

Course Title: 19th Century Unitarians and Nature
Instructor: Sheri Prud'homme
Units: 3

Syllabus

***Note: See Moodle course site for most up-to-date syllabus**

At the forefront of 19th century North American liberal Christian efforts to use all of humankind's faculties to interpret "the Divine Book of Nature" were many Unitarian ministers. This course will illuminate key aspects of Unitarian theologies in the mid-nineteenth century as they depicted the relationship among God, nature, and humankind, with close attention to the American Transcendentalists. Participants will explore the complexities of the Transcendentalists' positions commonly seen as polarized between advancing self-cultivation and focusing on efforts for the common good. Participants will explore how the Transcendentalists' theological heirs translated their nature-loving theology into acts of love on behalf of actual nature and will analyze the resources inherent in this theological heritage, assessing its adequacy in light of current ecological crises. Throughout the course, we will trouble the 19th century Unitarian's understanding of wilderness and their notions of a hierarchy of being, which privileged European-American Protestant Christians above all else. Online course using varied modalities. Weekly reading and assignments, research paper/project, and regular online participation required.

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will understand the major influences on the nineteenth century Unitarians' understandings of nature.
- Students will have analyzed the ways key nineteenth-century Unitarian theological contributors constructed the relationship among God, nature, and humankind and the implications of their theologies for religious practices, community life, and moral action.
- Students will have evaluated the perspectives found in this theological heritage for their adequacy in providing relevant historical grounding for contemporary efforts to address the ecological crises of our time.

Required Texts:

Cherry, Conrad. *Nature and Religious Imagination From Edwards to Bushnell*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980. (Amazon used \$4.00)

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by David M. Robinson. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. (Amazon used \$1.63)

Gatta, John. *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. (Amazon \$23.30)

Articles to be made available on Moodle:

- Albanese, Catherine. "Having Nature All Ways: Liberal and Transcendental Perspectives on American Environmentalism." *Journal of Religion* 77, no. 1 (January 1997): 20-43.
- Holmes, Steven J. "John Muir, Jeanne Carr, and Ralph Waldo Emerson : A Case-Study of the Varieties of Transcendentalist Influence." *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* 25 (1998): 1-25.

Excerpts to be made available on Moodle from these texts:

- Albanese, Catherine. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Buell, Lawrence. Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Dorrien, Gary. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Frankiel, Sandra Sizer. *California's Spiritual Frontiers: Religious Alternatives in Anglo-Protestantism, 1850-1910*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Grodzins, Dean. *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Gura, Philip F. *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and Literature in the New England Renaissance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-1861*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988.
- King, Thomas Starr. *Christianity and Humanity: A Series of Sermons, 4th Edition*. Edited by Edwin P. Whipple. Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880.
- King, Thomas Starr. *A Vacation Among the Sierras: Yosemite in 1860*. Edited by John Hussey. San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1962.
- Marsh, George Perkins. *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. New York: Charles Scribner, 1864.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.
- Robinson, David. *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

Course Outline:

9/3 Week One: Introductions and setting the context – Harvard Moral Philosophy in the 19th Century

Post an introduction to voice thread

Gathering your own wisdom-what do you already know?

Reading – Howe 1-76, Dorrien xiii-110 (can be read over the next 2 weeks)

Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts.

9/9 Week Two: Setting the Context – Words, Language, and Typology

Post on voice thread why you are interested in 19th Century Unitarians and Nature
Reading – Gura 1-105

Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts.

9/16 Week 3: Setting the Context – Nature and the Religious Imagination in the 19th
Century

Post on voice thread—why is it relevant for 21st century UUs to study our 19th century
religious forebearers?

Reading – Cherry 1-13, 134-156, 191-238, Buell 1-27.

Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts

9/23 Week 4: Nature as Sacred, Religion and Literature in the 19th Century

Reading – Gatta 1-99

Discussion in diads

Paper – In these first four weeks, we have read authors who have covered some
overlapping terrain, in one way or another outlining the contours of the Unitarian
theological landscape in the 19th Century. For this first synthesis paper, either choose one
idea and explore how three of the authors develop it. OR Write a paper that compares
some of the common threads among 3-4 of the writers. Are there any places where they
have discrepancies in their arguments or interpretations? Make use of at least two
sources outside of assigned class readings to support your thesis. (5-10 double-spaced
pages)

9/30 Week 5: Emerson in his own words

Reading – Emerson Robinson's preface and Introduction ix-20, Nature 21-62, Divinity
School Address, 63-82.

Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts

10/7 Week 6: Transcendentalism within Unitarianism

Reading: Robinson Culture 1-93, Grodzins 102-128

Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts

10/14 Week 7: Emerson: Moral Nature and Science

Reading: Albanese Ch 3 80-116, Albanese article, Walls 1-55, 84-105, 166-198, 223-226.

Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts

Reading Week 10/21-25

Introduction to Weeks 8-10

This next section will be a substantial research project, which you can carry out in pairs
or individually. It is designed to be equivalent in work-load to a final paper or project,
only it falls earlier in the course. We will learn from one another in this segment of the
course, in seminar style.

You will choose one 19th Century Unitarian figure (or one who was inspired by
Unitarian Transcendentalists) and, using at least two primary sources and secondary
sources from within and beyond the course readings, research their understanding of

nature and its relationship with God and humankind. Possible people include William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, Sarah Orne Jewett, Thomas Starr King, John Muir, Celia Thaxter, Frederic Henry Hedge, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Ward Beecher, or another figure with instructor approval.

Using the contextual groundwork from the first weeks of class, 1) position your figure in relationship to the streams of thought articulated by the authors we read; 2) articulate your figure's understanding of nature and how it functions in their theological framework, paying particular attention to implications for religious practice, community life, and moral action; and 3) evaluate this figure's theology of nature in terms of its relevance as historical theological grounding to contemporary efforts to address the ecological crises of our time.

15-20 page paper or other form with instructor's approval

10/28 Week 8: Research Project

Post a brief biographical statement about your figure. Post one of your primary sources written by the figure you have chosen for your research project and pose to your classmates two course-related questions for their reflection and input. You can email me a pdf file that I can post to the course in Moodle. Comment on your fellow classmates questions.

Read the original sources from your classmates and respond to your fellow students' questions in the discussion forum.

11/4 Week 9: Research Project Continued

Post either section one or section two (from assignment above) of your project. Comment on your fellow students' work by asking questions, offering comments, or gently challenging their thinking.

11/11 Week 10: Research Project Due

Read your fellow student's papers/projects in their entirety. As before, comment on your fellow students' work by asking questions, offering comments, or gently challenging their thinking.

11/18 Week 11: Practical Implications in the 19th Century

In this section we will explore the ways themes common to a contemporary understanding of environmentalism or ecological justice were addressed or not by nineteenth century Unitarians. We will read a selection from a non-Unitarian writer, George Perkins Marsh, to gain a sense of what was understood as human kind's possible impact on nature at the time. We will investigate Starr King's efforts for Congress to protect Yosemite and other kinds of conservation and protection measures. In this section we will explicitly trouble the nineteenth century Unitarians' understanding of wilderness and their notion of a hierarchy of being, which privileged European-American Protestant Christians above all else.

Reading: Marsh, Man and Nature, Holmes article, Other readings TBA
Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts

11/25 No Class AAR and Thanksgiving

12/2 Week 12: Thomas Starr King

Reading: Frankiel, ix-46, 120-129; Starr King's Nature Sermons, Other Readings TBA
Participate in discussion threads following instructor's prompts

12/9 Week 13: Final Course Reflection Due

Final Course Reflection: In this final synthesis paper, reflect on the ways the perspectives found in the 19th Century Unitarians' theological heritage concerning nature provide relevant historical grounding for contemporary efforts to address the ecological crises of our time, and in what ways do they fall short? What learnings from this course will inform your studies and ministry? (5-7 double spaced pages)

