Course Description:

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man’s attitude toward history and nature. The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe.

— Abraham Heschel

We human beings, most would agree, are inextricably tied to nature. Whether or not we are conscious of it and despite technological means to alter it, we are inherently a part of the natural world as we produce, consume, evolve, reproduce, are born and die. Put differently, much of what it means to be alive includes nature, and what it means to be human is largely a matter of our relationship to the natural world.

Furthermore, many scholars have recognized the complex role religious traditions and worldviews play in this fundamental relationship between human beings and nature. Religions, we could say, offer systems of beliefs and practices that motivate and concern human beings to define the natural and social worlds around them. Religions stipulate particular conceptual frameworks, advocate specific behaviors, and provide working models of how human beings can make sense of their place among natural phenomena. Doing so, religions promise to improve the quality of life for adherents. Of course, religious traditions disagree over which frameworks, behaviors and models to prescribe, but as a result, focusing on nature and the environment can serve as an excellent basis for the comparative study of religion and culture.

This course examines cross-cultural religious notions of nature, and the various roles of natural phenomena in religious beliefs and practices. Working with materials drawn from several religious traditions, it explores the broad question of how religions define the relationship between nature and culture, and how aspects of religion influence, and are influenced by, these definitions. Specifically, it considers examples selected from Christianity, Buddhism, Australian Aboriginal Religions, Maori Religions, Japanese Religions and modern Ecotheology. The course taps theoretical positions rooted in History, Phenomenology, Theology, Anthropology, Women’s Studies, and Cultural Studies. In the broadest sense, the goal of this course is to investigate the significance of religion for Environmental Studies, to explore the contribution Religious Studies makes to the general field of Environmental Humanities.

Course Requirements:

1. An open-minded approach to new ideas, a willingness to discuss issues, and a consistent effort towards class work are the most important, yet simplest elements of this course.
2. The satisfactory completion of three 4-6 page Comparison Essays (due Sept. 13, Oct. 16, and Nov. 24). Each Comparison Essay will be worth 20% of your final grade.

3. A take-home, open-book, final exam will be due at the end of your semester, and will be worth 30% of your final grade.

4. Regular punctual class attendance is required. Class participation and attention will be worth 10% of your final grade.

**Required Course Readings:**


Course Outline:

Week One: August 30
  — “What is religion?”
    Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System.”
    Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation.”

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Two: September 6
  — Nature as Religious Symbol
    Eliade, The Sacred and Profane.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Three: September 13
  — Comparison Essay No. 1 due—
    — Women, Nature and Religion
    Eisler, “Messages from the Past: The World of the Goddess.”
    Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Four: September 20
  — NO CLASS (Travel to Broome)

Week Five: September 27
  — Australian Aboriginal Religions.
Graham, “The Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews.”

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Six: October 4
— Indigenous Maori Religions.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Seven: October 11
— Comparison Essay No. 2 due—

David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Eight: October 18
— Indigenous Religious Traditions: Earth and Community (continued)

Week Nine: October 25 — Cultural Interim Abroad
Week Ten: November 1 — Cultural Interim Abroad
Week Eleven: November 8
— Japanese Shinto

Miyazaki, Princess Mononoke (film).

Optional Recommended Reading:
Week Twelve: November 15
— Buddhism: Self and Others

Kaza, Dharma Rain.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Thirteen: November 22
— NO CLASS (Thanksgiving break)

Week Fourteen: November 29
— Comparison Essay No. 3 due—
— Protestant Christianity: Use and Respect of Nature

Stoll, Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Fifteen: December 6
— Eco Theology

Fox, Creation Spirituality.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Week Sixteen: December 13
Final Exam
**Guidelines for the Comparison Essays:**

Ideally, the short (4-6 pages of double-spaced typing) comparison essays should demonstrate both your “knowledge” and “understanding” of the class material by developing a connection (by exploring a relationship) between one or more of the course texts and some other domain of interest. Draw a comparison and indicate how the similarities and differences you reveal are significant. Be sure to answer the question “So What?” as applied to your descriptions. Include descriptive information, that is, specific facts, details, characteristics and particularities gleaned from the readings or class lectures, but only information that serves as evidence for your claim (thesis, hypothesis, argument, point), your understanding of why this information is worthy of our attention, interest, or concern. Basically, you should present an organized account of your thoughts about the class material so that the reader will have those same thoughts (will be convinced) after reading your paper.

Essays that fail to present either one of these two components (a knowledge of descriptive information, and an understanding of some explanatory conclusion) will be insufficient. In other words, don't just summarize the reading or report a couple of pages of information (e.g. "Buddhists do this, and they believe this, and they say this... and I think it's interesting."). Likewise, don't simply talk about theory (e.g. "Eliade claims that it means this when people do that, and I believe he is correct..."). The best essays select information and arrange it in interesting ways to show unexpected connections and draw significant conclusions.

Of course, in addition to these criteria for the content of the comparison essays, you should conform to standard rules of grammar and bibliographic citation, and always strive for stylistic clarity.