

**Interfacing the Sacred and Secular in the Classroom:
Confronting the Naturalism of Disciplinary Content
Brent D Slife**

Six years before my recent retirement from BYU-Provo, the Dean of my College asked me to form an annual workshop for faculty members. He was dissatisfied at the time with our faculty's integration of the sacred and the secular. He said he was familiar with my work and wondered if I could take a fresh approach. First, I was floored that he was familiar with my work. But when I picked myself up from that floor, I realized I had mixed feelings about what such a workshop might entail. I welcomed the opportunity but wasn't sure I *had* a "fresh approach" — at least until I received an email from a struggling undergraduate we can call Sam.

Here are some excerpts from Sam's letter to me. Please excuse their length, but I think you'll see why I quote him so extensively. I'll display them on four consecutive slides.

"The topics we've been discussing in class have made me think about some internal struggles I've been having for quite some time. I am seriously teetering between belief in God, and just giving up on finding a personal, loving God. And with no loving, personal God, I'm afraid of where I'll find myself in life. Here at BYU I've taken quite a few natural science classes (chemistry, biology, physiology, etc.) and learned about evolution and the natural laws that make up the world. My psychology classes always harp on just about everything except for agency and a world that allows for a personal God. After learning about these things, I've begun to wonder if spiritual experience, or any experience for that matter, is just a result of chance, just some meaningless event. . . ."

"When I start thinking about really complicated matters, like how our spirit is involved with our bodies, or how God is involved in influencing us spiritually, or how we can have agency as this mass of chemical reactions, I just get confused and I can't seem to make sense of God. . . . So, I feel like either modern science is wrong, which I sincerely doubt, or my church leaders, parents, friends, and peers are well-intentioned but under some sort of illusion, which I hope isn't true, but I recognize that people have been known to be flat wrong about religious beliefs. . . . I feel trapped. I honestly do."

I won't say too much more about Sam, obviously very bright and a wonderful writer. I'll only say that I know he battled suicide soon thereafter. I persuaded him to get counseling, but I don't know its eventual outcome. When I chatted with a few of his instructors, they shrugged their shoulders and said in so many words, "I'm just presenting the information of the discipline. I always try to be respectful of students, and I begin all my classes with prayer."

This response of his instructors is understandable, but it became an important lesson for me in formulating the workshop. I realized how often it's tempting to think of our integration of the sacred and secular as more about the *process* of our courses rather than their *content*. To "teach by the spirit," as we sometimes refer to it, we frequently turn to prayer, new teaching techniques, or better quality relationships. As important as these are, faculty often leave the

disciplinary information — the course content — alone, without recognizing what that content might mean to students like Sam. The dilemma is that faculty members need to respect their disciplines as well as represent those disciplines properly to their students. So what can they possibly do with course content that is so very, very secular?

Worldviews. Well, I believe that my faculty workshop supplied one answer to this question, and I'd like to provide the rudiments of that answer here today. In this sense, I'll direct my remarks primarily to the faculty of this great university, but I'd love it if our students listened in. After all, our workshop's answer to this question of course content concerns them just as much. That answer proceeds from a fundamental idea about course content: what typically accompanies disciplinary content, either when it is generated or when an instructor presents it, is a *worldview*. And I believe it is the worldview of these disciplines that confused and disheartened my student Sam, not disciplinary information per se.

Several prominent scholars have noted that disciplinary worldview is one of the most ignored aspects of the university, especially in the sciences. A worldview is quite literally a view of the world, a way of interpreting the information and experiences we glean from that world. As an example in the sciences, the successful replication of a research finding could be interpreted either as a potential natural law that doesn't involve God at all, or a possible pattern of God's action in the world. The disciplinary information regarding this pattern, the data, may be the same. But the worldview of the investigator could guide the interpretation of these data in dramatically different ways — from the coldness of a mechanical law to the warmth of God's blessing in providing this pattern.

In this presentation, I'd like to discuss what world religion scholar, Huston Smith, considers the two most influential worldviews in Western culture: theism and naturalism. Frankly, my hope is that faculty teach both of them to their students. Now I understand that theism isn't Christianity. However, I'd like to go with the less complicated notion of theism, at least for the time being. I think we'll find it challenging enough. I also think you'll see that its scope matches nicely the scope of naturalism. With the exception of religion classes, many students know class content only from a naturalistic perspective. And even then, this worldview is not typically labeled or examined. Indeed, this worldview is so dominant in some of our disciplines that it is often taken as fact rather than view. For this reason, I think it's crucial to teach students like Sam an additional worldview, theism — as a contrast, if nothing else.

Naturalism, at least as I define it here, is what many philosophers call *reductive naturalism*: the worldview that only natural events and natural explanations matter. Our disciplinary studies should be focused on natural events solely, and our explanations should move toward naturalistic laws and general principles exclusively. The worldview of theism, on the other hand, presumes that all the events of the world involve a God or gods, that any explanation that doesn't involve a God, at least to a limited degree, is either incomplete or wrong. I'll be saying much more about both of these worldviews in due course, but allow me first to address a few concerns that may arise right off the bat.

Concerns. First, I'm aware that many BYU students are biased toward a theistic worldview. If an instructor gives permission to think in terms of both a naturalistic and a theistic worldview, some students might move toward the theistic while neglecting the naturalistic. I want you to know at the outset that I think it's a mistake to demonize naturalism in this pairing. Naturalism has been vital to most, if not all our disciplines, spawning all kinds of intriguing research and helpful insights into the subject matter. For this reason, I believe that both worldviews should be valued and understood in the classroom as well as in my presentation here today. We don't have to presume that something's the ultimate truth to value it.

Even so, I think you might be surprised at how many students are biased toward naturalism, especially in the way they think about disciplinary information. In fact, Jeff Reber and I have studied BYU-Provo students for their implicit biases in this regard. We found that the vast majority of BYU psychology majors were more biased toward naturalism than theism, especially when understanding human behavior and emotions. This finding made perfect sense to us, given that virtually every theory, concept, and practice of psychology has been generated and taught through the lens of naturalism. God doesn't seem to matter with these concepts and practices. Indeed, many students undoubtedly believe there's more evidence for naturalism than theism, much like Sam, or they believe that only naturalism produces evidence.

Students may also mistake naturalism for secularism. As many faculty know, secularism was historically formulated to include a variety of perspectives, a variety that *included* theism. Secularism, in this sense, should welcome a theistic worldview. Yet our disciplines typically don't welcome theistic explanations of disciplinary information, so the implicit worldview of many disciplines is likely to be naturalism, sometimes under the guise of secularism.

Part of the problem is that many in our disciplines mistake theism from deism and dualism. Deism is where God is only creator; he's not making a difference in current events. Dualism is where God is active only in supernatural or subjective realms, making no meaningful difference in natural, objective events. Theism, by contrast, assumes that God is active in current, natural events as well as at other times and places. *If theism is true, then God is present, active, and difference-making in the events of our disciplines.*

This divine activity also means, at least for our purposes, that deism and dualism are more aligned with naturalism than theism, because God can make no practical difference in disciplinary events if this God is only creator or only active in the supernatural realm. For example, we aren't necessarily theistic when we're awed at what God has created, because this kind of awe is consonant with deism and thus naturalism. Similarly, we aren't necessarily theistic when we recognize how much God loves us from the supernatural realm, because this recognition could be underlain with a dualist and thus naturalistic worldview.

I want to challenge faculty, instead, to begin to think through their course information from a thoroughly theistic worldview. For many of us, this challenge won't be easy. There is so much in our disciplinary traditions that works against us in meeting this challenge. Our mentors and training were typically naturalistic, and virtually all the published disciplinary literature is

naturalistic. Nevertheless, I believe we can *begin* to meet this challenge by comparing the worldview features of theism and naturalism in this presentation. This comparison should not only start your creative juices flowing; it should also combat the pervasive misconception that naturalism involves fewer assumptions and is thus less value-laden than theism.

I'll just mention one striking example of these "creative juices" from an early workshop. After barely an introduction to the two worldviews, an American history scholar decided to describe them to one of his classes. He was amazed, as he reported it, at the enthusiasm of his students, both with a possible theistic account of American history and a greater awareness of what the standard naturalistic account entailed. And a theistic account does not have to be confined to the continental United States. We have some Polynesian friends who frame the history of Hawaiian native culture through its many gods and spirits. Both accounts, whether monotheistic or polytheistic, illustrate what happens if divine spirituality truly matters.

Context of Comparison. Before I present this worldview comparison to you, permit me to make a few points about its context. I want to acknowledge, first, that in formulating this workshop, I assembled a team of people to assist me, from virtually every discipline of my College: from neuroscience to history, anthropology to family science. The comparison I'll present to you is the result of our *collective* efforts. Second, please have mercy on these particular assumptions, their labels, and their organization. It is exceedingly difficult in our specialized academic world to talk about even common ideas. There are surely hundreds of ways to organize this information, and I do not represent our approach as canonical.

As I list these contrasting features, I hope faculty will have a course in mind as they ask themselves: "How do these features illuminate, or not illuminate, the topics and issues of my course?" I'm aware the relevance of the features varies from discipline to discipline and course to course, so I'm not expecting all the features or labels to work universally. Don't hesitate to focus on the ones that make the most sense in your application.

Allow me to orient everyone to the table (see table, p. 10). Note that each worldview is in a separate column. Notice also that my team found it helpful to divide the worldview of naturalism into overlapping features, each with its own label. Some of these features are derived from its foundational assumptions; some are associated with it historically. My team gave up trying to put labels on their theistic contrasts. Within each box I've provided a brief summary of each feature and its contrast, but they're intentionally too small for you to see on this slide. I just wanted you to see the overall organization of the table. And, students, please don't let all the "isms" here throw you. I'll describe each pair of boxes as we continue, starting with the topmost comparison. I'll also provide brief illustrations of how each comparison inspired a workshop participant or two to modify their class.

Immanentism

A key feature at play in the relationship of naturalism and theism is what could be called *immanentism*. Immanentism is, essentially, limiting the scope of our study to the events and

explanations of the immanent or natural world, rather than the transcendent or supernatural world. Only the events of *this* world matter, and only the explanations that approximate natural laws or general principles count. Methods of investigation, too, should be tuned to detect and describe these immanent events and general principles. God, from this perspective, is either not involved in the events of the natural world, or his involvement doesn't really matter.

For theists, by contrast, God is not restricted to some sort of supernatural realm. He's also a difference-maker in the events of the natural world. Some kind of divine factor is thus necessary to any *complete* explanation. Even the law of gravity, for example, requires the sustaining hand of God from this perspectiveⁱ. Theists have also derived their own methods for studying and understanding both spiritual and worldly events. Some versions of natural theology, for example, focus almost exclusively on natural events for revelations of God.

Illustration: An early participant of our workshops, a neuroscientist, was embarrassed to admit that his way of integrating the sacred and secular was through deism. God was the creator of the brain but played no role thereafter. This neuroscientist decided to make clear to his students that disciplinary explanations, as good as they were, weren't complete from a Christian perspective. God would need to play a current role in the brain for them to be truly Christian. He then delighted in the student conversation that followed, replete with neural explanations for spiritual promptings. For perhaps the first time, he said, "I felt my students were meaningfully integrating the sacred and secular." Remember that my student, Sam, was "confused" by just this sort of issue. "Wow," I thought to myself, "this kind of class would've really helped him."

Dualism

Our next feature, dualism, assumes that the objective and the subjective realms are completely separable. This dualism can take many forms, but in contemporary naturalism it tends to consider the subjective realm the location of biases and values. The naturalist should therefore strive to eliminate this realm in an objective investigation of natural events. And because religion is thought to be on the subjective side of this dualistic divide, the naturalist views it as secondary, less real, and more biased — at least regarding disciplinary investigation and knowledge.

Many theists, however, note that an investigator's subjectivity is inevitably involved in *any* inquiry, from choice of topic studied to choice of method deployed. All knowledge, then, can be considered some combination of subjective and objective factors. A theistic worldview may seem more biased, but this is due, at least in part, to the naturalists' tendency to hide their values, so as to appear objective, and to the theists' tendency to promote their values. Theists also assume that some important events of the world are *unobservable* — such as God, morality, and love — and accessible only *through* values, especially the *right* values. As the scriptures repeatedly echo, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mat 11:15). In this sense, important truths of the world can only be discovered by those who are prepared *subjectively* to perceive, or "hear" them.

Illustration: I do remember that one of our workshop participants was especially interested in this dualism feature. She taught qualitative methods in family science and had long considered their openness to the values of the researcher as one of the strengths of these methods. It dawned on her through our workshop that she could not only study religious values but also interpret any resulting data in a theistic manner, and she altered her teaching accordingly.ⁱⁱ

Determinism

The feature of determinism assumes that the natural laws which govern the world also determine it. The old adage, “what comes up, must come down,” presumes the determinism of the law of gravity. Identifying these determining laws allows naturalists to predict and control world events. And human thoughts and behaviors are not exempt from this mechanistic perspective. Virtually all the data of neuroscience, for example, are interpreted in the service of discerning their biological determinants.

Many theists, on the other hand, presume that humans, at least, have an agency that allows them possibilities to choose and direct their behavior. Vital aspects of human communities, such as morality and love, require the personal responsibility this agency implies. When a rolling boulder, for instance, happens to avoid some hikers, we don’t say “good boulder.” We presume the boulder didn’t have a personal responsibility for its roll, and thus can’t be morally responsible for its goodness. Humans, by contrast, have a limited personal agency that permits them to be praised and blamed for many of their thoughts and actions.

Illustration: Neuroscience workshop participants were quick to see the errors of their teaching ways in regard to this feature. Recall that Sam mentioned the lack of any consideration of agency in his classes. Indeed, these participants soon realized that much of the data of their discipline didn’t *have* to be interpreted deterministically. A psychology participant also realized that she presented virtually all the factors of child development deterministically. She recognized that the standard factors of our nature and nurture were almost completely outside our control. For the first time in her classes, she opened the issue of agency for discussionⁱⁱⁱ.

Universalism

The feature of universalism, as I’m using it here, is the naturalistic assumption that the best form of real knowledge is general knowledge. Given several pieces of disciplinary information, the most important task is to abstract from these pieces their general pattern. The categorization of psychiatric disorders is an example in psychology, and I’ve repeatedly alluded to the supposed zenith of such knowledge, natural law. In this sense, many scientists presume universalism in believing that knowledge should be replicable.

Theism *also* values the patterns and regularities of the natural world. But there are at least two important differences between naturalism and theism in this matter. First, theists assume that God’s presently sustaining hand is necessary for it to remain a regularity. God could, in fact,

change the pattern to perform a miracle. The second difference is a change in the quality of the regularity — from a *determining* pattern to a *divine* pattern. The former quality eliminates human agency; the latter permits it. Most theists also do not limit their explanations to general principles or patterns. The worldview of theism typically makes room for the import of the singular and the particular. Spiritual experiences, for instance, are rarely generalizable or replicable, but many theists consider them to be significant personal knowledge.

Illustration: Our workshop participants often found the feature of universalism especially difficult to break free of. Pursuing the general is, after all, one of the hallmarks of Western knowledge advancement. But I do recall a psychologist coming to the aid of one workshop group, where he argued that a single case history of successful therapy was vital not only to student understanding but also disciplinary knowledge^{iv}.

Atomism

Our next feature, atomism, refers to the naturalistic assumption that the basic qualities of a thing or an event are inherent within it. If you want to understand a hammer, study the hammer. There's no need to refer to anything external to the hammer. Atomism often enters the humanities and social sciences through individualism. Here, the typical unit of choice is the individual, with relationships among individuals as the means to individual ends. The end of a marriage, in this sense, is not the relationship; it's the happiness of each partner.

From many theists, however, individuals and even hammers gain many of their basic qualities from their relationships, especially to God. Hammers are sometimes paper weights, depending on their external context. Also, marriage and other types of human relationships are not a means to individual ends. Communities are ends in themselves, perhaps even bodies of Christ. This kind of holistic thinking is evidenced in many disciplines, including physics, where the late Nobel Laureate, David Bohm, called for non-atomistic conceptions.

Illustration: The workshop participants who taught family science realized that their teaching of family "systems" was itself fundamentally atomistic. For example, virtually all their surveys of marital quality assess individuals, not the marital relationship. These participants loved discussing with their classes not only this kind of atomism but also the intriguing possibility of treating families as ends in themselves.

Hedonism

The last feature, hedonism, is perhaps more historically associated with naturalism than a direct assumption or implication. Indeed, hedonism tends to borrow from another feature of naturalism, universalism, because pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance are considered properties of all animals, including humans. Variations of this feature are incorporated into conceptions of evolution as well as conceptions of egoism in the social sciences. Common notions that individuals are meant to have the pleasure of happiness have long occupied

disciplines like psychology and economics. Even behaviors that serve some greater moral purpose are often construed as ultimately in our self-interest.

The worldview of theism, on the other hand, rejects the notion that all human relationships are ultimately reducible to the calculation of self-interest. Many theists argue that human beings are moral agents who can and ought to aspire to more than mere personal happiness or even individual well-being. The theist does not deny that personal happiness can be an important motive for behavior, but it's not the only or even primary motive in human endeavors, especially human relationships. Self-forgetting in devotion to God and the service of others has real meaning as an end in itself.

Illustration: This feature of naturalism always sparked important discussions among workshop participants. How is authentic altruism possible, especially if all biological organisms are primordially motivated to pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance? In one conversation I recall, new information about tree communities was cited. Several books have, in fact, been published recently that describe how trees share nutrients, often at their own expense, with nutrient-poor trees. If trees can be altruistic, perhaps naturalism has led us to misunderstand other parts of nature, including our own.

Conclusion

As I begin to conclude today, I want to acknowledge the challenge instructors face in presenting these six features in the classroom. Our approach is more of an *interfacing* than an *integrating* of the sacred and secular. People who adopt this interfacing approach would not be synthesizing the two worldviews, but laying them alongside one another for comparison. I appreciate that theism is being taught separately in religion classes, but we also need to guide students in the relationship between these two worldviews as it relates to our disciplines.

I realize, however, that thinking through disciplinary information in this fashion may seem daunting. Fortunately, there are all sorts of ways to begin slowly. By far the most successful in my experience is simply introducing some or all of these features to the students early in the course. Many instructors reported the students making connections spontaneously throughout the course. Indeed, some instructors had no intention of returning to the worldview comparison after its introduction. To their surprise, however, they found themselves discovering new insights they wanted to share and discuss with their students.

I can't help but think what such a class might have meant to my student Sam. Would it have helped him in his spiritual and existential crises? I sincerely believe it would have. Even if he never understood God's immanent role in our brains or a neuroscience explanation for human agency, he would have understood naturalism *as a point of view*, not a fact. He would have realized that this worldview has its own unproven values and assumptions; it isn't merely a neutral background for objective reasoning and research. It has important and perhaps even controversial implications for the methods and practices of the academy.

He also would have seen some of his own cherished religious and personal beliefs going toe-to-toe with these naturalistic implications. This comparison would have helped him understand that a theistic worldview has a place for many of the things he was learning in class, just a different explanation for them. I think he might have also recognized that theism isn't some medieval leftover from a pre-scientific age, but a set of fresh ideas that hasn't really been explored in the modern and postmodern contexts of the university. Maybe in the process, he'd have learned that theism has its own evidence and logic that don't have to take their cues from the evidence and logic of naturalism. And finally, I believe that Sam would've understood the radicality of Christian beliefs. Jesus was a theistic dissident in his day, and I believe that this comparison to the naturalistic status quo of *our* day reveals that his followers should still be dissidents.

**Distinguishing Features of the Worldview of Naturalism:
Contrasted with the Worldview Features of Theism
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Naturalism	Theism
Immanentism: Only the immanent or natural, not the transcendent, matter in understanding the world.	God is at least a necessary condition for understanding the things and events of the world.
Dualism: The real world is ultimately objective (e.g., observable) and can be free of subjectivity (e.g., values).	At least some important aspects of the real world are not free of interpretation or values.
Determinism: The world, including humans, is ultimately determined by its laws and principles.	Some facets of the world (e.g., humans) involve contextual agency.
Universalism: The most valuable aspects of the world are general laws, patterns, or principles.	Patterns of regularity are important but significant knowledge can also stem from irregular or singular events.
Atomism: The essential qualities of objects and events are inherent within them (e.g., variables, individualism).	Things and events are parts of wholes and thus gain some of their qualities from their relation to one another.
Hedonism: Pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance are the primary motives of all animals, including humans.	Not all motives are ultimately reducible to self-interest, with authentic altruism possible.

ⁱ I'm aware of the LDS controversy regarding whether God created (and creates) natural and ethical laws, or whether God is subject to those laws. However, I'm not sure that even the latter precludes God from being "inherent in the phenomena of the natural world," including gravity. We could use the term "law," for instance, when God is bound by his own covenants with us. He's trustworthy in this regard. Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated that Christ "governs and is governed by law" (Mormon Doctrine, p. 432.) God has said, for example, that He is bound when His children do what He says (see [D&C 82:10](#)). We could also use the term "law" in the sense that God is a being of a certain nature, for example, the embodiment of love. President John Taylor said: "God is ... the essence of law, the giver of law, the sustainer of law, all of those laws are eternal in all their operations, in all bodies and matter, and throughout all space. It would be impossible for Him to violate law, because in so doing He would strike at His own dignity, power, principles, glory, exaltation and existence." (Mediation and Atonement, p. 168.) But we should be careful if we believe that God is determined by (forced to) obey the laws, because then he's not free to obey, and thus not subject to our praise when he does. We should also be careful if these laws are, for example, biological, where he's prevented from intervening to heal someone.

ⁱⁱ My student, Sam, didn't explicitly mention objectivity in his letter, but he did compare religious belief unfavorably with objective evidence.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other participants, notably a sociologist teaching a quantitative methods course, realized that experimental design was generally considered to discern the determinism of the world. He began to question openly with his students about how this would work if humans have agency.

^{iv} Here I'll mention the classical formalization of this issue in psychology: nomothetic and idiographic investigation and knowledge.