Environmental Issues & Policy: Gaia, God and Government

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Spring Semester, 2018
GOVT 490.001
Writing Intensive course
Tues. Thurs, 1:30-2:45 pm
Room: TBA [Hanover Hall L003]

Ansel Adams  The Tetons and the Snake River  1942

Climate change is widely seen as the most difficult collective action problem humankind has ever faced. The enormity of the problem, and the magnitude of the changes human society will endure to combat it, are almost unimaginable. It is no wonder that the issue stirs up controversy, as it touches on the deepest beliefs and commitments people have: about their world, their place in the world and their responsibility for the problems the world faces, and solutions to those problems. Fundamental values and aspects of culture, including religious beliefs and worldviews, inform our understanding of the problems and shape our capacity and willingness to respond.

This course provides an introduction to the complex world of environmental and especially climate science, politics and policy, with specific attention to the role of religion. Religious beliefs are the most fundamental of human society’s value systems: they influence our ideas of where we came from, why we
exist, what is right and wrong, what is virtuous and what is evil. They even shape our social and economic systems in powerful ways: Max Weber famously attributed the rise of capitalism and its associated social, economic and political structures and behaviors, to Protestant religious beliefs, in his still-relevant Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.

And religion shapes our responses to the environment as well, and especially in the case of climate change. During the course, we will assess the relationship of various religions, and particularly Christianity, in climate change politics and policy. This approach is a bit unconventional, though by no means any longer novel: there is a robust debate about religion and ecology, nature, the environment that we’ll draw on in the course. Questions the course will address include:

- What is the role of religion is influencing our beliefs about environment and nature?
- How do differing cosmologies interpret the scientific understanding of climate and environmental change?
- How do religious beliefs affect their adherents’ responses to climate change as a problem?
- What ethical or spiritual challenges does climate change present?
- Does religion provide guidance to faith communities, and the wider public, about how to respond?
- Can, or does, the faith community serve as a galvanizing force for effective social movement to combat climate change?

**Learning outcomes**

By the end of the semester students will be able to:

- Identify important elements of climate science and climate change;
- Explain relevant policy controversies;
- Identify the core aspects of the major religious beliefs relating to nature and the environment;
- Identify and use key concepts relevant to climate communications and social movements.

The course teaches students pertinent approaches to the study of climate and environmental politics and policy, through the lens of ethics and religious belief. By the end of the course, students will be well positioned to pursue further work on environmental and climate change policy in any context.

**Books**

These books are on order at the bookstore. I strongly encourage you to check used book websites, such as [http://www.alibris.com](http://www.alibris.com) before buying new copies. They can often be found for a fraction of the cost.


**Requirements, grades and examinations**

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<td>Participation in class discussions</td>
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Writing Intensive course requirements

The Faculty Senate Writing Across the Curriculum Committee has approved this course to fulfill all/in part of the Writing Intensive requirement in political science major. These requirements will be met in three ways, outlined in more detail in the Assignments section below:

1. A 2-4-minute video and accompanying 1,000-word minimum reflection paper on your personal understanding of religious belief and climate change,

2. A 5-minute video produced by a small team, and an accompanying individually-written 2,000-word minimum research paper on community beliefs about religious beliefs and climate change that will undergo several drafts before final submission, and

3. A 1,500-word minimum analytical reflection essay on climate change lobbying by religious advocacy organizations that will receive extensive comments from me.

Assignments

The major writing assignments are designed to explore our three topics, climate change and environment, religion and politics, using unconventional deliverables, including video, peer interviewing and lobbying.

1. Assignment 1 is a personal reflection on your understanding of science, climate change, and ethical or religious beliefs. In a 2-4-minute video, you will describe your thoughts and feelings about the environment, climate change and their relationship to your spiritual or religious sentiments.

   The assignment also requires a 1,000-word reflection paper on the material you discuss in the video; it is expected that preparation of the paper is preparation for the video itself. I will provide feedback on the initial outline, on the rough draft and on the final paper.

2. Assignment 2 is to listen to and understand spiritual or religious community members’ conceptions of science, climate change, and ethical or religious beliefs. This assignment is focused on how spiritual or religious communities see the problem of climate and environmental change.

   Teams of two or three students will identify a target religious or spiritual community group, either on campus or in the surrounding region that has articulated a position on climate or environmental change, and will produce a 5-minute video based on the template used in Assignment 1.

   As with Assignment 1, each team member will produce a 2,000-word analytic paper that supports the video presentation with research on the target community or religious organization and its theology or cosmology as they relate to climate change or the environment. I will provide detailed feedback on the initial outline, the rough draft, and on the final paper.

3. Assignment 3 is participating or observing lobbying of political leaders on science, climate change, from a spiritual or religious community perspective. Arrangements for lobbying training and scheduling are underway. The assignment deliverable is a 1,500-word memo on the experience: what you did, what you observed, and what you concluded about the process and its impact.

   As with previous assignments, I will provide detailed feedback on the initial outline, the rough draft, and on the final paper.
Blackboard posting, presentations, précises and class discussion

We will use the public Discussion Boards on Blackboard to jumpstart class discussions. Comments and critiques online will give you time to consider what your classmates have to say about the readings, help us focus on core issues more quickly, and provide a shared resource to prepare for exams. Students will be assigned ahead of each session to present a summary of the readings and begin our discussion.

The class will be divided into three groups, and will post before class in rotation, as specified on the assignment schedule.

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Comments must be posted no later than midnight the day before class. Postings should be 250 words minimum, in which you:

1. Summarize the main ideas about the reading for the session.
2. Raise issues or problems you see with the arguments: this is essential.
3. Connect the readings with earlier sessions, helping synthesize the material.
4. These postings will be the basis of your Blackboard posting grade: thoughtful postings will be highly valued, superficial postings will be seen as inadequate.

You should respond to comments on forum threads, and you are encouraged to respond to earlier posts in the thread. The main idea is to add to the discussion, so staying on topic is essential.

Late postings: I give no credit for late postings, no exceptions.

No laptops or mobile phones in class

Laptops and mobile phones are not welcome in class. The only exception to this policy is if you have permission from the Office of Disability Services. Despite our heavy reliance on them, electronic devices turn out to be detrimental to learning in classrooms for two reasons:

1. Devices impede knowledge acquisition by turning note-taking into unreflective information transcription rather than concept synthesis (Dynarski, Mueller and Oppenheimer).
2. “Always connected” devices divert attention whenever they ping or buzz, regardless of our best efforts to ignore them (Barnwell).

The bottom line: When devices are present grades are lower by a full point for every person in the class, not just their owners. Here are links to the research:


Essential news and information sources: you are required to subscribe to at least one each of *general media, climate and environmental sources, and religion.*

For research help, check out the GMU Library Environment InfoGuide -- [http://infoguides.gmu.edu/environmentalpolicy](http://infoguides.gmu.edu/environmentalpolicy) -- this should be your first stop.

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|                                           | Create an alert in Google News using “religion,” “environment,” “climate change”                       |

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SYLLABUS

First class: Session 1: Introduction to the course: what does religion have to do with the politics of climate change?

We’ll set the stage for this course with a brief encounter with some provocative statements about the problems the world faces: the challenge of climate change. We’ll also watch (before class) several recent popular media presentations that raise questions about climate change and energy in easily accessible ways.

1. Films to watch before the first class: You may have already seen Al Gore’s 2007 film, An Inconvenient Truth. If so, watch at the first episode of the 2014-present documentary series, Years of Living Dangerously, a Showtime production, listed below.

In fact, while we’re at it, in addition to the above, watch any one of the films below. We will revisit the subject of climate and communications later, but these films are worth watching as we kick off the semester.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006) many streaming services
Years of Living Dangerously (2014-) http://yearsoflivingdangerously.com/watch-years/
Chasing Ice (2012) Netflix

2. Readings required for first class


3. Discussion questions for our first class, be prepared to discuss:

McKibben argues societies need to keep in the ground a large quantity of already-discovered fossil fuels if the planet is to avoid a climate catastrophe. In other writing he has argued that humankind has irrevocably changed Earth, that our traditional reliance on economic growth is a source of our environmental problems, and that we need new ways to think about the place of humans on it.

Subramanian’s series of articles from Inside Climate News shows how in some areas a traditional understanding of weather conflicts with scientific explanations. This article on how some rural West Virginians interpret natural disasters highlights the challenges of finding common ground on the issue, a prerequisite for more effective response.

The Moyers and Company broadcast looks at how Christian evangelical leaders and scientists are divided separating them over matters of climate change and faith. Katherine Hayhoe is both a climate scientist and an evangelical Christian. She is engaged in trying to convince her co-religionists that climate change is real, yet at the same time is not against the fundamental values of her religious faith.

Finally, we have to recognize that since the election of 2016, the country has been riven by political
conflict, on many fronts, not least of which concerns environment and climate matters. How we engage with others with whom we profoundly disagree is of utmost importance if democratic norms are to be preserved, and important public problems are to be solved, if not in the immediate present, then in the near future. David Smith’s posting on talking through outrage outlines the struggle many of us face.

So, let’s get started with some questions arising from these introductory, and provocative, pieces:

1. What are McKibben’s conclusions about climate change and human involvement? Does he make a persuasive case? Why or why not? What, in your opinion, will it take to achieve the goals McKibben lays out?

2. What are the main reasons dividing climate scientists and conservative religious groups? Is it a question of skepticism about science? Or is it a reluctance to accept the necessity of specific responses to the problem?

3. What aspects in the stories from West Virginia, and the interview with the evangelical climate scientist did you find the most interesting? Most surprising?

4. Finally, is Smith on the right track, about meeting and listening with people with whom you may disagree? How can we bring ourselves to act on his advice?

4. **Climate primers, if needed, before the first class:** If you are really unfamiliar with the main scientific and policy issues surrounding climate change, one of these primers is for you.

   - Climate Communication website, [https://www.climatecommunication.org/](https://www.climatecommunication.org/)

**Session 2: Religion and ecology: God, man and nature**


**Session 3: Taking science seriously and religiously**


Session 4: Human impacts on the environment and climate


Session 5: The scientific consensus about climate change


Session 6: Climate policies: the economics of climate change


Session 7: Climate science in the policy process


Session 8: Risk perceptions and skepticism …


Session 9: … and the organized politics of denial


**Documentary films: watch one**


**Session 10: Climate change, responsibility and ethics I**


**Session 11: Climate change, responsibility and ethics II**


**Session 12: Christian traditions: Dominion…?**


**Session 13: Christian traditions: … or stewardship…? Responses to White**


**Documentary film:**


**Session 14: Indigenous traditions, ecology and climate change**


Session 15: Early Buddhism


Session 16: Islam, ecology and climate change


Session 17: Womanist/feminist theology, wilderness, and sense of place


Session 18: Contemporary Catholic approaches: Pope Francis weighs in


Session 19: Mainstream religions, science and ecology


Session 20: Mainstream religions, science and climate change

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, “Can science and religion respond to climate change?” *Zygon*, vol. 50, no. 4, December 2015, pp. 949-61.

Tucker, Mary Evelyn and John Grim, “Religion and the new environmental ethic,” Forum on Religion and Ecology, School of Forestry and Environment, Yale University, January 13, 2009, (12:50) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG0bQ3SwDI8

**Session 21: Supernatural to natural: ecologies as sacred spaces**


Leopold, Aldo, “Land ethic” and “Odyssey,” in *Sand County Almanac*, many editions.


Wilson, Edward O., "The little things that run the world (the importance and conservation of invertebrates)," *Conservation Biology*, vol. 1, no. 4, December 1987, pp. 344-346.

**Session 22: Cosmology and ecology**


**Documentary film:**


**Session 23: Christian evangelicals and climate science …**


**Session 24: … and the political religious right**


Session 25: Climate change communications and behavior change


Session 26: Environmental social movements…


Liacas, Tom, “The social strategy that is super-sizing the climate movement, Mashable, July 19, 2015, http://mashable.com/2015/07/19/climate-change-social-movement/#zE2cuV3g0Gqs

Session 27: … and Christian climate social movements: are they different?


Session 28: Future of climate policy: how should climate be governed?


Final exam

12
Assignment schedule Spring 2018

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