



## RE 225: Religion and Ecology

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WF 10:10-11:30  
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“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, deep ecology, 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 ethnographies of sacred grove restoration in India.

## II. COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- 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;
- 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;
- 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.);
- to develop a richly nuanced conception of religion that recognizes both the social and the personal dimensions of religious belief and practice;
- 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. Because of this, no more than three unexcused absences will be tolerated without a direct impact on your course grade.

**Missing class more than six times will constitute grounds for failing the course.**

These are the baseline classroom etiquette rules necessary for creating a positive, respectful intellectual community during the limited time we have together:

- Plan to arrive on time and to stay in class the entire time.
- Feel free to bring a beverage or a light snack but not an entire meal.
- Be sure your cell phone is off and stowed out of sight the whole class period.
- Use of a laptop is prohibited, unless you can document a medical reason.

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 class dynamic.

**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
- Barbara Stoler Miller, trans. *Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Council in Time of War*, (Bantam Classics, 2004): ISBN 0553213652

**All additional readings on the syllabus will be distributed via Blackboard electronic reserve, unless otherwise indicated.**

### C. Writing

**1. Reading response papers.** Five 600 – 800 word essays are due throughout the semester, based on a short prompt from me that invites 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.

Five papers are required by the course's end, but you may choose which ones. If you choose to write more than five, only the five highest grades will count towards your final course grade. Please use the prompts to guide your reading, even in those weeks when you are not writing.

All reading response essays should be turned in via Blackboard. All feedback will be given via Blackboard.

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. Final paper:** The final paper will ask you to synthesize what you've learned in this class in a 5-6 page paper by responding to a prompt (you will get a choice among them) that stimulates comparison of the religious traditions we've examined.

**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:

### A. Grading Summary

Assignment	Due Date	Percentage
First paper	Ongoing	10%
Second paper	Ongoing	10%
Third paper	Ongoing	10%
Fourth paper	Ongoing	10%
Fifth paper	Ongoing	10%
Attendance and participation	Ongoing	20%
Nature writing	When weather is warmer	10%
Final Paper	Exam week, tba	20%

**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 response papers and final paper and get them in on time.

In addition, to merit an "A" your writing in the response papers and the final paper 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 reading response papers and final paper 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 reading response papers and final paper 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.

4. 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 several response papers 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*

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

**W 1/22 – 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)

**F 1/24 – 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

**W 1/29 - Genesis**

**Read:** The Holy Bible, Gen. 1-3 in two translations (ER)

**Read:** The Genesis of Genesis (recommended)

**F 1/31 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

**W 2/5 – The Christian Roots of Environmentalism**

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

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

**F 2/7 – The Christian Roots of Environmentalism**

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

Week Four – Do We Need a New Story?

**Monday – 2/10 – First response paper due in Blackboard 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?**

**W 2/12 – Reinventing Eden**

**Read:** Carolyn Merchant, “The Fall from Eden,” *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 10-36

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

**F 2/14 - 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), selections

Week Five – New Stories and New Retellings of Old Stories

**Monday 2/17 – Second response paper due in Blackboard dropbox** – *How do the stories and narratives we live by (which scholars of religion call cosmologies) shape our relationship with non-human nature? Use specific examples from the readings we’ve encountered so far, including from week four. You may also include personal examples as well, if you choose.*

**W 2/19 – Scientific Cosmologies and Religion**

**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.

**Read:** Critiques and rejoinders from the *Immanent Frame* Roundtable on Cosmologies and Science and Climate

<https://tif.ssrc.org/2015/09/14/cosmology-and-the-environment/>

**F 2/21 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

Week Six – Catholic Responses to Environmental Crisis

**W 2/26 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 (ER)

**F 2/28 On Care for Our Common Home**

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

Week Seven – Greening Religion 2: Hinduism

**Monday 3/2 - Third response paper due in Blackboard** - *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 does deep faith in the omnipotence and benevolence of God (as exemplified by Pope Francis) have on one’s attitude towards the environmental crisis?*

**W 3/4 – Hindu Cosmology and Ecology: Brahmanical Perspectives**

**Read:** *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. by Barbara Stoler Miller, introduction & translator’s note (pp. 1-20) and Teachings 1-3 (23 –).

**Watch at home:** *The Bhagavad Gita*, Invitation to World Literature Website (Columbia Univ., 30 min) (<http://www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/gita/watch/>)

**Key terms:** Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, yoga, Arjuna, Vishnu, Krishna, avatar

**F 3/6 – Hindu Cosmology and Ecology: Brahmanical Perspectives**

**Read:** *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. by Miller, Teachings 4-13

Week Eight – Spring Break no classes!



Week Nine – Greening Religion 2: Hinduism**W 3/18 – Living the Gita**

**Read:** Mohandas Gandhi, selections from *My Experiments with Truth* and *Hind Swaraj*

**F 3/20 – Satyagraha in the Forest**

**Read:** Ramachandra Guha, “Chipko: Social History of an ‘Environmental’ Movement,” *The Unquiet Woods*, 152-184.

Week Ten – Greening Religion 2: Hinduism**W 3/25 – The Problem with Wilderness**

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

**F 3/27 – Sacred Grove Restoration**

**Read:** Eliza F. Kent, “Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India,” *Worldviews* 13 (2009): 1-39.

Week Eleven – Lakota Religion/ Standing Rock #NoDAPL Protests**M 3/30 - Fourth Writing Assignment due in Blackboard – question TBA****W 4/1 – Cosmologies of the Lakota People**

**Read:** Raymond DeMallie, “Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Sioux Indian-Religion: Tradition and Innovation* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 25-43.

**Read:** Nick Black Elk and John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, selections (ER)

**F 4/3 Religion and Environmental Activism – Standing Rock Reservations Protests**

**Read:** Peter Nabokov, *Where Lightning Strikes*, selections

**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

Week Twelve – Lakota Religion/ Standing Rock #NoDAPL Protests

**Monday – 4/6 – Fifth response paper due on Blackboard:** *Provide two specific examples of how environmental destruction and psychological/physical trauma are related in the experiences of Native Americans? How does indigenous religion provide a solution, or a meaning-full response to this? If you don’t think it does, why not?*

**W 4/8 – Global Indigeneity and Environmental Protest Movements**

**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 Snakes](#)

**F 4/10 – Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants**

**Read:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Week Thirteen – Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge**W 4/15 – Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants**



**Read:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

**F 4/17 – Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants**

**Read:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Week Fourteen – Radical Environmentalism as a New Religious Movement

**Monday 4/20 – Sixth response paper due on BB: Question TBA**

**W 4/22 - Deep Ecology and Dark Green Religion**

**Read:** Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality & the Planetary Future* (2006), 13-16

**Read:** Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Reader*, ed. by Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue (1995): 13-30

**F 4/24 – Ritual and activism**

**Read:** Joanne Macy, “The Council of All Beings”

## Appendix B 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.