

Religion, Science, and the Ecological Crisis



Adam Block, July, 1998, Kitt Peak Observatory, NM

NOAO/AURA/NSF

ER 290-2 Course Control Number 27505 Mon 2-5 pm 203 Wheeler
Instructors: Richard B. Norgaard and Daniel R. Smith

Modern expectations for religion and science are not being fulfilled in contemporary society. Religion has emerged as a political force and, in some cases, believes itself to be an independent source of truth about the nature of the material world. Science -- on which modern reason, access to reality, and environmental management have rested -- no longer anchors and bounds public discourse and government decisions. Rather, science is being privatized, challenged by the complexity of social and ecological interactions, opposed by creationists, heralded as destiny by genetic engineers ready to “advance” the human species, accused of being socially constructed and value-laden by post-modernists, and selectively denigrated by corporate interests. Meanwhile, advances in modern science have made it clear that we are in an ecological crisis. Ecological degradation is hurting the poor, putting humanity on a technological treadmill, and reducing the prospects for all future generations. Yet, in spite of stronger environmental scientific knowledge, environmental governance has been substantially weakened under free-market fundamentalism, and religion has been far too silent about the problem.

Academic institutions historically have contributed to the growth of secular understanding, leaving the interplay between scientific truth and religious faith in the realm of the personal. Now, however, it is clear that new social contracts need to be worked out, including a new dialogue between science and religion. This course brings together graduate students of theology and science from the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) and UC Berkeley to explore together the scientific and religious issues of ecology and its intersection with religion.

The format will be a graduate seminar, including lectures by the instructors and guests, and discussion of assigned reading. Evaluation will be based on biweekly reflection papers, a student presentation and a term paper.

The course has a limit of 40 students, 20 from GTU and 20 from UCB. An approximate syllabus is on the back of this announcement.



Religion, Science, and the Ecological Crisis

This experimental course was taught for the first time in the Fall semester of 2006 and the 17 students ranked both the course and Richard Norgaard, the instructor, 7/7 overall. This year it will be co-taught by Professor Norgaard, and Daniel Smith, Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in systematic theology.

The course will trace the evolution of attitudes to the nature, environment, and ecology from both the scientific and religious perspectives (focusing especially on the Judeo-Christian tradition). It will explore the unique languages and cultures of science, religion and theology in order to discuss and interpret ecological matters, exploring the promises and limitations of such a dialogue.

Bi-weekly key topics:

1. August 31 & September 14 **Introduction to Course: Defining the Ecological Crisis, Defining Terms**

The first gathering will assume a pre-reading of Lynn White's essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis", as well two papers, one by each instructor. The first two sessions will be devoted to defining the crisis, the scope of our analysis in the course, and defining key terms for the religious and scientific language communities.

2. September 21 **History of Religion and its View of Nature**

How have religious groups defined and understood "nature"? How has this informed their environmental ethics and practice? This lecture will give a brief overview primarily of the theological history of Judaism and Christianity, with special attention to the biblical tradition, its integration with Greek philosophy, and its reformulations in the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment.

3. September 28 & October 5 **History of Science, 19th Century Narrative of Progress**

As an analogue to the history of religion, what is science and how has it developed? In what ways is it indebted to a religious worldview? In what way has it conflicted with – and corrected – that view? This session will look at the narrative of progress – in science *and* religion – of 19th Century; 20th Century "postmodern" critique of that view. We will give special attention to Charles Darwin's thought and the ongoing controversy over evolution, especially in the U.S.

4. October 19 **Religion and Science: Warfare or Dialogue?**

Guest lecturer: Robert John Russell, Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (GTU)

We welcome guest speaker Robert John Russell of CTNS to help us understand the burgeoning dialogue between science and theology in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries as an alternative to the so-called "warfare" model.

October 26 is reading week at GTU; class attendance is optional. We will continue our discussion of science and religion based on questions students have.

5. November 2 **Ecology: Scientific Research and Perspectives**

What is the scientific research on ecology, and how has it caused religious thinkers to reconsider their basic assumptions?

6. November 9 & 16 **Religion and Ecology; Contemporary Religious Environmentalism**

Key turning points in the development of an "ecological consciousness", and a survey of Judeo-Christian theological attitudes toward the environment.

7. November 23 & 30 **Ecological Economics**

How do religion, the science of ecology and economics interact? We will consider the moral basis of economic theory (or lack thereof), boundary-making and the ethics of global warming and ecosystem degradation.

8. December 7 **Energy and Public Policy**

The capstone of the course will focus on sound and hopeful energy policy for a sustainable future, and how to define this vision in theological *as well as* scientific terms.

Course Material & Course Requirements

Most readings will be available as pdf files on the course's bSpace website. Evaluations will be based on class participation (20%), reflection papers (30%) and term paper (50%).

