

Religion and Culture: Nature, Worlds and the Environment

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CRI 351/REL 351
Fall Semester 2004
Tues., Wed., or Sat.
Castle Rock Lodge

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

Course Description:

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:

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.
- Bernard, Rosemarie. "Shinto and Ecology: Practice and Orientations to Nature," *Earth Ethics* 10, No. 1 (Fall 1998).
- Eisler, Riane. "Messages from the Past: The World of the Goddess," pp. 449-461. In *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, 2nd ed. Edited by Roger S. Gottlieb. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred & the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959.
- Fox, Matthew. *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System," pp. 204-216. In *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, 2nd ed. Edited by William Lessa and Evon Vogt. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Graham, Mary. "Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews," pp. 89-97. In *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*. Edited by Richard C. Foltz. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003.
- Henare, Manuka. "Tapu, Mana, Mauri, Hau, Wairua: A Māori Philosophy of Vitalism and Cosmos," pp. 197-221. In *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*. Edited by John Grim. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Kaza, Stephanie and Kenneth Kraft, Editors. *Dharma Rain*. New York: Shambala, 2000.
- Ortner, Sherry B. "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" pp. 61-80. In *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*. Edited by Darlene M. Juschka. London: Continuum Books, 2001.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," pp. 155-167. In *Ecological Prospects: Scientific, Religious, and Aesthetic Perspectives*. Edited by Christopher Key Chapple. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Spiro, Melford E. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," pp. 187-222, In *Culture and Human Nature: Theoretical Papers of Melford Spiro*. Edited by Benjamin Kilborne and L.L. Langness. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Stoll, Mark. *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

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:

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John Harvey. New York, 1950.

Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture*. London: John Murray, 1873.

Wach, Joachim. *The Comparative Study of Religions*. New York, 1958.

Week Two: September 6

— Nature as Religious Symbol

Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

Allen, Douglas. *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions*. The Hague: Mouton, 1978.

Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York, 1954.

Eliade, Mircea. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. New York, 1961.

Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958.

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?”

Ruether, “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature.”

Optional Recommended Reading:

Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology; The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

Gebara, Ivone. “The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach,” In *Women Healing the Earth: Third World Women and Ecology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996.

King, Ynestra, “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology,” In *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, pp. 150-159. Edited by Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1995.

Mellor, Mary. “Ecofeminism and Ecosocialism: Dilemmas of Essentialism and Materialism,” In *The Greening of Marxism*, pp. 251-267. Edited by Ted Benton New York: Guilford Press, 1996.

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:

- Bell, Diane. *Daughters of the Dreaming*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1983.
 Berndt, R. M. *The World of the First Australians*. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964.
 Edwards, W.H. Editor. *Traditional Aboriginal Society: A Reader*. Melbourne: MacMillan, 1987.
 Gould, Richard A. *Yiwara: Foragers of the Australian Desert*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969.

Week Six: October 4

— Indigenous Maori Religions.

Henare, “*Tapu, Mana, Mauri, Hau, Wairua: A Māori Philosophy of Vitalism and Cosmos.*”

Optional Recommended Reading:

- Best, Elsdon. *Some Aspects of Maori Myth and Religion*. Wellington: Dominion Museum, 1954.
 Best, Elsdon. *Maori Religion and Mythology*. Wellington: P.D. Hasselberg, 1982.
 Patterson, John. *Exploring Maori Values*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1992
 Smith, Jean. *Tapu Removal in Maori Religion*. Wellington: The Polynesian Society, 1974.

Week Seven: October 11

— **Comparison Essay No. 2 due**—

— Indigenous Religious Traditions: Earth and Community.

David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

- Abram, David. “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth,” in *Environmental Ethics* (summer) 1988.
 Deloria, Vine, Jr. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1994.
 Grim, John A. Editor. *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Inter-Being of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
 Tedlock, Dennis, and Barbara Tedlock. *Teachings from the American Earth*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 1992.

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

Bernard, “Shinto and Ecology: Practice and Orientations to Nature.”

Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke* (film).

Optional Recommended Reading:

- Asquith, Pamela J., and Arne Kalland. *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997.

- Bocking, Brian. "Japanese Religions," pp. 160-168. In *Attitudes Toward Nature*. Edited by Jean Holm and John Bowker. London: Pinter Publishers, 1994.
- Earhart, H. Byron. *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*. 3rd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982.
- Picken, Stuart D. B. *Essentials of Shinto: An Analytical Guide to Principal Teachings*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.

Week Twelve: November 15

— Buddhism: Self and Others

Kaza, *Dharma Rain*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

- Blofeld, John. *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet: A Practical Guide*. New York, 1970.
- Conze, Edward. *Buddhist Thought in India*. Ann Arbor, 1970.
- Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press, 1974.
- Thomas, Edward J. *The History of Buddhist Thought*. New York, 1951.

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:

- Albanese, Catherine L. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Bellah, Robert N. "The Protestant Structure of American Culture: Multiculture or Monoculture?" pp. 7-28. In *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, Vol. 4: No. 1 (Spring 2002).
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 3rd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Worster, Donald. "John Muir and the Roots of American Environmentalism," pp. 184-202. In *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Week Fifteen: December 6

— Eco Theology

Fox, *Creation Spirituality*.

Optional Recommended Reading:

- Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983
- Fox, Matthew. *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988.
- Fox, Matthew. *Sheer Joy: Conversations with Thomas Aquinas on Creation Spirituality*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992.
- Peck, M. Scott. *The People of the Lie*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1985.

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.