schedule

*This schedule is always subject to revision

** Readings preceded by (B) will be posted on Blackboard

Part I: Identifying Nature and Religion

In this opening section of the course, we will seek to define some of our key terms, familiarize ourselves with some of the methods employed by scholars of religion.

Week 1. Orientation

8.24: Welcome and Introduction

Week 2. Nature, Religion, and the Sacred

8.29: Theophany and Sacred Space

- (B) Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Harcourt, Brace), 20–67, 116–161.

8.31: The Power of Place

- (B) Belden Lane, "Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space," *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 38–61.

Part II: The Clash of Cosmologies in Colonial America

Three cosmologies—Native American, African American, and Euro-American—dominated religious life in colonial America. Despite their differences, all shared the belief in an enchanted or animate cosmos, a sense of the sacred ambivalence of nature, and a proclivity to employ religious myth and ritual to manage this sacred ambivalence in order to secure material and spiritual benefits for individuals or communities. Despite certain continuities over time, these religious systems have been undergone continual development and been combined with other systems of belief to produce new forms of religious life.

Week 3. Native American Cosmologies

9.5 Native American Religion in Practice: Three Rituals

- Crawford, *Native American Religious Traditions*, 16–39.

9.7 Religion as Relationship

- Crawford, *Native American Religious Traditions*, 40–61.

Week 4. European Cosmologies

9.12 The Judeo-Christian Myth of Creation

- Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 11–28.
- (B) Genesis, chapters 1–3.

9.14 New England Puritanism: Contemplation of the “Book of Nature”

- Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 55–64.
- (B) Anne Bradstreet, “Contemplations”

Week 5. African Cosmologies

9.19 Slave Religion: Conjure and Combination in the Antebellum South

- (B) Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, 1–35.
- (B) Henry Bibb, “Conjuration and Witchcraft,” in Milton Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 76–80.

9.21: Slave Religion: Old World Sources of Conjuring Traditions

- (B) Chireau, *Black Magic*, 36–57.

Week 6. Nature’s God in the Age of Reason

9.26 Jonathan Edwards

- Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 77–83.
- (B) Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative”

9.28 Deism and the Scientific Revolution

- Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 83–98.
- (B) Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, selections

Week 7. Nature, Gender, and Science in New England

10.3 Animism, Mechanism, and Agriculture

- Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (UNC Press, 1989), 112–145.

10.5 In-class Midterm Exam

10.10 and 10.12 Fall recess

Part III. Nature in the Antebellum Era

The nineteenth-century brought dramatic transformations in religious attitudes to the natural world. This section examines Transcendentalism, which helped foster romantic attitudes to wilderness and the West. We also consider the rise of a national mythology of “manifest destiny,” which asserted that US expansion throughout the continent was an outworking of divine providence, and its repercussions for Native American religions.

Week 8. Transcendentalism

10.17 Ralph Waldo Emerson

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- Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, selections.
- (B) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), selections.
- Illustrations by Christopher Pearse Cranch:
[https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:11324577\\$1i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:11324577$1i)

10.19 Henry David Thoreau

- Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*, 127–142.
- (B) Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), selections.

Week 9. Nature Tourism

10.24 Nature Tourism

- (B) John Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*, 3–48.

10.26 Nature in the City

- (B) Paula A. Mohr, “God in Gotham: The Design of Sacred Space in New York’s Central Park” in Louis P. Nelson, *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Space*, 37–64.

Week 10. New Religious Movements

10.31 The Shakers

- (B) Belden Lane, “The Correspondence of Spiritual and Material Worlds in Shaker Spirituality,” in *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 160–179.
- Website of Shaker furniture:
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shak/hd_shak.htm
<http://artistproject.metmuseum.org/1/tom-sachs/>

11.2 Mormonism and the West

- Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 115–123.
- (B) Brook Wilensky-Lanford, “The Once and Future Eden,” in *Paradise Lust*, 221–235.

Week 11. Rupture and Renewal in Native American Religions

11.7 Coast Salish, Lakota, and Diné

- Crawford, *Native American Religious Traditions*, 62–83.

11.9 Black Elk

- (B) Black Elk,” in Marie Griffith, ed., *American Religions: A Documentary History* (Oxford, 2008), 341–352.

Week 12. Holy Matter

11.14 Roman Catholicism: The Healing Dirt of Chimayó

- (B) Brett Henrickson, “The Interweaving of Pilgrimage and Tourism as the Santuario de Chimayó,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 34.3 (Summer 2016), 127–145.

11.16 Protestant Evangelicalism: Serpent Handling in Appalachia

- Mary Lee Daughtery, "Serpent-Handling as Sacrament," *Theology Today* 33.3 (1976): 232–243.
- Short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwBVcsWYJd8>

Part IV. Nature Spirituality in the Age of Ecology

In this final section, we examine the transformations wrought in American religions as a result of the Ecological Crisis of the 1960s, focusing on the "greening" of American religions and the rise of new religious movements (such as Neopaganism) and other forms of nature spirituality. These developments have generated new appreciation for Native American spiritual traditions, while also raised questions of authenticity and cultural appropriation.

Week 13. Christianity and the Ecological Crisis

11.21 The Lynn White Thesis

- (B) Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of the Current Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203–1207.
- (B) David N. Livingstone, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis: A Reassessment," *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994), 38–55.

11.23 No class—Thanksgiving recess

Week 14. Nature Spirituality

11.28 Wicca and Neopaganism

- (B) Hugh Urban, "Wicca and Neopaganism: Magic, Feminism, and Environmentalism," in *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America* (University of California, 2015): 157–178.

11.30 Metaphysical Religion and Ayahuasca

- Ariel Levy, "The Drug of Choice for the Age of Kale," *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2016): <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/12/the-ayahuasca-boom-in-the-u-s>

Week 15. The Future of Nature

12.5 Native American Spirituality and Standing Rock

- Crawford, *Native American Religions*, 84–104; 105–126.
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/magazine/the-youth-group-that-launched-a-movement-at-standing-rock.html>
- <https://wp.nyu.edu/therevealer/2016/12/07/resisting-the-inevitable-narrative-standing-rocks-anti-colonial-eventualities/>

12.7 Science Versus Spirituality: Nature Enchanted and Disenchanted

- *Grizzly Man* (2005): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8MjDyfcMmU>

***Final Exam: Friday, Dec. 15, 2:30–5 pm**