

STMM593-01: Ecology and Ethics (Summer 2009)

Institute for Ecology, Theology, Spirituality, and Justice

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Monday 9:00 – 12:00

July 6 – 10

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Human beings are a part of the whole we call the Universe, a small region in time and space. They regard themselves, their ideas, and their feelings as separate and apart from all the rest. It is something like an optical illusion in their consciousness. This illusion is a sort of prison; it restricts us to our personal aspirations and limits our affective life to a few people very close to us. Our task should be to free ourselves from this prison.

Albert Einstein

“We are six billion humans and we need to learn to live with one another and with all the other ten trillion species of life in a mutually enhancing way. We fail at the present time precisely because we fail to see and understand what it is that surrounds us.”

Brian Swimme

“If we do not change direction, we will end up where we are heading.”

Ancient Chinese Proverb

Walk forward questioning.”

Anonymous

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Christian Ethics is the disciplined art of coming to know ever more fully the mystery that is God and the historical realities of life on Earth, and holding these two in one breath, so that we may shape ways of living consistent with and empowered by God being with, in, among, and for creation. Today the overwhelming “realities of life on earth” are that our species is threatening Earth’s capacity to sustain life as we know it, and that the suffering from ecological devastation falls disproportionately on people who are economically poor and not white. This course will be a collaborative exploration into what it means, in that context, to be faithful to the God whom Jesus loved. The approach to Christian traditions will be one of critique, retrieval, and reconstruction. Attention will given to reading Scripture from “perspectives of the Earth.” Students will be encouraged to formulate or refine their working understanding of normative Earth-human relations, and their understanding of human vocation in relationship to the rest of creation. The informing undercurrent of this course will be hope and moral power in the face of the profound moral challenge posed by unsustainable Earth-human relations.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The overall goal is that participants will experience themselves as critical, constructive, collaborative, and hope-bearing theological ethicists capable of helping the church forge and follow paths toward Earth-honoring Christianities (eco-reformation), and will be better equipped to grow in that capacity. To those ends, the course aims at enabling all participants (students and professor) to:

- deepen their understanding of the Earth crisis, and the roles of Christian belief and practice in contributing to that crisis historically and contemporarily, and the roles of the reigning political-economic structures in contributing to the same.
- deepen their awareness of the array of efforts toward eco-reformation, that currently are underway in Christian communities worldwide (theological reconstruction, biblical re-interpretation, reconstruction of Christian ethics, public policy work, reconstruction of economic theory, worship, education, greening congregations, public witness, evangelical defiance, etc.)
- deepen their moral imaginations and practical wisdom regarding a vast spectrum of paths (including those not yet identified) toward reversing the Earth crisis.
- grow in hope and a sense of agency for bringing faith to bear on the unprecedented challenge facing humankind today: unsustainable Earth-human relations wed to a morally untenable and growing gap between the rich and the impoverished people and peoples.
- increase their ecological-economic literacy.
- deepen awareness of resources available locally and worldwide to support efforts toward eco-reformation (literature, on-line resources, networks, etc.)
- grow in capacity to critique theological constructs; biblical interpretations; liturgical practices; and economic ideologies, policies, and practices that contribute to Earth's distress.
- deepen awareness of possibilities for reconstructing theology, biblical interpretation, liturgical practice, and economic life.
- grow in capacity to hear the voice of the Earth and learn from it, and to "join in the hymn of all creation."
- develop (at least initial) working familiarity with the discipline of Christian Ethics: its methods, tools, "languages," vocabulary and concepts, vibrancy, contested areas, and multi-faceted diversity.
- increase skill in various modes of thinking (systematic and creative; analytical and synthetic; sympathetic and critical), and experience the value of so doing for the life of faith.
- ask good probing question about all of the above.
- have fun as a community of theologically informed and critically conscious Christian ethicists working together.

(Yes, it may sound ambitious, but I think we will do it! Most of the above works together.)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The following will seem simpler if you note that: 1) only numbers 3 and 12 are to be completed before the course begins, and 2) the only work required to be done outside of the class hours during the week of the course are numbers 4, 5, 9 and some preparation for 10 and 11.

1. Contribute your particular gifts to building a trusting and exciting learning community out of this class.

- Bring your relevant experience and knowledge “to the table of discourse” in the course.
- Aim at not only your own learning but also your colleagues’ learning.
- Participate fully and respectfully in small group discussion and in full class discussion.

2. Attend every class, arriving on time.

3. Read all assigned readings before the class during which they will be discussed. Take notes and be prepared to discuss the readings. PLEASE NOTE: The key to this course is thorough reflective reading of the assigned texts. Our work with the texts in class will be “seminar style.” That is, we will discuss the texts, and will build on them, based upon your preparation to do so. To prepare for work with these texts in class, *please: 1) take notes in whatever format best serves your learning, and 2) discuss or “test out” an idea expressed in the texts for each day.* The notes are not to be turned in. I am providing Critical Reading Questions to guide your reading of a few of the texts. ***They are attached as Appendix A.*** For the other texts, please be prepared to discuss the following questions:

- What is the main question asked or the main thesis argued in each chapter or article?
- How does the author pursue this question or thesis (what main points are made and what evidence supports those points?)
- How does this chapter or article intersect with my experience (historical or current) or the life of a community of which I am a part? (The readings might intersect with another class, home life, church life, national or international affairs, ministry, community life, workplace, or elsewhere.)
- What have I learned from discussing or testing out a concept, theory, or claim developed in these readings?
- What do I find particularly useful, exciting, confusing, or disturbing about this reading?
- What one or two key questions for class discussion that I formulate from reading these texts?

4. Complete a communications essay of approximately two double-spaced pages during the week of the course. (To be explained in class.)

5. Maintain an “Earth-encounter Journal.” (To be explained in class.)

6. In a peer consultation group, serve as consultant to one another on your work in this class.

7. Small Group Project: This project will be a “presentation” to the class that enables your colleagues in class to draw upon your experience, research, and knowledge. Ample time will be provided during class time for group work.

8. Do an ecological “exegesis” of a piece of advertising (in-class).

9. Conduct an “eco-centric self” experiment (Swimme text). (To be explained in class.)

10. Contribute a morning prayer/meditation that would serve the ends of eco-reformation.

11. Contribute to Earth-honoring celebratory meal on last day of the course.

12. Written pre-assignment (done before the course begins). Not to be turned in and not to be graded. See immediately below.

Written Pre-Assignment. This assignment is **NOT** to be turned in; nor will it be graded.

This assignment should be done before reading the texts by Swimme and McFague. If you already have read those texts, try writing this assignment as you would have before reading these texts. *This assignment may be in any written form that enables your reflective process.*

Imagine that you are a person from another planet or from a society that never before has encountered the “modern western world.” You observe life in the United States in the year 2005. In particular, you are observing the life of “middle class” citizens (observing

their ways of sheltering, transporting, clothing, and feeding themselves; their work life, recreational life, devotional life, activist life; etc.)

You are asked to respond to the following. Based upon your observation of these people (not their written texts):

- Who do they think that they (the human species) are?
- Who do they think that they are in relationship to the rest of creation?
- What do they think is their purpose on Earth and their destiny?
- What or who is the God that these people worship?

(With the first three of these questions, you are describing their “anthropology,” that is their understanding of human nature, destiny, origins, and purpose.)

EVALUATION

Participation and preparation (40%)

Attendance, completion of all required reading and assignments on time, verbal and non-verbal contribution to a trusting learning community in class sessions (offering knowledge, experience, perspectives; listening attentively; respecting others’ opinions; being aware and supportive of others’ learning goals), receptivity to learning; behavior that is respectful of self and others; contribution of morning prayer/meditation).

Small group project presentation (20%).

Short “communications” essay (20%)

Small assignments (ecological exegesis of advertisement; eco-centric self experiment, Earth-encounter journal; presentation of Brown chapter; Earth-honoring celebratory meal) (20%)

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

PLEASE review the Academic Honesty Code in the Student Handbook. Every Student is expected to comply fully with it. I implore you to bear in mind that even UNINTENDED plagiarism is plagiarism. Be fully aware of what constitutes plagiarism. Review the handout on plagiarism that I pass out in class. If you have any questions, PLEASE ASK ME; other students may have the same question. Unintended plagiarism is a great loss to the student. I must either fail you for the assignment, fail you for the course, or vastly reduce the assignment’s grade if I encounter plagiarism.

DISABILITY NOTICE

If you have, or think you may have, a disability (including an “invisible disability” such as a learning disability, a chronic health problem, or a mental health condition) that interferes with your participation as a student in this class, you are encouraged to arrange support services and/or accommodations through Disabilities Service Staff (Loyola 100. 296-5740)

TEXTS (REQUIRED)

McFague, Sallie: *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*.
Fortress Press, 2008 (chapter 6 optional).

Brown, Lester. *Plan B3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2008. (Chapters 1, 3, 4, 6, 13, your choice of two from 7 – 12; other chapters are optional)

Swimme, Brian. *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*. Orbis Books, 2000 (entire).

Course Reader to be purchased at SU Reprographics Services (Student Pavillion)

LOVELY SUGGESTIONS FOR EXPANDED READING

Gnanadasan, Aruna. *Listen to the Women, Listen to the Earth*.

Eaton, Heather. *Introducing EcoFeminist Theologies*.

Gebarra, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*.

Evans, Mei Mei; Joni Adamson, and Rachel Stein, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader*.

Suzuki, David. *The Sacred Balance*.

McKibben, Bill. *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*.

COURSE SCHEDULE: READINGS and ASSIGNMENTS

Monday July 6

Introductions to Each Other, the Earth, the Course, and Christian Ethics

The Cosmos Story: Where is Home?

The Earth Crisis: Ecological Degradation and Social Injustice Meet

Readings:

- McFague: Intro and ch. 1
- Brown: Preface and ch. 1, 3, 4, 6 (ch 2 and 6 if time / or skim)
- Sachs (Course Reader)
- Vernice-Miller (Course Reader; note that the title page is: *Christianity and Ecology*)
- Swimme (entire text as backdrop to the course)

Tuesday July 7

Theological Roots of the Earth Crisis

Theological Roots of Earth Honoring Christianities: Eco-Theology

Who Are We?: Scientific and Theological Anthropology

Readings:

- Kinsely (Course Reader)
- McFague: ch. 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, epilogue.

Wednesday July 8

Political-Economic Roots of the Earth Crisis

Political-Economic Paths to Earth Community

Readings:

- McFague: ch. 5
- Moe-Lobeda: *Healing a Broken World*, ch. 3 (Course Reader)
- Brown: Your choice of two of the following chapters: 7 – 12. And ch. 13.

- Optional: “Proceedings of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” (on-line)

Thursday July 9

Earth-Honoring Liturgical Theology and Practice Eco-Centric Hermeneutics of Scripture Christian Ethics as Earth Ethics

Readings:

- Habel: 7-8, 13-17, 24-53 (Course Reader)
- Moe-Lobeda: “Liturgy for the Uncreators,” article from *Studia Liturgica* (posted on Angel)
- “God’s Earth is Sacred: An Open Letter to Church and Society in the United States (written by National Council of Churches) On-line at:
<http://www.nccusa.org/news/14.02.05theologicalstatement.html>
- Optional: Moe-Lobeda: “Christian Ethics Toward Earth- Honoring Faiths,” Article from *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (Posted on Angel)

Friday July 10

Eco-Reformation: Earth – Honoring Christianities in Practice (What Churches Are Doing: Coalitions, Denominations, Orders, Congregations...and...)

Readings

- Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, ch. 6 (Course Reader)
- Gottlieb (Course Reader)
- One social statement of a denomination, order, or faith-based coalition
Students are to select a statement from a denomination or faith-based coalition.
This reading will be explained in class and need not be read before the course begins.

Assignments due:

- Short “communications essay
- “Earth Encounter” journal
- Eco-centric self experiment

APPENDIX A:

CRITICAL READING QUESTIONS FOR SELECTED REQUIRED READINGS

This appendix provides “Critical Reading Questions” to assist your reading of some of the required texts. Responding to these questions will help prepare you to discuss the texts in class. As noted in the syllabus a written response to these questions will NOT be turned in or graded, and should be in whatever form best serves your learning.

Kinsley (Course Reader)

Kinsley very succinctly describes three arguments that Christianity bears a great deal of responsibility for the ecological crisis. He sees all three as part of a worldview which he calls the “mastery hypothesis.” He also finds weaknesses or problems with each argument.

1. Summarize briefly the “mastery hypothesis” in no more than two or three sentences.
2. Summarize each of the three arguments levied against Christianity.
3. Summarize the weaknesses (the problems) that he finds with each of the three arguments levied against Christianity.

McFague: Chapter Three

What is her thesis in chapter Three?

Describe what she refers to as the “false” anthropology of modern western societies. (Recall that an anthropology is an understanding of or “story” of human nature, purpose, origins, destiny, and relationship to the rest of the natural world.)

Why does she consider it “false?”

Why does she consider it dangerous?

What three social institutions does she argue undergird and perpetuate that “false” anthropology?

Describe the alternative anthropology that she proposes. What labels does she give it ?

According to this anthropology: What is the human being? How are we related to other living creatures? How are we related to the cosmos?

What is a metaphor that she offers for the human in this anthropology?

In what senses is the contemporary scientific anthropology congruent with the oldest and deepest Christian understandings of creation (creation stories)?

What is the significance of the idea that “the redeemer is also the creator?”

What are the three contexts in which she claims that theology ought to be situated? What is the significance of recognizing all three rather than just the psychological one?

What does she mean by the term “ecological literacy?”

How is the basic “house rule” that she suggests related to the three words that – according to McFague in this chapter -- sum up the entirety of Christian faith?

She gives a second basic “house rule” on top of 54 and then explains its two components: the first and second laws of thermodynamics. Explain those two laws and their significance for ecology.

What do you think of her understanding of salvation (58)? Do you think that how one understands salvation has implications for how one lives?

What do you think of her metaphor for human responsibility (59)?

McFague: Chapter Four

Read carefully the questions on the bottom of 62.

What is her thesis of chapter four?

She argues that for Christians, the basic relationship between God and the world is “incarnational.” What does this mean?

She describes four traditional “models” or understandings of God and the God-world relationship, all of which go with the “traditional” creation story. And she points out the problems with each of these models (66-72).

- What is that “traditional “ creation story ?
- What is each of the four models of God that go with it? What is God like in each”?
- What is the relationship between God and the world in each of them? What are the problems or limitations of each?
- Explain how these different models of who God is in relationship to the world make a difference on how humans live (according to McFague)
- She calls this set of four models a “typology of God-world relationships.” What is meant by a “typology” (66)?
- What does she mean by the word “model?” How is a “model of God different from a description of God?
- If you are a Christian or have spent time in Christian traditions, with which of these models are you most familiar? If you have not spent time in Christian traditions, have you heard or assumed that any of these models is the Christian understanding of God? Or is any of these models familiar to you from another religious tradition?

Then she proposes a different model (a sort of revision of her fourth problematic model) that she calls the “incarnational” model. It sees the world as God’s body. She argues that this model is truer to the heart of Christianity, and is the only model that can meet the ecological needs of our day.

- Explain the creation story (doctrine of creation) that goes along with this model. (72-3)
- What is the God-world relationship in this (incarnational) model? (72-3)
- What are three implications of this model for how humans think, behave, and understand themselves? (74-79)

In her conclusion, McFague summarizes the similarities and differences between what she has called the “traditional” models of the God-human relationship (in four different problematic variations) on the one hand, and the model of world as God’s body (the incarnational model) on the other hand.

- What are the similarities?
- What are the differences?

What do you think about what McFague is saying in this chapter? How do you feel about it?

What do you find important, exciting, disturbing, or provocative in this chapter and the book thus far? Why?

Swimme

This book addresses key questions addressed by this course. After reading the entirety of Swimme's book, summarize what you understand to be his response to some of these questions: What does it mean to exist as a human in this vast unfolding universe? What is our role here? What is our destiny? Who are we in relationship to the rest of the universe?