RELIGION 365: Christian Moral Issues
Christian Ecological Ethics
Fall 2010
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1.45-3.30 pm  Admin 206

Instructor: Kevin J. O’Brien  Office Hours:  TR 10 – 11.30 am
Office: Blomquist House, #14  Wed 1 – 3 pm
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Introduction
This class explores questions of ecological ethics—how human beings can and should live in relationship to earth’s systems and respond to environmental degradation—in dialogue with practices and texts from Christian traditions. Together we will closely read texts by Christian thinkers responding to environmental issues, and we will critically discuss and write about the arguments we find in these texts and our discussions. I hope that we will all work to be critical thinkers both within and against the field of Christian ecological ethics while learning about it.

We will study the Christian ecological ethics through the lens of five organizing questions, and will spend our time introducing these questions, exploring their expression in three texts of the field, applying them to an analysis of case studies, and developing individual papers demonstrating scholarly research and personal reflection. Reading schedules for each unit and detailed instructions for each assignment will be handed out in class. Please read these schedules, this syllabus, and all other handouts of this course carefully, as it is your responsibility to understand them and complete all readings and assignments on time. If anything is unclear, please ask.

Course Objectives
Together as a community of learners, the instructor and students will:

• Contribute to a classroom environment in which religious traditions, scientific perspectives, and human feelings can all be studied and shared with respect, open criticism, and academic rigor.
• Develop the intellectual tools by which to analyze the intersection between religious and environmental ideas and practices.
• Read a diverse selection of texts with careful attention to their content, their impacts upon the world, and their effects on our thinking and feeling.
• Research and reflect on a particular issue of Christian ecological ethics.
• Speak and write clearly, professionally, and insightfully.

Readings
Four required books are available for purchase in the PLU bookstore:
Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*
Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*
Christine Gudorf & James Huchingson, *Boundaries: A Casebook in Environmental Ethics*
James Martin-Schramm, *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy*

In addition, a number of required articles are available through the course Sakai site. You should always have a copy of all the readings under discussion with you in every class session.

Expectations
This is an upper-division course, which means that all participants should be able to:
• Read substantial, complicated material critically and insightfully,
• Draw constructively on perspectives and insights from previous courses,
• Apply multiple frameworks of analysis to course materials and your own ideas,
• Participate constructively, demonstrating respect for the material and one another, and
• Write carefully and clearly.
Religion Requirement:
This course fulfills a Christian Religious Traditions requirement for the General University Requirement in religion (or, if you enrolled under the previous system, a Line 2 requirement), which means that we will critically and thoughtfully explore ideas and practices emerging from the Christian faith. If you have questions about this requirement, or if you would like to declare a religion major or minor, please consult with me or Professor Kathlyn Breazeale, Chair of the Religion Department.

Environmental Studies Requirement
This course also fulfills an Environment and Sensibility requirement for the Environmental Studies Program, which means it offers perspectives from the Division of Humanities on the complex relationships between people and the environment. At PLU, Humanities includes the Departments of English, Languages and Literatures, Philosophy, and Religion. Each offers tools with which to interpret the ideas, texts, values, and languages of human cultures. This project is vitally important for environmental studies because ideas, texts, values, and languages have shaped and are shaping the ways human beings interact with the nonhuman world and one another. Concepts like “nature,” “wilderness,” “animals,” “environment,” and “sustainability” have powerful influence in many cultures, and the ways we understand these ideas today will profoundly influence how we respond to the dire realities of environmental degradation. This course will prepare students of environmental studies to better understand the ways human beings live in and with the world, to more carefully analyze the assumptions behind claims about the natural environment, and to develop stronger arguments about the future of life in particular ecosystems and on the earth as a whole. If you are interested in declaring an Environmental Studies major or minor, please see me or Professor Bill Teska, Chair of the Environmental Studies Committee, for further information.

Assumptions of the Course
The following ideas are foundational to the structure of this class.
• Environmental degradation is a serious issue in contemporary Western societies calling for careful ethical reflection.
• Ecological ethics should be a multidisciplinary pursuit, seeking to synthesize ideas from diverse sources both within and outside the University.
• Some Christian traditions can contribute constructively to such dialogues in environmental ethics.
• Some Christian traditions have contributed to environmental degradation and the types of thinking that make it possible.

You are by no means required or even expected to agree with any or all of these ideas, but you are asked to be aware of and consider them during the course of the semester. You should feel free to dispute and argue respectfully against these assumptions and anything else in the course with which you disagree with. You are a student at a school that emphasizes your freedom to think freely and critically about important issues; take advantage of that opportunity in this course.

Special Notes
1. Any amendment to the course schedule will be announced in class. If you are absent, it is your responsibility to contact peers or the instructor to determine what you missed.
2. Students with medically recognized and documented disabilities and who are in need of special accommodation have an obligation to notify the University of their needs. Such students should contact the Office of Counseling and Testing (x7602). If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible.
3. In the event of inclement weather, make sure to confirm whether class is meeting. You can call the University’s hotline (535.7100) or access the PLU website (www.plu.edu) after 6 a.m. to see if school has been canceled.
Absences & Due Dates
During the term, you may miss 3 class sessions with no penalty. The only circumstances in which you can miss more classes without losing credit are serious illness with a doctor’s note or a family emergency excused through the office of Student Services. Missing more than 6 classes or the first two classes without prior permission is grounds for failing the course.

All written assignments are due by the beginning of class on the date listed below unless prior permission has been given with medical or other important justification. Late papers will be docked substantially for every day they are delayed. If you know you will be unable to meet a deadline, you must make arrangements with the instructor ahead of time. Retroactive extensions will be allowed only in the most extreme circumstances.

Academic Honesty
PLU’s expectation is that students will not cheat or plagiarize, and that they will not condone these behaviors or assist others who plagiarize. Academic misconduct not only jeopardizes the career of the individual student involved, but also undermines the scholastic achievements of all PLU students and attacks the mission of this institution. Students are inherently responsible to do their own work, thereby ensuring the integrity of their academic records.

Everything you write for this class should be your own, and all the sources you consult in the course of your writing and thinking should be cited completely and carefully. Please carefully review the expectations for academic honesty outlined in the current Student Handbook and online at http://www.plu.edu/academics/integ.html. If you have any questions or doubts about whether something in your work is appropriate, consult with the instructor well before the assignment is due. Any plagiarism or academic dishonesty will have very serious consequences to your grade and your academic career.

Civil Conversation
This class will be a positive educational experience if all of us commit to a genuine, open, and respectful conversation together. You are expected to treat your classmates and your instructor with respect, and you should expect the same in how you are treated. The PLU Student Code of Conduct reads: “Faculty and university are committed to protecting the rights of community members to engage in dialogue and express ideas in an environment that is free from harassment, discrimination, and exploitation. This freedom of expression does not, however, entail the freedom to threaten, stalk, intimidate, harass, or abuse. Students are therefore expected to treat every individual with respect and civility” (p. 12). Please note the following basic guidelines for civil conversation as expectations for our time together:

1. Classroom discussions should be civilized and respectful to everyone. When you disagree with something that is being said, be sure that you listen to it carefully, respond thoughtfully, and always treat others with the same level of consideration and politeness that you hope to receive.
2. Listen respectfully when others are talking: do not whisper, sleep, or daydream during class.
3. Be in your seat and ready to begin class on time; turn off cell phones, music players, and anything else that might distract others or you from paying attention during class.
4. Do not pack up your belongings and watch the clock prior to the end of our time together. It is disruptive to those around you and causes you to miss the learning you are here to do. If you behave inappropriately in class, I will point it out to you and ask you to change. If your behavior does not improve, it will negatively affect your grade. If it continues to be a problem or is an egregious violation of the Code of Student Conduct, I will have to refer you to PLU’s Student Conduct System.
**Discussion Participation**

In most of our sessions, you will be asked to contribute to discussions in the class as a whole or in small groups. Every student should learn to speak up during class, to thoughtfully contribute to our discussions, and to leave room for others to join the conversation. The following behaviors characterize the kind of participation I expect:

- Attend class regularly and on time, getting notes from colleagues and contacting the instructor in the case of an unavoidable absence.
- Not only read the assigned texts, but also reflect on them critically, demonstrating this participation through active questioning and comments in class.
- Come to class prepared with insights and questions about the readings and topics of our course.
- Engage in classroom discussions, not only responding to the texts and instructor, but encouraging and respecting the insights and perspectives of your classmates.
- Use small group discussions as a chance for thoughtful conversation, ensuring that your group not only performs the assigned task, but also uses the time constructively to discuss the issues and questions of this course.

If you are worried about your participation, I will be happy to talk with you about strategies for how to contribute effectively and well in class discussions.

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**Assignments & Grading**

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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Initial Reflection</td>
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<td>Case Presentation</td>
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<td>Research &amp; Reflection Paper Progress</td>
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<td>Final Research &amp; Reflection Paper</td>
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The central components of this class will be in-class presentations and discussions. You should be present, prepared, and actively engaged with our work in class. You will also work in pairs and small groups on some assignments, and will be assigned occasional in-class writing assignments.

*Initial Reflection*

At the beginning of the semester, you will reflect on the oil spill in the Gulf in conversation with the organizing questions of the course. Please see the guidelines in a separate handout.

*Class Leadership*

Once during the semester, you will introduce the material and lead the class in a small group. You will be graded based on how well you prepare, structure the class, and respond to the questions and ideas of your colleagues. Please see the guidelines in a separate handout.

*Case Presentation*

In small groups, students will present case studies that apply what we have learned about environmental ethics. You will be graded as a group based on your presentation. Guidelines will be distributed in October.

*Research & Reflection Paper Progress*

Your largest writing assignment in this course will be an original paper of constructive ethics written as a response to one of the central questions of this course. At four points during the semester you will share your progress on this assignment, and your thoughtful and prompt completion of these steps will contribute to this grade. Please see the final assignment guide.

*Final Research & Reflection Paper*

Your original paper, reflecting substantial research and thoughtful, constructive ethics, is the largest portion of your grade. Please see the final assignment guide.
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Five Organizing Questions about Christian Ecological Ethics

1. **WHAT DOES THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION HAVE TO DO WITH ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION?**

   Is Christianity in any way to blame for environmental degradation? Can the Christian faith affirm the natural world and the importance of caring for it, or is Christianity inherently otherworldly? What parts of the Christian tradition are most useful and relevant in understanding and responding to environmental degradation? Is there a uniquely Christian response to this issue?

   **INTRODUCTORY TEXTS:**
   - Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”
   - Calvin DeWitt, “Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God”

2. **WHAT SOURCES SHOULD INFORM A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION?**

   What is the place of science in Christian ecological ethics? What do the Bible and theological tradition contribute to ethical reflection on environmental degradation? Must anything about Scripture, the ways it is interpreted, and theology change in light of this reality?

   **INTRODUCTORY TEXTS:**
   - Calvin DeWitt, “Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God”
   - Peter Vitousek et al., “Human Domination of Earth’s Ecosystems”
   - Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology”

3. **SHOULD THE PRIMARY MORAL RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION BE A CHANGE IN IDEAS OR IN PRACTICES?**

   In developing a solution to environmental degradation, is it most important that we find new ways to think about our relationship to the nonhuman world, or develop new practices with which to act differently?

   **INTRODUCTORY TEXTS:**
   - J. Baird Callicott, “Environmental Philosophy Is Environmental Activism”
   - Ana Peterson, “Toward a Materialist Environmental Ethic”

4. **AT WHAT SCALE SHOULD CHRISTIANS PRIMARILY FOCUS THEIR WORK TO CONSERVE THE NATURAL WORLD?**

   How should Christians balance attention to particularities and universality in their understanding of the natural world? Should the work of Christian ecological ethics be primarily focused on local, national, or global issues, and how should attention to these different scales be balanced?

   **INTRODUCTORY TEXTS:**
   - Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain” and “The Land Ethic”
   - Peter Vitousek et al., “Human Domination of Earth’s Ecosystems”

5. **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE?**

   Does a concern for the nonhuman world compete with a concern for other human beings? If so, how should the two concerns be balanced? Can the two coexist and complement one another?

   **INTRODUCTORY TEXTS:**
   - James Cone, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?”
   - Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology”