Course Title: Foundations for Ecological Ethics

Description:

Can religious faith motivate thinking and acting in ways that will mitigate the loss of biological diversity, the degradation and destruction of ecological systems, and threats to the life-sustaining capacity of Earth? Scholars of the world religions are answering this question by exploring their foundations and identifying guidelines for acting more compatibly toward other people, species, and systems for their mutual well-being. Students in Theology 4440 are offered an opportunity to participate in this ongoing "greening of religion" by examining expressions of faith and discerning the extent to which they provide promising foundations for ecological ethics.

We will begin by examining texts in which Pope Francis and leaders of other Christian denominations have expressed their concerns about climate change and other evidence of the ongoing ecological crisis. Emphasis will be placed subsequently on (1) critically retrieving expressions of faith conveyed in the Bible (e.g., the goodness, beauty, and sacramentality of creation) and developed by eminent theologians throughout the centuries, (2) reformulating these faith-based expressions to reflect our current scientific understanding of the world, and (3) testing their effectiveness for addressing ecological problems students will have researched from the academic literature. Focus will shift during the second part of the semester to the ecologically promising beliefs and practices of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Underscored throughout is the need for religious discourse to be informed by broad scientific findings (particularly cosmology and biology) and for recognizing how poor and vulnerable people are most adversely affected by polluted air, land, and water, the accelerated rate of species extinction, and a life-impoverished planet that scientists are predicting. The semester will culminate with students' identifying beliefs and principles the world religions share for addressing ecological degradation.

Students will aim to (1) accurately identify and explain orally and in writing key expressions of faith and corresponding principles in Christianity and other world religions that are effective for addressing ecological concerns, (2) critically assess the extent to which these faith-based beliefs and principles provide ways of thinking about and living more compatibly within the ecosystems of Earth, (3) adequately research an ecological problem on which to test the efficacy of religious beliefs and principles examined in this course, and (4) work cooperatively with other students to critique assigned texts, evaluate religious ideas for their effectiveness in our age of widespread ecological degradation, and identify shared beliefs and principles among the world religions for constituting a global system of ecological ethics.