

Religion and Ecology

McMaster University
Religious Studies 2W03E
Winter 2012

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Office Hours: Mondays 4:30-6:00

Lectures + tutorials: Mon. 7:00-9:50 pm
Location: CNH/106

“The goal of life is living in agreement with nature.” Zeno (333-264 BCE)

Course Description

What is the place of human beings in the natural world? Are human beings primarily of nature or above or apart from nature? Do human beings have a responsibility to other beings and to the planet itself? This course will address such questions by exploring attitudes towards the environment in a variety of religious traditions, historically and in the present time. We will examine the underlying assumptions of our contemporary view of the natural world, assumptions that are informed by both science and religion. Even while religion may not seem to be as relevant to the modern world as it once was, we need to consider that religions have been profoundly influential in shaping worldviews (beliefs, perspectives, values, understandings of the world and our place in it). Thus, becoming familiar with the complex connections between religion, spirituality, attitudes, behaviour and ecology is crucial for how we live today and for the future.

Objectives

 Students will:

- Learn about what religious traditions from around the globe have said about the natural environment in their authoritative texts and teachings, and the interpretation of those teachings over the centuries
- Learn about what religious leaders and laypeople are saying and doing about their faith's attitude and responsibility towards the environment today
- Become familiar with some of the key figures who have offered critiques of prevailing attitudes towards nature, and championed new (or renewed) ways of understanding our relationship with the natural environment (the biosphere) in the modern era, beginning with such figures as Thoreau and Muir, and into the 20th century: Leopold, Lovelock, Thomas Berry, and Rosemary Ruether –developing into what has been called “Dark Green Religion”
- Practice critical thinking and writing skills

Course Requirements and Evaluation

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| • 5 reading-question response papers | 33% |
| • attendance/ participation | 12% |
| • film/book review | 15% |
| • research/project/practicum essay outline | 5% |
| • research essay/project or practicum report | 35% |

Textbooks:

- Gottlieb, Roger ed. *This Sacred Earth—Religion, Nature, Environment*. 2nd edition. Routledge, 2004
- Course Pack of selected readings (RS 2W03)

ASSIGNMENTS:**i) Question-Reading Response Papers:**

Consult the course outline (lecture topics, readings, and discussion questions). **Choose five of the questions** (or clusters of questions), and select 2-3 readings from **different weeks**. Prepare an approx. 800 word (or 2 ½ page) response to the question based on your selected articles from the required readings. While you may focus on one reading in particular to review and as the main source from which to address your chosen question, include references to the other readings for that week, as pertinent.

ii) Book/Film Review (15%), see instructions posted online (under “assignments”)

iii) Research Essay or Project or Practicum (35%)

You must decide whether to submit a research essay, complete a project, or undertake a practicum. The **practicum** option is available for those of you who have a strong desire to have practical experience with the activities that promote environmental awareness and responsibility. Since we do not have the resources to run a guided practicum for all students, this option requires strongly self-motivated students who are willing to find a placement and create a learning opportunity. It will involve a minimum of 24 hours of volunteer work, followed by a **6 page report** [details in the handout for the practicum].

Project: A project is similar to a research essay insofar as you need to conduct research (gather data, analyze and present it), but it differs in that (1) it can be a group effort; (2) it can be presented in class using multi-media, and so (3) it can be more creative than a research paper. While a dvd/film, slide show or other media may be created, you still need to submit a written portion. [see details in the handout for the project option]

Research Essay: Length: 2600-3000 words (approx. 9-10 pp)

In choosing your research essay topic, look over the course outline and your text book readings. Do any of these topics or readings look especially interesting to you? Do you want to follow up your reading with more research? (Do you want to pursue one of the questions that are already formulated in the course outline, maybe follow up on one of your reading response papers?)

Once you have chosen a general topic area, e.g., “Theravada Buddhism and Ecology,” now begin to narrow down your topic and formulate a few questions whose answers you want to research. For example, what do sutras from the Pali Canon say about our relationship with sentient and nonsentient beings? How are these ideas expressed in particular Theravada story literature? practices? Who are modern Theravada Buddhist exponents of these teachings? Are they trying to revive them or give them new meanings/applications? How? Where?

Within the confines of this paper, you may well not be able adequately to answer **all** of these questions about “Theravada and ecology.” So, next, choose two or three questions on which to focus. Do some preliminary research. Are there enough secondary sources to draw on? Too many? Do you need to broaden your questions, modify them, or narrow them? Once you’ve made these decisions, it is time to write up an outline.

Course Outline

Date	Topic and Readings
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I. Setting the Scene

Jan. 9 Introduction

- to course content and requirements
- What is ecology? How does it relate to religion?
- Are our current crises “spiritual” crises?

Film: “Home” (2009); can also view online <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqxENMKaeCU>

Read: Gottlieb: Intro pp. 6-12; 361-381; cp: Taylor, 1-4; Bauman et.al. “introduction” 1-8.

Recommended film series to (re)view: “Planet Earth”

Jan. 16 Environmental Crisis/ Earth-Civilization Collision

- Where are we at? (the 9 critical planetary limits)
- Earth as Gaia

Films: “The 11th Hour”; start “What a Way to go”

Read: re. nine planetary boundaries, see: <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/planetary-boundaries> ; Calculate your own eco-footprint at www.footprintnetwork.org

Questions: What are the implications of thinking of the Earth as a superorganism? How does this perception call upon us to live differently than we do at present?

Jan. 23 The Modern Roots and Sources of our Ecological Crisis

- How on earth did we get here?
- Science the problem? Science the saviour?
- The adages and myths that inform our worldviews

Film: finish “What a Way to Go: Life at the end of Empire”

Read: Gottlieb: article by L. White, 192-201; cp: Merchant (39-47), Easterbrook (49-58)

Discussion questions:

- How is progress defined? Is progress necessary? Are there limits to growth? (consider above “planetary boundaries”—what determines those limits?) Is environmentalism incompatible with industrial development?
- Is nature imperfect? Can or should human improve on nature?
- Are humans part of nature? Can human activities be unnatural? How? Why? Should some natural areas be protected from all human activity? (this last question is relevant for next week’s readings also)
- In relation to film “What a Way to Go”, What are the ‘stories’ that you live by? (why? How?) or what are the myths that inform the dominant worldview at present? What sort of myths/stories do we require in order to live successfully and sustainably in the future?

II. Interpreting Tradition: A Quick Tour of Faiths and Ecology

What have some of the world’s major religions actually said about human beings’ relationship with the natural environment? How are particular teachings implicated in our current ecological crisis? What resources do the world’s religions offer to address the crisis?

Jan. 30 Aboriginal Worldviews and Ecology: The Sacred Balance/ A Sense of Place

Film: TBA

Read: cp: Campbell “Place”, pp. 203-218; Gottlieb: creation stories and accounts 54-5; 57-60; 65-66; 124-29; 175-79; 186-88; 513-14

Discussion questions:

- What does it mean to view the land as sacred?
- Is it possible for non-Native North Americans to feel a connection to the land? What conditions are necessary in order to feel such a connection? (How do you feel about the land you grew up on? Does it “belong” to you?)
- See also questions in Campbell’s chapter on “place”
- What is “Traditional Ecological Knowledge”? How could it help us live more sustainably on this Earth?

(a) Asian Religions: The Interconnectedness of Life

Feb. 6 Hinduism, Jainism and Ecology

Read: Gottlieb: stories 61-2; Dwivedi 145-56; Chapple 300-313.

Recommended doc: “The Story of Stuff” (online)

Discussion questions:

- What are the ecological implications of the doctrine of nonviolence (*ahimsa*)?
- What are some specific examples of how applying Hindu or Jain teachings/principles might lead to a more ecologically friendly way of life?
- Do asceticism and world renunciation lead to indifference toward the state of the environment? (What aspects of Hindu or Jain teachings might work against a concern for the environment?)

Feb. 13 Buddhist Worldviews and Ecology—the kinship of all beings

Film: story from “Renewal” and “The Human Footprint” (excerpts)

Read: Gottlieb, Kabilsingh 130-33; Kaza 330-47; and re. animals Kowalski 351-54.

Recommended doc to view: “Food Inc.”

Buddhism & Ecology Discussion questions:

- What does the kinship of all life mean? What are its implications? (e.g., for the treatment of animals? For our diets?)
- What are some specific examples of how applying Buddhist teachings/principles might lead to a more ecologically friendly way of life?
- How does one reconcile engaged Buddhism with the ideal of nonattachment?
- What is the relationship between over-population and over-consumption in terms of environmental degradation (from a Buddhist or Jain perspective)?

(b) Abrahamic Religions: Custodians of Creation

Discussion Questions for all three religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam):

- How does God will humans to act in relation to material creation? What is the place of humans, as both physical and spiritual creatures, in the created world?

- What does it mean for humans to have dominion over creation? What does it mean to be stewards of the Earth? Can we be stewards of the Earth while remaining embedded within it?
- Can nature be seen as sacred (in Judaism/Christianity/and-or Islam? Does reverence for nature pose a danger to monotheism? What is the difference between reverence and worship?

Feb. 27 Judaism, Islam and Ecology

Film: stories from “Renewal”

Read: on Judaism: in Gottlieb: Bible 77-89; Swartz 92-109; Ginsberg 110-12; Waskow 273-76; and on Islam: Qur’an 90-91; Dean 158-67; Ammar 285-99

Discussion Questions:

- What is eco-kosher? How do dietary laws have ecological implications?
- What Jewish laws/practices lend themselves to a positive ecological implication? (e.g., the Sabbath, the Jubilee year?) What teachings or interpretations might have negative ecological implications?
- How does the Qur’anic concept of stewardship compare with the biblical version in Genesis?
- How do some Muslims see environmental degradation as connected to issues of social justice? Are these issues separable?
- What Muslim teachings lend themselves to positive ecological implications? What teachings or interpretations might have negative ecological implications?

March 5 Christianity and Ecology

Film: stories from “Renewal”

Read: Gottlieb: Peterson, 113-123; John Paul II 202-09; cp Dewitt (349-354)

Discussion Questions:

- How do beliefs about separation between spirit and matter affect or inform environmental values?
- What Christian teachings lend themselves to positive ecological implications? What teachings or interpretations might have negative ecological implications?

III. Spirituality and the Environment: Contemporary Perspectives

March 12 Eco-feminism and Eco-Justice

Film: “Taking Root: The Vision of Wangaari Mathai”

Read: on eco-feminism, in Gottlieb: Ruether, 388-98; Gebara 400-410; Shiva 466-9.

On eco-justice: Gottlieb: principles 729-30; Higgens-Freeca & Tomhave 716-20; Conradie et. al. 661-79; Mananzan 688-94; 712-15

Discussion Questions:

- Are women closer to nature than men? If so, what ways and what does this mean? If not, how has this social construction affected views of women and nature? What could be its positive implications, if any?
- Is patriarchy inherently ecologically destructive?

- Would improving the status and rights of women lead to improvements in how we treat nature?
- Would seeing the Divine as feminine have positive ecological repercussions?
- Who should decide how to manage natural resources in so-called developing countries?
- Must poorer countries choose between addressing environmental issues or addressing social problems?
- Is a high standard of living the same as a high quality of life? What defines each?

March 19 & 26 Modern Environmentalism and the Emergence of “Dark Green Religion”

- The beginnings of modern environmentalism
- Deep Ecology; (neo-)Paganism
- Eco-activism (is the human species a virus?)

Film: “Fierce Light”, dir. V. Ripper

Guest speaker (Jeff Warren)

Read: Gottlieb: intro 473-4; Seed, 550-1 and 552-3 and 554-7; Gottlieb “A Spirituality of Resistance”; cp: Bron Taylor, intro pp. 5-12, and ch. 4 “Radical Environmentalism”, 71-102, from his *Dark Green Religion*, 2010; (see too “The Earth Charter”)

Discussion Questions:

- Is it possible for humans to be non-anthropocentric?
- Is the human species a virus? How do radical environmental groups (like “Earth First!”) defend such a position, assigning greater value to the eco-system?
- Is it possible or desirable to “green” existing religions, or is a form of “dark green religion” the only answer to finding a spiritual approach to living in this world sustainably?
- Does Paganism hold a special claim to being an ecological religion? How so? Or Why not? in today’s world
- What are the spiritual principles underlying “The Earth Charter”? Is it the most promising way to go forward? (to engage humanity in a universal ‘green’ ethic?)

April 2 Conclusions What can religions offer to enable a sustainable future?

- Project presentations