

**College of Charleston**  
**Department of Religious Studies**  
**Fall 2012**

## **HONS 281: SPECIAL TOPICS--RELIGION AND ECOLOGY**

**Instructor:** Dr. Todd LeVasseur

**Office:** RSS 116 (bottom of the old library, inside room 115)

**Office Hours:** T/TR 12:20 pm to 2:50 pm; W 12:45-1:45pm, or by appointment (email works best)

**Email:** [levasseurjt@cofc.edu](mailto:levasseurjt@cofc.edu) (I typically respond to emails within 24 hours, but expect longer on weekends)

**Lectures:** T/TR 10:50-12:05pm Maybank 119

**Credits:** 3 Semester Hours (fulfills core requirement for Religion Major or Minor and the Environmental Studies Minor)

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

**Course Description and Instructional Format:** This course serves as a comprehensive introduction to the study of religion/nature/culture interactions. It is comparative in scope and methodology and the course is designed so that the student, by the end of the semester, has engaged with and mastered foundational material germane to the study of religion and ecology. Classes will largely be based on a **seminar format**, meaning we will spend a majority of most classes discussing the assigned readings. This discussion will occur in small groups and amongst the class as a larger whole. Students should not expect structured daily lectures, but rather *should expect* to be *called upon* to vocalize their thoughts about the readings and are expected to be able to articulate key points in the readings.

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

1. To introduce the student to the field of "Religion and Ecology," its methodologies, tributaries, some of its foundational works, and some of its key scholars
2. To introduce the student to the field of environmental ethics and to explore how environmental ethics and the fields of evolutionary biology, ecology, and environmental studies impact the study of religion and in turn how they may be impacted by the study of religion
3. To explore how religion/s shape/s human relations to the environment and how the environments in which humans live influence religion/s (aka "biocultural evolution")
4. To utilize a comparative method to highlight similarities and differences amongst religions in objective #3

Specific objectives of the course are as follows:

1. To facilitate the development of critical thinking skills regarding religion, nature, and ethics issues by having in-depth discussions about assigned readings and contemporary events

2. To systematically analyze and synthesize various theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of human/nature/religion interactions during every class period
3. To be able to understand contemporary responses from various cultures and areas of the planet to the emerging ecocrisis, especially where religion plays a prominent role in such responses
4. To develop interdisciplinary acumen in regards to understanding human-nature interactions
5. To develop comfort in working with small groups and in participating in class discussions by requiring active engagement in both forms of discussion during every class meeting

**Some views that will mark and guide our exploration:**

“We live in a natural world framed by the stories we tell... We walk continually through a terrain manufactured by the human imagination, dwelling as much in our interpretation of the place as in the place itself.” –Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, 2001

“[O]ne can only speak of [religions] of particular times and places, or one can speak of [religious] texts, or perhaps of specified [religious] traditions and their material, intellectual, and social productions. From my point of view, there is no [religion] that speaks on its own, no capacious [“tradition”] that contains things within itself.” –Raoul Birnbaum, “Socially Engaged Buddhism and the Trajectory of Buddhist Ethical Consciousness,” 2009

“The scientific temper is one that looks for the appropriate method in each field, that carefully distinguishes different sorts of questions for differing treatment. To become obsessed with a method for its own sake and try to use it where it is unsuitable is thoroughly unscientific. And the purpose of all *explanation* must be, ultimately, to illuminate the chaotic world with which we are actually surrounded. That is what we have to explain.” --Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, 1978

“We are receptive, imaginative beings, adapted to celebrate and rejoice in the existence, quite independent of ourselves, of the other beings on this planet. Not only does our natural sympathy reach out easily beyond the barrier of species but we rejoice in the mere existence of plants and lifeless bodies.” –Ibid

“The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile, but that it is indifferent.” –Stanley Kubrick

“We are making macroscale changes in microscale time.” –paraphrase of J. Baird Callicott

“[W]hile recognizing the vital need for conservations both cultural and biological, we should be reflexively critical of our motives. Nostalgia for the wild—an untrammelled

past of valorized differences, natural or cultural—is based on idealist retrojections. Even if we could get it, which past would we really want, and why?” –Peter Whiteley, pg. 225, “Epilogue: Prolegomenon for a New Totemism” in ed. Sodikoff, *The Anthropology of Extinction: Essays on Culture and Species Death*, 2012

“If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.” –Meister Eckhart (quoted in Lane, pg. 247)

“If one could conclude as to the nature of the Creator from a study of creation, it would appear that God has an inordinate fondness for stars and beetles... The Creator would appear as endowed with a passion for stars, on the one hand, and for beetles on the other, for the simple reason that there are nearly 300,000 species of beetle known, and perhaps more, as compared with somewhat less than 9,000 species of birds and a little over 10,000 species of mammals.” J.B.S. Haldane

“We are not obligated to complete the task; neither are we free to abstain from it.” –Pirke Avot 2:21

“Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen, for the glorious trees are ruined! Wail, oaks of Bashan, for the thick forest has been felled!”—Zechariah 11:2, dated to approximately 520 BCE

**Required Texts:** Available at the CofC and University bookstores (and most likely used copies on-line):

1. David Haberman *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India* 2006
2. Vine Deloria, Jr. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* 1994 (or more recent editions)
3. A variety of .pdfs will be made available on OAKS and/or weblinks will be emailed to the class. A box of these readings will be kept outside my office so students can make their own hard copies. These readings are to be printed out and brought to class for discussion. You should bring all assigned readings to class for they day they are assigned, as this is when you should raise questions about any content you did not understand.

Recommended websites:

- <http://www.arcworld.org/> Alliance of Religions and Conservation
  - <http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.htm>
- <http://fore.research.yale.edu/> The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
- [www.religionandnature.com](http://www.religionandnature.com) International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture
- <http://www.nrpe.org/> National Religious Partnership for the Environment
- <http://www.creationcare.org/> Evangelical Environmental Network
- <http://thankgodforevolution.com/> Thank God for Evolution, Michael Dowd
- <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/> The Earth Charter

- <http://www.worldwatch.org/> Worldwatch Institute
- <http://earthdevotion.org/>

Recommended Journals:

- *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*
- *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*
- *Orion*

**Requirements, Expectations, and Resources:**

1) *Attendance*: Attendance is mandatory. Roll will be taken at the beginning of each lecture. If you are more than 5 minutes late to class, you will be counted as absent for that day. Tardiness harms your understanding of the material and disrupts the class. Notes or discussion of class material that have already been covered will not be provided by the instructor for any student. It is your responsibility to be present and to be to class on time. Only excused absences render the above moot—it is the student’s responsibility to approach the Office of Student Affairs and present them with valid excuses for missing class, at which point I receive an email that says either “documented” or “undocumented.” Undocumented excuses count as an absence. After 2 absences of any kind, your grade drops by 1/3 letter (i.e. A to A-, C- to D+, etc.) for each successive absence. After 5 absences (i.e. your 6<sup>th</sup> absence), you will receive a WF and be dropped from the course. **Please observe the totality of this attendance policy.**

2) *Common Courtesy*: As stated by the Code of Conduct in the CofC Student Handbook, cell phones and other electronic devices must be turned off during the whole class period. Computers are not allowed in the classroom except for research purposes and accessing online readings. The instructor also reserves the right to ask any student engaging in disruptive behavior (i.e. whispering, reading a newspaper, texting messages, etc.) to leave the class. Repeat violations of these rules will result in dismissal from the class. *Each time* a person is caught texting messages during class or engaging in activities on their computer or phone that are not related to the immediate class lecture (such as checking Facebook or sending email), **they will be required to write a 10 page research paper of the professor’s choosing.** Failure to complete this paper will result in an incomplete grade for the course. Please observe this policy with diligence.

3) *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.

4) *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/~cde/index.htm>

5) Counseling Resources, a writing lab, and a career resource center are all available to CofC students and are staffed with trained professionals.

6) *Assignments*: Your grade will be determined based on the performance you exhibit for the following: [all uploaded files should include total word count and be saved as either a .doc or .docx file, titled “Last Name First Initial Assignment Number” for example LeVasseur T Summary 3]

1. Class participation—This includes attendance; how often and how well you contribute to class discussions and small group discussions; and performance on open-note quizzes about assigned readings (plus the option of sharing ecoreligion related imagery and/or rituals at the beginning of class). 15% of grade
2. Summary papers—You will be required to write a 700-800 word summary and analysis of 8 major theoretical pieces that we will read over the course of the semester. These are to be double-spaced, with *word count provided for each section*, and **uploaded** to the course dropbox on OAKS by the **beginning** of the class for which they are due. The following format must be observed for these summaries:

The first section must be approximately 500 words and provide:

- (1) a summary of the main argument/s and point/s of the article;
- (2) an explanation of why these points are important to the author (i.e. why does the argument matter)
- (3) a brief summary and exploration of the evidence presented by the author
- (4) and mention of what other authors/articles the reading is in dialogue with, and why/how.

The second section must be approximately 200 to 300 words and provide your own analysis, response, and/or opinion about the reading. Including impactful, pertinent quotes in both sections will help your score and should help drive your summary and analysis. If multiple readings are assigned for a summary, your word count must adequately address each reading.

\*\*\*4% each for 32% of grade.---Please observe that late summaries will not be accepted, even if you have a documented excuse for missing class.

3. Research paper—You will write a 1,250 word research paper about religion and ecology, with the exact subject matter left open to your choice. Guidelines for this paper will be distributed and discussed in early September and the paper will be uploaded into the course dropbox on Monday, 11/5, by 5pm. For each part of every successive 24-hour period after the due date 10 points will be deducted from the paper. 20% of grade.

\*A brief one-paragraph summary of your topic, including a list of your sources, is due *in class* on W 10/17. 3% of grade. No late summaries will be accepted.

4. Final Exam—Please see the last page of the syllabus for guidelines about the final exam. Due at 12pm, December 8<sup>th</sup>, uploaded to course dropbox. Late papers will lose 10 points for each part of every successive 24-hour period. 30% of grade.
5. Extra Credit—There will be options for extra credit as the semester develops. Most likely these will include attending guest lectures, watching movies, writing book reviews, analyzing coverage from a variety of sources about a current environmental issue, and then turning in a 1 to 2 page analysis of the event/item. Points awarded for each event depend on the event in question, ranging from 1 to 2 points. Each student may earn a total of 3 possible extra credit points that are added onto their final score. The final day to turn in extra credit work is Monday, 12/3. Any student with perfect attendance will automatically receive 1 point on their final grade (documented excuses count as an absence against this point).

\*\*option 1 for full 3 points: keep a plant journal, where you find a plant or tree somewhere in “nature” (i.e. not inside) and commit to spending 20 minutes a week, every week, with this plant. After each visit you will record observations, thoughts, feelings, and whatever else may arise during your visit. Each entry should be approximately 150 words and dated.

\*\*option 2 for 2 points—with 2 other students, you are to interview and film at least 10 **random people** you meet on the street about their views of the environment, and how these views might be shaped by their religious beliefs/ethics/practices. This video should be edited and be submitted by the last day of class, when it will also be viewed by the class. Each student should also turn in a 500 word summary of the experience, including an analysis of the views using analytical skills gained during the semester.

Grading Scale: A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; 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)

## Course Schedule

Unit 1: Introduction; Exploration of Key Terms; Ecology and Evolution and Ethics

- W 8/22: What is Religion?
- M 8/27: from Whitty, “13<sup>th</sup> Tipping Point;” Ayers, “Cup of Coffee;” Taylor, “Introduction to Ency. of Religion and Nature;” Tucker and Grim, “Ecology and Religion”
- W 8/29: Sale, chapter “Intensification and Agriculture” **Summary #1 due**
- M 9/3: Cronon, chapter “The Trouble with Wilderness;” Berry, “Nature” **Summary #2 due**
- W 9/5: Soper, “Feminism and Ecology;” Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”

[http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art\\_tragedy\\_of\\_the\\_commons.html](http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_tragedy_of_the_commons.html)

- M 9/10: Aldo Leopold, excerpts from *A Sand County Almanac* **Summary #3 due**

Unit 2: The Interaction of Environments and Religions

- W 9/12: Snarey, “Natural Environment’s Impact”

- M 9/17: Tomalin, “Limitations of Religious Environmentalism” **Summary #4 due**
- W 9/19: Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis; “Yi-Fu Tuan, “Our Treatment of the Environment...pagan vs. China” **Summary #5 due**

### Unit 3: Hinduism and Ecology

- M 9/24: catch-up, movie...? Start reading Haberman if you so desire.
- W 9/26: lecture on Hinduism; Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature, readings on “Hinduism,” “Hinduism and Pollution,” and Encyclopedia of Religion, readings on “Dharma,” “Karma,” “Bhakti”
- M 10/1: Haberman, pgs. 1-73
- W 10/3: Haberman, pgs. 74-94
- M 10/8 Haberman, pgs. 131-195

### Unit 4: “Western” monotheism (especially Christianity) and the Environment

- W 10/10: lecture on Ecological Hermeneutics; video on Thomas Berry
- FALL BREAK—go outside! Have fun! Be safe! Stay focused!
- M 10/22: Davis, “Seeing with God: Israel’s Poem of Creation;” Habel, “The Mandate to Dominate” **Summary #6 due**
- W 10/24: Stoll, “African American Environmentalism;” McDuff, chapter on Christian responses to Mountain Top Removal
- M 10/29: Dewitt, “Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God;” Cizik, “Love God;” *LA Times* article on pollution and Catholicism **Summary #7 due**
- W 10/31: conclude Christianity, work on paper

### Unit 5: Indigenous Peoples and North American Manifestations

- M 11/5: **Research Paper Due at the beginning of class (uploaded)**
- W 11/7: ERN entries on Romanticizing Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing, and Natural History and Indigenous Worldviews; Nabhan, “Cultural Parallax in Viewing North American Habitats”
- M 11/12: Deloria, Jr., pgs. 1-61
- W 11/14: Deloria, Jr., pgs. 62-97
- M 11/19: Deloria, Jr., pgs. 98-134
- Thanksgiving Break—eat Tofurky, give thanks, reduce entropy.
- M 11/26: Deloria, Jr. pgs. 185-202, 231-292

### Unit 6: Possible Futures

- W 11/28: Maffi, “Biocultural;” Garreau, “Environmentalism as Religion;” Schendler, “Climate Revelations”
- M 12/3: Taylor, “Gain Earth Religion;” Jackson, selections from *Becoming Native to this Place*; OAKS—ERN entries by Benavides, “Ecology and Religion,” Wilson, “Evolutionary Biology, Religion, and Stewardship” **Summary #8 due (last day to turn in extra credit)**

## FINAL EXAM

Thoroughly read and spend time comprehending this question before getting started. In your answer, make sure to respond to each part of the question asked, including making EXPLICIT reference (either by important quotes [give page #s] and/ or *precise, accurate* summary) to each article I ask you to include in your answer. Answers are to be between 4,000 to 4,150 words (include your word count), double spaced, 12 font, Times New Roman, uploaded to the course dropbox by 12 pm, December 8th.

Question:

In visual form, the question reads:

Ideas/values/religion x-----x material nature

And asks: which of these two poles is more influential in human-nature relations?

One of the larger meta-tensions that has arisen in discussion, lecture, and in readings is which influences the other more strongly—religion or nature? In other words, do you think that religion plays a stronger role than nature in shaping and determining human values and perceptions of and relationships with the environment/nature, or do you think that nature plays a stronger role in shaping and determining religious beliefs about and values of the environment/nature, and therefore human interactions with nature?

Another way of putting this is: Does the human world of belief, values, and ideas (including religion) shape human-nature relations, or does the material world of nature and our experience as mammals embedded in ecosystems shape religious values and beliefs about nature? Might there be differences given I=PAT, the history of colonialism and imperialism, our need for calories, and various ecosystems around the earth? Give a thesis statement that clearly articulates your answer, and then use the following readings and class discussions to justify your answer (I am not looking for opinion as much as I am looking at how you justify your answer *using course material*. Think of this as a research paper with all the sources provided. However, do not give me 4 pages of quotes—use powerful quotes selectively to justify your position, thereby showing mastery of the question and course content), keeping in mind some readings might be contradictory, so you should defend your position from possible counter-arguments:

Sale; Berry; Soper; Leopold; Snarey; Tomalin; White, Jr.; Tuan; Habel; McDuff; Cizik; Stoll; Dewitt; Haberman; Deloria, Jr; Maffi; Benavides; Sloan Wilson; Taylor; Class lectures on TEK (you MUST include this in your answer, and do so with nuance...you can quote .ppt slides or summarize key points); and any other relevant readings and/or lecture materials that help you write a compelling answer.

Finish your answer with a BRIEF (and this should only be about 150 words) prediction of which of these influences (ideas/values/religion or the material environment and “ecologic crisis” to quote Lynn White) will have a greater influence on human-nature relations over the rest of this century, and why.



The following rubric will be utilized to determine your final grade:

	<b>Benchmark</b>	<b>Competence</b>	<b>High Competence</b>	<b>Mastery</b>
Thesis /argument.	Thesis/argument is stated, but is simplistic and obvious	Thesis/argument is stated and acknowledges different sides of an issue.	Thesis/argument takes into account complexity. Other points of view are acknowledged.	Thesis/argument is imaginative. Complexities are taken into account. Limits of position are acknowledged. Other points of view are synthesized.
Use of evidence to support argument.	Information is taken from sources with some interpretation or evaluation. There is recognition that experts can be questioned. Evidence is identified.	Information is taken from sources and placed into context. Students are comfortable with their own interpretation and evaluation. Viewpoints of experts questioned. Evidence is connected to argument.	Information is taken from sources with enough context and evaluation to develop a coherent analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are subject to questioning. Evidence is connected to argument and is well chosen.	Information is taken from sources with enough context and interpretation to develop a comprehensive analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are questioned thoroughly. Evidence is explicitly connected to the argument persuasively and logically.
Contextualization of argument and counterarguments.	Identifies basic questions. Identifies some context. Recognizes some inconsistencies.	Identifies some questions. Notes some bias. Recognizes basic content. States some inconsistencies.	Asks insightful questions. Detects bias. Categorizes content. Identifies inconsistencies. Recognizes context.	Analyses insightful questions. Refutes bias. Critiques content. Examines inconsistencies. Values information.
Use of sources and course materials.	Cites source/s for evidence.	Cites sources for evidence and identifies relevant issues. Is able to compare source material and draw conclusions.	Identifies relevant issues. Attributes sources naturally and effectively. Incorporates source information into argument.	Discusses issues thoroughly. Identifies strengths and weaknesses of sources. Justifies decisions. Assimilates information. Demonstrates mastery.