

# *CLIMATE CRISIS AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF LIFE*

Meadville Lombard Theological School

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## **DESCRIPTION:**

This course explores connections between the climate crisis and the enhancement of life. We will engage the climate crisis as a geophysical and planetary reality, a moral phenomenon, a religious concern, a social justice tragedy, a problem of political economy.

The climate crisis is a profound challenge to the future of human life as we have known it. It is also the greatest justice challenge humanity has ever faced. It is not merely that those who are least responsible for causing it are most negatively affected, but more insidiously, that those most responsible for it are the most likely to either deny that it's a problem or to deflect responsibility for it.

A guiding question of the course is whether or not (and if so, how) the changes we need to make to our moral and political, socio-economic, and cultural systems, in order to respond adequately to the climate crisis, might also contribute to the enhancement of human and nonhuman forms of life.

Climate change has already profoundly and tragically degraded the lives of many people and other species. And it is clear that the future of human life is going to be radically different from the present as a result of the climate changes that are already underway. But, granting these realities, might human and other forms of life be enhanced by imagining and bringing to life more ecologically sustainable and socially just counterworlds?

A primary task of the course is thus to guide students through diverse theological analyses of the moral, political and scientific contexts of the climate crisis in order to empower them to respond creatively in their own lives and faith communities to the climate crisis and climate justice.

Some of the questions we will pursue include:

What time is it—a time of transition, collapse, or emergence?

Is there a relation between the discourse of the Anthropocene and a new axial age, a time of cultural turning?

What are some forms of religion innovation and spirituality emerging in response to the climate crisis?

How might these innovations deepen our theological imagination, expand our moral empathy, and facilitate new forms of community and solidarity?

What are the causes/drivers of the climate crisis? What makes it such a difficult moral challenge—conceptually, theoretically, practically?

Why has it been politicized in the US? How and why should the climate crisis be construed as a justice issue? Who is most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and why? What do the climate crisis and climate justice have to do with debates about the Anthropocene?

How do the climate crisis and climate justice trouble/complicate/disrupt some of the modern west's most fundamental concepts and categories—nature, culture, human being, species? Does the climate crisis, paradoxically and not without great loss, also provide opportunities for positive social, political, and cultural change?

The course will use field work, readings, films and other media, lectures, student presentations, and group discussion.

### **FIELD WORK**

Research your local area's (e.g. town, city, metro-region, bioregion, etc.) awareness of, response to, and preparation for climate change. This research may entail a combination of internet research and in-person informational interviews. Further below you will find a small sampling of internet resources that may be helpful. Use your research to prepare a 20 minute class presentation that profiles your local community. Your presentation should answer questions such as the following:

\*What are the existing and projected impacts of climate change in your local community, both direct (e.g. sea-level rise, more frequent extreme weather) and indirect (e.g. increasing food prices)? How are these local impacts related to regional impacts (e.g. West Coast, Pacific Northwest, Midwest, North Atlantic, Mid-Atlantic, Southwest, etc...)?

\*Are there adaptive and/or mitigative systems in place in your community, whether governmental or nongovernmental? If there aren't systems in place in your local community, are there regional systems? If not, have there been efforts to establish systems that were thwarted for some reason? If so, explain.

\*What is the demographic make-up of your local community (e.g. race, socio-economic status, age) and which population groups are most likely to be most negatively affected by the existing and projected (direct and indirect) climate impacts in your area?

\*Do the response systems in your community, if they exist, address the potential racial and economic or other disparities in your community/region?

\*Are the more and less vulnerable populations working together? Are there cross-cultural, multiracial, interfaith climate justice coalitions at work in your area or region?

\*How, if at all, are the religious communities in your local area dealing with the climate crisis and climate justice (e.g. education, protest, advocacy, organizing)? Are the religious

communities working across denominational / traditional lines? Are they working across religious / secular lines? Which religious communities, if any, are engaged? Which aren't?

\*Is there a local or nearby Transition community? (See: <http://www.transitionus.org/>). Are there alternate economies and/or forms of cooperative, intentional community that are organized around ecological values? If so, how are they engaging climate change and climate justice?

\*Given your reading and research, what more do you believe your local community can do to address the climate crisis and climate injustice?

\*How might you communicate the moral, spiritual, economic, and social justice significance of responding to climate justice across faith and cultural lines?

### **Websites for local environmental/climate justice research:**

<http://scorecard.goodguide.com/index>: This website provides lots of local and regional data on various pollutants and presents the data comparatively by income and race—but from what I can tell it doesn't specifically address climate issues, the data may not be up to date, and the data may not be as thorough in all parts of the county as it is in others. It still may be useful. If it doesn't provide data specific to your local zip code, you might try looking up other nearby zip codes.

<http://cses.washington.edu/cig/fpt/guidebook.shtml>: This links to the Climate Impacts Group which has put together a climate change preparedness handbook scaled to local communities.

<http://epa.gov/statelocalclimate/local/topics/impacts-adaptation.html>: This EPA website on climate impacts and adaptation is excellent.

<http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/>: This is the EPA's website on environmental justice.

<http://epamap14.epa.gov/ejmap/entry.html>: An EPA EJ mapping tool may be useful.

<http://www.resilientus.org/>: Local and regional resilience organization.

<http://www.ukcip.org.uk/wizard/current-climate-vulnerability/lclip/>: This is a UK-based organization that has created a handy tool called the "Local Climate Impact Profile".

### **ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES**

Since this is a highly interactive course, all students are expected to participate deeply each day—through active reflection, discussion, and questioning. Student grades will be based on: a) daily participation and contributions to others' learning (25%); b) in-class Journey or local field research presentations (25%); c) in-class small group presentations (25%); d) and a final 10 pp. summative paper due by the end of April 30 (25%).

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES**

## Required Reading

Bauman, Whitney A. *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*. 172 +pp. [Purchase or borrow].

Bellah, Robert. "What is Axial about the Axial Age?" 20 pp. [PDF].

Bullard, Robert D., et al. "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007: A Report Prepared for the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries". 150+pp. [PDF].

Crutzen, Paul, et al. "The New World of the Anthropocene". *Environmental Science and Technology*. 44 (2010): 2228-2831. [PDF].

Delegates of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. "Principles of Environmental Justice". [PDF].

Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change. "Principles of Climate Justice". [PDF].

Foster, John Bellamy. "Four Laws of Ecology and the Four Anti-ecological Laws of Capitalism". Excerpt from Foster's *The Vulnerable Planet*. [PDF].

Gardiner, Stephen. "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics, and the Problem of Moral Corruption". *Environmental Values* 15 (2006): 397-413. [PDF].

Liu, Eric and Hanauer, Nick. *The Gardens of Democracy: A New American Story of Citizenship, the Economy, and the Role of Government*. 165 pp. + notes. [Purchase or borrow].

Macy, Joanna and Johnstone, Chris. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*. 238 pp. + notes. [Purchase or borrow].

Oreskes, Naomi and Conway, Erik M. *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (speculative-realist fiction). 79 pp. + notes. [Purchase or borrow].

Tokar, Brian. "Movements for Climate Justice". From *Handbook of the Climate Movement*, ed. M. Dietz. 13 pp. [PDF].

Wildman, Wesley. "Religious Naturalism: What it Can Be, and What it Need Not Be". *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences*. 1:1 (2014): 36-58. [PDF].

## Choose One or the Other

Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy*. 200+pp. [Purchase or borrow].

-OR-

Menzies, Heather. *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good*. 240pp. [Purchase or Borrow].

### Supplemental – Elective Reading

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Climate of History: Four Theses". *Critical Inquiry*. 35 (Winter 2009): 197-222. [PDF].

Hogue, Michael S. *American Immanence* (Columbia University Press, 2017). [Purchase or Borrow].

Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*.

Lambert, Yves. "Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?" *Sociology of Religion* 60:3 (1999): 303-333. [PDF].

Maslin, Mark. *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction*.

Steffen, W., et al. "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives". *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*. 369 (2011): 842-867. [PDF].

Swimme, Brian Thomas and Tucker, Mary Evelyn. *Journey of the Universe*.

### Additional Resources: General Climate Crisis and Climate Justice Websites

Global Warming Primer, Jeffrey Bennett: <http://www.jeffreybennett.com/a-global-warming-primer/>

Post-Carbon Institute: <http://www.postcarbon.org/>

Climate and Capitalism: <http://climateandcapitalism.com/>

Daily Climate News: <http://www.dailyclimate.org/frontpage/>

Environmental Justice Resources: <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/>

United Nations Environment Program: <http://www.unep.org/>

Climate Central: <http://www.climatecentral.org/>

Stockholm Resilience Center: <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/>

Transition USA: <http://www.transitionus.org/>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: <http://www.ipcc.ch>

Resilience website: <http://www.resilience.org/>

**CLASS SCHEDULE, TENTATIVE:** (NOTE: THE PROFESSOR RESERVES THE RIGHT TO MAKE CHANGES TO THE SEQUENCE AND STRUCTURE OF THESE SESSIONS. STUDENTS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HAVING THE READING AND IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS COMPLETED BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF THE CLASS.)

**DAY 1:** On the Anthropocene: Collapse and/or Emergence: [Required Reading: Crutzen, et al; Oreskes and Conway] [Supplemental: Chakrabarty; Greer; Steffen, et al.].

**DAY 2:** Axiality and Religious Naturalism: [Read Bauman, Bellah, Wildman]. [Supplemental: Hogue; Swimme and Tucker; Lambert].

**DAY 3:** Climate Crisis and Climate Justice I: [Read Bullard, et al; Gardiner; “Principles of Environmental Justice”; and “Principles of Climate Justice”; Foster]. [Supplemental: Chakrabarty; Klein].

**DAY 4:** Climate Crisis and Climate Justice II: [Read Shiva or Menzies; Tokar]. [Supplemental: same as Wednesday].

**DAY 5:** Getting Engaged: [Read Liu and Hanauer; Macy and Johnstone]. [Supplemental: Resilience and Transition websites].