

# **Religion & Earth Ethics**

## **Religious Studies (87-362) - Fall 1997**

[Required Texts](#)  
[Course Outline](#)  
[Course Schedule](#)  
[Requirements & Evaluation](#)

Public debates about "what is the proper nature-human relationship" are increasing as many concerned people attempt to understand the religious and philosophical dimensions of a perceived environmental crisis. Some have argued that its roots can be traced to Western religion and philosophy. Some of these critics suggest that the ecological crisis can only be addressed by promoting non-Western religious worldviews, such as Buddhism, Taoism, or Hinduism, or by reverting to the worldviews believed to typify tribal societies, such as those of Native Americans and other indigenous peoples, or the pre-Christian "pagan" societies of Europe. Others call for the reformation or "greening" of the Western religious traditions, while still others defend them, arguing that they embody environmental ethics adequate or even superior to the non-Western alternatives. Still others criticize these debates, claiming that the causes of environmental degradation do not lie so much in religious or philosophical ideas, but in othersocial and economic trends. As the attached bibliography attests, over the last thirty years, there has been an explosion of scholarly discussion along these lines, enough to create an entirely new field of study which is now called "religion and ecology."

The battlegrounds for all the resulting debates have not, however, been only in academic halls and journals. Differing perspectives in these areas animate the moral passions and environment-related behaviors of many social actors (e.g. environmental activists and their opponents). The varying positions thus play an important role in contemporary environmental conflicts. Indeed, what we conclude about such theories will shape our own views about the causes and solutions to environmental degradation.

This course will explore the role of religion in the diverse ways humans in different cultures (and times) have viewed their moral responsibilities to the natural world, how such views contribute to contemporary environmental philosophies and political ideologies, and whether and to what extent such views actually shape environmental action. By so doing, the course will increase the student's understanding of today's environmental controversies. Moreover, by providing a panorama of the various options within environmental philosophy and religion, it will provide students with a unique opportunity to explore and develop their own perspectives about what constitutes a proper nature-human relationship. In other words, the course will help students think more critically about human moral responsibilities toward the earth and its diverse inhabitants.

### **Role of the Seminar in the General Education and Environmental Studies Curricula**

This course serves as an elective in the 24 credit Environmental Studies Minor. Prerequisites are "Environmental Ethics" (87-262) or "Environmental and Values" (37-262) or "Comparative Religious Ethics (87-107), or the approval by the instructor.

### **Required Texts (purchase at University Bookstore)**

Gottlieb, R., ed. 1996. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. New York & London: Routledge.

Kinsley, D. 1995. *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross- Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Supplementary Readings (on reserve, some selections required)

Callicott, J. B. 1994. *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics From the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. University of California Press.

Des Jardins, Joseph. 1993. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. Wadsworth.

Tucker, M. E., and J. A. Grim, eds. 1994. *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*. Orbis.

Swimme, B., and T. Berry. 1992. *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. Harper.

Macy, J. 1991. *World As Lover, World As Self*. Parallax Press.

Taylor, B. "Religion and Earth Ethics -- Course Reader"

## Course Outline

The following course outline provides the subject matter and a number of the major questions addressed in the course. It also mentions a few of the most influential works that have shaped the public "religion and ecology" forum. After this course outline, a week-by-week "course schedule" chart appears, indicating when the general subject areas will be addressed, and providing specific reading assignments for that week.

Required readings will include readings from two of the "on reserve" books (indicated above) and from the "Religion and Earth Ethics Course Reader". Optional readings are also recommended; they are few in number and are carefully selected so I hope you will make time to read at least some of them. More detailed reading lists, divided into subject areas, are appended at the end of this syllabus.

## **PART ONE -- RELIGION AND ECOLOGY IN THE WORLD'S MAJOR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS (up to and including the contemporary period).**

**Introduction:** In this part of the course we introduce the major questions of this course and overview the debates related to these questions, focusing especially on the world's most prevalent religious orientations.

Posing the questions. Among this course's central questions, are: What is the relationship between religion (and religious ideas) and the natural world? There has now been 30 years of intense debate about this, fueled by the perception of a global environmental crisis.

- Lynn White and Arnold Toynbee trace the environmental crisis to Christianity and Monotheism, eventuating in:
  - Widespread acceptance of the thesis
  - A vigorous defense of monotheistic traditions
  - A dramatic reformation (greening) monotheistic traditions.
- Ecofeminists (and others) blame the modern (Western) scientific worldview, and even the so-called enlightenment, for disenchanting and enabling a "war" on nature.
  - Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) -- the most influential example in this regard.
- Others attack the assumption that ideas drive historical changes rather than result from them.

### Religion & Ecology in Tribal and Indigenous Societies

- Arguments that such societies as ecologically beneficent and relatively sustainable
- Contentions that such arguments are overstated.

Hinduism and Ecology

Chinese Religions (Taoism & Confucianism) and ecology

Buddhism and Ecology

- Traditional Buddhism and Ecology
- Contemporary Buddhism and Ecology in North America and in the ritualizing unfolding within the international deep ecology movement.
  - Joanna Macy, John Seed, and The Council of All Beings.
- The technology debate in contemporary Buddhism: Does Buddhism provide a basis for social-environmental critique?

Monotheistic Religion & Ecology: Judaism

Monotheistic Religion & Ecology: Islam

Monotheistic Religion & Ecology: Christianity

- Roman Catholicism
- Protestantism (mainstream denominational and "evangelical")

## **PART TWO -- NATURE RELIGION IN NORTH AMERICA (1492 - 1960)**

**Introduction:** Nature has been an important symbolic center for religious reflection in North America, and not only for Native Americans, as is sometimes believed. Since the arrival of Europeans, such nature religion has taken diverse forms that nevertheless promote three broad impulses: (1) the mastery of nature; (2) indifference to nature; and (3) harmonization within nature. Here we examine these impulses up until the social 1960's social upheavals and the age of environmentalism.

Nature Religion in America - before the 1960's social upheavals and the age of Ecology

- Roderick Nash, Wilderness in the American Mind
- Catherine Albanese, Nature Religion in America
- Stephen Fox, The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and his legacy
- Nature writing and ecological spirituality

## **PART III -- CONTEMPORARY NATURE RELIGION IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

**(or "global bricolage" and the emergence of diverse, "out of the closet," forms of "pagan environmentalism")**

**Introduction:** Since 1960 there has been an explosion (perhaps especially among environmentally concerned citizens) of interest in non-western, pre-Christian European, and indigenous religions; this explosion has often been fueled by their supposed ecological superiority. Those drawn to such spiritualities have been increasingly bold and overt in expressing and promoting such alternative religious perspectives and practices. Within what might be called the religious "counterculture" is a milieu in which the ideas and practices of alternative spiritualities are readily available and freely exchanged. During the past two decades or so, within this countercultural milieu, modern scientific narratives have increasingly been incorporated into what are considered to be ecologically beneficent religious worldviews.

Within such spiritual countercultures, the lines between various emerging traditions is often hard to discern. Here in part three of the course, we will examine several of these often mutually influential and reinforcing streams of religious thought. (It should also be kept in mind that the changes taking place in the main, "world" religions have also influenced, sometimes importantly, developments within what are best considered to be "new" or "alternative" religions.)

- Contemporary Nature Religion - Deep Ecology Spirituality, Radical Environmentalism and the emergence of overt Pagan environmentalism.
- Contemporary Nature Religion - Ecofeminist Goddess Spirituality, Neo-Paganism, and Wicca
- Contemporary Nature Religion - Science-Based, "New Paradigm" Spiritualities
  - The Gaia theory and cybernetic systems theories
  - Myth-making: Cosmology and Evolution - consecrating scientific cosmogonies.
  - Ecopsychology - reconnecting with nature and restoring human emotional health
  - New Age ecologies: Buckmaster Fuller, and Pierre Tielhard de Chardine, and steering spaceship earth.

## **PART IV -- ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION AND SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY**

**Introduction:** It is one thing to understand the issues that have emerged in contemporary discussions related to religion and ecology, quite another to deal personally with this material. We have reviewed a wide variety of views about religion and ecology, offering various diagnoses regarding the role that religion has played in environmental deterioration and prescriptions for reforming (or re-invigorating or rejecting) religion as a means toward environmental sustainability. With these final readings we focus on the question: What role, if any, can religious ethics play in fostering appropriate attitudes and behaviors toward nature? And in light of an appropriate earth ethics, what sorts of environmental action must be engaged?

Evaluating Spiritual Ecology.

- What is the proper relationship between science, religion, and ecology?
- Can or ought we to stand environmental ethics on Sacred Ground?

Environmental Action and Earth Ethics

- The World Parliament of Religion and Religious Earth Ethics
- Can such religious earth ethics be integrated with environmental politics?
- Personal responses to the environmental degradation

### **Course Schedule & Assignments**

**(Assignments are to be prepared before the date assigned)**

### **Requirements and Evaluation**

1. **Journals.** To ensure that students read carefully and come to class well prepared for class discussions, each student will be required to keep a journal in which she or he will document understandings of and reactions to the readings.

It is essential that you strictly observe the following guidelines. Purchase a 5x8", six-ring notebook and paper at the University bookstore (option: if you prefer to "word process/type" your journals, do so on standard printer paper and, after folding them in half, insert them into the envelopes provided; write + of the length specified below):

Each week, write three things in your journal:

In 3-5 pages, write a narrative summary of the major argument(s) or perspectives that were being advanced by the authors of this week's readings. Answer these questions: What are the central arguments made and by whom?, How do the author(s) build their arguments?, and What evidence do they cite? Are there common themes emerging in these readings? If so, what are they? If you wish, you may also analyze the articles' key presuppositions, strengths or weaknesses. (Worth ten points).

In 1-2 pages, write a personal reaction to the present week's readings. Answer questions such as: What surprised you? What did you hear or learn for the first time? What made sense to you or disturbed you, and why? With whom did you agree more than the others, and why? (Worth 5 points).

In 1-2 pages, relate the present week's readings to previous readings and class-room presentations, comparing and contrasting the central claims made and issues illuminated. Answer questions such as: What are the central issues being debated or discussed? On what points do the authors agree and disagree? What are the differing assumptions and the evidence upon which the positions are based? What are the differences (and what is at stake) between this week's readings and in the positions read in previous weeks? In other words, show that you are making connections between the present readings and other things you are learning in the course (worth 5 points). I will provide additional questions to think and write about for each week readings.

Each week you must be prepared to turn in your journal entries for that week's readings in the envelopes I will provide to you for this purpose. I will collect and grade your journals ten times during the semester. This will provide you with an opportunity to earn up to 200 points (nearly + of the course grade). Obviously, you should take this assignment seriously.

**2. Weekly bibliographic readings.** Each week, for 10 weeks (see schedule) you will turn in an analysis (per the instructions in Appendix A) of a scholarly article or book related to your chosen research project. Each will be worth 5 points (total 50) and this will ensure you make consistent progress on your research paper.

**3. Attendance and participation.** The quality of your contributions to the classroom sessions may significantly affect your grade. By quality I mean: Do you demonstrate that you have read and understood the course readings and can you engage in discussions in an informed and civil manner? How well do you integrate what you are learning in this course with information gathered elsewhere? I will award extra points, and in some cases will deduct points, based on this evaluation (up to 50 points either way in extreme cases).

We will regularly arrange forums and debates and hold them in class. Although I will not award points based on the quantity of participation, obviously, regular participation will insure that I will have enough experience of you to evaluate. Do not miss class. Each session missed represents an entire week (7%) of the 14 week semester. Missing three class sessions will result in your failing or being administratively withdrawn from the course.

**4. Research Paper.** Each student will complete a research paper and make a classroom presentation based on it. The subjects for this research must be approved by the instructor by the fourth class session. A list of possible topics can be found in Appendix B of this syllabus, and guidelines for these papers in Appendix C. These papers will be

worth 200 points and the classroom presentation will be worth 50 points. I will read and provide feedback on drafts of research papers that are turned in to me on or before the class session during week 12 (20 November).

**5. Participation in the E-mail classroom.** Through e-mail we will handle certain course logistics and discuss readings. All students will be expected to provide an e-mail address and to monitor e-mail at least every week. Any changes in the course structure or evaluation will be announced in class, and sometimes before that via e mail. (As the course progresses, the list of assignments and the readings are subject to modification.)

### Points Possible for Required Assignments

Assignment	Points per Assignment	Total Possible Points
Journals	10 times @ 20 points each	200
Bibliographic entries	10 times @ 5 points	50
Student Presentations	50	50
Research paper	200	200
	Total Possible Points/Course:	500

### Calculating Grades

At the end of the semester, the total number of points earned by each student will be divided by the total number earned by the highest-scoring student. The resulting percentage will be used to calculate the student's grade for the course. Put in a formula, it looks like this:

$$\frac{\text{the score of each individual student (yourscore)}}{\text{(divided by) the highest score earned by a student}}$$

The percentage arrived at by means of this formula will be evaluated according to the following scale:

95%	A
90%	A/B
85%	B
80%	B/C
70%	C
65%	C/D
60%	D
59%	F

This kind of scoring is fairer than many other forms of grading because: (1) It is based on what students

receive a high grade; (3) Hard-working students will not be penalized for staying in a demanding course full of equally industrious students. With a traditional curve, demanding courses that "weed out" less industrious students, leaving hard-working ones, can unintentionally harm good students putting them in competition with each other. This will not occur in this course. To further insure fairness any extra credit points will be added to the individual student's score only after the highest score earned by a student has been established. This ensures that the extra credit earned will not increase the difficulty of the grading scale.

**Late or Missing Assignments.** Late assignments will not be accepted. Assignments are late if they are not turned in at the beginning of the class session in which they are due. The research paper will be due at the beginning of the last class session. It will be reduced by one grade if it is turned in on Friday, and will not be accepted after that date (the last day classes are in session).

**Returned Assignments.** Assignments will be returned to students during the class session subsequent to the one in which they were due (except in the case of an extreme personal problem). At the end of the semester, unreturned course work will be available for six weeks in the religious studies office. After this time, it will be recycled.

**Appointments and Office Hours.** Due to my diverse responsibilities and three offices I am sometimes hard to find, so I ask that you make appointments to see me. This is easily done by telephone or e-mail. Remember, you can always call me at home or e-mail me with your questions and concerns.

**Academic dishonesty:** Students found cheating or to have engaged in plagiarism will receive an "F" in the course and may be referred for disciplinary action.