



# Religion and Ecology



## About this Course Religion and Ecology

REL 493B; Fall 2005  
Tuesdays  
1:15 PM to 4:00 PM  
Blaustein Hall 212

## About the Instructor Ahmed Afzaal

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### What to Expect in this Course

This course will offer you the opportunity to explore some of the ways in which religion, spirituality, ethics, culture, and science have been coming together in the last few decades as a result of the effort to address the crisis of environmental deterioration.

*Religion*, despite one hundred years of predictions about its imminent demise, is not only alive and well in the contemporary world, it seems to be undergoing a period of unprecedented revival and transformation. *Science*, not too long ago was thought to be the one effective solution for all our problems, is undergoing a period of self-criticism and change as well; for quite some time now, science has been in the process of destroying some of its own idols, and the results of this process are rapidly permeating popular imaginations. *Spirituality*, sometimes conceived as the esoteric aspect of religion itself, is growing along its own trajectories, often independent of



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institutionalized forms of religion, and is increasingly concerned with issues of social and environmental justice. *Ethics* used to be concerned entirely with human beings, but has since the 1960's embraced the questions arising from human interactions with non-human nature. *Culture*, instead of being the invisible presence around and inside us, is now widely recognized as a key player in shaping our worldviews, attitudes, and behaviors, leading to an unprecedented sensitivity to the way in which language and images are used. The crisis of environmental degradation has generally worsened during the last fifty years or so. At the same time, the awareness of this crisis and of the roles played by science, religion, spirituality, ethics, and culture in exacerbating it—as well as reducing its speed and, in some cases, reversing its effects—has been on the rise as well. With awareness comes the recognition that things do not have to be the way they are, that change is possible, and that objective change often necessitates a transformation in worldviews, attitudes, and behaviors.



At the center of all this is the fact that religion plays an ambivalent role vis-à-vis nature. Clearly, some religious beliefs and attitudes can contribute to a worsening of our environmental predicament (or causing it, according to some), while others can have the opposite effect. Yet, religion is not a conscious agent itself; to the extent that religious beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors are human products, they can be refined, adjusted, or otherwise transformed by human beings. Similarly, to the extent that the awareness of the enormity and urgency of our ecological problems increases, religious men and women find themselves motivated not only to do something to alleviate these problems but also to look at their religious beliefs and practices for inspiration and guidance.

Generally speaking, the majority of our religious traditions were first developed in pre-modern times before the advent either of modern technology or the ecological crisis. Consequently, finding inspiration and guidance from these traditions in order to address problems that are particularly modern in origin calls for creativity, discernment, wisdom, and great interpretive skills.

These realizations have made the followers and observers of various kinds of religiosities and/or spiritualities to critically examine their beliefs and attitudes, to locate and amplify eco-friendly resources in their traditions, and to abandon, modify, or re-think those that are not so eco-friendly. Entirely new fields of study are therefore being created at the junction of these concerns. This course is meant to explore some of these new and exciting terrains where religion and science, nature and culture, ethics and spirituality meet and overlap.



Religion is not going to go away, but it can change just as it has been changing throughout its history. Religion is meant to fulfill certain deep-seated needs of the human soul, and it has been doing this by adapting itself to the conditions of the people to whom it is addressed. In our times, religion will serve its purpose only if it is effective within the conditions of life that exist today, not the conditions of life that existed in the past. The ecological crisis is a major part of the world in which we live; it is here, and it is real. A religion that ignores that crisis does so at its own peril.

What we are dealing with are issues of survival, of life and death. What are the stakes? Survival of human and non-human life forms on earth; survival of the earth itself as a hospitable and habitable planet; survival of human cultures; survival of religion. Unfortunately, many of us do not recognize these stakes and cannot look too far in either space or time. They continue to concern themselves with very local, very transient, very immediate gains, an attitudes that contributes to a worsening of our predicament.

This course is listed as a 400 level seminar, and will be conducted as such. This means that you are responsible for your own learning and your instructor is here only to facilitate the process. The subject is vast and the ques-



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tions are inexhaustible, but we will focus only on a few key issues. The problem of religion and ecology can be explored in a somewhat satisfying manner only as we allow ourselves to freely move among various fields of study: history of science, sociology, religious studies, psychology, anthropology, gender studies, economics, and, of course, politics.

## Grading and Evaluation

Your final grade in this course will depend on your attendance, class participation, weekly journal, two short essays, and one research paper.

**Attendance: (10%)** Your physical presence in the class is essential. Since this is a small group, even one absence will be acutely felt by everyone. Frequent late arrivals or early departures can and will negatively affect your grade, so would habitual or unexcused absences.


**Participation: (20%)** I will give a mini-lecture at the beginning or end of each class meeting; other than that, you are going to do most of the talking. This requires you to do your readings thoroughly, take sufficient notes, spend some quality time thinking about what you have read, and come to the class armed with an understanding of the readings as well as your own insights, questions, and comments. I assume that everyone will be polite and respectful, particularly when disagreeing with each other.

**Weekly Journal: (10%)** Once or twice a week, you are required to find a quiet place OUTDOORS (such as in the Arboretum) and spend some time alone. See, smell, and hear your surroundings; be there. What do you feel? What ideas come to your mind? Record them with a pen or a voice recorder. Take “The Little Earth Book” with you each time you do this exercise; read a few pages at random as you re-connect with nature. Then come back and write your thoughts and reflections in a 2-3 pages long journal entry. You can bring these writings to class and read them to everyone; otherwise, I will collect them from you at some point in the semester.


**Short Essays: (20%)** You will write two short essays (3-5 pages long) during the semester, due on October 18 and November 22. The first essay should consist of your reflections on the relationship between religion and science in the context of the environmental crisis; the second essay should be a critical overview of a particular religious tradition’s view of nature.

**Research Paper: (40%)** You will write one research paper, 12-15 pages long, drawing upon as well as going beyond the readings included in this course. Try to select your topic as early in the semester as possible, and keep me informed about your progress and any problems you may be facing. It is perfectly fine to change your topic and/or approach as the course progresses. Your paper is due on December 20 in my office or mailbox.

## Required Texts



The following books are required in this course: 1) Richard Foltz. Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment; 2) James Bruges. The Little Earth Book; 3) Bryan Appleyard. Understanding the Present; 4) Carolyn Merchant. The Death of Nature; 5) Charlene Spretnak. Resurgence of the Real; 6) Joel Bakan. The Corporation; and 6) Richard Heinberg. The Party’s Over. The first six are already available in the bookstore; the seventh is on its way. You are required to read a few other articles that are available for download on the course website. Several books have been put on reserve in the library; feel free to consult them, particularly for your research paper. I recommend that you also consult the Encyclopedia of Religion and





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## Syllabus and Schedule

### September 6: Framing the Debate

Introduction to the Course

### September 13: Religion & Science I

Max Weber. "The Vocation of Science" (ER); Rodney Stark. "God's Handiwork" (ER); Lynn White Jr. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" (FL)

### September 20: Religion & Science II

Seyyed Hossen Nasr. "The Traditional Sciences, the Scientific Revolution, and its Aftermath" and "The Rediscovery of Nature" (from his book, Religion and the Order of Nature) (ER)

### September 27: Science & Scientism

Bryan Appleyard. Understanding the Present

### October 4: The License to Dominate

Carolyn Merchant. The Death of Nature

### October 11: Postmodern Science?

Charlene Spretnak. Resurgence of the Real; Watch the video "What the bleep do we know"

### October 18: In the Presence of the Sacred

Vine Deloria Jr. "Sacred Places and Moral Responsibility" (FL); Mary Graham. "Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews" (FL); Gary Paul Nabhan. "Cultural Parallax in Viewing North American Habitats" (FL); Graham Harvey. "Paganism and the Environment" (FL)

### October 25: Hinduism & Buddhism

Vasudha Narayanan. "Water, Wood, and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Hindu Tradition" (FL); O. P. Dwivedi. "Dharmic Ecology" (FL); Rita Gross. "Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic" (FL); Ian Harris. "Ecological Buddhism" (FL)

### November 1: Judaism

Aloys Hutterman. "Genesis 1 — The Most Misunderstood Part of the Bible" (FL); Tikva Frymer-Kensky. "Ecology in a Biblical Perspective" (FL); "Arthur Waskow. "And the Earth is Filled with the Breath of Life" (FL); Roger S. Gottlieb. "A Spirituality of Resistance" (FL)

### November 8: Christianity

Anna Peterson "In and of the World? Christian Theological Anthropology and Environmental Ethics" (FL); Calvin Dewitt. "The Three Big Questions" (FL); Rosemary Radford Ruether. "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology" (FL); Leonardo Boff. "Science, Technology, Power, and Liberation Theology" (FL); Thomas Berry. "The New Story" (FL)

### November 15: Islam

Richard Foltz. "Islamic Environmentalism in Theory and Practice"; K. L. Afrasiabi. "Toward an Islamic Ecotheology"; Nawal H. Ammar. "An Islamic Response to the Manifest Ecological Crisis: Issues of Justice" (FL); William C. Chittick. "God Surrounds all Things" (ER)

### November 22: The Economics of Ecology

Joel Bakan. The Corporation: Pathological Pursuit of Power and Profit; David R. Loy. "The Religion of the Market" (FL); Watch the video: "The Corporation"

### November 29: The End of Oil Age

Richard Heinberg. The Party's Over; Watch the video "The End of Suburbia"

### December 6. Environmental Ethics

Peter S. Wenz. "Environmentalism and Human Oppression"; Holmes Rolston III. "Feeding People vs. Saving Nature" (from The Ecological Community ed. Roger Gottlieb) (ER)

### December 13: Nature and Spirituality

Joseph Price. "Naturalistic Recreations"; Lois K. Dally. "Ecological Activism" (from Spirituality and the Secular Quest ed. Peter H. Van Ness) (ER)

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ER: Electronic Reserve

FL: Richard Foltz. "Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment"