PRÉCIS

While science traditionally has been seen as the primary discipline for ecological understanding, recent scholarship in the humanities and social sciences signals the importance of religious worldviews in shaping attitudes toward the environment. This course introduces class members to the emerging discipline of religion and ecology, a promising new field of inquiry into the spiritual dimensions of ecosystems and the place of human beings therein. Religion and ecology focuses on how different religious traditions have shaped human beings' fundamental outlook on the environment in ancient and modern times. In turn, it examines how various spiritual worldviews can aid -- or not -- the development of an Earth-centered philosophy of life. As a response to the global ecological crisis, it consists of study, conversation, and contemplation about the ancient green wisdom within different world spiritualities that provides insight into how human beings can live in harmony with their natural environments.

Beyond learning the field of religion and ecology, the practical goal of this course is for students to cultivate inner self-awareness and outward compassion for other lifeforms in a dialogical, interdisciplinary, and global religious context. How to coordinate the inner landscape of the heart with the outer landscape of the Earth is a primary theme. The thesis of this course is that the environmental crisis, at its core, is less a scientific or technological problem and more a spiritual problem because it is human beings' deep ecocidal dispositions toward nature that are the cause of the Earth's continued degradation. The crisis, in other words, is a matter of the heart, not the head. Market values have overtaken community values, and the lives of most people in the developed world run opposite the crucial insight in the American Indian proverb, "The frog does not drink up the pond in which it lives." Regarding the environmental crisis as a spiritual crisis, this course seeks to recover the biophilic convictions within different religious traditions as valuable resources for countering the utilitarian attitudes toward Earth community that now dominate the mindset of the global marketplace. The course is predicated on two baseline convictions about nature shared by most religious communities. (1) A core belief in the Sacred (God, the Real, the One, etc.) as that which binds together all living things in a web of biotic interdependence. And (2) the concomitant ethical ideal of working toward the healing of endangered communities of species whenever they suffer ecological degradation. This combination of unitary worldview and interspecies idealism runs like a green thread through a wide variety of religious traditions; in turn, it is a potent resource for developing lifestyles and policies that can lead to a sustainable future.

Course topics include ecological thought in Western philosophy, theology, and biblical studies; the role of Asian religious thought in forging an ecological worldview; the value of American nature writings for environmental awareness, including both Euroamerican and Amerindian literatures; public policy debates concerning vegetarianism and the antitoxics movement; and the contemporary relevance of ecofeminism, deep ecology, Paganism, and wilderness activism. In
addition to two writing assignments, a midterm, and final project, the course features regular Earth-based rituals and contemplative journaling exercises. The course also includes a community based learning component primarily centered in the nearby city of Chester.

**Required Bibliography**

Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*

John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*

David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb (eds.), *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*


Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*

J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*

Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*

Julia Butterfly Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwood*

This is a Blackboard course. Additional required readings are marked in the schedule below with an asterisk (*) and are available online. These readings are not optional but required assignments for the course. Other important course related information is accessible through the course homepage: syllabus, assignments, announcements, supplementary course guides, course links, college tripod system, and class discussion board communication. Regular visits to our homepage will be the digital portal through which class materials and information will be shared outside of class.

**Format**

This course uses a "rough seminar" format featuring opening comments by the instructor followed by general classroom and small group discussion. In addition to writing and exam assignments, the course uses alternative learning activities for cognitive development, self-discovery, and growth in civic responsibility. These activities include the following:

* Earth-Based Rituals. Approximately every other week, we engage in nonsectarian ritual practices that are borrowed from different religious traditions and modified for use in the college classroom. These practices include the following: Neopagan Council of All Beings ritual, lectio divina contemplative reading, modified Tu Bshevat (Tree Planting) ceremony, Zen Buddhist zazen sitting meditation, and Lakota medicine wheel practice. These activities are employed in order to deepen experientially insights gleaned from class discussion and the readings.

* Community Based Learning. Once every week or two, class members volunteer at a local food co-op or after-school tutoring programs, among other activities. Swarthmore College understands
its mission as developing ethical intelligence among its student body. To that end, the goal of community based learning (CBL) in this course is to integrate classroom theory and community practice so that that class members can become more reflective and competent participants in public life.

* Contemplative Journaling. Maintaining a reflective, gut level account of your weekly activities -- with special reference to CBL experiences -- helps to integrate learning inside and outside the classroom, and provide raw material for course writing assignments. Traditional writing, artistic media, or digital documents can be used for journaling. In particular, as the course develops, students should consider how the contemplative journal, in response to CBL experiences, can inform their vision of the final assignment.

Assessment

Writing requirements and corresponding grade percentages include two short papers (33%), midterm (33%), final term project (33%), and participation in class discussion and community based learning (gestalt overlay evaluation).

Schedule

I. Ecology in Christianity and Judaism

Philosophy, Theology, and Root Metaphors

wk.1.


Kinsley, Ecology and Religion, xiii-xxi, 101-40


wk.2.

Practicum: Council of All Beings ritual

Heidegger, Question, i-xxxix (skim), 1-35, 115-82

*Michael E. Zimmerman, Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art, 222-47

*Devall and Sessions, Deep Ecology, 63-108 (skim)

**Christian Ecotheology and Ecofeminism**

**wk.3.**

McFague, The Body of God, vii-97

Kinsley, Ecology and Religion, 203-209


*Susan Griffin, Woman and Nature, 5-46, 207-27 (skim)


**wk.4.**

Practicum: Lectio Divina meditative reading

McFague, The Body of God, 99-157


**Judaism, Creation, and the Eco-Kosher Project**

**wk.5.**

1st Paper Due

Practicum: Tu B'Shevat ceremony
II. Ecology in Asian Religions

Taoism, Buddhism, and Dynamic Interdependence 1

wk. 6.

Kinsley, Ecology and Religion, 68-98


Spring Break

Taoism, Buddhism, and Dynamic Interdependence 2

wk.7.
Midterm Due

Practicum: Zazen sitting meditation


*"The Sermon at Benares" and "Questions Not Tending to Edification," in The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha, ed. Burtt, 28-37


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David J. Kalupahana, "Toward a Middle Path of Survival," in same, 247-58

**III. American Nature Traditions**

**Amerindian**

**wk. 8.**

Neihardt, Black Elk, ix-212

Kinsley, Ecology and Religion, 7-21, 42-50

*Ed McGaa, Eagle Man, Mother Earth Spirituality, x-39

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**wk. 9.**

Practicum: Lakota medicine wheel ritual

Neihardt, Black Elk, 213-300

Euroamerican

wk. 10.

Kinsley, Ecology and Religion, 142-60, 210-32 (focus on Snyder and Berry sections)

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, selections from The Norton Book of Nature Writing, 144-58

*Henry David Thoreau, selections from same, 169-207

*John Muir, selections from same, 279-298

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*Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in Environmental Philosophy, ed. Zimmerman, 87-100

*Gary Snyder, The Practice of the Wild, 3-47, 175-85

*Gary Snyder, No Nature: New and Selected Poems, 218-19, 236-38, 245 (from Turtle Island)

*Wendell Berry, Collected Poems, 69, 109

IV. Public Policy Conflicts

Vegetarianism

wk. 11.

*Peter Singer, Animal Liberation: A New Ethic For Our Treatment of Animals, 163-91


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The Antitoxics Movement

*Larry Lohman, "Visitors to the Commons: Approaching Thailand's Environmental Struggles from a Western Starting Point," in same, 109-26


V. Earth Spirituality and Wilderness Activism

wk.12.

2d Paper Due

Practicum: "Council of All Beings" ritual

Abbey, The Monkey-Wrench Gang, entire


wk.13.

Julia Butterfly Hill, The Legacy of Luna, entire


wk.14.

TBA based on emerging personal and class interests -- TBA Final Term Project date