

## MN 396W-L2 ECOJUSTICE: THEOLOGICAL, ETHICAL, AND SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES

Instructors: Craig L. Nesson, Lisa Dahill, Larry Rasmussen

Open for all.

2 Credits; letter grade or credit/no credit

This course explores biblical, theological, ethical, and scientific perspectives that inform and analyze the contemporary crisis in creation, including the urgency of rectifying climate change. The course will include guest lectures, the use of video materials, and presentation/discussion with the instructor(s). This course is held in partnership with Spirit of the Desert Retreat Center at Carefree, Arizona from January 10-13, 2022. Due to the pandemic, the intensive course will be held through digital communications on Zoom.

### OBJECTIVES:

1. To explore the biblical and theological foundations for a theology of creation ethics (practice of biblical and theological wisdom).
2. To become more deeply informed by science for the church's deliberation of ecojustice (practice of complex analysis).
3. To examine the theological and ethical responsibilities facing the church in advocating for the integrity of creation in local places (practice of personal faith and integrity).
4. To participate in worship and devotions that accent our interdependence with creation (practice of *missio dei* in Word and Sacrament).
5. To claim one's own theological voice in articulating an ethics of creation (practice of pastoral concern).

**PROCEDURE:** The course will meet from January 10-13, 2022 with required readings to be completed prior to the intensive and a class presentation due during the intensive. Teaching and learning methods will include lectures, interactive discussion, video materials, student presentations, and group discussion.

**EVALUATION:** Evaluation is based on 1) Demonstrated preparation in one's class participation based on readings (30%), 2) Informed participation in all intensive activities (30%), and 3) Class presentation (40%).

### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

#### Required Reading:

Lisa Dahill and James Martin-Schramm, editors. *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*. Wipf & Stock, 2016.

Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*. Georgetown University, 2013.

Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. Oxford University, 2015.

#### Recommended Reading:

William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*. Oxford University, 2010.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago, 2017.

Willis Jenkins, *Religion and Sustainability*. Berkshire Publishing Group, 2016.

Craig L. Nesson, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community*. Fortress Press, 2010.

Kevin J. O'Brien, *The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance from Nonviolent Activists*. Georgetown University, 2017.

*Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (July 2020), Section Two on "Creation in Crisis: Science and Theology Respond." <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/view/61>

## PROCEDURE:

1. The course will meet by Zoom from Monday, January 10-Thursday, January 13, 2021. The Zoom link and course materials will be available to WTS students through Castle Commons. The arrangements for other participants will be communicated directly to them.
2. Students and participants are expected to read the three required books prior to the first day of class on January 10. To prepare for book discussions, please refer to the instructions at the end of the syllabus.
3. Students seeking credit for the course will prepare and make one presentation to the class 20-25 minutes in length (no longer!). Wendell Berry has written eloquently that paying attention to the wellbeing of one's local place is the most promising way forward toward ecological balance: "And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home." (from *The Unforeseen Wilderness*)

The presentation should be based on turning your attention to your local place, the place where you live, the place on earth where you are rooted. As you explore this place, your presentation can focus on one of the following (or both): 1) an eco-wonder, a feature of your local place that inspires awe, fascination, beauty, and wonder; 2) an eco-challenge, a feature of your local place that needs repentance, redress, repair, and reparation. Turn our attention to that eco-wonder or eco-challenge and share with the group your imagination, reflections, interpretation, and ethical response. You are encouraged to use audio and/or visual images with your presentation, for example, through PowerPoint or film.

This project aligns with the work of Willis Jenkins, who writes: "Integrating the moral humanities into science-based management of sustainability problems and forging practical collaborations across alienating borders, I argue, needs a mode of ethical engagement that begins from concrete problems" (*The Future of Ethics*, 69).

4. Students will work in dyads or triads to prepare devotions (10 minutes in length) either for the beginning or ending of the class each day. Please employ creativity, recognizing the limits of Zoom technology, to lead the class in prayer, song, scripture, reflection, and contemplation on themes related to the course. Two possible resources for the devotions:

Norman C. Habel, *On Being an Earth Being: Searching for the Spiritual in a Cosmic Sanctuary Called Planet Earth*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020.

Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology*. Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007.

## SCHEDULE (all times are according to Central Standard Time):

### Monday, January 10:

9:30 am Overview of the Intensive

9:45 am Opening Devotions

10 am - Noon Presentation by Lisa Dahill: "Rewilding Life Together: Bonhoeffer, Spirituality, and Interspecies Community."

1 – 3:30 pm Student Presentations

3:45 pm Closing Devotions

Tuesday, January 11:

9:45 am Opening Devotions

10 am - Noon Discussion of *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* by Larry Rasmussen

1 – 3:30 pm Student Presentations

3:45 pm Closing Devotions

Wednesday, January 12:

9:45 am Opening Devotions

10 am - Noon Discussion of *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril* with Lisa Dahill

1 – 3:30 pm Student Presentations

3:45 pm Closing Devotions

Thursday, January 13:

9:45 am Opening Devotions

10 am - Noon Presentation by Larry Rasmussen: “Church and Creation in Epic/Epoch Times”

1 – 2:00 pm Student Presentations

2:15 -4 pm Concluding Session, “What Does This Mean?” based on Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*

### **BOOK DISCUSSION PREPARATION:**

Discussion of *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*.

There are two parts in Earth-honoring Faith:

- Part One is the effort to say who we are as human creatures, what the state of our present world is, and what moral framework is needed in order to confront planetary creation in crisis.

“Planetary creation in crisis” can be described with three citations from the book:

“We are far too many and many of us are far too rich, with far too much stuff and the wrong kind of economy, for the planet to bear on our terms.”

“Earth can industrialize but once in the manner and on the scale it has. The throbbing modern world cannot be replicated and extended indefinitely.”

“The planet has changed and now we much change with it. We’ll need to figure out what part of our lives and our ideologies we must abandon so that we can protect the care of our societies and civilizations. There’s nothing airy or speculative about this conversation: it’s got to be uncomfortable, staccato, direct.” (Bill McKibben)

- Part Two foresees an alliance of spirituality and ecology in order to respond to the world described in Part One. A typology of five shared millennial interfaith traditions is presented, set over against the destructive forces they address: Asceticism and Consumerism, The Sacred and the Commodified, Mysticism and Alienation, Prophetic-Liberative Practices and Oppression, Wisdom and Folly.
- With Part One as backdrop, think about the moral and spiritual profile of the congregation you know best, together with its locale. Then from Part Two choose one of the five spiritual traditions, or two or three of them together, and generate a proposal for how that spiritual resource or those resources might address a destructive force (or forces) in the congregation and/or in its locale.
- Be prepared to share your proposal in our discussion period. There will only be time to name the spiritual tradition and what it addresses locally, as well as a sentence or two about why it is appropriate. But the whole class doing this naming, even briefly, will spur our imaginations in the direction of practical outcomes that arise from reading the book together.

#### Discussion of *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*

For the course as a whole, students are researching one locus of loss, lament, or suffering of/in the natural world in their home place and/or one locus of wonder, mystery, miracle, or beauty in their location. This place-based emphasis of the course provides an important (literal) grounding in particular bio-regions, watersheds, relational contexts – since thinking ecologically, like thinking theologically, takes place necessarily within such particular relationships.

The essay by Paul Santmire in *Eco-Reformation* tracks nicely in relation to this course focus on particular local places of lament and wonder. Santmire is urging human attention to the voices of creation as a whole as those similarly express both groaning and praise before God.

With Santmire’s essay as the foundation, please bring these pieces of preparation to the discussion session on *Eco-Reformation*:

- **Choose and research** both a place of groaning/lament and a place of wonder/praise in the larger natural world of your home. These might be two separate places/contexts, or they might be aspects of a single beleaguered and beautiful piece of your world. Take time before the course begins to become familiar – as you are able with the sources available to you – with both scientific and contemplative forms of knowing about these realities.
- What creatures, waterways, soil elements, plants and minerals, insects and microbes inhabit the place/s you are researching? Which of their lives or voices or movements become particularly visible, audible, tangible, inhalable (etc.) to you in this process of learning and attending more deeply? **Choose one or two of these iconic creatures or elements of your place** to be your companions in reading *Eco-Reformation*: one creature or element that groans and one that praises – or a single one that embodies both of Santmire’s elements.

- **Read the rest of the *Eco-Reformation* essays through a dual lens:** reading as the human you are, with your personal, theological, and ecological questions and passions, and reading imaginatively through the lens of the creatures or elements iconic for you of the groaning and praise of your home bioregion. No need to overwork this process – just read, as deeply or lightly as you wish, noticing which pieces (whole essays or particular quotes or insights) beckon to you, refracting or recasting your questions and passions OR finding resonance with the groaning or praise of your bioregion. This too is a contemplative process.
- For discussion, in both plenary and small-group conversation, be ready to **share specific pieces of the book** (with author and page numbers) that help you **articulate theologically** the groaning and the praise – the urgent needs and the miraculous life – you experience in your bioregion.
- If time permits: From the book as a whole, what would a **theology of interspecies “life together”** (Bonhoeffer) look like for your place?

Discussion of *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*.

At the conclusion of the course, we will engage in a discussion of Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics*. Our task will be to juxtapose the student projects within the framework proposed by Jenkins for ethical engagement around concrete ecological problems and challenges.

ACCOMODATIONS POLICY: It is Seminary policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have documented disability conditions that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. Students are responsible for informing their instructor of any documented disability by the end of the first week of class or upon subsequent diagnosis. Documentation on disability conditions is kept in a confidential file in the ADA Compliance Officer’s office.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION STATEMENT: Creating Beloved Community and a learning environment full of mutual respect is hard and ongoing work. We are a diverse community seeking greater diversity, and this diversity is paramount in the beauty of God’s good creation and even the Trinity itself. Diversity can refer to multiple ways that we identify ourselves, including but not limited to race, national origin, languages, sex, ability, body type, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, gender identity, ancestry, veteran status, culture, or genetic information. These diversities and more contribute to the perspectives and excellence we bring into the classroom and beyond and will be affirmed

My own commitment to DEI at WTS is grounded in the very method of doing theology. The starting point for liberation theologies begins with the suffering ones of this world and their cries. Alongside the suffering of creation itself, we attend today to the cries of those persons oppressed and suffering under the weight of systemic injustice according to race, gender, sexual identities, ethnic origins, immigration status, class inequities, disabilities, age, religion, and many other categories used to classify people and disregard their inherent dignity as those created in God’s image. These experiences of suffering belong to the heart of theological inquiry as I seek to understand the causes of systemic injustices and bring the resources of Scripture and theology toward a praxis that appreciates diversity, advocates for equity, and practices inclusion.

Topics covered in seminary are often difficult on various planes. When we embrace diverse perspectives, we embrace healthful disagreement—a mark of deep and true community. Please engage in discussion with care and empathy for yourself and others. In this class we endeavor to embrace the uncomfortable as we critically examine some of our most basic assumptions, values, and beliefs. As you work to bring good courage to this course, I will work to ensure an environment that supports your full participation and risk taking.