Religion, Nature and Morality
Course Outline

Semester: Semester 2 - 2007
Unit Weighting: 10
Teaching Methods:
Lecture
Tutorial

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Brief Course Description
A comparative analysis of the differing ways in which differing religions (including modern science) have conceived or conceive of nature and humanity’s place within it, and of how these differing conceptions have informed or continue to inform their differing conceptions of humanity’s responsibility toward nature.

(N.B This course was previously called Topics in Religious Studies and has not changed in content.)

Contact Hours
Lecture for 2 Hours per Week for the Full Semester

Course Objectives
At the completion of this course, students will be able to discuss (i) the differing religious conceptions of nature and human nature compared in the course, (ii) how these differing religious conceptions have informed or continue to inform their differing conceptions of human responsibility toward nature, and (iii) the extent to which these differing conceptions resonate (or can be made to resonate) with a modern scientific conception of nature.

Course Content
If western society is on the road to ‘ecological Armageddon’, then what part, if any, has its Judeo-Christian religious heritage played in setting it upon this path, and what, if anything, can western society learn about its predicament from earlier societies whose religious conceptions of nature and humanity’s place within it lead and enabled them to pursue more ecologically sustainable paths? The religious conceptions of nature which will be compared in this course include the Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Australian Aboriginal, Native Hawaiian,
North American Indian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and New Age. The extent to which these differing conceptions resonate (or can be made to resonate) with a modern scientific conception of nature will also be examined.

This course will not only appeal to students who have an interest in the human-nature relationship and the role which the religious beliefs have played in defining and redefining this relationship, it will also appeal to any student who has ever pondered the questions, What is human nature? and What does it mean to be human?

**Assumed Knowledge**

Nil

**Online Tutorial Registration:**

Students are required to enrol in the Lecture and a specific Tutorial time for this course via the Online Registration system. Refer - [http://studinfo1.newcastle.edu.au/rego/stud_choose_login.cfm](http://studinfo1.newcastle.edu.au/rego/stud_choose_login.cfm)

NB: Registrations close at the end of week 2 of semester.

**Studentmail and Blackboard:** Refer - [www.blackboard.newcastle.edu.au/](http://www.blackboard.newcastle.edu.au/)

This course uses Blackboard and studentmail to contact students, so you are advised to keep your email accounts within the quota to ensure you receive essential messages. To receive an expedited response to queries, post questions on the Blackboard discussion forum if there is one, or if emailing staff directly use the course code in the subject line of your email. Students are advised to check their studentmail and the course Blackboard site on a weekly basis.

**Further Information**

Details about the following topics are available on your course Blackboard site (where relevant). Refer - [www.blackboard.newcastle.edu.au/](http://www.blackboard.newcastle.edu.au/)

- Written Assignment Presentation and Submission Details
- Online copy submission to Turnitin
- Penalties for Late Assignments
- Special Circumstances
- No Assignment Re-submission
- Re-marks & Moderations
- Return of Assignments
- Preferred Referencing Style
- Student Representatives
- Student Communication
- Essential Online Information for Students
Assessment Details

This course will be assessed on the basis of four minor assignments (each worth 15% of your total mark) and a major essay (worth 40% of your total mark).

Minor Assignments (NOT to be submitted through HUB)

Students will complete four minor assignments (600-1000 words). These should not be simple summaries of the relevant readings. They can include a summary of the readings but they should also include relevant points that have been raised in lectures or classroom discussion, and any further relevant points which occur to you in reflective hindsight.

Assignment 1

To what extent, and on what specific grounds, can Christianity be held responsible for the ecological crisis we currently find ourselves in? (due Week 4)

Assignment 2

Is humanity at war with nature, and, if so, in what sense does its being at war with nature separate it from nature? (due week 6)

Assignment 3

What is the nature of the nature with which indigenous peoples have traditionally lived in harmony, and what is the nature of the harmony? (due week 9)

Assignment 4

What, if anything, do we learn about the human-nature relationship by ‘Thinking like a Mountain’? (due week 11)

Major Essay (submit through HUB)

Word Length: 1600-2000 words
Due Date: November 11th

In what sense, and to what extent, do the beliefs (i) that humans are separate and superior to nature, and (ii) that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper purposes, place Christianity in absolute contrast with paganism and the religions of Asia? (see Lynn White, p.189)

Reading for the Course

There is no prescribed text for this course, but there are prescribed weekly readings (see Schedule of Topics/Readings below) and some recommended texts:

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Callicott, J. B., >Traditional East Asian Deep Ecology=, Ch.3 of his *Earth's Insights*  
Supplementary Reading  
| 10 Sept 19 | **Nature, Human Nature, Religion and Morality**                      | The origins of religion (and religious consciousness) and morality (and moral consciousness)  
Reading: Notes to be distributed. |
| 11 Sept 26 | **Religion and Morality: Natural or Unnatural**                      | Do our capacities for religious and moral consciousness tie us or to or separate us from nature?  
Reading: Notes to be distributed. |
| **MID-SEMESTER BREAK - October 1 - October 12** |                                                                        |                                                                                      |
| 12 Oct 17 | **Religion, Nature and the Human Predicament**                      | What is human nature and what does it mean to be human?  
Reading: Notes to be distributed. |
| 13 Oct 24 | **Course Synthesis**                                                 | Pulling together the various thematic threads which need to be pulled together for the purposes of answering the major essay question. |
| 14 Oct 31 | **REVIEW/OPEN DISCUSSION**                                          |                                                                                      |