

RE 225: Religion and Ecology

Dr. Eliza Kent Spring 2021

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and by appt.

“Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want your hope, I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act, I want you to act as if you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is.

--Greta Thunberg, speech at World Economic Forum at Davos (Jan. 22, 2019)

**I. COURSE DESCRIPTION:** An exploration of the critical connections between religion and the natural environment. How do religious beliefs, symbol systems, and ritual behaviors shape human perceptions of, and interactions with, the nonhuman environment? How are people of faith revitalizing their inherited traditions to meet current environmental challenges by “greening” their religions? How does environmental activism – both “mainstream” and “radical” – arise out of or inspire religious experiences in nature? How do environmental activists attain and sustain a level of commitment that resembles the intensity of religious conviction? Using primary texts drawn from a variety of sacred traditions, and writings from a broad spectrum of naturalists, theologians, and scholars, the course will cover such topics as ecotheology, ecofeminism and indigenous ecological knowledge. In addition, we will read case studies that feature how religious people have drawn on the cosmological and ritual resources of their traditions to reimagine our relationship to non-human nature – from Pope Francis’ landmark encyclical, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* to campaigns led by Native Americans against oil pipeline construction on sacred land.

**II. COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

1. to acquire a technical vocabulary that will allow you to speak in a precise and informed way about religious belief and practice in general, and about Christianity, Lakota Religion, and Hinduism in particular;
2. to gain a familiarity with religious hermeneutics, that is, the interpretation of received religious texts and traditions to meet the needs of a changed socio-historical situation;
3. to understand how religious worldviews have shaped human interactions with the natural environment, in concert with other factors (technological capacity, economic conditions, natural conditions, land use policies, etc.);
4. to develop a richly nuanced conception of religion that recognizes both the social and the personal dimensions of religious belief and practice;
5. to examine, challenge and clarify one’s own self-understanding, worldview and fundamental values.

**III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

A. Attendance and participation

B. Reading

C. Writing

**A. Attendance and Class Participation:** Regular attendance and active participation are essential to your learning experience and success in this course. Having said that, our primary concern at this time is your health and well-being. In this difficult climate, I ask that you only miss class when absolutely necessary. If you do need to miss class, please let me know in advance, or as soon as possible, so that I can work with you to help you keep up. Such absences will not be counted against you. **More than five unexcused absences, however, will be grounds for failing the course.**

As a “hybrid” class we will be meeting both in-person and on-line. The goal of all of our meetings is to foster positive, respectful intellectual community during the limited time we have together. Therefore, whether we are meeting on-line, or in-person please note:

* Plan to arrive on time and to stay in class the entire time.
* Provided the class agrees, collectively, to do this, we will begin each in-person day with a 5-minute mindfulness exercise.
* Please be sure to keep your mask on, covering your nose and mouth, at all times.
* No eating or drinking in class (because you have to keep your mask on).
* Be sure your cell phone is off and stowed out of your sight and mine the whole class period (p.s. I have x-ray vision and can detect texting under a desktop).
* While in class, please refrain from using your laptop to shop, message with friends and family, check weather forecasts, etc. Whether meeting in-person or online we will regularly need to use our laptops, tablets, etc. to communicate or look at materials together, so the temptation to veer away from our work together will be ever-present. Taking notes as you listen is one way to stay anchored.
* Zoom etiquette: keep your mic muted and plug in your device to save operating system power for the app. I would prefer you to keep your video on during our synchronous Zoom sessions.

Beyond these, your regular, active participation is expected. Please come to class having read the assignments so that you are prepared to offer your thoughtful questions, comments, comparisons and suggestions for further areas of exploration. This kind of participation benefits the class enormously, as does your attentive listening to the comments and questions of others. Your class participation grade will depend not only on the consistency of attendance and basic classroom etiquette (which is the bare minimum expected), but also on how well you contribute positively to the overall class dynamic through your comments, questions, attentive listening, prompt arrival, leadership and cooperation in small group work, etc. Generally speaking, when an imbalance occurs in terms of who is speaking and how frequently, those who are shy need to exercise the virtue of courage and those who are loquacious need to exercise the virtue of restraint. I reserve the prerogative to call on students in order to even out the dynamic. Class participation may take other forms than questions or responses to in-class discussions. You are encouraged to reach out over email, attend office hours, or meet with me over Zoom to continue conversations begun in class. **Class participation counts for 10% of the overall grade.**

**B. Reading:** Nothing is more central to a course in the humanities than the careful, thorough, critical reading of texts, and that will certainly be the case here. I encourage you to take notes in the margins of your books or in a notebook designated for that purpose. To enhance your vocabulary, maintain word lists of new words or concepts and look up their definitions in a dictionary. Such active engagement with the reading will enhance your retention of the material and help you to think through the issues and questions raised by the texts.

**Required books to purchase:**

* Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants* (Milkweed editions, 2015): ISBN: 9781571313560
* Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: Care for our Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor 2015) ISBN: 978-1612783864

In addition, we will be reading scholarly essays written by scholars in religious studies, philosophy, history, anthropology, and environmental studies, examining the nexus of religion and ecology through a variety of disciplinary lenses. **All such readings will be available through our course website on theSpring. You will do many of your article and essay reading on Perusall.com where you can annotate the readings in collaboration with your fellow students.**

**C. Writing**

1. **Module synthesis papers.** Four 600 – 800 word essays are due throughout the semester, at end of each module of the course. In each case, I will distribute guidelines with a question or set of questions that invite you to reflect on the readings of the preceding weeks and generate a short, thesis-driven essay in response. These papers are meant to encourage active, engaged reading; to offer you a chance to try out your ideas and make connections among the readings; to deepen your insight and sharpen your analyses through sustained reflection on the material; and to provide you with a sense of my expectations and grading standard. Where appropriate, there will be options or opportunities to experiment with other writing styles: letters to public officials with proposals for public engagement or policy changes; self-reflection essays; creative non-fiction nature writing.

All module synthesis essays should be turned in via theSpring. All feedback will be given via theSpring.

Grading rubric: 1) depth and complexity of your critical engagement with the texts, 2) the persuasiveness and originality of your argument, 3) the clarity and quality of your writing, 4) correct spelling, grammar and punctuation, including proper citation format.

Even the most accomplished writer may benefit from having a second pair of eyes look over their paper. I encourage you to make the most of the support provided by the Writing Center. <https://www.skidmore.edu/writingcenter/>

2. **Daily/weekly responses to the reading.** Studies have shown that any written reflection on an assigned reading aids in comprehension. Digital technology now allows us to super-charge that technique by enabling us to pool our annotations, and thus complexify our knowledge and insight. I will ask you to create a free account for one such platforms, Perusall.com, where you will socially annotate and respond to the readings on a daily or weekly basis.

3. Late paper policy, borrowed from IGR: I allow a 24-hour “grace” period after the deadline during which you may turn in a paper with no penalty, because…stuff happens.   After that, though, I will deduct 1/3 of a grade for each day a paper is not turned in (e.g. a B+ would become a B, then a B-, then a C+, for each 24 hour interval it is turned in late).

**IV. Evaluation:**

1. **Grading Summary**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Assignment** | **Due Date** | **Percentage** |
| Four module synthesis papers | 3/1, 3/12, 4/2, 4/19 | 15% each = 60% |
| Final exam (short synthetic essay on fifth module + short self-reflection essay) | 5/12 | 10% |
| Attendance and participation | Ongoing | 10% |
| Social annotation of readings (Perusall) | Ongoing | 6% |
| Nature writing | 4/12 | 10% |
| Research-a-thon! | Btw. 3/1 and 3/5 | 2% |

**B. Grading Standards:** The following is designed to help you think about the level of participation you’re prepared to give to this course, and the final grade you would like to shoot for. (Obviously, finer gradations are possible for each of the grades discussed below, e.g. A-, B+, C+)

1. “A” signifies outstanding. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and demonstrate excellence in discussion; (b) do a thorough, analytically acute job on the module synthesis papers and final exam and get them in on time.

In addition, to merit an “A” your writing in the module synthesis papers and the final exam must reflect the following: a statement in the first paragraph of what you intend to accomplish; correct grammar and accurate spelling; depth and complexity in your engagement with the materials (readings, lectures, films, etc.) marked by an exceptionally creative original contribution--a new idea, a different way of thinking about the issue(s) you’re discussing--that takes you beyond the accurate presentation of someone else’s ideas.

2. “B” signifies good; it is a solid, good grade. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) do a thorough job on the module synthesis papers and final exam and get them in on time.

In addition, a “B” grade essay typically contains: a statement in the first paragraph of what you intend to accomplish; correct grammar and accurate spelling; solid engagement with the materials (readings, lectures, films, etc.).

3. “C” stands for satisfactory. To earn that, you need to (a) maintain regular attendance and participation in discussion; (b) do a satisfactory job on the module synthesis papers and final exam that meets the requirements of the assignment, and get them in on time.

In addition, “C” level essays contain no statement of intent, or a confused one; occasionally lapse into bad grammar or incorrect spelling; replace full sentences with fragments; misconstrue or distort key ideas; display no clear development leading to a supportable conclusion.

1. To fall below satisfactory (i.e. C-, D), you could be consistently unable to contribute to the class discussion when called on due to lack of preparation, skip one or more papers altogether or turn them in several days past the deadline, and/or be very irregular in attendance and discussion.

In addition, below “C” level essays do not adequately meet the requirements of the assignment. They typically also contain no statement of intent, or a confused one; frequently lapse into bad grammar or incorrect spelling; replace full sentences with fragments; misconstrue or distort key ideas; display no clear development leading to a supportable conclusion.

**C. Students with documented disabilities**: I strive to create an inclusive classroom that respects the fact that our eyes, ears, brains and bodies all work a little bit differently. If you have, or think you may have a learning disability, please work with the Office of Student Academic Services to determine what strategies and accommodations are appropriate for your situation, and then speak with me early on so that we may arrange appropriate accommodation.

[**http://cmsauthor.skidmore.edu/academic\_services/accessibility/**](http://cmsauthor.skidmore.edu/academic_services/accessibility/)

**D. Academic Honesty:** Making references to the work of others strengthens your own work by granting you greater authority and by showing that you are part of a discussion located within a community. When you make references (by quotation or paraphrase) to the work of others, it is essential to provide proper attribution and citation. Failing to do so is considered academically dishonest, as is copying or paraphrasing someone else’s work. Please consult Appendix B for the citation format I recommend for your work in this class.

**Any confirmed instances of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty (cheating, fabrication or facilitating academic dishonesty) in this course will result in the work in question receiving a zero. Assignments that receive a zero for this reason may not be rewritten or redone. As per the Skidmore College Honor Code, documentation of the infraction will be kept on file with Dean’s office and may impair eligibility for honor societies, study abroad, etc.**

**E. Title IX:**Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students’ personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore’s values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore’s faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore’s Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college’s processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available.

**Schedule of Assignments and Readings**

(subject to change as the course progresses)

***Readings and other assignments are due by class-time on the date assigned***

**MODULE ONE: VISIONS OF EDEN**

Week One – Introduction to the Course – What is religion? What is ecology?

**T 2/2 – Beginnings**

**Read:** Jane Goodall, “Primate Spirituality,” from *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Nature and Culture,* ed. by Bron Taylor, pp. 1303-1306 (emailed in advance by Prof. Kent)

**R 2/4 – Definitions**

**Read:** Bron Taylor, “Introduction,” from *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Nature and Culture,* ed. by Bron Taylor, pp. ix - xxi

Week Two – The Biblical Story of Creation

**T 2/9 - Genesis**

**Read:** The Holy Bible, Gen. 1-3 in two translations (short, but read carefully!)

**R 2/11 - The [Christian] Roots of Our Ecological Crisis**

**Read:** Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” (1967) in *Science ns*, pp. 30-37.

Week Three – Changing Interpretations of the Creation Story

**T 2/16 – The Christian Roots of Environmentalism**

**Read:** Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Christian Roots of American Environmentalism* (2017), pp. 25-38

**Read:** Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking” (selections), originally published in *The Atlantic Magazine* (June 1862)

**R 2/18 – The Christian Roots of Environmentalism**

**Read:** John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierras*, selections

**MODULE TWO: GREENING CATHOLICISM**

Week Four – Greening Catholicism

**T 2/23 – Greening Traditions 1: Roman Catholicism**

**Read:** Pope Francis, preface, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home,* encyclical letter (2015), 7-16 and Chapter 1

**R 2/25 - On Care for Our Common Home**

**Read:** Francis, Chapters 2 and 3 (especially 2), *Laudato Si*

**Read**: The Holy Bible, Gen. 5-11, the story of Noah and the Flood

Week Five – Greening Catholicism

**M 3/1 – DUE First module synthesis paper due in theSpring dropbox –** *Is Lynn White correct, are Christian ideas, as developed by Christian thinkers, responsible for the ecological crisis? Or, might those same Christian ideas, or other ones, provide a redemptive solution to the ecological crisis?*

**T 3/2 – On Care for Our Common Home**

**Read:** Francis, Chapters 4 and 6 (especially 6), *Laudato Si*

**R 3/4 – Hindu Cosmology and Ecology – Introduction**

**Read:** Creation myths packet

**Read:** Eliza Kent, “Hinduism and Environmentalism in Modern India,” first part

**Due by March 5th:** Finish all 26 questions of the library’s annual online research-a-thon and send me a screenshot of your final score to a) get full credit for this assignment, and b) be entered into the raffle for a whole bunch of awesome gift cards.

For more information see <https://libguides.skidmore.edu/researchathon>

**MODULE THREE: GREENING HINDUISM**

Week Six – Greening Religion 2: Hinduism

**T 3/9 – Hindu Cosmology and Ecology – Rivers**

**Read:** Kent, “Hinduism and Environmentalism in Modern India,” second part

**Read:** Kelly Alley, “Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution” in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God,* ed. by Lance Nelson (SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 297-330.

**R 3/11 – Hindu Cosmology and Ecology – Rivers**

**Read:** Georgina Drew, “Beyond Contradiction: Sacred-Profane Waters and the Dialectics of Everyday Religion,” *Himalaya* 36,2: 1-12.

**F 3/12 - Second module synthesis paper due -** *What are the strongest arguments that Pope Francis makes against Lynn White’s contention that Christianity is in many ways responsible for the environmental crisis? What effect may religious faith in the omnipotence and benevolence of God (as exemplified by Pope Francis) have on one’s attitude towards the environmental crisis?*

Week Seven – Greening Religion 2: Hinduism - Rivers

**T 3/16 – No Class! Midterm break!**

**R 3/18 – Hindu Cosmology and Ecology – Forests**

**Read:** Ramachandra Guha, “Authoritarianism in the Wild,” from*How Much Should a Person Consume*(pp. 125-151)

Week Eight – Greening Religion 2: Hinduism - Forests

**T 3/23 – Hindu cosmology and ecology – forests**

**Read:** “Hinduism and Environmentalism in Modern India,” fourth part and conclusion

Lecture by Prof. Kent on sacred groves in India

**R 3/25 – Native American Religion and ecology**

**Read:** Gary Paul Nabhan, “Cultural Parallax in Viewing North American Habitats,” *Worldviews, Religion and the Environment*, ed. by Richard C. Foltz, pp. 104-111

**MODULE FOUR: GREENING NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS**

Week Nine – Greening Religion: Native American Religions

**T 3/30 – Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants**

**Read:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* (for sure preface through p. 32, more if you like)

**R 4/1 – Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants**

**Read:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* (for sure 83-117, 121-155 more if you like)

**F 4/2 – Due: Third Module Synthesis paper on Greening Hinduism**

Week Ten –Lakota Religion/ Standing Rock #NoDAPL Protests

T 4/6 **– Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants**

**Read:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (205-253 and 303-384, some refining of the reading assignment may be necessary, depending on where we all are)

**ASYNCHRONOUS WORK – PROF. AT ACADEMIC MEETING**

**R 4/8 - History, Cosmology, Ecology - Lakota People**

**Read:** Peter Nabokov, “The Heart of Everything: Lakota/Cheyenne/Kiowa,” in *Where Lightning Strikes: The Lives of Native American Sacred Places,* pp. 206-222.

**Read:** Vine Deloria, Jr. “Sacred Places and Moral Responsibility,” in *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (1994)

Week Eleven – Lakota Religion/ Standing Rock #NoDAPL Protests

**M 4/12 - Nature Writing Assignment due on theSpring**

**T 4/13 – Global Indigeneity and Environmental Protest Movements**

**Read:** Saul Elbein, “The Seventh Generation: The Youth Group that Launched a Movement at Standing Rock,” *The New York Times Magazine* Ja. 31, 2017: 28-31, 49

**Read:** Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft, “Standing on the Sacred: Ceremony, Discourse and Resistance in the Fight Against the Black Snake,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 11.1 (2017): 131-147

[Listen: Prolific the Rapper x a Tribe Called Red – Black](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdeHUrL1FEM) Snakes

**R 4/15 – Case Study – Mauna Kea and the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT)**

**Read:** [Noenoe K. Silva, “Ke Mau Nei Nō Ke Ea O Ka ʻĀina I Ka Pono,”](https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/forum-2-4-ke-mau-nei-no-ke-ea-o-ka-%ca%bbaina-i-ka-pono/) *Radical History Review, The Abusable Past Forum 2.4,* August 14, 2019.

**Read/Browse:** TMT public information website

<https://www.maunakeaandtmt.org/>

**Read:** History of TMT development from TMT organization’s POV

https://www.maunakeaandtmt.org/tmt-process/

**Watch:** “Kapu Aloha 101” footage from a non-violent direct action campaign against construction of TMT on Mauna Kea, from Hawaiian language/culture public access TV station (12 minutes)

**https://oiwi.tv/maunakea/kapu-aloha-101/**

**MODULE FIVE: ENCHANTED SECULARITY**

Week Twelve – Enchanted Secularity – New Stories

**M 4/19: Fourth Module Synthesis paper due**

**T 4/20 – Secular Visions and Ecology – Introduction**

**Read:** Val Plumwood, “Surviving a Crocodile Attack,” *UTNE Reader* July August 2000: 1-6.

**R 4/22 – The Universe Story**

**View:** *Journey of the Universe.* Directed by David Kennard, Patsy Northcutt. MVD Entertainment Group, 2011. 55 minutes.

https://skidmore.kanopy.com/video/journey-universe

**Read:** Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (1994), pp. 1-5

**Do:** Viewing Guide for *Journey of the Universe*

Week Thirteen – Enchanted Secularity – New Stories

**T 4/27 - Science as Sacred Myth**

**Read:** Lisa Sideris, “Science as Sacred Myth: Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 9.2 (2015): 136-153.

**R 4/29 – Religious Naturalism and Hope**

**Read:** Carol Wayne White, “Re-envisioning Hope: Anthropogenic Climate Change, Learned Ignorance and Religious Naturalism,” in *Zygon* 53,2 (June 2018): 570-585.

**W 5/12 – Take home final exam due – synthesis of fifth module + self-reflection on your learning in the course as a whole**

**Appendix A**

**Citation Format**

For this class, please use the MLA in-text citation system for citing quotations and ideas that you have arrived at from reading other authors. See Purdue University’s OWL guide to citations, for a complete discussion of this system [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/].

Briefly, in this method of citation, one introduces the source in a signal phrase that gives the author’s name (first and last at first mention, last name only thereafter). Parenthetical references following the cited material supply the page number or numbers. No abbreviations like p. or pp. precede the page number, unless the absence of them would cause confusion for the reader. These parenthetical references are keyed to a list of works cited, which is placed at the end of the paper. This list is arranged alphabetically and may bear the title “Works Cited,” or “Bibliography.”

If you want to comment on a citation but do not want to do so in the body of the paper, you may add a footnote, which is easily done with the footnote function of your word processing software.

**Citation Example**

In *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, Sudhir Kakar argues that Indian medical systems depend on a distinctive sense of “freedom.” He writes, “Human freedom in the traditional Indian context, then, seems to imply an increase in the potential to experience different inner states while limiting action in the outer world” (272). This notion of freedom inhering in mental states rather than external conditions is corroborated by the philosophy of Yoga. Barbara Stoler Miller emphasizes this by titling the fourth section of Patanjali’s Yoga-Sutras, “Absolute Freedom” (74). This is not to say that India lacks this-worldly thinkers who have worked hard to win political and social freedom by changing external conditions; rather, it is to emphasize the role that ascetic other-worldly thinkers have had in defining and shaping core Indian values.

[**Note:** It seems odd at first, but the concluding period or other punctuation mark must go outside the final quotation mark, and *after* the closing parenthesis].

**Works Cited**

Dinnage, Rosemary. Review of *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors,* by Sudhir Kakar. *The New York Review of Books* 17 February 1983, p. 15.

Doniger, Wendy, et al. **“Hinduism.”** *Encyclopædia Britannica.* 14 January 2019, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/266312/Hinduism>. Accessed 21 January 2019.

Heesterman, J.C. *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*. The University of Chicago P, 1985.

Kakar, Sudhir. *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions*. The University of Chicago P, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Psychoanalysis and Religious Healing: Siblings or Strangers?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 53, 1985, pp. 841-53.

Miller, Barbara Stoler. *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom.* Bantam Books, 1986.

Smart, Ninian. “Soteriology: An Overview.” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade. McMillan, 1987.