UNDERGRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTION

Term: Spring 2011
Instructor: Jame Schaefer
Course #: THEO 4440 5440
Section: 101
Course Title: Foundations for Ecological Ethics

Description:

Can religion provide the impetus to deter humans from accelerating the rate of species' extinction, degrading and destroying ecological systems, and threatening the integrity of Earth's biosphere? Ongoing abuse of the environment has prompted scholars of religions to pose this question and to explore ways of thinking that might motivate believers to act in ways that are more compatible with the well being of our planet and its many varied constituents. Students taking Theology 4440 are afforded an opportunity to participate in this ongoing "greening of religion" by examining teachings of the world's major religions and discerning the extent to which they provide promising foundations for environmental ethics.

During the first part of the semester, we will examine Christian calls to address ecological concerns. Texts by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the United States Catholic bishops, and leaders of other Christian denominations will be examined. Emphasis will be placed subsequently on critically retrieving and reformulating notions in the Bible and works by eminent theologians in order to respond more relevantly to current ecological problems that concern you. Focus will shift during the second part of the semester to the ecologically promising orthopraxis suggested in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Emphasized throughout is the need for religious discourse to be informed by broad scientific findings, particularly cosmology and biology. The semester will close with considering the possibility and makeup of a global environmental ethic and examining models of the human to identify one that is most motivating for each student.

Students in this course will aim to achieve the following: (1) Accurately identify and explain orally and in writing key concepts with corresponding principles in the Christian and other world religions that appear promising for addressing ecological concerns; (2) critically assess the extent to which these concepts and principles provide ways of thinking about and living more compatibly within the ecosystems of Earth and selecting one that appears most promising to you; (3) adequately research an ecological problem on which to test the viability of religious concepts and principles examined in this course; (4) work cooperatively with other students to critique assigned texts, evaluate religious ideas for their effectiveness, and identify principles that are promising for constituting a system of ethics that might be acceptable to the world religions studied; and, (5) critically evaluate models of the human that are suggested in the assigned readings and choose one that you think will be most helpful to guide your actions in the near future.