

# WINGATE UNIVERSITY

*Preparing students for lives of significance in the global community*

## **REL 450: Ecotheology: An Introduction to What's Growing On**

TR 9:30-10:45am (Bridge 111)

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### **Required Texts:**

Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology* (2017)

Melanie Harris, *EcoWomanism: African American Women and Earth Honoring Faiths* (2017)

Catherine Wright, *God Creation Humanity* (2017)

Selected readings from Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013)

Various articles, readings, and papers will be provided on canvas

## **Ecotheology: An Introduction to What's Growing On**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course will explore the blossoming discipline of ecotheology – a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and creation. Participants will have the chance to explore the state of our planet's ecologies and grapple with the famous challenge made to Christianity by Lynn White Jr.: Christianity and its human centeredness is the root cause our current ecological crisis and exploitation of nature. Students will explore the relationships between God, creation, and humanity, discover the religious wisdom being unearthed by ecofeminists, ecowomanists, ecotheologians, indigenous scholars, preachers, artists, poets, and Christian missions. This course will also engage with nature and "holy noticing" in creative ways. Students will also be offered the opportunity to connect their classroom learning about ecotheology with the work of earth advocates at the Trinity Retreat Centre and NOAA at the Rachel Carson Reserve (Outer Banks, NC).

### **GOALS**

The course will provide the students with:

- ◆ An understanding of the principles inherent to ecotheology and the voices developing these principles in this new field of religious studies.
- ◆ Opportunities to learn and engage with the network of social, political, economic, gender and religious concepts and injustices that are contributing to our current ecological challenges
- ◆ The background knowledge and critical and creative thinking skills to offer inclusive, faith-based responses in a variety of contexts to the ecological challenges
- ◆ Opportunities to formulate their personal responses to ecological challenges
- ◆ The ability to construct a set of principles for articulating an ecotheological ethic.
- ◆ Opportunities to engage current public, faith infused dialogues on ecological issues

## OBJECTIVES

The students will be able to:

- ◆ understand the multi-faceted scientific, social, and spiritual dimensions of our current ecological crisis by listening to mainstream voices and those marginalized in society;
- ◆ identify the contribution of women scholars and practitioners in ecotheology and ecospirituality
- ◆ appreciate and describe historical factors contributing to the current ecological crisis, including the theological paradigms and social systems that have played a role in that history;
- ◆ review, analyse and critique the various voices that are suggesting a new role and relationship for humanity within planetary ecosystems and new ways to relate within social systems;
- ◆ create, describe, and evaluate potential faith-based responses to the ecological crisis;
- ◆ experience and contribute to a practical integration of theology and ecology that will demonstrate how students might engage others in ecojustice discourses.

## COURSE TOPICS:

### WHAT QUESTIONS ARE WE ASKING? WHAT THREADS ARE WE FOLLOWING?

**Envisioning our World: Focus Questions:** How have some historical voices in the Christian faith understood creation? What models have been constructed to describe how religion and science interact? How are Christian understandings of creation changing? Why? How/When/Why did the discipline of ecotheology emerge? What are the foundational principles of eco-theology?

**Ecotheological Methodologies and Contexts: Focus Questions** What is unique about a feminist analysis of ecological issues, and what is unique about the feminists' response to ecological challenges? What are the various forms of eco-feminism? How does an eco-feminist's approach complement and differ from the approach of other contextual theologies such as ecowomanism and indigenous theologies? What is ecowomanism? How does ecowomanism differ from ecofeminism? What similarities differences did you find between ecowomanism and indigenous faith traditions? How does the spirituality associated with indigenous peoples' cultures' address issues associated with ecological ethics? Are there similarities between an eco-cosmological approach to ecological ethics and an aboriginal approach to ecological ethics, and if so, what are they; how do they differ?

### Theological Disciplines

**Biblical EcoHermaneutics: Focus Qs** Can we have an ecological interpretation of the bible? What new meaning comes to light if students explore bible passages through the lens of ecology? Is anything lost in our understanding of Scripture if we use this lens? Why? How

could this new lens impact what is preached in Christian churches? How does an ecological interpretation of a wide range of biblical texts impact how Christians act towards creation?

**Anthropology: Focus Qs** What is the relationship among God, creation, and humanity? What relationship has been overemphasized and underemphasized? Why? How does this impact our understanding of all three? How does this overemphasis of the human-God relationship impact how people of faith interact with creation and with marginalized social groups?

**Creation Theology: Focus Qs** Has Christianity lost sight of creation in its desire to understand Jesus Christ? Does a focus on understanding creation (the science and faith dimensions) diminish our understanding of Jesus? Why? What attitudes have informed our relationship with the land? How does this neglect of creation impact our understanding of ourselves (dust dwellers) and God as Creator? When creation ceases to be important in the study of God, how does preaching change? How do the ethics and activities of church goers change?

**Christology: Focus Qs** How does our new appreciation of Earth impact how we understand Jesus, the Incarnation? How does an “Earthy” Christology impact how people of faith act towards one another and creation? How can our understanding of the love of Christ deepen with an ecological hermeneutic?

**Spirituality: Focus Qs** How can a reimagination of the Holy Spirit through an ecohermeneutic invigorate Christian imaginations? Can an ecologically informed spirituality fit within a Christian context? Is it helpful when addressing our ecological crisis?

**Suffering/Theodicy: Focus Qs** How can we understand God as Love within an evolutionary world full of suffering and brokenness? How does theological anthropologies help and harm modern explorations of suffering? What are some of the perspectives of suffering and what root theological concepts do they germinate from?

**EcoSocial Justice in Action: Focus Qs** What is the role of mission and ministry? What is the relationship between social, economic, and ecological injustices? How could missions incorporate an ‘eco’ framework to justice? Who are the neighbours we are called to love in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How does this inform our ethics and activities?

## **REQUIRED READING**

Please see the itinerary for more details. Each week, there will be assigned readings that students must read prior to our weekly assigned meeting day(s). Assignments, prompts, and in-class discussion germinate from these important readings. Think of it as a time to explore the authors’ thoughts, perspectives and assumptions – as well as your own. If you do this prep work, our in-class dialogues will be quite fruitful and you will find the assignments and assessments much easier.

## EVALUATION (SUBJECT TO REVISION)

Participation .....	10%
Prompts .....	25%
Subjectivity Projects .....	20%
<i>Ground Beneath My Feet</i>	10%
<i>Water of Life</i>	10%
Mid Term .....	15%
Final Exam .....	30%
(Preaching 10%; Analysis 10%; Subjectivity Project 10%)	

The following grades will be used in the evaluation of all work.

A 90-100	Excellent (always meets and exceeds expectations)
B 80-89	Above average (consistently meets expectations)
C 70-79	Average (meets some expectations but not others)
D 60-69	Passing (rarely meets expectations but does so enough to pass)
F 0-59	Failing (does not meet expectations to pass)

### ***Criteria for Success:***

***Participation:*** The student is expected to make all scheduled class times and be prepared to meaningfully discuss the assigned reading materials. Also, any research or requested items should also be brought and included in these meetings. To achieve a full participation mark, see the following chart:

***Prompts:*** These analytical and reflection papers will provide a brief overview of any issue or concept raised in the course readings indicated in the itinerary. This prompt will attempt to describe how and why the student's understanding of that matter has either been reinforced or shifted. Often, it will also be a place where this understanding will have to be presented in a way or context that will facilitate public dialogue in worship spaces (e.g., preaching). It should deal with a moment of significant insight or learning experienced by the student, why the student experienced a shift in understanding, and the possible ethical implications that might result with respect to faith and our ecological crisis.

***Subjectivity (SLBC) Projects:*** This is a unique and creative medium for students to connect with creation and express this relationship in ways beyond 'pen and paper' analyses. The two projects have been adapted from the text *Stop Look Breathe Create* (by Wendy Ann Greenhalgh). These projects emerged from an awareness of the historical disconnection of humanity from creation brought to light by ecotheologians. Students are encouraged to explore their own connectivity with creation and faith expressions of the Creator and spirituality within this medium.

***Mid Term Exam:*** This will be a take home examination of the in-class and/or field trip materials and reflections

***Final Exam:*** This exam has three components to assess student learning outcomes. There will be an analytical section that will draw upon principles and concepts learned in the course (similar format to the mid-term). The next two sections will be a final SLBC project and a preaching

(sermon) prompt. Both will assess the integrative abilities of the students in accordance to the SLOs. Students will present either the sermon or the creative project during the Final Exam period, while the analysis will be handed in by 3pm on the day of the final exam. This is a comprehensive exam and students will interact with all materials covered.

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Studying ecotheology is not purely a theoretical pursuit or merely accumulating data about concepts and ideas. It is equally a matter of engaging others about their beliefs and perspectives, while seeking to articulate your own. Thus, every effort will be made to cultivate a justice oriented, inclusive community of faith within which each voice is heard and every person treated with dignity and respect; learning how to live and love faithfully and fruitfully as a planetary community requires that we learn how to live and love faithfully and fruitfully as individuals and a class of engaged, critical thinkers. As participant in this interactive learning process, it is expected that course participants will be involved in all class activities (i.e., arrive on time, come with all texts and academic supplies, come with assigned readings done) and that they will contribute positively to a healthy, faithful, and fruitful context for learning. Also, please note that the course instructor reserves the right to alter this syllabus to meet the need of each class.

*Active Learning:* In this class, we will employ the Wingate University active learning model. It is based on the student success model developed by Kuh et al. (2005) and has been successfully applied at other colleges. In this teaching approach, we take steps to help you get more involved and connected with your studies and your classmates. To do this, you will be encouraged to share your learning experiences with others, thereby assisting them and yourself in the learning process. ‘Active learning’ is grounded in the principle that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings. Furthermore, when students collaborate with others in solving problems or mastering difficult material, they acquire valuable skills that prepare them to deal with the messiness and unpredictability of campus life and after life after Wingate.

Thus, Wingate faculty encourages all students to:

1. Ask questions in class or contributing to class discussions or both;
2. Make class presentations;
3. Work individually or with the other students in a study group on class projects inside or outside of class;
4. Tutor other students;
5. Participate in a community-based project as part of a course;
6. Discuss ideas from readings or classes with other students, family members, or others outside of class;
7. Search for answers to their question on their own, individually or in groups, rather than always relying on the faculty for the answers;
8. And, along with the faculty, lead by example, showing classmates and all the other university stakeholders how to become involved and connected with one another in meaningful ways of learning, and in sharing that learning with all those whose lives we may touch by passing on our knowledge.

(Adapted from: G. Kuh, et al. *Student Success in College* (2005) and Dr. Heather McDivitt)