

*Tree of Life:
Christianity, Climate Change, and Ecological Vocation*

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Magnolia Project:

Following the fantastic Magnolia Project, I re-worked a number of changes into the syllabus below. I will highlight several major changes. The first major realization was structural: when I taught the course in Spring 2016 I had not sufficiently named for my students the primary theme for the course, which was the role of the *religious imagination* in confronting climate change. I had assumed that students would arrive at that theme on their own, when in fact I needed to make it more explicit. My two days with the Magnolia Project also helped me see that the Tree of Life as a governing metaphor for the course was one worth keeping, but that it, too, needed to be more explicitly discussed in tandem with the course content.

In terms of content, the main changes I made were in my course reading list. I pretty much jettisoned most of the previous readings and created a new list based on our discussions in the Magnolia Project.

Finally, I plan to incorporate several new speakers and field trips into my course based on the Magnolia Project. One of those is Will Scott, the Yadkin River Keeper. He gave a fantastic presentation on the impacts of industrial agriculture on our local watershed. I can foresee a field trip to Sam Dobson's farm in Iredale County, one of the organic farmers Will Scott works with. Having students meet the two of them and see how a working organic farm offers a viable alternative to industrial methods will be a worthwhile field trip.

Course description: A growing number of scientists refer to our era as the Anthropocene, the time in which no part of the world remains untouched by human intervention. Whatever we call it, the scientific facts of our era are undisputed: that we are living in the midst of the 6th great extinction of species, that disruptive climate change is already underway and that human activity is the prime driver of that change; that we are depleting our forests, soils, and water supplies faster than their natural capacity for renewal; and that as the effects of these changes multiply (drought, heat waves, super storms), agricultural systems will become more stressed and the most adversely affected will those in the Global South.

In light of these stark realities, this course will posit a central thesis: one of the great untapped resources for confronting climate change lies in the religious imagination. One recent and notable example can be found in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si.* Using this document as our starting point, this course will engage a number of recent texts from

both Christian thinkers and secular writers. As a guiding metaphor for our discussion we will use the Tree of Life from both Genesis and Revelation. As we discuss the health of ecosystems on which human and non-human lives depend (and visit actual forests, farms, and watersheds), these metaphors will serve as theological lodestars that might guide us toward ecological healing. The course's end goal will be to articulate a holistic Christian response to the climate crisis. As WFUSD students are learning how to be "agents of justice, reconciliation, and compassion" among the human family, this course will ask how can their Christian imaginations be deepened by the adoption of an ecological way of seeing.

Rationale: The changes brought on by Anthropocene are not something our grandchildren will face, they are issues we are facing now, even here in North Carolina, and those changes are only predicted to worsen unless humans as a species take radical steps to alter our way of life. As a divinity school that trains Christian leaders, we need to introduce our students to the ecological realities thus described, and train them to apply their theological thinking to the problems posed by those realities. The purpose of the course is fourfold: a) introduce students to a range of literature on climate change which both outlines the problem and proposes solutions, b) think theologically about the human place in creation, c) provide a thick description of what Elizabeth Johnson calls "the ecological vocation," i.e. identify a theologically-informed set of practices for how we derive our energy and feed ourselves that lead to creation's flourishing rather than its demise; d) empower students to achieve a basic ecological literacy and, with that knowledge, encourage them to adopt an ecological vocation in their role as religious leaders.

Assignments:

1. *Quizzes*—at the very beginning of each class period we will have a short quiz on that day's assigned readings. You can drop your lowest quiz (including missed quizzes) at the end of the term. If you miss class or arrive late, you may not make up a quiz. 25%
2. *Participation*—given the seminar nature of this course (as well as field trips), participation is critical. I expect you to be present for all classes, and to be fully engaged in mind, body, and spirit. That means contributing regularly to class discussion, being attentive listeners to your colleagues, and contributing in other ways to the success of our learning community. Part of your participation grade will involve leading class discussion on one of the class periods in partnership with another student. Unexcused absences will result in a missed quiz, which will detract from your final grade. 25%

3. *5-7 page mid-term essay*: Half-way through the term you will write an essay on a theme of your choosing. The only requirements are that you demonstrate deep engagement with the course readings, discussions, and lectures thus far in the course, and that you demonstrate original, creative thinking on faith, climate change, and ecological vocation. Think of your papers being a creative essay (albeit one that brings your readings into conversation) rather than a theological argument. 20%
4. *Final Paper*: 15-20 page essay that brings to bear course readings and immersion experiences into a final synthesis. I would encourage you to try writing an essay for publication for a journal like Eco-Theo, The Other Journal, or Terrain.Org. See me for ideas. You may build on the topic from your first paper, but it needs to show substantive changes in that paper based on my comments. All final paper topics need to be approved by me. Email me or talk to me about this. 30%

Required Readings:

1. *Facing Gaia: A New Inquiry Into Natural Religion*, Bruno Latour's 2013 Gifford Lectures (publication?)
2. *Laudato Sí* Pope Francis, (free on Vatican website).
3. *Reason in a Dark Time*, Dale Jamieson, Oxford University Press 2014.
4. *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred In a Post-Modern World*, Jerome A. Miller. State Univ. of New York Press, 1992.
5. *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations*, Carole M. Cusack. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.
6. *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*, William P. Brown. Oxford Univ. Press, 2010.
7. "Carbon Capture," Jonathan Franzen, *The New Yorker*, April 06, 2015.
8. "Generation Anthropocene," Robert MacFarlane, *The Guardian*, April 1, 2016.