

Ecotheology as Liberative Practice:

**Spring 2011: March 16, 23, 30; April 6, 13, 20;
April 29-30 (Ecotheology Lecture and Workshop)**

Instructors:

Rev. Kent Doss

Dr. Michael S. Hogue

Patrick McLaughlin, Ministerial Candidate

Rev. Dr. Karen Stoyanoff

Course Overview

This adult religious education course in ecological theology is designed to *facilitate new habits of perceiving and analyzing our social and natural environments and to embolden the moral judgments and political acts to which liberal religious people are called in a time of environmental crisis.*

The course assumes that theology is not so much a settled system of religious ideas as it is a particularly reflective way of living religiously. Theology in this sense is not something that one *has* but something one *does*. The hope is that by participating in this course students will be inspired and equipped *to live* religiously in more ecologically sustainable ways and *to do* theology in a deeper shade of green.

As with any course, this course contains an argument. The argument of this course is, first, about the nature of “ecotheology” as an area of study and, second, about how and why “ecotheology” should be practiced as an aspect of responsible religious life in the contemporary world.

What is Ecotheology?

While “ecotheology” is a way of theologically interpreting the natural world and engaging ecological concerns, it is not an exclusively theistic enterprise. This

course includes theistic and nontheistic perspectives and examines writings from Native American, Buddhist, Christian and other religious traditions.

“Theology” in this course is broadly defined as *critical reflection on religious life in order to live more faithfully, justly, and compassionately*. The central task of theology in this sense is not so much to get our religious ideas right as it is to live our religious lives in praiseworthy ways. By *“ecology”* is meant the interrelationships of biotic and abiotic systems that generate and sustain life on this planet. *“Ecotheology”* is thus *critical reflection on religious life for the purpose of living more faithfully, justly, and compassionately in relation to the ecological systems that generate and sustain life*.

How Should We Study Ecotheology?

There are many ways to teach ecotheology. We could focus on a particular tradition or thinker, or specific religious doctrines or practices, or a particular environmental ethical concern. Instead of taking one of these approaches, this course investigates *ecotheology as a liberative practice*. This approach is rooted in the view that the deepest drivers of the environmental crisis are ingrained within certain cultural habits of perception and knowing, valuing and judging, and being and doing. Many of these cultural habits cause harm to the natural world, to the symphony of life, to the marginalized and poor among us, and to the whole of human life—oppressors and the oppressed, the human and the nonhuman, the present and the future of life all need to be liberated from our addictions to these bad habits. No economic, political, or technological proposal has a hope of mitigating the environmental crisis if the cultural patterns that gave rise to it are not questioned and recalibrated.

Construing ecotheology as a liberative practice, this course is structured around the three primary aspects of the methodology of liberation theology: *“seeing,” “judging,”* and *“acting”*. This methodology is committed to the principle that seeing deeply into what’s going on—especially from the perspective of those who are most vulnerable (human, plant, animal, ecosystem)—is a necessary precondition for responsible religious and moral judgments and effective social change. In other words, learning to see *“what’s going on”* is prerequisite to engaging the question *“what should be done”*. Engaging the question *“what should be done”* entails making moral judgments (often rooted in our religious traditions) which are most responsibly made only once a situation has been deeply seen from the perspective of the vulnerable. Making judgments from the

perspective of the vulnerable—human, animal, plant, and mineral—helps us to short-circuit the otherwise self-reinforcing interests of the various forms of privilege and injustice. This sort of critical judgment allows for the imagining and performance of actions that have a better chance of leading toward social and ecological justice.

Why Should We Study Ecotheology?

The instructors, host congregations, and students in this course all have various reasons for participating in this project in lay religious education. Students may be taking the course for the purpose of learning how to articulate the religious convictions and moral values that motivate their ecological concerns; or in order to test and refine their ecotheological convictions and values through comparison with other perspectives; or in order to learn new ways in which their spiritual practices and lifestyles might become more ecologically sustainable and just. The host congregations for this course have various reasons for wanting to make this course available as well, and the course instructors have their reasons for facilitating it. Many of these diverse reasons, it is hoped, will surface through the course.

But it is also likely that we all share some reasons for participating in this course. We probably all agree, at bottom, on why this course is worth our time and energy. First, it's likely that we're all pretty sure that what's going on in the world is not the way things should be. We sense that the natural world is being devalued, degraded, and diminished in ways it ought not to be. Second, we also probably all share the conviction that we'd like to do our part in transforming the world from the *way it is* toward a closer approximation to the *way it should be*. In some way or another, we probably all would like to discover a way to live more justly and compassionately in relation to the diversity of human life and the various systems of the earth. We probably all would like to live in a way that continues to generate and sustain the creativity of life.

These shared fundamental reasons have brought us all together to learn with and from one another. In order to function as a learning community, it will be critical for us to keep these shared reasons in mind as we engage our differences. When it comes down to it, we're all struggling to do and to be the best we can and to be liberated from false ideas and socially and ecologically destructive forms of life. Partly because we often fall short of fulfilling these aspirations, we need to struggle with rather than against one another. We need to partner together in our

liberative work. This is probably the case in all things, but it's certainly the case, as we'll learn in this course, when it comes to what may be the greatest work of our time, the work of learning to live religiously in more ecologically sustainable, faithful, just, compassionate and praiseworthy ways.

Course Structure and Assignments: Seeing, Judging, Acting

The *first* part of the course is concerned with perception and analysis. Combined, perception and analysis constitute the "seeing" phase of the liberation methodology. We'll examine here some varieties of perception, Native American and American Transcendentalist in particular. We'll compare these ways of perceiving the world and ask ourselves how they affirm or challenge our own patterns of perception. We'll consider the question of how the ways in which we perceive the world influence the ways we act within it. Perception alone, though, is insufficient to "seeing" in the sense intended by liberationists. Analysis is also critical. To analyze is to describe critically and in some detail how the world we perceive has some to be the way it is. Analysis is in this view a form of deeply critical perception. In addition to readings and class discussion, participants will be asked to complete at least one modest practical assignment during this part of the class.

Work in the *second* part of the course focuses on constructive theological and ethical responses to environmental challenges. This is the "judging" phase of the course's liberation methodology. To refer to judgment as "constructive" is to say that the kind of judgments we are interested in here are not judgments about *what is* going on with religion and the environment, but judgments about what *should or ought to be*. Various points of view will be examined here. We will read and discuss Ecocentric, Feminist and African American liberationist perspectives along with other interreligious sources. As with the first part of the course, a modest practical assignment will accompany the readings and discussion.

The *third* part of the course, "acting," includes readings, discussions, and exercises that will help class participants to begin to embody and practice what they learn through previous sessions. Attention will be given especially to liturgical and political practices. One of the important questions to be explored concerns the relation between the liturgical and the political. The aim in this part of the course is to commit to embodying religiously, morally, and politically the values and principles and judgments to which the previous two parts of the course have led us.

This course does not end after the last session. The liberationist method, after all, includes a critically important fourth aspect. After the sequence of *seeing, judging, and acting* is complete, we are called to *repeat* the whole process. There is a great deal of theological significance to this last aspect of the method. After analysis, after judgment, and after action, we and the world are different. We, as well as the world, have changed through the process of seeing, judging and acting. So changed, we are different people and the world is a different kind of place. Given these changes, and given the view that the demand for change toward what should be is never ceasing, it is our task to renew our seeing, to renew our judgments, and to renew our action. The liberationist method, then, is a cyclical enterprise. It is hoped that this course will facilitate ongoing seeing, judging, and acting and that it will generate ecotheologically informed individual and congregational practices. The tasks of being and seeing differently, the joy and the imperative of living religiously in a deeper shade of green, the work of *doing ecotheology* is a way of praying without ceasing for the liberation of nature and humanity into a more mutually blessed, just and compassionate partnership.

Topics and Assignments

I. Part I: Seeing

A. Session 1: Perception (@ 30-35 pp.)

Carol Lee Sanchez, "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Carol J. Adams, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" and "Beauty" from *Nature in Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, (New York: Library of America, 1983).

Pattiann Rogers, "The Greatest Grandeur," *Song of the World Becoming: Poems, New and Collected (1981-2001)*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2001).

Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," *God's Grandeur and Other Poems*, (New York: Dover, 1995).

B. Session 2: Analysis (@ 50 pp.)

Eric Lamben, Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2, *The Middle Way: Avoiding Environmental Catastrophe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

II. Part II: Judging

A. Session 3: Ecocentric, African American and Feminist Perspectives (@ 50 pp.)

Aldo Leopold, "Thinking like a Mountain" and "The Land Ethic," *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996). Reprinted from *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Carol J. Adams, ed., (New York: Continuum, 1993).

Theodore Walker Jr., "African American Resources for a More Inclusive Liberation Theology," *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996). Reprinted from *Good New for Animals?: Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being*, Charles Pinches and Jay B. McDaniel, eds., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

B. Session 4: Interreligious Sources (@ 40 pp.)

Mary Evelyn Tucker, "The Role of Religions in Forming an Environmental Ethics: New Challenges for Interreligious Dialogue," in *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*, Dieter T. Hessel, ed., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

Stephanie Kaza, "The Greening of Buddhism: Promise and Perils," *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," (Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990). Reprinted in *This Sacred Earth*:

Religion, Nature, Environment, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996).

III. Part III: Acting

A. Session 5: Politics (@ 85 pp.)

David Orr, "Governance," *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) (about 35 pp.)

Max Oelschlaeger, "The Role of the Church," *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) (about 50 pp.)

B. Session 6: Practices and Liturgics (@ 35 pp.)

Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Five Earth Touchings," *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2008).

Beryl Ingram, "Eco-Justice Liturgics," *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*, Dieter T. Hessel, ed., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

National Council of Churches, "A Service of Worship: The Earth is the Lord's—A Liturgy of Celebration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Commitment," *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996). Reprinted from *God's Earth Our Home* (National Council of Churches, 1994).