

**College of Charleston**  
**Fall 2015**

**RELS 298/ENVT 352: Special Topics—Religion, Environmentalism, & the Natural World**

**Instructor:** Dr. Todd LeVasseur

**Office:** ECTR 207E   **Phone:** 953-3911

**Office Hours:** T/R 9:30am to 12:00 pm; or by appointment (email works best)

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

**Lectures:** MWF ECTR 219 11:00-11:50am

**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, where this serves as an entryway into the environmental humanities. 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 nature/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,” and its formation, methodologies, tributaries, some of its foundational works, and some of its key scholars
2. To explore how an interdisciplinary approach to human-nature issues, including insights from environmental ethics, evolutionary biology, ecology, and environmental studies may 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 investigate moral prescriptions, especially religious ones, that surround human-nature relations; and of these, how might they be embedded in a religious cosmology
5. To discuss the nature of Nature
6. To develop interdisciplinary acumen in regards to understanding human-nature interactions

7. 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

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 analysis of the Pope's Encyclical.
- 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in writing assignments
  - a. Assessed on analysis of the Pope's Encyclical.

**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

“arguably the greatest lesson from biology is that all life on Earth, including us, belongs to a single, multibillion-year-old family. To date, however, this insight of the mind has yet to penetrate our hearts.”—Scott Sampson

“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

“We’re running time backward, from Apocalypse to Genesis, as de-creation.” –Larry Rasmussen

“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. John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker Ecology and Religion 2014
  - a. To watch a video recording of a lecture where they discuss the “Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology,” visit:  
<http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/stm/edevnts/CampusEvents/PastLectures/2012/10-17-2013.html>
2. Vine Deloria, Jr. God is Red: A Native View of Religion 1994 (or more recent editions... I suggest buying this used from Amazon or another company)

There will also be required readings that will be made available online on OAKS. These readings are to be *printed out* and brought to class for discussion. You should bring all assigned readings (book, course packet, or on-line) 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 (see Tucker and Grim pg. 208 for further resources):

- <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*

Online videos on Religion and Ecology:

- <http://fore.research.yale.edu/multimedia/conversations-on-religion-and-ecology/>

**Requirements, Expectations, and Resources:**

1) *Assignments:* Your grade will be determined based on the performance you exhibit for the following—no late work will be accepted on any of these, but work can be emailed by the start of class only if you are missing class that day:

1. Class participation—This includes attendance; how often and how well you contribute to class discussions and small group discussions; and performance on reading questions (plus the option of sharing ecoreligion related imagery and/or rituals at the beginning of class). 16% of grade
2. Analysis of the Pope’s Encyclical—to be discussed in class. 4% of grade
3. Summary papers—You will be required to write a summary and analysis of 18 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 turned in 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, written in the format of an abstract for a published journal article, and provide:

- (1) a catchy title that captures the gestalt of the reading
- (2) in your own words, a one to three sentence summary and repackaging of the main argument/s and point/s of the article;
- (3) an explanation, in your own words, of why these points are important to the author (i.e. why does the argument matter)
- (4) a brief summary and exploration of the evidence presented by the author
- (5) a list of 4 keywords
- (6) and brief mention of what other authors/articles the reading is in dialogue with, and why/how.
- (7) Two key quotes that best capture the spirit of the article (argument/why matters)

The second section must be approximately 300 words and provide your own analysis, response, and/or opinion about the reading. Here you may want to relate how the reading fits into course goals/objectives. If multiple readings are assigned for a summary, your word count must adequately address each reading.

\*\*\*2% each for 34% of grade.---Please observe that late summaries will not be accepted, even if you have a documented excuse for missing class.

4. Research paper—You will write a 10-page research paper on a topic related to religion/nature interactions. Guidelines for this paper will be distributed and discussed early in the semester. 25% of grade.
5. Final Exam—There will be a 10-page open book, open note essay question for your final exam. We will discuss this in class, and answers are to be uploaded to course dropbox. Late papers will not be accepted unless cleared in advance, and a late penalty will be assessed. 20% of grade.
6. 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 2 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)

2) *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 3 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.***

3) *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—please print off readings and bring a hard copy to class. 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. Consistent use of cell phones will result in a failing grade for the class participation part of the course.

4) *Honor Code:*

Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when identified, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved. Incidents where the instructor determines the student’s actions are related more to a misunderstanding will be handled by the instructor. A written intervention designed to help prevent the student from repeating the error will be given to the student. The intervention, submitted by form and signed both by the instructor and the student, will be forwarded to the Dean of Students and placed in the student’s file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This grade will appear on the student's transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the X to be expunged. The F is permanent. The student may also be placed on disciplinary probation, suspended (temporary removal) or expelled (permanent removal) from the College by the Honor Board.

Students should be aware that unauthorized collaboration--working together without permission--is a form of cheating. Unless the instructor specifies that students can work together on an assignment, quiz and/or test, no collaboration during the completion of the assignment is permitted. Other forms of cheating include possessing or using an unauthorized study aid (which could include accessing information via a cell phone or computer), copying from others' exams, fabricating data, and giving unauthorized assistance.

Research conducted and/or papers written for other classes cannot be used in whole or in part for any assignment in this class without obtaining prior permission from the instructor.

Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the *Student Handbook* at <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php>

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.

- **Center for Student Learning**: I encourage you to utilize the Center for Student Learning's (CSL) academic support services for assistance in study strategies, speaking & writing skills, 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.
- <http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/index.php>

## **Course Schedule**

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

- W 8/26: Get syllabus. What is Religion? What is Nature?
- F 8/28: Tucker and Grim, Intro and Chpt 1—reading ?s due
- M 8/31: Tucker and Grim, Chpt 2; OAKS: Bron Taylor, Introduction to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature—reading ?s due
- W 9/2 Jenkins and Chapple, “Religion and Environment” pgs. 442-450—reading ?s due
- F 9/4 William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness”
  - Summary 1 due (“religion” is not part of this at all, so don't even worry about looking for anything to do with religion)
- M 9/7: Daniel Quinn, selections from *The Story of B*

- Summary 2 due (notice—the point of the reading is not religion, religion is peripheral in this one, so don't focus on religion)

Unit 2: *The Interaction of Environments and Religions*

- W 9/9: Snarey, “Natural Environment’s Impact”
  - Summary 3 due
- F 9/11: Tomalin, “Limitations of Religious Environmentalism”
  - Summary 4 due
- M 9/14: Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis;”
  - Summary 5 due
- W 9/16: Yi-Fu Tuan, “Our Treatment of the Environment...pagan vs. China”
  - Summary 6 due
- F 9/18: Minter and Manning, “An Appraisal...”
  - Reading ?s due at beginning of class
  - **Topics and Scope due in class**
- M 9/21: Lynn White, Jr., “Continuing the Conversation”
  - Summary 7 due

Unit 3: “Western” monotheism (especially Christianity) and the Environment

- W 9/23: Davis, “Seeing with God: Israel’s Poem of Creation”
  - Summary 8 due
- F 9/25: Habel, “The Mandate to Dominate”
  - Summary 9 due
- M 9/28: **Literature review due** (no reading)
- W 9/30: Dewitt “Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God”
  - Summary 10 due
- F 10/2: Bauman, “Ecology and Contemporary Christian Theology”
  - Summary 11 due
- M 10/5: no reading
- W 10/7: Habel, revisited
  - Summary 12 due
- F 10/9: **Real World Examples**—bring to class to share and discuss
- M 10/12—F 10/16: The Pope’s Encyclical
  - SLO #1 and #2 evaluated

FALL BREAK—go outside!!!!

Unit 4: *Indigenous Peoples and North American Manifestations*

- W 10/21: **Counter examples due** (no reading)
- F 10/23: ERN entries on Romanticizing Indigenous Peoples; Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; and Natural History and Indigenous Worldviews
- M 10/26: **Working thesis**—bring to class to discuss and give feedback (no reading)
- W 10/28: Deloria, Jr., Introduction and Chapter 4—1 page reflection due
- F 10/30: Deloria, Jr., Chapter 5—1 page reflection
- M 11/2: Deloria, Jr., Chapter 6—1 page reflection
- W 11/4: Deloria, Jr. Chapter 11—1 page reflection
- F 11/6: Deloria, Jr. Chapter 15—1 page reflection
- M 11/9: Deloria, Jr.—rest of book
  - Summary 13 due
- W 11/11: **Paper Due** (no reading)

Unit 5: *Contemporary Issues and Possible Futures*

- F 11/13 (watch out for black cats!): Taylor, selections from *Dark Green Religion*
  - Summary 14 due

- M 11/16: OAKS: Garreau, “Environmentalism as Religion;” Schendler, “Climate Revelations”
  - Summary 15 due
- W 11/18: ERN entries by Benavides, “Ecology and Religion,” Wilson, “Evolutionary Biology, Religion, and Stewardship”
  - Summary 16 due
- F 11/20: David Loy, “Religion of the Market”
  - Summary 17 due
- M 11/23: No Class---**Final Exam will be posted** on OAKS

EAT TOFURKY! Celebrate Buy Nothing Day

- M 11/30: Clingerman and O’Brien, “Playing God: Why Religion Belongs in the Climate Engineering Debate”—1 page Reflection
- W 12/2: Paul Watson—1 page Reflection
- F 12/4: Wendell Berry—1 page Reflection
- M 12/7: David James Duncan—1 page Reflection
  - Last day for Extra Credit

FINAL EXAM: Mandatory attendance; Vegan/Veggie Pot-luck

