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 economistic 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. Bloging 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

Bibliographic and Scholarly Resources
Course Syllabus and Timetable

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


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 urbansation – 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

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.
4 Nature and Roots of the Ecological Crisis


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.


5 Repairing the Western Christian Tradition


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.

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.


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.


**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.


**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.

**10 Ecology as Religion**


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.


**11 The Greening of Popular Culture**


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.