

**University of North Texas**  
**PHIL 5730.001**  
**Western Religion and the Environment**

Spring 2007  
Monday 6:00-8:50pm  
EESAT 225a

Dr. George James  
Office: EESAT 225e  
Hours: M W 4:00- 5:00 and by  
appointment

**Scope of the Course:**

This course stands upon three critical assumptions: The first is that advances in science and technology are not likely in themselves to address the environmental crisis. Environmental problems are not simply the result of limitations in human knowledge and technical ability. On the contrary, some of the most striking environmental issues we now face could not have occurred without prodigious knowledge and the application of highly advanced technology. The second assumption is that the present condition of the environment is related to deep seated attitudes and assumptions concerning the value and significance of nature. Attitudes, assumptions, and values concerning nature are very often embedded in cultural traditions of great antiquity. Human behavior is often shaped by these attitudes even when the tradition is explicitly rejected. These assumptions, attitudes, and values invite philosophical reflection. Questions concerning the degree to which the values embedded in Western religious traditions have enhanced or undermined the relationship between human beings and nature, the question of the impact of such values and assumptions, is the subject matter of this course. It is a question that has been debated since environmental ethics emerged as an academic sub-discipline. A variety of responses to this question have been articulated by various specialists in Environmental Ethics. The third assumption of this course is that our answer to this question ought to be based upon a scholarly examination of the sources of the Western cultural tradition and its development, rather than an attitude of sympathy or antipathy towards Western religion.

The purpose of this course is to examine the assumptions, values, and attitudes of the Western religious tradition concerning nature. We shall proceed by inquiring into the attitudes and values concerning nature reflected in Western religion from its Biblical sources and the typical ways these sources have been interpreted in the history of Western religion. This exploration will involve exploration and reflection upon Biblical sources, patristic and medieval sources, and the history of Western religious art, literature, and theology. It will also require an analysis of the influence of the attitudes reflected in these sources upon the eventual emergence of secular approaches to nature, such as we find in the nineteenth century in the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism. Our objective is a scholarly appreciation for the significance of the values concerning nature embodied in Western Religion.

The course is divided roughly into 5 parts treating successively (1) Biblical sources of attitudes towards nature, (2) patristic and medieval sources of attitudes towards nature, (3) the status of

nature in the reformation and enlightenment, (4) the standing of nature in romantic art, literature and philosophy in the nineteenth century and beyond, and (5) contemporary approaches to ecological theology. The course will focus upon Christian religious thought, but it will also entail some exploration of the status of nature in Jewish and Islamic thought.

### **Requirements:**

A meaningful encounter with the issues of this course will require considerable interaction with the primary and secondary documentary resources, and with others dealing with them. For this reason an essential requirement of the course will be class participation. The seminar should be thought of as a working group with each member sharing insights gathered in the course of the week's reading and research. Students are expected to come to the seminar prepared (a) to recapitulate the thesis or argument of the reading of the week, (b) to say something significant about the material, and (c) be prepared to discuss this material with others. Weekly reading assignments are to be read with care before they are discussed. Participants should formulate questions pertaining to the reading of the week for discussions during seminar sessions. Students are required to write *a one page response* to the reading of the week. It should contain a *very concise* statement of the author's thesis, and a response to the thesis presented, for each article or chapter to be read. One student will be designated to present the main points of one of the reading materials of the week, and initiate the group's discussion. In addition to this, the course will require a research paper, on a topic to be chosen in consultation with the instructor, to be presented to the class at some point in the course of the semester. The purpose of lectures by the instructor of the course is to provide background pertaining to the material and cultural history of the tradition in question.

### **Grades:**

Grades will be based on the quality of class participation, the quality of written responses to the weekly readings, and the quality of the research paper and its presentation to the seminar. The principal basis for the final grade will be your grade on the research paper. There will be no final exam.

### **Books, articles and other materials for discussion:**

The principle sources for the course will include many articles and essays published in professional journals. Relevant journal material will be indicated each week as we proceed through the semester. In addition we will be examining three principle books that you will need to purchase. They include:

Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds. *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans.*

Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory:*

*The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite.*

Sallie Mc Fague, *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology*

Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*

A selected bibliography of sources concerning Western Religion and the Environment, compiled by Eugene Hargrove, is to be found in *Is It Too Late: A Theology of Ecology*, by John Cobb, Revised Edition (Denton TX: Environmental Ethics Books, 1995).

Books for the course are available at the University Store in the Student Union Building, and at Voertman's, 1314 W. Hickory Street.

***Tentative Schedule of Topics:***

Jan	15	Martin Luther King Day (No class).
	22	Introductions
	29	Lynn White, "The historical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," and responses to the "Lynn White Thesis."
Feb	5	Attitudes towards nature in among the Ancient Hebrews
	12	Attitudes towards nature in the New Testament
	19	The understanding of nature in early medieval art, and the meaning of nature among the Church Fathers: Augustine
	26	The Desert Fathers, the Benedictines, St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscans
Mar	5	The meaning of nature among the reformers of the Church
	12	The status of nature in the enlightenment
	19	Spring Break
	26	Nature in the legacy of the enlightenment, and the industrial revolution
Apr	2	The Status of nature in the Romantic art, literature and philosophy in the nineteenth century.
	9	The legacy of romanticism and the origin of environmental ethics.

- 16 Contemporary approaches to Ecological Theology
- 23 Contemporary approaches to Ecological Theology cont'd
- 30 Final discussion and review of the question of the course.