

THEO 204 Religious Ethics and the Ecological Crisis

John Felice Rome Center

Fall 2024

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2.00-3.00 pm or by appointment

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’ (Genesis 1.31).

What went wrong?

Across the globe so many socio-political values have their origins in religious ethical systems. Historically Christian moral theology has been uniquely powerful in providing structure and content to political and legal systems across the western and colonial worlds. The authors of Genesis present us with the first commands of the Creator to humanity, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gen.1.28). In the past these words have been taken as a free pass for universal exploitation of resources: animal, vegetable and mineral.

When we look beyond this paradigm of dominance for humanity’s stewardship, grounded on an ‘othering’ of the created world, we uncover alternative worldviews which offer holistic rather than hierarchical models and place humanity within nature rather than apart from it.

The first part of THEO 204 introduces the concepts and definitions of ‘religion’, ethics’ and ‘ecological crisis’ to clarify the basic parameters for our studies. We then take a brief journey through history to uncover the process whereby religious ethics evolved to designate the human species as a phenomenon *apart* from the rest of the material world. Alongside this paradigm we’ll look at alternative movements within Christian culture which were, and are, challenging this hierarchical notion of humanity over nature. Examples include Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan movement; Hildegard of Bingen, polymath, mystic and visionary; and, in the present time, Pope Francis’ framework for an ecological theology set out in *Laudato Si’*.

Moving on to the cyclical and timeless worldviews of Asian religious/cultural contexts, we discover notions of re-birth which fuse humanity as one with the natural world. How does this status of humanity impact on ethics towards non-human life and ecology?

Cyclical and non-time bound traditions share elements of their world views with indigenous traditions whose spirituality is bound to the earth, to their particular piece of land on this earth. This connection to a particular sacred place is rooted in a relationship of mutual dependence/mutual survival. We’ll be studying examples of these traditions from the Americas and Australia, examining their ethical understanding and approach to nature, as well as the impact colonialism has had on these values, beliefs and practices.

In the third and final section we examine the impact the ecological crisis has had on the value systems of ‘linear’/time-bound traditional religions. Are beliefs and values essential to indigenous spiritual traditions informing major religious traditions? What are the sustainability initiatives, for example, emerging from majority Islamic or Christian countries? What are examples of joint initiatives between NGOs and faith communities?

Throughout the course we'll be utilizing material from on-going sustainability projects to inform the current status between religious ethics and the ecological crisis. The **World Resources Institute's 'Faith and Sustainability Project'** will be an important resource for this course:
<https://www.wri.org/initiatives/faith-and-sustainability>

The Project is a central feature on THEO 204. Your project, selected in consultation and supervised during the second half of the course, will provide a unique opportunity to delve in depth into a particular aspect of religious ethics and ecology. These projects can investigate theologies and spiritualities of the past and the present to evaluate how they measure up to the needs and expectations for the future of the planet.

Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete this course will have the ability to:

- Develop their academic skills to construct a well-informed argument in writing and oral presentation
- Demonstrate their critical skills to evaluate secondary sources in relation to primary texts
- Identify and explain key issues in approaches to ecology from religious ethical, historical and global perspectives
- Understand diversities and similarities of religious ethical approaches to ecology across global spiritual traditions
- Demonstrate awareness of global faith based initiatives addressing the ecological crisis
- Synthesize information from a variety of academic disciplines as it relates to the impact of the ecological crisis around the world

Readings and Responses

For each class you will be given questions based on the reading/s for that week - posted on SAKAI Resources. Your responses to these questions discussed in your groups will prepare you for the Midterm Exam, and the Final quiz, overall they will be assessed towards your Participation grading. The aim of these exercises is to ensure that you are consistently building on your knowledge base and developing your reflections in this subject, as well as honing your skills in critical reading and analysis.

Assessment Components

10% Participation in group/class discussions and group project presentations

35% Midterm Exam – based on the classes and readings for Weeks 2-5

Finals

5% 1. Annotated Project Plan

20% 2. Final Exam – based on the classes and readings for Weeks 7-10

30% 3. Written Project Paper

Grading

94-100: A	90-93: A-	87-89: B+	84-86: B	80-83: B-	
77-79: C+	74-76: C	70-73: C-	67-69: D+	60-66: D	59 or lower: F

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest, and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a guiding principle for all academic activity at Loyola University Chicago, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle. Failing to meet academic integrity standards is a serious violation of personal honesty and the academic ideals that bind the University into a learning community.

Students may not plagiarize the use of AI is considered plagiarism and treated as such.

Follow this link for more details about these standards, sanctions, and academic misconduct procedures: (https://www.luc.edu/academics/catalog/undergrad/reg_academicintegrity.shtml)

SAC

If you are a student with Accommodations, please make contact with me at the beginning of the semester in order to discuss your requirements for this class.

Late or Missed Assignments

Late or missed assignments will not be accepted for grading except with authorization.

Attendance Policy In accordance with the JFRC mission to promote a higher level of academic rigor, all courses adhere to the following absence policy. Prompt attendance, preparation and active participation in course discussions are expected from every student:

- For all classes meeting once a week, students cannot incur more than one absence. Absences beyond this will result in 1% lowering of the final course.

DO NOT ATTEND CLASS IF YOU ARE ILL the collective health of the JFRC is everyone's responsibility.

Email Communication I will do my best to reply to emails sent **during business hours (Monday to Friday, 9.00 – 18.00)**. Emails sent after 18.00 will be considered received the next day. The best way to communicate with me is directly: after class, during my office hour or by making an appointment via email.

Computer, Phone & Internet Use in the Classroom Use of phones is always prohibited. Please turn your phones off when in class. Use of laptop computers during class time is permitted **only** for note taking, group work and class workshop research activity.

Course Outline

Indicative bibliography

(All set readings for the course will be available on Sakai 'Resources' and 'Lessons'.)

Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016;

Gottlieb, Roger S. The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Taylor, Bron. Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future, University of California Press, 2009.

'Religion and Environment' Willis Jenkins and Christopher Key Chapple published online, 2011, The Annual Review of Environment and Resources

Tucker, Mary, and John Grim. 'Ecology and Religion: An Overview.' Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 4, 2005, pp. 2604–16.

Course Schedule

Section One: Introductions, Creation and theologies of nature

a. Terminology and meaning

Week 1 9/5 Introduction to THEO 204 Overview: Major themes

Analyzing and illustrating terminology: 'Religion', 'Ethics', 'Ecological Crisis'

Introducing Linear religions: Beginnings and Endings

The Future, Naomi Alderman, review for NYT by Ian Wang

[https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/07/books/review/the-future-naomi-](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/07/books/review/the-future-naomi-alderman.html?ugrp=m&unlocked_article_code=1.jE0.YSIR.tSHjWJPc8MpW&smid=url-share)

[alderman.html?ugrp=m&unlocked_article_code=1.jE0.YSIR.tSHjWJPc8MpW&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/07/books/review/the-future-naomi-alderman.html?ugrp=m&unlocked_article_code=1.jE0.YSIR.tSHjWJPc8MpW&smid=url-share)

b. Creation through a Christian interpretive lens

Week 2 9/12 The Garden of Eden – Utopian and dystopian readings

Genesis 1-3

Sayem, Md. Abu. 'Lynn White, Jr.'s Critical Analysis of Environmental Degradation in Relation to Faith Traditions: Is His "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" Still Relevant?' Journal of Ecumenical Studies, vol. 56, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–23

Week 3 9/19 The aftermath of the Fall – anti-materialism and exploitation

"The Crisis and Effects of Modern Anthropocentrism", Pope Francis Laudato Si', pp.78-91

c. Christian Ecological Initiatives

Week 4 9/26 The Franciscan movement and St Hildegard of Bingen

'Phytophonies: Echoes of Hildegard of Bingen Today', Michael Marder Green Mass : The Ecological Theology of St. Hildegard of Bingen

Week 5 10/3 Contemporary Christian ecological ethics

'Laudato Si', Mi' Signore' Pope Francis, Laudato Si', pp.7-17

Van Wieren, Gretel. Restored to Earth : Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration. Georgetown University Press, 2013, pp1-33

Week 6 10/10 Midterm Exam: Ecology, Ethics and the Christian Heritage

Fall Break

b. Non-linear Spiritual traditions: Asian and Indigenous cultures

Week 7 10/24 i. Midterm feedback and Project workshop

ii. Implications of non-linear worldviews

Friday Class 10/25 Cycles of life i. Hinduism

'Hindu Traditions: Dharmic Ecology', in Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016

Week 8 10/31 Cycles of life ii. Buddhism

Buddhist Traditions: Interdependence in Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016

Week 9 11/7 Indigenous traditions i. Australia

Tonkinson, R. (2012). 'Australia', in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice (eds M.D. Palmer and S.M. Burgess). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444355390.ch24>

Week 10 11/14 Indigenous Traditions ii. North America

'American Indian Traditions: Balance with All Our Relations' in Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016, pp.162-180

Week 11 11/21 Faith and Sustainability Projects

World Resources Institute's 'Faith and Sustainability Project':
<https://www.wri.org/initiatives/faith-and-sustainability>

Week 12 11/29 No class: Thanksgiving Break

Week 13 12/5 Project Presentations

Week 14 Final Exam