

M/T 219 Science, Theology and Ministry

Bethany Theological Seminary, Spring 2019

Tuesday, 6:10-9:00 PM

Instructor: Russell Haitch, Professor of Theology and Human Science

Course Overview

This course deals with how Christians can see God in a scientific world. Science and theology both seek to understand reality, but they take different tacks, which can lead to feelings of conflict at places of intersection, or else there grows a chasm of non-interaction, whereby people struggle to fit together the Sunday world of faith with the Monday world of science and technology. A slew of questions ensue. Can we find coherence between these two worlds? Does science, with its focus on physical causation, undermine faith in divine activity and traditional tenets of faith, such as the Virgin Birth and Resurrection? Do Christians have good reason to believe certain things that scientists deem highly improbable, if not downright impossible?

These sorts of question form the background to this course. In the foreground, we will consider the themes of human life, death, and resurrection from the standpoint of both Christian theology and empirical science, with a view to Christian ministry.

What is life—and “fullness of life”? In contemplating this question, we will try to appreciate the antagonism of many Christians toward the science of evolutionary biology. We will ponder proposals for transforming this conflict. Can Christians accept mainstream science about the origins of biological life without betraying their sacred texts and traditions?

Next, what is death—and can it be conquered? In contemplating these questions, we will examine scientific (or scientific-sounding) proposals for cybernetic immortality; for example, by uploading the human brain onto synthetic neurons housed in self-replicating robotic bodies. Meanwhile, Christian faith speaks of death as more than physical, more than a flatline on the heart monitor, but also proclaims that Jesus has overcome death; further, that this victory is both physical and spiritual, and further still that it is conferred on

all who are united with Christ. What can we say about these two very different ways of dealing with death?

Finally, we will contemplate resurrection. An existence beyond biological death also seems to be beyond the reach of science. But scientists do investigate near-death experiences, including those of people who report visions of another world, as well as awareness of goings-on in this world, sometimes when they are in a coma and monitors show only isoelectric brain activity. What can we learn from science about these experiences, and what can we say, theologically speaking, about the Christian hope of eternal life?

Assignments

While the course begins and ends with questions, students will be pressed to find answers, even if your answers are provisional or hypothetical. More specifically, you will be required to:

(1) write an essay that defines “faith” and “science” and then explains your method for relating them, so that the two are harmony, or so that contradictions are explicit and not hidden.

(2) write an essay that discusses some aspect of life and fullness of life, in light of Christian Scripture and evolutionary biology.

(3) write an essay on death, including in your discussion both the gospel of Christ’s victory over death and secular hopes of immortality through technology.

(4) write an essay that states your convictions about eternal life, making references to near-death experiences.

(5) be informed and engaged during class discussions.

Each essay, about 4 pages long, is due ten days after we have covered all the pertinent material in class.

The essays can be creative, in your own voice, and express your own convictions. At the same time, all four essays have these three mandates:

(a) show comprehension of and interaction with two or more course readings; (to this end, quoting phrases or short sentences is one good way to convey the voice of the author);

(b) show awareness of the your topic’s depth and complexity, which is different from simply stating, “this is a very difficult topic”; and

(c) indicate how you might teach on this topic in a ministry setting.

Objectives

This course counts toward the completion of the M.Div. and M.A. programs, by meeting the following program objectives. Hopefully you will also have your own goals for taking this course, and if you express them to me, I can try to help you meet them. But here are our common objectives.

M.Div. Program Objective 2 and M.A. Program Objective 3

(2) *Communicate faith and values with contextual awareness.*

(3) *Communicate religious faith and values effectively, listen well, and express faith with clarity in ways that are theologically informed and culturally persuasive.*

Explanation: If culture refers to shared language, values, symbols and, overall, to a communally shared sense of reality, then it seems safe to say that people in the global West live in cultures shaped by both Christianity and science.

In recent centuries, modern science has risen to the fore, so that science has become the public test of truth. As a minor but ready example of science's influence, note how the language of these program objectives bears more kinship to the language of a modern research university than to that of Scripture, prayer or worship. Or consider how most people reading the phrase "faith and values" above will see strong kinship between the two, which in turn hints at the "demythologizing" influence of science and a process of turning Christianity into ethics shared by people of many religions and even nonbelievers of good will.

In sum, if science and technology are the water in which we swim, then this course aims to help us to become more critically conscious of these forces. The course challenges us to express theological truth in an age of science, and to do so "with clarity" and "in ways that are theologically informed and culturally persuasive."

M.Div. Program Objective 3

(3) *Integrate learning that is interdisciplinary, intercultural, and imaginative for the practice of ministry.*

Explanation: While recognizing that the geographic and ethnic dimensions of culture demand attention, one could also claim that this course does entail *intercultural* learning, in that it brings into juxtaposition and interaction the

communal sense of reality supported by modern science with the communal sense of reality found in the classic Christian tradition. Certainly this course demands that we do *interdisciplinary* thinking—not just between science and theology as a whole, but between various sub-disciplines, including neuroscience, biology, computer science, sociology, dogmatics, poimenics, and education. Because the experts in these disciplines so seldom talk to each other, bringing their insights into coherence will summon all our *imaginative* powers.

M.A. Program Objective 3

(5) *Develop a self-understanding that brings a calling to the life of scholarship into conversation with models of ministry and vocational vision.*

Explanation: From biblical studies to church history to practical theology, seminary scholarship has felt the heavy influence of empirical sciences, which provide Western society's gold standard for knowledge. Accordingly, this course aims to aid understanding of science and theology, in ways that contribute to your self-understanding and clarify your vocational vision.

Evaluation of Your Work

Here are guidelines for evaluation of your written work.

A good and acceptable paper

- (a) demonstrates comprehension of the material contained in the curriculum;
- (b) develops an argument with main ideas and supporting evidence; and
- (c) shows adequate attention to grammar and spelling.

In addition to these features, an excellent paper

- (a) demonstrates deeper thinking that makes connections between readings and tests ideas for internal contradictions;
- (b) develops an interesting argument with examples and other evidence that are pertinent and persuasive; and
- (c) has very few grammatical or spelling errors.

In addition to these features, an outstanding paper:

- (a) demonstrates analytic and synthetic thinking that finds hidden complexities and underlying simplicities;
- (b) offers an argument with one or more fresh insights; and

(c) has well-chosen words, well-constructed sentences, and an overall structure whereby the parts create a lucid whole.

Additional Considerations

(1) At the end of the course, students receive an assessment based on rubrics rather than letter grades. In addition an overall evaluation places work in one of these four categories: *credit with distinction*, *credit*, *credit with concern*, and *no credit*. However, formal transcripts will use just two categories, *credit* or *no credit*—unless a student requests conversion to a letter grade.

(2) The seminaries are committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. For assistance, Bethany students should contact Karen Duhai by sending an email (duhaika@bethanyseminary.edu) or by calling 765-983-1806. This contact should be made during the first two weeks of the semester. The student handbook contains a section on the seminary's policy regarding students with disabilities.

(3) The standard seminary style for citing sources in your written work is explained in the most recent edition of Kate Turabian's *A manual for writers of term papers, theses, and dissertations: Chicago guide to writing, editing, and publishing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). A reference guide for this style can be downloaded from the seminary's website (<https://bethanyseminary.edu/academic-programs/style-manuals-citation-policies/>). Another respected citation style is APA (American Psychological Association), which is used in education, psychology, and other human sciences. For this course, you may use either the Turabian or the APA style—but not both in the same paper.

(4) Please make sure you understand and follow your seminary's policies in favor of inclusive language and against plagiarism. As you review these policies, feel free to talk to Bethany professors if you have questions. The consequences for committing plagiarism are serious, but easily avoidable.

(5) The deadline for dropping a course this semester is March 11; after then, a drop results in a "no credit." Even dropping after February 25 can result in financial penalty.

(6) This syllabus is not a legal contract. It may be changed by the professor in light of new information or circumstances. Clearly I would want to consult the rest of the class before making any substantial change.

Books

Much of the reading for this course will be placed on reserve and posted to Moodle. Here are the books that will be good for you to own.

Alexander, Eben. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

Chaves, Mark. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends, Second Edition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Hutchinson, Ian. *Monopolizing Knowledge: A Scientist Refutes Religion-Denying, Reason-Destroying Scientism*. Belmont, Mass.: Fias Publishing, 2011.

Kellehear, Allan. *Experiences Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World*. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010.

Stump, J.B, Ed. *Four Views on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2017.

Walton, John. *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Schedule

Collaborative learning is most successful when every student has **completed the required reading before class**. Sharing from one's own experience is very valuable—as an addition to, not replacement for, focusing on the reading material. We are dealing with complex topics in this course. Doing justice to them requires doing some reading. I will check in with you during the semester. to see how easily people are keeping up, and to determine whether we need to trim some of the reading.

*Books with asterisks are books you need to own. Other readings will be put on reserve and/or posted to Moodle.

Faith and Science

1. Jan. 29 Diving In

Before class, watch:

(a) Jennifer Wiseman, "A Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN8cKL1MDY4>

(b) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNhtbmXzIaM> to 21:55

(c) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok8N2PkqCDs&vl=en>

(d) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAnySx2IHC8>

Before class, read *Cosmos*, "Where did we come from? A primer on early human evolution," at <https://cosmosmagazine.com/palaeontology/where-did-we-come-from-a-primer-on-early-human-evolution>.

2. Feb. 05 Human Science: A Sociological Look at the Religious Landscape

Before class, read:

(a) *Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, pp.11-114.

(b) Jonathan Hill, *Emerging Adulthood and Faith*, pp.47-59.

3. Feb. 12 Scientists, Science, and Scientism

Before class, read:

(a) *Ian Hutchinson, *Monopolizing Knowledge: A Scientist*

Refutes Religion-Denying, Reason-Destroying Scientism, pp.1-71, 145-128, 227-236.

(b) James Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, pp.9-33.

Life

4. Feb. 19 Christians Debate Evolution

Before class, read:

- (a) Genesis 1-3 and John 1.
- (b) Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, pp.638-649
- (c) David Masci, "For Darwin Day, 6 Facts About the Evolution Debate," <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/10/darwin-day>.
- (c) *Ken Ham, Hugh Ross, Deborah Haarsma, and Stephen Meyer, *Four Views on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*, pp.1-123.

5. Feb. 26 The Debate Continues

Before class, read Ken Ham, Hugh Ross, Deborah Haarsma, and Stephen Meyer, *Four Views on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*, pp.124-235.

6. Mar. 05 Revisiting Genesis

Before class, read *John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, pp.11-210.

Death

7. Mar. 19 A Non-Western Christian View of Life & Death

Before class, read:

- (a) Russell Haight, *From Exorcism to Ecstasy: Eight Views of Baptism*, pp.1-22.
- (b) Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, pp.7-46, 81-113.

8. Mar. 26 Transhumanism—Believers and Critics

Before class, read:

- (a) Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, pp.1-30.
- (b) Paul Scherz, "Living Indefinitely and Living Fully: *Laudato Si'* and the Value of the Present in Christian, Stoic, and Transhumanist Temporalities," pp.1-20.
- (c) Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach, Third Edition*, pp.1035-1067

9. Apr. 02 Transhumanism—Believers and Critics (cont.)

Before class, read:

- (a) Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, pp.117-151.
- (b) Macmillan, "Cyborg Humanity and the Technologies of Human Enhancement," pp.1-15.
- (c) Macmillan, "Future Minds," pp.1-8.
- (d) Macmillan, "Robot Warfare," pp.1-19.
- (e) Ted Peters, "Radical life extension, cybernetic immortality, and techno-salvation. Really?," pp.2-9

Resurrection

10. Apr. 09 A First-Person Account of An Afterlife?

Before class, read *Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*, pp.1-139.

11. Apr. 16 Assessing Experiences Near Death

Before class, read:

- (a) *Allan Kellehear, *Experiences Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion*, pp.vii-99.
- (b) Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*, pp.140-172.

12. April 23 Assessing Experiences Near Death (cont.)

Before class, read:

- (a) Allan Kellehear, *Experiences Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion*, pp.100-189.

13. April 30 Review**14. May 7 Exam Week (No Class)**