

**College of Charleston  
Department of Religious Studies  
Summer I, 2015**

**RELS 298.001/ENVT 352/URST 398: Nature Spirituality, Ecotopia, and Applied Ecovillage Living**

**Instructor:** Todd LeVasseur

Office: 4 Glebe St, Room 206 (upstairs, in back)

Office Hours: After class

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Lectures: EDCT 219, M-F 10:00-11:45 am

\*\*\*Any student may email me for a copy of my teaching philosophy.\*\*\*

In announcing the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives (part of the State Department) at the White House today, Secretary of State John Kerry expressed the following: “In fact, if I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion because that’s how integrated [religion] is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today.”

**Course Description and Instructional Format:** This course introduces students to the academic study of religion and to the environmental humanities through the lens of how humans decide to live in community and construct built environments. We will become familiar with key religious studies theories that help us to understand human-nature interactions, focusing on religious environmentalism and nature-as-sacred forms of religiosities. This exploration will be undertaken within the context of contemporary issues including the environmental crisis, sustainable agriculture, environmental justice, globalization, urban planning, and sustainability. This course is comparative and cross-cultural, focusing primarily on intentional communities in the U.S., Europe, India, Australia, and Latin America, via a mix of lectures, videos, discussions, and reading of primary religious texts, scholarly articles, and first-person “insider” accounts. Students should expect to participate in discussions, as the class is based on a seminar format, with structured lectures woven throughout the course as appropriate. Discussions provide a space for the class to learn together, and to gently have assumptions critically examined and questioned, two key goals of a liberal arts education.

**Course Goals and Objectives:** Specific goals of the course are as follows:

1. To introduce students to the academic study of religion, including a brief exposure to key theorists and various methods for studying religion, focusing especially on religion and nature/ecology and this theoretical approach to the academic study of religion.
2. To gain a basic level of understanding and knowledge about how humans live in community, past and present, and the role of religion in how humans structure community life and the built environment.
3. To develop an appreciation for the myriad and often contentious views about economics, resource use, and architectural planning in today’s globalized world.
4. To help students encounter religious traditions outside of those in which they were raised/are most familiar with, thus helping to build citizenship and religious literacy skills.

<http://www.cofc.edu/about/missionvisionvalues/core-purpose-and-values.php>

Specific objectives of the course are as follows:

1. To facilitate the development of critical thinking skills regarding the study of utopias (and by default, dystopias).
2. To investigate and analyze how association with communities, and narratives about communities, act as a marker of identity, status, and privilege within and between religious communities and acts as a boundary marker between sacred/profane, prohibited/required, in-group/out-group.

3. To question how visions of utopia can both reinforce and/or subvert power dynamics based on gender and race in a community and in society.
4. To gain an appreciation of how utopic experiments, especially religious utopias, have shaped U.S. political, religious, social, and/or environmental movements, past and present.
5. To explore how various religious communities have and continue to grapple with social and environmental ethics in regards to structuring their built and social environments.
6. To gain a working knowledge about the historical development and current manifestations of the “ecovillage milieu,” which includes an on-site visit to an ecovillage.
7. To develop comfort in working with small groups and participating in class discussions, while also engaging in interdisciplinary discussions about religion/environmental humanities issues.

This course satisfies the **General Education Student Learning Outcomes:**

- 1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted, and valued in various expressions of human culture
  - a. Assessed on Paper #1
- 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments
  - a. Assessed on Paper #1

### **Required Texts:**

There are required readings that will be made available on OAKS. These readings are to be printed out and brought to class for discussion. You should bring all assigned readings (book or on-line) to class for the day they are assigned, as this is when you should raise questions about any content you did not understand. Readings listed for the day are to be read by the beginning of class for that day.

- 1) Wes Jackson: *Becoming Native to this Place*
- 2) Karen Litfin: *Eco-villages: Lessons for Sustainable Community*

### **Requirements, Expectations, and Resources**

- 1) *Assignments:* Your grade will be determined based on the performance you exhibit for the following:
  1. Class participation—This includes your attendance, how well you engage the assigned readings, and how often and how well you contribute to class discussions and small group discussions. Students who are exceptionally engaged and who exhibit mastery of course materials and a robust inquisitiveness about the course content may earn more than 100% for this part of the overall grade. **40% of grade.**
    - a. Buy a journal, for taking notes in class, and for use at Earthaven.
    - b. Any student who was present for the entirety of each class will automatically receive .5 points to their overall final grade.
  2. Reading Analysis—You will be required to write a 450 word “reflection” for each reading (some may be clustered together). This writing will contain two components:
    - a. Critical and Factual Analysis (75 points)—each review will begin by addressing four interrelated items:
      - i. What is the key argument/point of the reading
      - ii. What evidence is used in making this argument
      - iii. Why does the argument and data matter to the author?
      - iv. What other authors/readings is this reading related to/with whom is it in dialogue?

These are to be written as an abstract for a Journal, so you must generate a title for the article; find four keywords to put at the end; suggest “cross listed” readings from the course at the end;

and then your summary should read like an abstract. You may use relevant quotes to show you captured the main points as needed, but do not give 300 words of quotes. 300 words.

- b. Personal Analysis and Reflection (25 points)—the second half of the entry should address thoughts and emotions that were triggered as you read, as well as what you learned that was helpful or challenging. Overall, you should address how the article helped you understand specific course goals and objectives better. This should be written in the first person. 150 words.
  - c. These will be printed out and turned in for each class meeting.  
\*15 total summaries, at 3% each, for 45% of your grade.
3. Paper assignments—you 2,000 word paper on some aspect of ecotopia and ecovillage living. No late papers will be accepted.
    - a. The metric will be discussed in class. Paper is due June 29<sup>th</sup> at 9am.
    - b. SLO #1 and #2 will be assessed with this paper, for 15% of your grade.

Grading Scale: A: 94-100; A-: 90-93; B+: 88-89; B: 83-87; B-: 80-82; C+: 78-79; C: 73-77; C-: 70-72; D+: 68-69; D: 63-67; D-: 61-62; F: 60.49 or below (all grades ending in .5 or higher are rounded up to the next point)

2) *Attendance*: Attendance is mandatory. Roll will be taken at the beginning of each lecture. If you are repeatedly more than 5 minutes late to class, you will begin to be counted as absent for that day, as tardiness harms your understanding of the material and disrupts the class. Keep in mind that the instructor will not provide notes or discussion of class material that have already been covered; it is your responsibility to be present and to be to class on time. After 1 unexcused absence of any kind, your grade drops by 1/3 letter (i.e. A to A-, C- to D+, etc.) for each successive absence. After your 2nd unexcused absence, you will receive a WA and be dropped from the course. An excused absence means that I receive an email from CofC saying your excuse was “documented;” if I receive an email (or no notice at all) saying your absence was “undocumented,” then it is unexcused. It is up to you to contact the Office of Student Affairs in order to find out what counts as a documented excuse. Please observe the totality of this attendance policy.

\*\* reading summaries are not able to be made up or turned in late—you must be present, or must clear *in advance* with me that you will email your summary before class begins if you are unable to be in class.

3) *Common Courtesy*: As stated by the Code of Conduct in the CofC Student Handbook, cell phones, personal computers, and other electronic devices must be turned off during the whole class period. The instructor also reserves the right to ask any student engaging in disruptive behavior (i.e. whispering, reading a newspaper, surfing the web, texting messages, etc.) to leave the class. Be aware that if the professor observes that a student is often, and more so, continuously texting or using their computer for activities not directly related to the course, then the student’s class participation component of the overall grade will automatically lose points. The more often this behavior occurs, then the more points will be deducted. Please stay focused and on task if you have your computer open!

4) *Honor Code*: On all work submitted for credit by students at CofC, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The legal code of the College specifically prohibits plagiarism, cheating, bribing, conspiracy, misrepresentation, and fabrication. If it is proven that any student has committed any of the above infractions of the honor code, then that student will automatically fail the course with an XF. In addition, violations of the Academic Honesty Guidelines shall result in judicial action. Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration (working together without permission) is a form of cheating—this is especially true on the take-home reading quizzes, whereas if strong evidence appears that students collaborated, then all parties involved will automatically receive a “0” for that assignment.

5) *Accommodation for Disabilities*: To request classroom accommodation, you must first register with the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. This office will provide you with documentation that you will then provide to me when you request accommodation. For more information, please see <http://www.cof.cedu/~cds/index.htm>

6) Counseling Resources, a writing lab, and a career resource center are all available to CofC students and are staffed with trained professionals. I urge you to pay special attention to the Center for Student Learning, and I encourage you to utilize the Center for Student Learning's (CSL) academic support services for assistance in study strategies and course content. They offer tutoring, supplemental instruction, study skills appointments, and workshops. Students of all abilities have become more successful using these programs throughout their academic career and the services are available to you at no additional cost. For more information regarding these services please visit the CSL website at <http://csl.cofc.edu> or call (843)953-5635.

## Class Schedule

**Wed 6/10**: Receive Syllabus...What is religion? What are basic human needs?

**Thrs 6/11**: Daniel Quinn (summarize); Cradle to Cradle, and Value of Nothing (summarize together)

**Fri 6/12**: Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis;" Yi-Fu Tuan, "Our Treatment of the Environment in Ideal and Actuality: A Geographer Observes Man's Effect on Nature in China and in the Pagan and Christian West;" Gilman (summarize each reading separately)

**Mon 6/15**: Wes Jackson—breakdown each summary: 1: prologue, chpt 1, chpt 2; summary 2: chpt. 3; summary 4: chpt 4; summary 5: 5 and 6

**Tues 6/16**: Dark Green Religion (summarize); LeVasseur (summarize); Gilbert + NY Times article + Libertarian (summarize together)

**Wed 6/17**: Abram (summarize); New Moral Codes (summarize)...print out the readings to bring on the trip!

Bring the *Eco-topias* book to Earthaven! **We leave for Earthaven at 7am on June 10<sup>th</sup>! Meet in the parking lot behind Addlestone Library.**

"Utopian ideas and fantasies, like all ideas and fantasies, grow out of the society to which they are a response. Neither the ancient world nor the modern world is an unchanging entity, and any analysis of Utopian thinking which neglects social changes in the course of history of either antiquity or modern times is likely at some point to go badly wrong." -M.I. Finley, "Utopianism Ancient and Modern"

"The weakness of all utopias is this, that they take the greatest difficulty of man [i.e. original sin] and assume it to be overcome, and then give an elaborate account of the overcoming of smaller ones. They first assume that no man [sic] will want more than his [sic] share, and then are very ingenious in explaining whether his [sic] share will be delivered by motor-car or balloon." -G.K. Chesterton

"It was never, in our minds, an experiment. We believed we were living under a system which the whole world would sooner or later adopt." -Pierrepoint Noyes, *My Father's House: An Oneida Boyhood*

"The problem is to coordinate, on the basis of more essential human values than the will-to-power and the will-to-profits, a host of social functions and processes that we have hitherto misused in the building of cities and polities" (9) -Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." -Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

- *General websites on the academic study of religion, and real-time analyses of religion:*
- <http://www.studyreligion.org/why/index.html>
- <http://usreligion.blogspot.com>
- <http://religionandpolitics.org>
- <http://www.religiondispatches.org>
- <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com>
- <http://religionnews.com/index.php?rnsblog>
- *Websites on food issues:*
- <http://www.slowfood.com/>
- <http://www.oxfam.org/>
- <http://viacampesina.org/en/>
- *Websites on the Earth Charter, World Watch Institute, and religion/nature interactions:*
- <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/>
- <http://www.worldwatch.org/>
- <http://earthdevotion.org/>
- <http://www.arcworld.org/>
  - <http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.htm>
- <http://fore.research.yale.edu/>
- [www.religionandnature.com](http://www.religionandnature.com)
- <http://www.nrpe.org/> National Religious Partnership for the Environment

#### **Specific Websites for Utopias:**

- <http://www.sacred-texts.com/utopia/index.htm> Utopia/Dystopia
- Society for Utopian Studies <http://utopian-studies.org/>
- Communal Studies Association <http://www.communalstudies.info/>
- Bibliography of Utopian Studies—key journals and books <http://utopian-studies.org/bibliography/>

#### **“The Laughing Oath”**

I do solemnly swear from this day forward  
 To grease my giggling gears each day  
 And to wear a grin on my face for no reason at all  
 I promise to tap my funny bone often,  
 With children, family, friends, colleagues and clients,  
 And to laugh at least fifteen times per day.  
 I believe that frequent belly laughter  
 Cures terminal tightness, cerebral stuffiness,  
 And hardening of the attitudes,  
 And that HA HA often leads to AHA! Therefore, I vow, from this day forth,  
     To brighten the day of everyone I meet,  
             And to laugh long and prosper.