

# Ecology, Ethics and Religion

Course Code THET 10021

Course Manager: Professor Michael Northcott

School of Divinity

m.northcott@ed.ac.uk

Semester 1 2014 Fridays 1000 – 1300

**First Class: Friday 1000 - 1300, September 26 2014, , New College, EH1 2LX**



## Course Description

The biosphere has evolved a level of biodiversity unprecedented in earth history in a period (the last eight thousand years) known as the Holocene in which humans evolved from hunter-gatherers to agrarians. Humans were therefore able to develop complex civilizations which have had a tendency to press ecological support systems to the point of collapse. The latest of these – industrial capitalism – is now a global civilization and is putting pressure on most earth systems to the extent that the evolving and reparative capacities of life on earth are at risk. The most obvious signs of this are declining biodiversity in forests, oceans, croplands and pastures, soil erosion, ground water depletion, ocean acidification, strengthening storms, enduring droughts and climate change. Protests at the ecological depredations of industrialism first emerged in the Romantic movement. Two hundred years later ecological philosophy and environmental ethics are recognized sub-disciplines in philosophy and theology. In this course we will study the interaction of religion and ecology through the seminal essay on the chemicalization of the environment, an aetiological account of the ecological crisis by a moral theologian, an account of environmental ethics by its foremost advocate, a critique and revision of enlightenment and economic rationalities by a feminist philosopher, and a narration of the rise of modern nature religions and environmental activism.

## Requirements

**Private weekly study** of eight hours for completion of set reading and assessment requirements (ten hours of private study and class participation represents just under one third of a 35 hour working week). If you do not intend to commit 8 hours each week for private study in this course you are advised not to take the class.

**Blogs (20%):** Blogs are primarily designed to facilitate individual learning, and communication between students in advance of class discussion since writing and note taking on texts are proven means to improve memory and understanding in reading. Learn offers the facility for students to exchange online comments on set readings before class each week. Blogging on texts is intended to promote formative learning and blogs therefore attract a pass/fail grade. A weekly grade of 69% will be awarded to a blog of minimum 300 words which must include precise discussion of at least three quotes from set readings. A zero mark will be entered where students miss the blog, or fail to quote and comment on three quotes, or fail to attend class. Responding to other bloggers is also valuable.

**Class Attendance:** Each class will commence with break out groups (10-11) in which the required reading will be discussed. This will be followed by plenary discussion (11-1130) and a coffee break (1130 - 1150) before a lecture on the set reading for the following class in the last class hour. The ideal class scenario is one where everyone comes with their own copy of the set book with passages highlighted (this can be on a mobile computing device or a personal hard copy). A class register will be kept each week. Attendance is required. One or two unexplained missed classes will result in a zero grade for the blog in those weeks. Three unexplained missed classes will result in a zero grade for the blog for the whole course. If you do not intend to attend class each week then please do not take this course.

**Mid-semester essay of 1500 words (30%):** a critical discussion of at least one of the set texts demonstrating careful exposition and critical understanding and drawing on relevant secondary literature. This essay should demonstrate learning outcomes 1 - 4 and include at least **five** scholarly references.

Due **November 20th by 12 noon on Learn.**

**End-semester essay of 2500 words (50%):** a critical discussion of a theme that links three of the set texts and draws on relevant secondary literature. This essay should demonstrate learning outcomes 1 - 5 and include at least **ten** scholarly references including the set readings and other relevant readings.

Due **December 19th by 1200 noon on Learn.**

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students should be able to do the following:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the historic and cultural roots of the ecological crisis and efforts to resolve it.
2. Articulate and critically compare different philosophical and religious approaches to ecological ethics.
3. Critically expound and compare set texts in scholarly writing exercises that demonstrate a capacity for independent learning and critical thought.
4. Describe and evaluate the interaction of religious beliefs, rituals and spiritualities and human behavior in relation to the environment.
5. Narrate an overview of the developing scholarly interface between religion and ecological ethics.

## Required Texts

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962, reissued New York, First Mariner Books, 2002.

Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Holmes Rolston, *A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, New York, Routledge, 2001.

Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, Los Angeles: California University Press, 2009.

## Bibliographic and Scholarly Resources

An extensive annotated bibliography in environmental ethics is available from the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology at [http://fore.research.yale.edu/disciplines/ethics/environmental\\_ethics\\_annotations.pdf](http://fore.research.yale.edu/disciplines/ethics/environmental_ethics_annotations.pdf). An excellent overview of bibliographies in environmental ethics and ecology and religion is provided by the International Society for Environmental Ethics at <http://iseethics.org/bibliographies/>. The journals *Worldviews*, *Environmental Ethics*, *Environmental Values*, and *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, formerly *Ecotheology*, all provide scholarly papers in the field.

# Course Syllabus and Timetable

## 1 Welcome and Overview of course goals, pedagogy, themes and concepts

Michael Pollan, 'The food movement, rising', *New York Review of Books*, August 19, 2010.

Wendell Berry, 'The idea of a local economy', *Orion Magazine*, Winter 2001.

## 2 The Chemicalisation of Nature

Reading: Carson *Silent Spring*, 1 – 112.

The 1960s was a crucial period in the birth of the environmental movement. Acid rain was killing Europe's forests, DDT and other pesticides threatened wildlife in North America, Europe and beyond. Carson's account of the effects of toxic chemicals – and in particular agricultural pesticides – in the environment stimulated a widespread debate in the USA and beyond. It provoked a movement that led to environmental laws in the USA that established the Environmental Protection Agency, followed by Clean Air and Clean Water Acts and the Endangered Species Act. Murray Bookchin in *Our Synthetic Environment* argued that the reconfiguration of the human habitat, and political economy – and in particular industrialisation and urbanisation – were responsible for the toxification of organic life. Bookchin's work suggested that only radical transformation of human-human relationships – and the recovery of what he called human ecology – could effect a recovery from the growing health and social – as well as environmental – consequent on the ecological crisis.

Secondary Reading: Murray Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment* on line at

[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/bookchin/syntheticenviron/osetoc.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/syntheticenviron/osetoc.html)

Theo Colborn, Dianne Dumanoski and John P. Myers, *Our Stolen Future: Are We Threatening Our Fertility, Intelligence and Survival? A Scientific Detective Story*, London, Abacus, 1997, Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, ch. 1., Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* Oxford University Press, 1989, Gregory A. Barton, *Empire, Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism*, Chicago University Press, 2009.

## 3 The Discovery of Community Ecology

Carson, *Silent Spring*, 113 – 187.

Carson shows how certain pesticides, and other industrial chemicals, mimic the action of hormones in mammalian bodies so promoting cancers and nervous system disorders. She argues that their systemic use indicates a reductionist science that neglects the discoveries of community ecology in the mid-twentieth century. Instead she argues that farmers and industrialists should find ways to enhance production by following more relational and symbiotic approaches as revealed in the science of ecology.

Secondary Reading: Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, Eugene P. Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, Philadelphia, W. B. Saunders and Co, 1959, H. J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life* 1943, reissued London, Jon Carpenter 2003.

#### **4 Nature and Roots of the Ecological Crisis**

Northcott, *Environment and Christian Ethics*, Chapters 1 - 3.

From Lynn White's essay on the theological roots of the environmental crisis it has been widely assumed that Christianity is responsible for the crisis. However White's essay over-stated the case and understated the importance of the rise of capitalism, political economy and industrial technology in reshaping human attitudes to and use of the environment. Northcott traces the roots of the ecological crisis through the history of Western Christendom to the modern age noting the importance of changed attitudes to nature, and changed material practices, which originated in the late middle ages and the renaissance and involved the increasing understanding of 'nature' as a realm of being radically different to the human and lacking in spiritual depth.

Secondary Reading: Lynn White, 'The historic roots of our ecologic crisis', *Science*, 1967, Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, London, Routledge, 1993, Caroline Merchant, *Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, New York, Harper and Row, 1990, Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature*, Ipswich, Golgonzoza Press, 1987, Syed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London, Unwin, 1976, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, Oxford, OUP, 1996, Eugene Hargrove (ed.), *Religion and Environmental Crisis* Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986, Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton University Press, 1989, R. Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science*, Scottish Academic Press, 1972, Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, University of Chicago Press, 1978.

#### **5 Repairing the Western Christian Tradition**

Northcott, *Environment and Christian Ethics* 149 - 289.

In the second half of this book Northcott argues that the Jewish and Christian traditions carry within them significant resources for the repair of the ecological impact of the Western tradition including the Hebrew theology of the cosmic covenant and the land, the theological understanding of the cosmic as well as human and historic implications of the incarnation crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, medieval natural law, and an embodied and relational account of human being and knowing.

Secondary Reading: Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1993, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *God and Gaia* London SCM Press, 1994, Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, Hessel, Dieter T., and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* Cambridge MA, Harvard UP 2000, Kevin J. O'Brien, *An Ethics of Biodiversity: Christianity, Ecology and the Variety of Life*, Georgetown,

DC, Georgetown University Press, 2010, Martin Palmer, *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment* Washington DC, World Bank 2003, Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and our Planet's Future*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, Mallory McDuff, *Natural Saints: How People of Faith are Working to Save God's Earth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2010, Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, Lisa H Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, Sara McFarland Taylor. *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009 , Mark Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, and Nature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005.

## 6 Repairing Enlightenment Philosophy

Rolston, *A New Environmental Ethics*, 1 - 158.

The utilitarian ethics of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, is the key foundation text of the animal rights movement. Singer's approach is philosophically at odds with the deontological (duty-based) approach of Holmes Rolston in *Environmental Ethics* and of Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights*. The utilitarians were the first to suggest that the modern turn of moral philosophy towards the reasoning self as the arbiter and source of value also had implications for nonhuman animals to the degree that they feel suffering or may be said to have a sense of self. But Rolston argues that the roots of respect for animals are deeper than the utilitarian account allows and calls for a Kantian-style recognition of the intrinsic value of other animals.

Secondary Reading: Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston, Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*. 2nd ed. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1991, Jamieson, Dale, ed. *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2001, Michael Zimmerman, et al. *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993 Peter Singer, 'Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 9 (1980) 325 – 337; Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Second edition, London, Jonathan Cape, 1990, Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, London, Routledge, 1988, Tom Regan, 'Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism and Animal Rights' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (1980), 305 – 324,

## 7 Duties to and Values in Commons, Ecosystems and Species

Rolston, *A New Environmental Ethic*, 160 - 289

Ever since Plato philosophers have argued that aesthetic appreciation of beauty is a core element in human experience of truth and goodness. Pre-moderns regarded natural beauty as a manifestation of divinity and hence as intrinsically valuable (see Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*, Harvard UP, 2007). With the demise of a transcendent cosmological frame for ethics the concept of aesthetics has moved centre stage in some accounts of the human good, most notably that of David Hume and more recently Theodore Adorno. John Muir gives a classic account of the beauty of nature and

the spiritual experiences in humans which it may occasion see John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (various editions). Rolston argues that aesthetics and ethics are closely related and in particular in relation to the recognition of the intrinsic value of those parts of the environment that are non-sensate.

Secondary Reading: Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002, Brennan, Andrew, ed. *The Ethics of the Environment*. Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1995, DesJardins, Joseph R. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*, 3rd edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001, Kaufman, Frederik A. *Foundations of Environmental Philosophy*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003, Light, Andrew, and Holmes Rolston III, eds. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. Martin-Schramm, James B., and Stivers, Robert L. *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003, Newton, Lisa H., and Catherine K. Dillingham. *Watersheds: Classic Cases in Environmental Ethics*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994, Palmer, Clare. *Environmental Ethics: Contemporary Ethical Issues*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997 Wenz, Peter S. *Environmental Ethics Today*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, Weston, Anthony, ed. *An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, Westphal, Dale and Fred Westphal, eds. *Planet in Peril: Essays in Environmental Ethics*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994.

## **8 The Ecological Crisis of Reason**

Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, 1 - 142

Plumwood argues that monologic rationality and dualisms between mind and body, nature and culture, universal and local are central to the origin of the ecological crisis. She traces the misdirection of rationality from Aristotle through Kant and Smith and argues that gender division as well as slavery and class oppression are all implicated in a larger crisis of rationality which since the enlightenment has increasingly refused to recognize the situatedness of human reason in animal bodies, the mutually constitutive relations between persons and between persons and their biological environment and the intrinsic relationship of the mind to the body and the senses.

Second literature: David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997, Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, New York, Harper Collins, 1989.

## **9 Repairing Secular Reason**

Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, 167 - 234

Plumwoods repair of modern human self-enclosure and rationalistic mind-body dualisms engages a number of disciplines and themes including economics, animal ethology, deep ecology, the material spirituality of place. She makes a case for a newly situated account of human being and knowing in the more than human world which engages debates around panpsychism, ecosocialism, indigenous cultures and place-based resistance to globalization and ecological destruction.

Secondary reading: Alasdair McIntosh, *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power*, Edinburgh, Aurum Press, 2004,

## **10 Ecology as Religion**

Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* 1 - 102.

Taylor argues that the cultural turn towards nature runs deep in North America and beyond, from environmental philosophy to ecological activism and radical ecology. He makes the case for the emergence of a new nature religion in America with its own distinctive belief systems, rituals and sacred places and argues that its origins lie in the romantic movement and the writings of Muir, Thoreau and others as well as in native American spiritualities.

Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age History of American Religion*, University of Chicago Press, 1990, Gary T. Gardner, *Inspiring Progress: Religion's Contributions to Sustainable Developments* New York, NY, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, Whitney A. Bauman et al eds. *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, New York, Routledge, 2011, J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics* Berkley, CA, University of California Press, 1994, Roger. S Gottlieb (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008,

## **11 The Greening of Popular Culture**

Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, 103 - 222

Taylor traces the phenomenology of 'green religion' through surfing culture, disney and the movies, and a global 'terrapolitan religion' reflected in the continent by continent adoption of many of the core beliefs of American nature religion in recent decades. Taylor argues that the cultural and ritual upwelling of a religiously grounded sense of the wonder and value of nature is an essential means for humans to resile from their current destructive earth practices and to recover a more ecologically and spiritually attuned way of being.