

THEO 179--Theocentric Foundations for Environmental Ethics

Spring 1999, MW 2:25-3:40 p.m., 114 Cudahy Hall

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Office Hours MW 1-2, 4-4:30 p.m. and by appointment

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Background/Description/Goals

Can the Christian tradition provide a rationale that will persuade human beings from destroying other species, their habitats and the greater biosphere of our planet? Widespread ecological degradation has prompted biblical scholars, systematic theologians and ethicists to explore ways of thinking about and acting more compatibly within the community of diverse beings which constitute Earth. This course has been designed to bring students into this ongoing dialogue by examining systematically some notions in Christian texts and discerning the extent to which they provide promising foundations for environmental ethics.

Toward this end, students will aim to achieve the following goals: (1) Identify and explain key theological themes in Christian texts selected for this course, (2) assess critically the extent to which thematic notions provide ways of thinking about and living more compatibly within the ecosystems of our planet; (3) demonstrate analytical skills by comparing themes and selecting one which seems most promising for environmental ethics; (4) collectively identify and prioritize the most promising theocentric foundations for environmental ethics; (5) examine recent Catholic and other denominational texts to determine their adequacy in reflecting "the tradition"; and, (6) explore in-depth one of the most profound and cutting-edge ways in which one Christian theologian thinks about our planet in an effort to address the ecological crisis.

Bases for Evaluation

Presentation in class of an environmental problem to which an assigned theocentric theme is applied (10%), class participation in small and full group discussions (20%), a reflective journal on one reading from each theocentric theme (20%), and two cumulative exams (20% and 30%).

Required Texts

A Bible (*New Jerusalem, New American, or Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*)

Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility" (1990)

United States Catholic Conference, "Renewing the Earth" (1991)

Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993)

Handouts and Readings on Reserve

Class Attendance Policy

Because presence in class is crucial to student understanding of assigned and presented materials, attendance is mandatory. After three absences, the final letter grade will be lowered by one-half per absence. Up to 10 minutes late will count for one-third absence from the class, and more than 10 minutes of tardiness will count as one class absence.

Academic Honesty Policy

Each student is expected to represent his or her own efforts in all assignments and examinations. Penalties for academic dishonesty will be rigorously administered as indicated in the *Undergraduate Bulletin*.

Tentative Schedule of Class Sessions, Assignments and Examinations

January 20 -- Overview of course and introductory lecture on the meaning of "theocentric foundations" and "environmental ethics" stressing differences between this approach and other systems of ethics, the basic tenets of the Christian faith assumed in this course, and theological discourse as diverse attempts to talk about

God within specific historical-cultural contexts.

January 25 -- Student identification of many ecological problems occurring in the world today; presentation by Marquette's Dr. James Maki on the science of ecology which informs our theological discourse and scholarly sources of scientific information about environmental problems; view WWF film on the need for a religious response to environmental degradation; distribution of forms on which to indicate the ecological problem you will track (completed form due next class session).

January 27 -- Collection of forms designating eco-problems to be tracked; introduction to the "Goodness of Creation" theme, beginning with biblical references (Gen 1-2 and Sir/Eccles 39.12-35) and moving into selections by St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and others in readings packet, and distribution of directions for presentations and journal entries.

February 1 -- The Goodness of Creation: Student presentations applying this theme to ecological problems chosen for tracking with emphasis on the extent to which the readings suggest a theocentric ethic of valuing all natural entities; discussion of this theme related to other problems being tracked; introduction to the "Beauty of Creation" theme highlighting selections by St. Augustine and St. Basil from the readings packet; distribution of student presentation schedule; collection of draft "Goodness" journal entry.

February 3 -- The Beauty of Creation: Student presentations and discussion regarding the fruitfulness of an ethics of aesthetic appreciation suggested by this theme; introduction to "Praising" theme from selections in the Bible, readings packet, and taped songs.

February 8 -- Praising God for Creation/Creation's Praising God: Student presentations and discussion about the ethics of respect for other creatures to praise God according to their natures; introduction to the "Sacramentality of Creation" theme in biblical and packet readings.

February 10 -- The Sacramentality of Creation: Student presentation and evaluation of the ethics of reverence suggested; examination of other readings in packet; view and discuss "The Wonders of God's Creation" videotape.

February 15 -- The Sacramentality of Creation: Student presentation and consideration of the ethics of reverence and appropriate behavior as "ritual"; introduction to "Functional Unity of Creation" theme from packet readings.

February 17 -- The Functional Unity of Creation: Student presentation and discussion on ethics of cooperation of all creatures for our mutual sustainability; review of other readings; directions for first cumulative examination on February 24.

February 22 -- The Functional Unity of Creation: Student presentation and discussion regarding ethics of cooperation with all creatures to assure mutual sustainability; student questions about first examination.

February 24 -- First cumulative examination.

March 1 -- The Kinship of Creatures: Introduction to theme, perusal of packet readings, and student comments on fruitfulness of this theme's ethics of companionship in tackling ecological problems; introduction of "Dominion/Stewardship" theme.

March 3 -- Dominion/Stewardship: Student presentations and discussion exploring the ethics of human responsibility to care for God's Earth; examination of Pope John Paul II's "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility."

SPRING BREAK

March 15 -- Dominion/Stewardship: View and assess USC video, "Keeping the Earth" from this theme's perspective; introduction to "Restrained and Grateful Use" theme in readings.

March 17 -- Restrained and Grateful Use: Student presentations and discussion centered around using God's creation as "blessings" in temporal life; introduction to "Living Virtuously" theme.

March 22 -- Living Virtuously in the More-than-Human World: Student presentations and discussion centered around applying the cardinal virtues to human behavior in an age of ecological degradation requiring prudence, moderation and justice.

March 24 -- Living Virtuously in the More-than-Human World: Possible guest lecturer on a local ecological problem and discussion on the promise virtue-thinking can bring to addressing this problem; introduction to "Loving Creation" theme.

March 29 -- Loving Creation: Student presentations and discussion of theme stressing an ethics of loving all creatures out of love for one's human neighbor and minority theme of loving all creatures for the glory they give to God.; introduction to "Covenant" theme.

March 31 -- Covenant: Student presentation and discussion regarding the ethics of protecting the flourishing of creation as a criterion for having a right relationship with God; examination of the "Rainbow Covenant" issued by leaders of the five major religions of the world in 1990.

HAPPY EASTER

April 7 -- Group work assessing themes using students' statements identifying the most promising theme each found; submission of statements and completed journals; introduction to USCC's "Renewing the Earth."

April 12 -- Discussion and evaluation of USCC's "Renewing the Earth."

April 14 -- Completion of "Renewing" and examination of other denominations' statements on the environment.

April 19 -- Lecture on metaphorical theology, overview of McFague's *The Body of God*, examination of "Introduction," and instructions for reading chap 1.

April 21-- Discussion of McFague's chap 1 as assigned; directions for chaps 2-3.

EARTH DAY -- April 22

April 26 -- Discussion of McFague's chaps 2-3; directions for chap 4.

April 28 -- Discussion of McFague chap 4; directions for chaps 5-6.

May 3 -- Discussion of McFague chaps 5-6; directions for completing and reflecting on merits of *The Body of God* for environmental ethics.

May 5 -- Completion and evaluation of McFague; directions for final examination.

FINAL EXAM -- Wednesday, May 12, 1-3 p.m.

DIRECTIONS FOR THEOLOGY 179 ASSIGNMENTS

Journal Entry Requirements (20% of grade)

Submit the following on ONE reading from EACH theocentric theme on April 7* (draft of "Goodness" them due February 1*)

1. Title of the theme (e.g., Goodness of Creation);
2. Author of the text (e.g., St. Augustine);
3. Title and section numbers of the text you found most illuminating and promising in dealing with this theme (e.g., *The Nature of the Good*, 1-19);
4. Synopsis of major point/s the author made on this theme;
5. To what extent the author's teachings on this theme have been helpful to you in thinking theocentrically about how you ought to relate to the rest of creation and any aspect of this work which you found problematic; and
6. To what extent the author's teachings help you address the environmental problem which you're tracking this semester.

Requirements for Presentation of Ecological Problem (10% of grade)

1. Declare the problem on the form provided by January 27*
2. In your presentation on the day assigned, (i) describe the nature of the problem, its causes and why you chose this particular problem, (ii) identify two scholarly sources you used for information on this problem, (iii) apply to this problem the designated theocentric theme from at least one specific reading, and (iv) indicate the merits/demerits of that theme in dealing with the problem.
3. Submit to me just prior to your presentation on the day assigned a double-sided sheet on which you outline the ecological information you're presenting along with the complete bibliographical citation of the two scientific sources on one side and on the other side the author/title of the text/s you chose to apply to the problem along with your assessment of the merits/demerits of using this theme.
4. Use whatever visual sources you need or want with my approval.
5. Limit your presentation to ten minutes.

* Grade penalties apply when these deadlines are not met.
