

**THEO 204 Religious Ethics and the Ecological Crisis**

**John Felice Rome Center**

**Spring 2025**

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2.00-3.00 pm or by appointment

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’ (Genesis 1.31).

What went wrong?

Across the globe so many socio-political values have their origins in religious ethical systems. Historically Christian moral theology has been uniquely powerful in providing structure and content to political and legal systems across the western and colonial worlds. The authors of Genesis present us with the first commands of the Creator to humanity, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gen.1.28). In the past these words have been taken as a free pass for universal exploitation of resources: animal, vegetable and mineral.

When we look beyond this paradigm of dominance for humanity’s stewardship, grounded on an ‘othering’ of the created world, we uncover alternative worldviews which offer holistic rather than hierarchical models and place humanity within nature rather than apart from it.

The first part of THEO 204 introduces the concepts and definitions of ‘religion’, ‘ethics’ and ‘ecological crisis’ to clarify the basic parameters for our studies. We then take a brief journey through history to uncover the process whereby religious ethics evolved to designate the human species as a phenomenon *apart* from the rest of the material world.

Conversely, we’ll examine alternative historical movements within Christian culture which were challenging this hierarchical notion of humanity over nature. Examples include Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan movement and Hildegard of Bingen, polymath, mystic and visionary.

Before moving on to the cyclical and timeless worldviews of Asian religious/cultural contexts, we’ll study the Islamic ethical traditions and contemporary Muslim ecological initiatives. Turning to Hinduism and Buddhism we explore notions of re-birth which fuse humanity as one with the natural world. How does this status of humanity impact on ethics towards non-human life and ecology?

Cyclical and non-time bound traditions share elements of their world views with indigenous traditions whose spirituality is bound to the earth, to their particular piece of land on this earth. This connection to a particular sacred place is rooted in a relationship of mutual dependence/mutual survival. We’ll be studying examples of these traditions from the Americas and Australia, examining their ethical understanding and approach to nature, as well as the impact colonialism has had on these values, beliefs and practices.

Within this frame of holistic approaches to ecology we’ll investigate ecofeminism - a contemporary movement, originating in the West towards the end of the twentieth century. Its critiques of the environmental crisis, and its application of practical remedies, reflect the integration of ecology, feminism and spirituality.

In conclusion we’ll reflect on the impact the ecological crisis has had on the value systems of ‘linear’/time-bound traditional religions. Are beliefs and values essential to indigenous spiritual

traditions informing major religious traditions? What are the sustainability initiatives, for example, emerging from majority Islamic or Christian countries? What are examples of joint initiatives between NGOs and faith communities?

### **Learning Outcomes**

Students who successfully complete this course will have the ability to:

- Develop their academic skills to construct a well-informed argument in writing and oral presentation
- Demonstrate their critical skills to evaluate secondary sources in relation to primary texts
- Identify and explain key issues in approaches to ecology from religious ethical, historical and global perspectives
- Understand diversities and similarities of religious ethical approaches to ecology across global spiritual traditions
- Demonstrate awareness of global faith based initiatives addressing the ecological crisis
- Synthesize information from a variety of academic disciplines as it relates to the impact of the ecological crisis around the world

**The Project** is a central feature on THEO 204. Your project, selected in consultation and supervised during the second half of the course, will provide a unique opportunity to delve in depth into a case study which illustrates a particular aspect of religious ethics and ecology. These projects can investigate theologies and spiritualities of the past and the present to evaluate how they measure up to the needs and expectations for the future of the planet.

### **Readings and Responses**

For each class you will be given questions in advance attached to each week's Lesson Page on Sakai. These are based on the reading/s for that week – also posted on the Lesson Page (and on Sakai Resources).

Your responses to these questions and readings together with discussions in your groups will prepare you for the Midterm and Final exams. The aim of these exercises is to ensure that you are consistently building on your knowledge base and developing your reflections in this subject, as well as honing your skills in critical reading and analysis.

### **Assessment Components**

10% Participation in group/class discussions and group project presentations  
35% Midterm Exam  
5% 1. Annotated Project Plan  
20% 2. Final Exam – based on the classes and readings for Weeks 7-10  
30% 3. Written Project Paper

### **Grading**

94-100: A      90-93: A-      87-89: B+      84-86: B      80-83: B-

77-79: C+    74-76: C    70-73: C-    67-69: D+    60-66: D    59 or lower: F

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest, and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a guiding principle for all academic activity at Loyola University Chicago, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle. Failing to meet academic integrity standards is a serious violation of personal honesty and the academic ideals that bind the University into a learning community.

**Students may not plagiarize - the use of AI is considered plagiarism and treated as such.**

Follow this link for more details about these standards, sanctions, and academic misconduct procedures: ([https://www.luc.edu/academics/catalog/undergrad/reg\\_academicintegrity.shtml](https://www.luc.edu/academics/catalog/undergrad/reg_academicintegrity.shtml))

### **SAC**

If you are a student with Accommodations, please make contact with me at the beginning of the semester in order to discuss your requirements for this class.

### **Late or Missed Assignments**

Late or missed assignments will not be accepted for grading except with authorization.

**Attendance Policy** In accordance with the JFRC mission to promote a higher level of academic rigor, all courses adhere to the following absence policy. Prompt attendance, preparation and active participation in course discussions are expected from every student:

- For all classes meeting once a week, students cannot incur more than one absence. Absences beyond this will result in 1% lowering of the final course.

**DO NOT ATTEND CLASS IF YOU ARE ILL** the collective health of the JFRC is everyone's responsibility.

**Email Communication** I will do my best to reply to emails sent **during business hours (Monday to Friday, 9.00 – 18.00)**. Emails sent after 18.00 will be considered received the next day. The best way to communicate with me is directly: after class, during my office hour or by making an appointment via email.

**Computer, Phone & Internet Use in the Classroom** Use of phones is always prohibited. Please turn your phones off when in class. Use of laptop computers during class time is permitted only for note taking, group work and class workshop research activity.

### **Useful preparation reading**

**(weekly required readings will be available on Sakai 'Resources' and 'Lessons'.)**

Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016;

Gottlieb, Roger S. The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Taylor, Bron. Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future, University of California Press, 2009.

'Religion and Environment' Willis Jenkins and Christopher Key Chapple published online, 2011, The Annual Review of Environment and Resources

Tucker, Mary, and John Grim. 'Ecology and Religion: An Overview.' Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 4, 2005, pp. 2604–16.

## Course Schedule

- Week One 1/23**      **i. Introduction to THEO 204**  
                          **ii. Analyzing and illustrating terminology: 'Religion', 'Ethics', 'Ecological Crisis'**  
                          **iii. Introducing Linear religions: Beginnings and Endings**

VanDrunen D. 'Conscience and Natural Law in Scripture', in Hammond JB, Alvare HM, eds. Christianity and the Laws of Conscience: An Introduction. Law and Christianity. Cambridge University Press; 2021:39-56.

- Week Two 1/30**      **The Garden of Eden – Utopian and dystopian readings**

Genesis 1-3

Sayem, Md. Abu. 'Lynn White, Jr.'s Critical Analysis of Environmental Degradation in Relation to Faith Traditions: Is His "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" Still Relevant?' Journal of Ecumenical Studies, vol. 56, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–23

Lane, M. (2019). 'Ancient Ideas of Politics: Mediating between Ecology and Theology', in A. Hunt & H. Marlow (Ed.). Ecology and Theology in the Ancient World: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives (pp. 13–24). London,: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved October 15, 2024, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350004078.ch-002>

- Week Three 2/6**      **Medieval ecology: St Francis of Assisi & St Hildegard of Bingen**

- i. 'The Original Green Campaign: Dr. Hildegard of Bingen's Viriditas as Complement to Laudato Si', John Dadosky Toronto Journal of Theology, Volume 34, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 79-95
- ii. Johnson TJ. Francis and creation. In: Robson MJP, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge University Press; 2011:143-158.

- Week Four 2/13**      **Islam: Introduction to the belief system, ethics and ecology**

- i. 'Islam Contemporary Expressions', Erin E. Stiles in, Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice, Ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, 2012.
- ii. "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth." Islamic Horizons, vol. 51, no. 4, Islamic Society of North America, 2022, pp. 42–43.

- Week Five 2/20 Implications of non-linear worldviews**

**Introduction to Hinduism – cycles of life and ecological perspectives**

'Hindu Traditions: Dharmic Ecology', in Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016

- Week Six 2/27**      **Introduction to Buddhism -'dependent origination'**

1. 'Buddhist Traditions: Interdependence', in Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016

**Week Seven 3/6 Midterm Exam**

**-----Spring Break-----**

**Week Eight 3/20**

**Part 1: Indigenous approaches to ecology i. Australia**

Tonkinson, R. (2012). 'Australia', in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice (eds M.D. Palmer and S.M. Burgess). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444355390.ch24>

**Part 2: Project workshop – Finding a topic**

**Week Nine 3/27**

**Holistic ecology ii. North America**

'American Indian Traditions: Balance with All Our Relations' in Scheid, Daniel P., The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics New York, 2016, pp.162-180

**Week Ten 4/3**

**Part 1: Ecofeminism**

**Part 2: Project Workshop – Creating a Project Plan**

Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures: Pushing the Limits of Cultural Imperialism?" Ecofeminism, edited by Greta Gaard, Temple University Press, 1993, pp. 295–314. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt5pf.15>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2024.

**Week Eleven 4/10**

**Contemporary Christian ecological ethics**

'Integral Ecology', Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter: Laudato Si', 2015, pp.93-108.

Van Wieren, Gretel. 'Re-Storying Earth, Re-Storyed to Earth' in Restored to Earth : Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration. Georgetown University Press, 2013, pp. 170-188.

**Week Twelve 4/17**

**Part 1: Faith and Sustainability Projects**

**Part 2: Group Presentation discussions**

World Resources Institute's 'Faith and Sustainability Project':  
<https://www.wri.org/initiatives/faith-and-sustainability>

**Week Thirteen 4/24**

**Project Presentations**

**Week Fourteen 4/28 -5/1**

**Final Exam Period**