SENV 3302A: Religion, Nature, and Justice

“Religion” is a complex subject; but whether the term is used to refer to sets of beliefs, practices, orientations, values, communities, or worldviews, it is clear that these things commonly termed “religions” have profoundly influenced the development of human cultures and shaped their ethical systems. While scholars have studied the interactions between religions and cultures for generations, it is only recently that some have explored the importance of religious studies as a component of interdisciplinary environmental studies. Tied to that academic trajectory, this elective is oriented around the central question, “how can religions and religious communities help societies forge just solutions to ecological crises, and what would such work look like in an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world?”

To begin to answer this question we will examine several specific religious communities across the globe with attention to how religious values and worldviews have influenced perceptions of and behavior toward the natural world. Tied to the School of the Environment’s 2015 theme, we will primarily focus on issues of food justice and agriculture across these global case studies. Through the course students will gain the following tools for their environmental studies “toolkits” and accomplish the following goals:

• Learn theories about religion and details about global religious communities that can inform future interdisciplinary work on environmental studies.
• Develop skills of empathy, active listening, and consensus building to strengthen environmental leadership.
• Practice effective communication across ideological and cultural boundaries, along with strategies for including religious individuals and communities in environmental and social policymaking.
• Explore calming and contemplative practices to resolve stress in our professional lives and to think deeply about the roots of and solutions to environmental and social challenges.

Instructor

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Course structure

Each week of this course engages with diverse academic theories associated with the study of religion, nature, and justice and then tests their analytic and explanatory value through concrete, global case studies. These cases will include the struggles of American Indian and other indigenous communities for sacred land rights; Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious responses to development and international conservation efforts in Africa and the African diaspora; the influence of Christianity on North American visions of issues such as climate change, agriculture, and environmental policy; and finally, Hindu and Buddhist responses to pollution, agriculture, and deforestation in South and Southeast Asia. It has been suggested by scholars and activists that religious voices are needed to solve environmental crises. After surveying these global examples of religious involvement in environmental issues, this course concludes by evaluating the debate on the “greening of religion.” Compiling what we have learned and experienced in the previous weeks, we will reconsider the course’s opening question: “how can religions and religious communities help societies forge just solutions to ecological crises, and what would such work look like in an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world?”

Along with discussing religious studies theory and case studies, in this course we will also perform contemplative, meditative, and creative activities to develop new insights for communicating effectively across cultural differences, active listening, and consensus building. These practices may also be useful for managing the stress associated with school, work, and awareness of emerging environmental disasters and social injustices. Awareness of these issues can easily cause feelings of stress and even hopelessness, and when efforts to solve them seem non-forthcoming, this stress can also contribute to “burn out.” Contemplative and meditative practices can be used to prevent burn out and calm the stresses that both we and our communities endure.

Readings

All of the course readings are available electronically on the School of the Environment Moodle site. Other short readings and resources will also be distributed in class. Some of the texts from which these readings are drawn are available at the Middlebury library or as e-books. A complete course bibliography is provided at the end of this syllabus for students who would prefer to locate physical copies of the texts.

Assessment

Course Journal (60%): Through the course there will be several short writing assignments about the readings/class discussion as well as reflections on in-class exercises. Students will compile these short assignments into a single course journal which will be graded three times through the course (July 2, 16, and 30), each time counting for 20% of the total grade. If it is clear that students are not reading the material and preparing for class then I may grade the journals more frequently.
Service as Co-Facilitator (20%): Once during the course each student will serve as a co-facilitator of class discussion. For this assignment, students will find an article, issue, perspective, or experience related to the day’s discussion. They will then teach the rest of the class about this issue and help lead discussion on the topic. This will not be a formal presentation; instead, students will help guide discussion for a portion of the class period. Students should draw from their own interests and experiences for this exercise. It can include experiences from study abroad and travel, other research you have conducted on a similar topic, or discussing a scholarly or lengthy journalistic/documentary account of an issue or theme. I will work with students to help find topics and resources for this exercise. Co-facilitation exercises will take place on each Thursday class session (except for the final class) and we will all choose our preferred dates in the first class session. Students will be graded on their ability to clearly present their topic and engage the rest of the class in discussion.

Engagement (20%): This is a reading intensive and discussion oriented course. Therefore, it is essential that all students come to each class having completed the readings and assignments ready to discuss the major topics and engage in activities to supplement learning. Disengagement from discussion and failure to show preparedness will result in a lowered participation grade.

Grading

Grades will be assigned on a straight percentage basis: 90-100% is an A, 80-89% is a B, 70-79% is a C, 60-69% is a D, and <60% is an F, with + and - grades assigned to high and low scores within those ranges.

Course Calendar

Week 1: Defining Religion, Nature, and Justice

Tues, June 23--Introducing the Course

Thurs, June 25--Read: Bauman et al., “Religion;”
    Dowie, “Nature;” and
    Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the 21st Century”

Week 2: Indigenous Perspectives

Tues, June 30--Read: Basso, “Stalking with Stories”

Thurs, July 2--Read: Salmón, selections from *Eating the Landscape*

    *First Course Journal Due* Today
Week 3: Africa and African Diaspora

Tues, July 7--Read: Dowie, selections from *Conservation Refugees*; and
    Maathai, selections from *Replenishing the Earth*

Thurs, July 9--Read: Clay, “How Does it Feel to be an Environmental Problem?” and
    McCutcheon, “Community Food Security ‘For Us, By Us’”

Week 4: Christianity in North America

Tues, July 14--Read: White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis;” and
    Zaleha, “Keep Christianity Brown!”

Thurs, July 16--Read: Berry, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation;”  
    McDuff, “Feeding the Hungry;” and
    Wirzba, “Feeding Bodies and the Theology of Taking Lives”

*Second Course Journal Due Today*

Week 5: Buddhism and Hinduism in South and Southeast Asia

Tues, July 21--Read: Hanh, “Love Letter to the Earth”

Thurs, July 23--Read: Sanford, “Gandhi’s Agrarian Legacy;” and
    Haberman, selections from *River of Love in an Age of Pollution*

Week 6: Reconsidering the Role of Religion in 21st Century Environmental Debates

Tues, July 28--Read: Zaleha, “Our Only Heaven”

Thurs, July 30--Read: Wilson, “Religion;” and
    Grim and Tucker, “Building on Interreligious Dialogue”

*Final Course Journal Due Today*
**Course Bibliography** (sources from which we will read more than one chapter marked with *)


