RELG 270: Religious Ethics and the Environment (Winter 2021)
Tuesday and Thursday 8:35 - 9:55PM in LEA-232 (Online due to pandemic until further notice)

Professor: Dr. David K. Goodin
Office hours: By appointment (via Zoom)
Email: david.goodin@mail.mcgill.ca
Teaching Assistants: Daniel Heide, daniel.heide@mail.mcgill.ca
Tahereh Tavakkoli, tahereh.tavakkoli@mail.mcgill.ca

Course description

This course examines the potential for world religious traditions to engage in contemporary environmental discourses of various religious traditions and secular perspectives, including animal rights, ecofeminism, and deep ecology. Specifically, these insights from the world’s religious traditions will be used to evaluate the potential of religious ethics in the fight for environmental justice, and to further effective social responses to a variety of ecological issues such as drought, famine, resource depletion, pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

Any course on such wide-ranging topics will necessarily have to be incomplete. Instead, this course will survey the place of nature in the major world religious traditions, together with several case studies on how they can engage contemporary environmental challenges. A particular focus will be on Judeo-Christianity ideology as it is reflected in contemporary economic and environmental policy, and how new theological thought is challenging the long-held belief that nonhuman life does not matter. Other religions will be covered too, including eco-Islam, First Nations perspectives, the religions of India, and Chinese traditions.

No prerequisites are required. However, it should be noted that this class covers topics at the intersection of several different academic domains, including: environmental science, religious studies, theology, economics, history, philosophy, philosophical ethics, and others. It will be expected that students will learn to appreciate the types of discourses that occur in these disparate domains, and be able to utilize these perspectives when considering religious ethics and the environment.

Required texts


- Supplemental Readings (posted on MyCourses)
Assessments

These are REQUIREMENTS for completing this course. If you fail to complete any of these requirements, you will receive an “F” grade.

1. Weekly Reaction Papers: 6pts each
   a. Ten (10) required for any of the thirteen (13) weeks of the course: 60 points (total)
2. Final Exam (date determined by McGill): 40pts

Weekly Class Papers

A paper is due every week. They are to be reaction papers to the readings covered in the preceding week. Since there are thirteen weeks in the course, and only ten (10) papers are required, the student may choose which weeks of the term for the reaction papers. Once graded, these papers are intended to serve as your study notes for the final exam. Success in the papers will therefore greatly aid in success for the final exam.

The papers should not just be a statement of subjective belief; all opinions must be justified and supported by arguments and evidence drawing from the textbook and articles used for this course. Independent research is not required, and not encouraged: you are to focus on the course materials in order to be prepared for the final exam, which will specifically test your understanding of these course materials. For general grading criteria, read the essay evaluation rubric posted on MyCourses. Also review the sample essay at the end of this syllabus.

Each paper is to be: one full page in length (single-spaced, 12pt. Font, New Times Roman, 1” margins). Title page (optional) and list of references do not count toward the length of paper. Papers should also not exceed one-page by more than a half page in length; papers that exceed this length may receive a point reduction penalty. Each paper is due the following Monday, submitted only by midnight. Footnote citation not allowed. Use any in-text citation style you wish, however. Bibliography does not count to today paper length.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate your compression of the course materials. Do not “string quotes together.” You should instead seek to explain the material, and use quotes to punctuate your claims. Clarity of expression, conscientiousness of engagement with the topics, and thoroughness of explanation are the main criteria on which your papers will be graded. Remember: these papers are meant to also serve as your study notes for the final exam. Strive, therefore, to write the best papers possible in order to excel in the final exam.

Please note that it is expected that students have already taken have mastered the analytical and writing skills needed to write a college-level academic paper. Students needing assistance should avail themselves of the writing classes and tutorial services at the McGill Writing Centre (see http://www.mcgill.ca/mwc/home-page for details).
Late essays and extensions

No extensions will be granted for any course element for any reason. In cases of medical emergencies and related issues, contact Student Affairs for guidance; notes from the McGill clinic will not be accepted (only a Doctor’s letter may be considered for such cases). No make-up work or ‘extra credit’ of any kind will be allowed.

Late papers will be downgraded at a rate of 3 points (out of 6 points per paper) per week (including weekend/holidays); papers more than one week late are therefore not graded.

Final Exam

This course covers many religious traditions. However, students are allowed, and encouraged, to focus on those traditions they find most accessible and appealing. The final exam will be a timed exam:

Timed exams – a timed exam must be started and completed within a specified number of hours (three hours) with a set time limit for completion (72 hours); it will be administered through MyCourses. In case of connectivity or access issues, an additional 30-minute allowance is given. Timed exams will be released at the scheduled start time of the final exam set by the Exam Office, which will be determined at a later date.

In the Final Exam, the students are asked to answer any 8 out of 16 possible questions; each question covers readings for a particular week and/or faith tradition—a study guide will be provided near the end of the term so students can focus on those questions and traditions as they wish.

Academic Integrity, Student Rights, and Extraordinary Circumstances

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. All students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity/cheating for more information).

In accordance with McGill guidelines, text-matching software may be used to verify the originality of student’s written course work. For further information, see http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/files/students.srr/text-matching-policy-on-english_0.pdf.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.
Schedule of Classes

Week 1

Jan. 5  Introduction to Deep Ecology

Spirit and Nature (recommended film – a study guide is posted on MyCourses)  
https://vimeo.com/56784975

Jan. 7  Introduction to Religion and the Environment


Week 2

Jan. 12 Lynn White Jr.’s “The historical roots of our ecologic crisis” ¹


Week 3

Jan. 19 Textbook: Chapter 7 — Judaism


Jan. 21 Ecology and Food Production ²


“As More Jews Go Vegan, So Does Birthright” by Liza Schoenfein  
http://forward.com/food/359724/as-more-jews-go-vegan-so-does-birthright/

¹ Recommended Documentary: Manufactured Landscapes, 2006: Library Call Number, DVD #8581
Week 4

Jan. 26  
**Textbook:** Chapter 8 — Catholicism

Jan. 28  

**Online:** ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME (May 24, 2015)³

Read Sections: 1 through 16 inclusive, 25, 60, 62, 81, 82, 139, 160, 162, 203, 205, 246

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Week 5

Feb. 2  
**Eastern Orthodox Christianity**


Feb. 4  
**Food Security and Economic Development** — Ethiopia, a case study


³ This Encyclical has been translated into eight other languages, including French and Arabic (hyperlinks at top of webpage).
Week 5

Additional Reading (optional)


Week 6

Feb. 9  **Textbook**: Chapter 10 — *Protestantism*

Feb. 11  **Critical Thinking and Lynn White Jr.’s Critique**


Week 7

Feb. 16  **Philosophical Christianity** — Albert Schweitzer, a case study


Dr. Albert Schweitzer - Full Documentary (recommended)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf4B9v0s0CY

“Albert Schweitzer: My Life is My Argument” (recommended)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wv0tK5VM4Fc

Feb. 18  **Dogmatic Christianity** – Karl Barth, a case study


---

4 You may skip the discussion of ecological science, and focus only on the social and religious aspects – particularly p.41.

Week 8

Feb. 23  **Textbook:** Chapter 9 — *Islamic and Sufi Perspectives*

*Online:* Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change (August 2015)
Available in French, Arabic, and several other languages at:
http://www.ifees.org.uk/declaration/


**READING WEEK** - No Class on March 1 – March 5

Week 9

March 9  **Textbook:** Chapter 3 — *Hinduism*


**Special Topic:** Water Scarcity and Community Based Resource Management (CBRM)


Read pages 1 - 4 (the rest of the chapter is only recommended)

March 11  **Textbook:** Chapter 4 — *Buddhism*


**Special Topic:** The Ethics and Economics of “Big Game” Trophy Hunting
Week 10  **Chinese Religious Thought**

March 16  **Textbook:** Chapter 5 and 6 — **Daoism**


**Special Topic:** Trans-humanism

March 18  **Textbook:** Chapter 6 — **Confucianism**


**Special Topic:** Economic Development and Human Rights

Week 11  **Japanese Religious Thought - Shinto**


**Special Topic:** Japanese Aesthetics


Week 12  **North American Indigenous Religion**


---

6 Available at http://iba.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/january_june_2010Anantagiri.pdf (see pages 97-105)
### Week 13  Activism


“If a Tree Falls” (documentary) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmZkNNJqr1I
Additional Resources

**African Traditional Religion and the Environment**

**Anglican Environmental Stewardship**
http://stewardshipoftheenvironment.blogspot.ca/

**Bahá’í Environmental Stewardship**

**Buddhist Environmental Stewardship**
http://www.greenfaith.org/religious-teachings/buddhist-statements-on-the-environment

**Catholic Environmental Stewardship**
http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/about

**Daoism Environmental Stewardship**
http://conbio.org/images/content_groups/Religion/Daoism.pdf

**Evangelical Christian Environmental Stewardship**
http://creationcare.org/

**First Nations Environmental Stewardship**

**Hindu Environmental Stewardship**
http://www.greenfaith.org/religious-teachings/hindu-statements-on-the-environment

**Islamic Environmental Stewardship**
http://islam.about.com/od/activism/a/Muslim-Environmentalists.htm

**Judaic Environmental Stewardship**

**Mormon Environmental Stewardship**
http://www.mesastewardship.org/

**Orthodox Christian Environmental Stewardship**
Shintoism Environmental Stewardship

Quaker Environmental Stewardship
http://www.quakerearthcare.org/

Other Resources

This is an example of the style of writing for a student paper expected in this course. It is an example of how to outlay your evidence in support of your arguments:

Moral philosophers have historically only examined ethics from the perspective of the “good” for the human community, and the “right conduct” necessary for human wellbeing within that community. Shaw looks to expand these traditional understandings of moral behaviour for environmental ethics—which is to say, to extend ethics beyond immediate interpersonal conduct to include the wellbeing of the larger biotic community in which people live and depend upon for their long-term survival. Shaw examines two issues in particular: defining the “good” to which environmental policy should seek to maximize, and the particular environmental virtues that promote this “good” within a biotic community.

Shaw begins with the issue of extending moral consideration to nonhuman life (that is, beings with an evolutionary telos). Leopold asserted ethics have an evolutionary and Darwinian foundation, that people develop “modes of cooperation” which mirror the interdependence of species within a biotic community—which is to say, people only survived as a species throughout history because of their ethical relationships with nonhuman life. This is the way of nature. Species survive because they established biotic relationships through co-evolutionary predation, seed dispersal strategies, mutualism, and the like. “Ecosystems come to this cooperative/interdependent stage naturally, and they do so in order to survive and prosper ... our existence and our culture are intricately bound to land, and our continued well-being clearly depends upon a recognition and strengthening of our ties to it” (96). For this reason, Shaw, like Leopold, contends that modern society needs to think of itself as part of that biotic community by extending ethical consideration to nonhuman life.

That said, this is not a call for “equal citizenship” for nonhuman life (97). As for the question of how to manage the ethical relationships, Shaw proposes virtue ethics. “In virtue ethics we are able to stop fretting about what claims the environment has against us, what rights we may be impinging upon, and concentrate on the more important question of how we as moral agents ought to relate to other environmental communities” (99). He specifically proposed three virtues for human citizens: respect (meaning, ecological sensitivity to our impacts on other life), prudence in terms of enlightened self-interest, and practical judgment in environmental decision-making (100). Nevertheless, Shaw cautions: “This is no quick fix” (103). And while such virtues do not give specific guidance, Shaw argues that the paradigm shift in thinking that comes from a virtue ethics perspective will begin moving society in the correct direction for long term sustainability. “Leopold makes it clear enough that the new paradigm is not a new set of commandments or an ecological golden rule. Right and wrong, good and bad are assessed in terms of the tendency to produce or preserve ‘the integrity, beauty, and stability of the biotic community’ ... Beyond that, the land ethic and the virtues that advance it simply take time to do their work” (102-3).

I, for one, feel that ... [a statement about your own belief or assessment of author’s strength and weakness of arguments]