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388-20 Theology and Ecology

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THEO 388: Theology and Ecology

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1:00 p.m. – 4:45 p.m.
MRWRF
Cintas Center 201

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to theological and ethical reflection on the ecological crisis. Together we will engage in an interdisciplinary exploration of the following questions: what is the ecological crisis? What are its causes? Can Christianity and other religious traditions contribute to a more ecologically viable form of human civilization?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning outcomes specific to this course include:

1. Ecological literacy.
2. The ability to think theologically and ethically about humanity’s relationship to creation.
3. Strengthened skills for ecological living and civic action.

Core curriculum learning outcomes served by this course include the following:

1. Students will be effective communicators in writing and orally.
   a. Students will organize and express their ideas in writing and orally.
   b. Students will formulate clear and arguable theses, supported by evidence drawn from appropriate sources.
   c. Students will utilize an effective writing process guided by audience, purpose, cultural context, and disciplinary standards.

2. Students will be critical thinkers.
   a. Students will analyze and interpret texts, images, objects, artifacts, and quantitative and qualitative data.
   b. Students will describe the historical, cultural, mythological, and social contexts of texts, works of art, and theories.
   c. Students will evaluate the strength of an argument or claim and its evidence.
d. Students will discuss fundamental questions that arise from the human condition, such as questions about the grounds of morality, the essence of justice, the nature of reality, the possibility of certainty, the nature of beauty, or the reasonableness of religious faith.

3. Students will be creators of new knowledge and expression.
   a. Students will utilize their imagination and creativity, individually and collectively, to innovate and generate new perspectives to problems.
   b. Students will create, perform, and produce works of high quality technical execution that expressively communicate to the intended audience.

4. Students will be able to understand and appreciate the arts, humanities and scientific disciplines, and reflect on connections among these studies.
   a. Students will engage in critical, theological reflection by the method developed in Jesuit and Catholic practice, using human experience and religious traditions as resources to address issues or questions arising in today’s world.
   b. Students will think historically in order to understand the past on its own terms and to understand how societies have changed over time.
   c. Students will recognize and interpret artistic and literary expression.
   d. Students will apply social science methodology to relevant social issues.
   e. Students will compare and contrast the aims and methodologies of the humanities, fine arts, sciences, and mathematics.

5. Students will be integrated individuals who articulate a coherent, ethical perspective on the world and their place in it.
   a. Students will recognize the societal, ethical and moral dimensions of discourse, art, information, science and technology.
   b. Students will relate their knowledge and skills in a reflective and constructive way to their life experiences and the challenges confronting today’s world.
   c. Students will use information and resources responsibly in their communication and research.
   d. Students will utilize intellectual, moral, and spiritual tools and sensibilities to engage faithfully and responsibly in the world for the promotion of peace, social justice, and
ecological sustainability.

6. Students will be aware global citizens.
   a. Students will recognize relationships between diversity, inequality, and social, economic, and political power both in the United States and globally.
   b. Students will consider perspectives of diverse groups when making decisions.
   c. Students will interact with sensitivity as members of society and as professionals with people who have ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are different from their own.
   d. Students will engage Catholic, ecumenical, cross-cultural, and inter-religious perspectives in reflecting upon contemporary issues of significance.

7. Students will be intellectually, morally and spiritually educated individuals capable of critical reflection on ethical and/or religious questions of social significance from the perspective of multiple disciplines with unique methods.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Eric Reece, *Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness*
Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*
Michael Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*
A Bible
Additional articles on Blackboard

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Theological conversation takes place at the intersection of faith and reason. As such, it requires both adherence to the standards of academic rigor and sensitivity to questions of a personal nature. It requires an open mind and also an open heart; intellectual integrity and mutual respect. Class discussion will be guided by St. Augustine’s principle *Non intratur in veritatem nisi per caritatem*—one cannot enter into truth except through charity.

Participation by everyone in class discussion is important for your own active learning and in order that we may all benefit from your insights and questions. All of your contributions are important! I will call on people as necessary to encourage everyone’s participation.
Cell phones, lap tops, etc. are not permitted within the classroom as they can distract from engagement with class discussion. If you do use an electronic device, you will be asked to put it away. On the second occasion of such usage the device will be turned into the Dean’s office.

**Academic Honesty.** Academic dishonesty violates the Xavier community and your own integrity and progress toward learning outcomes. Plagiarism or cheating on an exam will result in failure of the assignment or test, and notice will be given to the Dean’s office.

**CORE REQUIREMENTS**

**Attendance.** Because this is an intensive intersession course, more than one absence will result in failure.

**Participation.** *Active participation is essential* to realization of the learning outcomes.

**Journal.** As one form of active participation, students will write journal entries reflecting on class readings, films, and field trips.

**Essays.** Four essays are required. These writing assignments will give you the opportunity to reflect constructively and critically on the readings, synthesize and integrate knowledge, and develop your skills of creative written expression.

**Examination.** The final exam will consist of a take-home essay and in-class exam that will give you the opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of basic terms and concepts in the study of ecology and theology.

**Group project.** Together as a class we will identify and execute a project that will put an environmental ethic into action. Each student will write a reflection on this experience in her/his journal.

**Grade calculation.** Grades will be determined according to the criteria posted on the theology department webpage. The final grade for the course will be calculated in the following manner:

- Class participation: 5%
- Journal: 5%
- Quizzes: 10%
- Reece essay: 15%
- Johnson essay: 15%
- Pollan essay: 15%
- Book review: 15%
- Final exam: 20%
SCHEDULE FOR CLASSES AND ASSIGNMENTS

Monday, May 12

A. Introduction to one another and to the course
B. Introduction to the ecological crisis
C. The practice of contemplation

Tuesday, May 13

A. Diagnosing the causes of the ecological crisis

Read: Eric Reece, *Lost Mountain*

Essay due:
Erik Reece’s book *Lost Mountain* describes the destruction of the Appalachian ecosystem. Write an essay in which you address these questions: 1) Why, according to Reece’s analysis, are our actions so destructive? What, in his judgment, are the political, economic, cultural, and spiritual causes of the destruction of Appalachia? 2) What is your assessment of his analysis? Do you agree or disagree? Why? What insights or questions does the reading stimulate? The essay should be 4 pages, double-spaced.

B. Discussion of Group Project

C. Scripture and Ecology

Read: Genesis chapters 1-3
Lev 20:19
Proverbs 8
Psalm 148
Gospel of John chapter 1
Romans 8:18-25
Ephesians 1:1-14

Recommended secondary readings:
Lynn White, “The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”
Anne Clifford, “Foundations for a Catholic Ecological Theology of God”
Sallie McFague, “The Scope of the Body: The Cosmic Christ”

Wednesday, May 14

Field trip: Permaganics
*Wear work clothes!*

Thursday, May 15

A. Ecology and the Christian Theological Tradition

Read:
Excerpts from Bonaventure, *The Mind's Road to God* (handout)
Excerpts from the writing of Hildegard of Bingen (handout)
Elizabeth Johnson, “Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition” (recommended)
Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*

Friday, May 16

A. Ecology and the Christian Theological Tradition, cont.

*Johnson essay due* (4 pages, double-spaced):

Option A:
Identify a primary thesis of this book. How does Johnson support and develop this thesis? What is your assessment of the argument? What are the contributions of the book? What are its weaknesses or limitations?

Option B:
Write a dialogue between Johnson and a Christian who for biblical reasons does not accept the science of evolution.

Option C:
Write a dialogue between Johnson and a Christian who believes that ecology is not relevant to Christian faith, which should be focused on humanity.

B. Ecology and Christian Ethics

Read: James Nash, “Seeking Moral Norms in Nature: Natural Law and Ecological Responsibility” (recommended)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Renewing the Earth”

Steven Bouma-Prediger, “What Kind of People Ought We To Be? Earth-Care and Character” (recommended)
C. Ecology and Christian Liturgy

Marthinus Daneel, “Earthkeeping Churches at the African Grass Roots” (recommended)

Margaret Pfeil, “Liturgy and Ethics: The Liturgical Asceticism of Energy Conservation” (recommended)

D. Ecology and Contemplation

Stephen Chase, excerpt from *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice*

Annie Dillard, excerpt from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (handout)

Monday, May 19

A. Climate Change

Read:
Richard Miller, “Global Climate Disruption and Social Justice”
Daniel K. Finn, “Theology and Sustainable Economics”

B. Field trip: Civic Garden Center Green Learning Station

Tuesday, May 20

A. Biodiversity

Read: Excerpt from Douglas Burton-Christie, *Blue Sapphire of the Mind*

B. Field trip: TBA

Wednesday, May 21

A. Food and Agriculture

Read: Michael Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*
Norman Wirzba, “Life through Death,” *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*
John Sniegocki, “Christianity and Dietary Choices”
Essay due on one of the following topics (4 pages):

A. Pollan argues that human beings face the dilemma that we are omnivores, and that in the United States we have been managing this dilemma rather badly. In fact, he writes, we have a national eating disorder. What evidence does he give for this thesis? What, according to Pollan, are the symptoms of this disorder? The underlying causes? Evaluate Pollan’s analysis, and then articulate a response to the omnivore’s dilemma from the perspective of your own ethical, spiritual, and theological tradition.

B. To eat meat or not to eat meat? This is the question. Using Pollan, Wirzba, Sniegocki, and any other sources that contribute to your essay, articulate and substantiate your own position on this question.

Thursday, May 22

A. Chemical Pollution and Water

Friday, May 23

A. Presentations on book report
B. In class portion of final exam