

## Comparative Studies 277 Religion and Environmentalism

### **Rationale for GEC Category 2. Breadth: C. Arts and Humanities (3) Cultures and Ideas and Assessment Plan**

This course is intended to fulfill the GEC Arts and Humanities Breadth requirement in the Cultures and Ideas category. Focusing on North America, the course explores the complex interrelationships of religious beliefs and practices to different and changing attitudes toward nature from colonial times to the present. It examines the conflicts between indigenous and European belief systems, the representation (and misrepresentation) of indigenous beliefs and practices in scientific and religious discourse, the growth of domestic religious and intellectual movements such as Transcendentalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, contemporary religious movements and new directions in mainstream and Evangelical Christianity, and relationships between world religions and environmentalism.

### **Rationale: How this course meets the Arts and Humanities General Learning Objectives of the ASC Model Curriculum:**

*1. To have direct contact with major forms of human thought and expression as distinctive and as interrelated cultural phenomena, and to nurture informed responsiveness to them and heightened participation in them.* This course assigns readings that report upon and analyze the texts, traditions, and practices of Native Americans, early and contemporary Christians, and practitioners of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary religious movements. Students will begin to understand the complexity of the relationships between these widely variant belief systems and environmentalism.

*2. To acquire a perspective on human history and an understanding of the force of the past in shaping human activity. Such a perspective should enable a student to examine the present cross-culturally and cross-temporally; to view cultural phenomena in context; and to be aware of human interaction with the material world.* The course is presented within a historical framework, beginning with discussion of early contact between Europeans and Native Americans and including contemporary religious movements in the U.S. and world religious traditions. Critical analysis of how these very different groups of people conceptualized and interacted with the material world is a central focus of the class.

*3. To develop a capacity to comprehend and evaluate critically the personal and social values of one's own world as compared with those of other communities in time and space.* At its core, this course is intended to help students see beyond their own values and beliefs to begin to understand how people in very different historical or cultural contexts have developed profoundly different ways of understanding the natural world and different means of interacting with it.

4. *To contribute to a student's sense of social and cultural diversity and sensitivity to problems of inequity and of individual similarity and difference (e.g., race, color, gender, ethnicity, religion, and class).* Most obviously, the course explores religious diversity, but also necessarily involves discussion of race, ethnicity, and gender, particularly as these categories have been constructed and represented through religious and scientific discourses and practices. It addresses, for example, relationships between particular strains of contemporary feminist movements and environmentalism.

5. *To examine the cultures of major regions of the world and through such study to develop international and global perspectives.* This course is principally focused on North America and the United States, but is global in its attention to European and Native American relations and to contemporary relationships between environmentalism and world religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam.

6. *To contribute to a student's understanding of the foundations of human beliefs, the nature of reality, and the norms which guide human behavior.* This course addresses the ways in which historically and culturally different religious belief systems are thoroughly intertwined with the development of social, political and economic policies that provide the framework for human interaction with the natural world.

7. *To learn to appreciate and interpret significant writings (e.g., literary, philosophical, or religious).* Reading assignments for this class include explanations of religious belief systems (historical and contemporary) and critical analyses of those systems and their relationships to environmentalism. Students also read texts by religious leaders and view several films related to these subjects.

8. *To develop abilities to be an enlightened observer or an active participant in a discipline within the visual, spatial, musical, theatrical, rhetorical, or written arts.* This course does not focus on the arts, but on other (religious) forms of cultural expression, and in doing so, develops students' abilities to analyze different forms of religious expression and their influence (both negative and positive) upon environmentalism.

**Rationale: How this course meets GEC learning objectives for Category 2.**

**Breadth: C. Arts and Humanities (3) Cultures and ideas**

1. *Students develop abilities to analyze, appreciate, and interpret major forms of human thought and expression.*
2. *Students develop abilities to understand how ideas influence the character of human beliefs, the perception of reality, and the norms which guide human behavior.*

This course helps students gain insight into the complex and conflicted history of the many interrelationships between religion and environmentalism in North America from the earliest European contact with Native Americans to contemporary times. The course will address the profoundly different understandings of and attitudes toward nature of these two groups. The course begins with discussion of this early contact and the ways in which indigenous cultures have been represented and misrepresented in

religious and scientific discourse. The course will move on to explore continuities and differences between these representations and 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century religious movements, particularly as they affect construction of U.S. policies toward the environment. Finally, the course addresses changing attitudes toward the environment evidenced by contemporary religious movements (e.g., neo-paganism, eco-feminism) as well as mainstream and Evangelical Christianity within the U.S. From this historical framework, students will begin to understand the many historical continuities and differences with current (and still changing) attitudes toward nature and environmental policy.

By examining historical relationships between religious beliefs and attitudes toward nature, students will better understand how the past shapes current attitudes toward nature. The class will help them understand the political, social, and economic conflicts surrounding modern environmental movements as these have been profoundly influenced by a range of religious beliefs and practices, from European Christianity during the colonial period to neo-paganism and Evangelical Christianity in the present.

Students will understand how contemporary conflicts about environmental policy have been shaped by the religious traditions and beliefs of indigenous peoples, by European colonists, by intellectual and spiritual movements such as Transcendentalism, by new contemporary religious movements, by contemporary exposure to different world religions, and by changes within contemporary Christianity in its various forms.

#### **Assessment plan for the course:**

Assessment is embedded in the grading criteria for the assignments; that is, assignments will be evaluated based on the goals and objectives of the course. Specifically, the course will evaluate whether students' written and oral assignments indicate that they have learned to

- write and speak with clarity and precision so as to advance thoughts and arguments coherently and persuasively
- engage in critical analysis of a range of religious traditions and practices as they relate to human attitudes toward and interactions with nature
- understand research methods used in the fields of history, ethnography, religious studies, cultural studies
- achieve an understanding of and develop an appreciation for ethnic, gender, and religious differences as these are expressed through environmentalism
- appreciate the roles of both religion and environmentalism in shaping their own cultural values and beliefs

The instructor will assess the degree to which the main objectives of the course, as stated above, have been achieved in the various course assignments. In particular, the assessment will focus on students' ability to express a critical understanding of the development of American popular music genres in relation to diversity in the United States. The assessment will also focus on students' interpretation and appreciation of

popular music. The department office will maintain the instructor's assessment and other comments in the course file for future review.

In addition, students will be asked to fill out narrative evaluations at the end of the quarter. Narrative evaluation forms used in Comparative Studies ask detailed questions regarding the effectiveness of the course, including the teaching materials. Based on the comments of the students, but also including the instructor's assessment of the course (which includes an evaluation of the materials and pedagogy employed to reach the objectives of the course), appropriate changes will be made to the syllabus.