The University of Toronto  
School of the Environment  

ENV 1008H S  
Worldviews and Ecology  

Academic Term: Winter 2023  
Instructor: Prof. Stephen Bede Scharper  
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Time: Monday 2:10-4 p.m.  
Location: This is a Synchronous, On-line course via Zoom  
Office Hours: Via Zoom & by appt.  

Course Description and Rationale  

Will religions assume a disengaged pose as species go extinct, forests are exterminated, soil, air, and water are polluted beyond restoration, and human health and well-being deteriorate?” Mary Evelyn Tucker  

The connection among worldviews, religion and ecology, while perplexing for many, has been of growing academic and pragmatic concern in recent years.  

Scientists, policy makers, and activists have of late been frustrated with the long-term efficacy of their actions, and have begun to reflect on the underlying worldviews and core values of their work. Is the neoliberal economic model a “worldview,” for example? Is consumerism? This has led to a recrudescence of interest in religious worldviews as a source of environmental theory and practice.  

The fact that certain religious groups are beginning to take ecological systems seriously is a distinctive, important emergence within environmentalism. Given that approximately eighty-five percent of the human family reads their reality through a religious lens, any environmental policy or ethic that does not relate to religious concerns potentially ignores dialogue with ethical and moral traditions held by the majority of the world's peoples.  

Religions traditionally challenge their members to ask foundational questions of human existence; such as what is the place or role of the human in the universe? What are the ethical and moral imperatives of being human? What responsibilities do humans have, if any, to other aspects of creation? As the ecological challenge forces the human family to deeply query social, economic, political, cultural, and ethical traditions, many are beginning to argue that the reading assistance of the world's religious traditions in answering such queries might be helpful, and perhaps necessary, for an informed and effective response to the world's current ecological plight.  

The participation of religions in environmental movements is of course not unproblematic. Certain religions have been fingered and faulted for their accent on
transcendence, and for their patriarchal, hierarchical systems, which help engender a disregard for the earth and the women who have been historically associated with it- as ecofeminism suggests. Moreover, religions, as institutions, have not been at the vanguard of the environmental movement, and many potential pitfalls, such as sectarianism, apocalypticism, fundamentalism, and triumphalism, surround the involvement of the world's religions in environmental questions.

While much of the religious discourse around ecology has entailed ontological, doctrinal, and cosmological or "worldview" questions, there have also been religious responses that take issues of class, race, gender, poverty, and justice seriously. Indeed, many tensions have surfaced and continue to exist between these two broadly outlined ecological approaches. Thus, the question has emerged whether the ecological contributions of the world's religions are chiefly in the realm of worldviews, doctrine, and cosmology, or in the realm of a political and economic critique.

Through weekly seminars, we will probe sundry ecological worldviews, religious and otherwise, and how they help shape environmental discourse, practice, and theory.

**Course Texts**

**Required:**


Also, selected readings which will be shared via Quercus.

**Recommended:**


World Religions and Ecology Series, Harvard University Press.

A helpful website is that of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology [http://fore.research.yale.edu/](http://fore.research.yale.edu/)

**Course Requirements**

**a) Class attendance and participation (10%)**
It is essential for the success of this course that students attend class regularly and participate in class discussions. (All of us are part of this learning process!) The doctoral students in the class will select a book of their choice which they will present on for 15 minutes in class.

**b) One–page written reflections for each class (40%)**
Students will bring with them a one-page, double-spaced, typed paper, outlining the thesis or main point of the article or chapter assigned for the week, and one fully developed critical question of the author's thesis. Please note that the question section of the assignment is not a "questions for discussion" item. Rather, these are fully developed, probing, critical questions directed at the author's thesis.

c) Research Paper /Major Assignment (50%)

**DUE: last day of class**

The research paper must address an environmental issue from a worldview/religious perspective. Students will get a flavor of such perspectives and potential topics from the course subject matter and readings. It is imperative, however, that by **late February** each student clears his/her paper topic with the instructor by presenting a one-page assignment with the proposed title, thesis statement, and preliminary bibliography. This will afford an opportunity to discuss pertinent readings, format, and any problems that may be surfacing with the assignment.

The paper, **8-10 pages double-spaced, typewritten**, must include a "thesis statement," and argue that "thesis" or particular perspective in a clear and comprehensive fashion. In other words, the assignment requires not merely a description of a particular environmental issue, but rather a constructed argument based on the students' critical reflection upon collected data, and creative grappling with the religious, theological or ethical issues involved. Additional guidelines and expectations for the paper will be provided in class. Late papers, without a legitimate excuse, will be returned without comments, and a late penalty assigned.

* Students may wish to opt for a 30-minute **class presentation** instead of a research paper, but must inform the instructor of their choice to do so by **the end of February**. Students may also explore other projects for their major assignment with the instructor.

**Bibliography**


http://www.bothends.org/strategic/contacts_latinam.html
http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=1988


