



**JOHN FELICE  
ROME CENTER**

**John Felice Rome Center**  
**THEO 204 Religious Ethics and the Ecological Crisis**  
**Spring 2026**  
Wednesdays | 2.30-5.00pm  
Dr. Deborah F. Sawyer  
Email: dsawyer2@luc.edu  
Office Hours: Thursday s 2.00-3.00pm

### Course Description

‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’ (Genesis 1.31).  
What went wrong?

Across the globe so many socio-political values have their origins in religious ethical systems. Historically Christian moral theology has been uniquely powerful in providing structure and content to political and legal systems across the western and colonial worlds. The authors of Genesis present us with the first commands of the Creator to humanity, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gen.1.28). In the past these words have been taken as a free pass for universal exploitation of resources: animal, vegetable and mineral.

When we look beyond this paradigm of dominance for humanity’s stewardship, grounded on an ‘othering’ of the created world, we uncover alternative worldviews which offer holistic rather than hierarchical models and place humanity within nature rather than apart from it.

The first part of THEO 204 introduces the concepts and definitions of ‘religion’, ethics’ and ‘ecological crisis’ to clarify the basic parameters for our studies. We then take a brief journey through history to uncover the process whereby religious ethics evolved to designate the human species as a phenomenon *apart* from the rest of the material world.

Conversely, we’ll examine alternative historical movements within Christian culture which were challenging this hierarchical notion of humanity over nature. Examples include Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan movement and Hildegard of Bingen, polymath, mystic and visionary.

Before moving on to the cyclical and timeless worldviews of Asian religious/cultural contexts, we’ll study the Islamic ethical traditions and contemporary Muslim ecological initiatives, namely, *Al-Mizan*. Turning to Hinduism and Buddhism we explore notions of re-birth which fuse humanity as one with the natural world. How does this status of humanity impact on ethics towards non-human life and ecology?

Cyclical and non-time bound traditions share elements of their world views with indigenous traditions whose spirituality is bound to the earth, to their particular piece of land on this earth. This connection to a particular sacred place is rooted in a relationship of mutual dependence/mutual survival. We’ll be studying examples of these traditions from the Americas and Australia, examining their ethical understanding and approach to nature, as well as the impact colonialism has had on these values, beliefs and practices.

Within this frame of holistic approaches to ecology we’ll investigate ecofeminism - a contemporary movement, originating in the West towards the end of the twentieth century. Its critiques of the environmental crisis, and its application of practical remedies, reflect the integration of ecology, feminism and spirituality.

In conclusion we’ll reflect on the impact the ecological crisis has had on the value systems of ‘linear’/time-bound traditional religions. Are beliefs and values essential to indigenous spiritual traditions informing major religious



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traditions? Here we'll look closely at Pope Francis' ecological initiative – 'Integral Ecology', outlined in *Laudato Si'*, and examine how this evolves from the theology of St Francis, while maintaining humanity as unique in the natural world, but also intrinsically connected to all of God's creation.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Students who successfully complete this course will have:

- Developed their academic skills to construct a well-informed argument in writing and oral presentation
- Demonstrated their critical skills to evaluate secondary sources in relation to primary texts
- Identified and explained key issues in approaches to ecology from religious ethical, historical and global perspectives
- Understood diversities and similarities of religious ethical approaches to ecology across global spiritual traditions
- Demonstrated awareness of global faith-based initiatives addressing the ecological crisis
- Synthesized information from a variety of academic disciplines as it relates to the impact of the ecological crisis around the world

### **Required Text / Materials**

All assigned readings are posted on Sakai

### **Attendance Policy**

In accordance with the Rome Center mission to promote a higher level of academic rigor, and in compliance with full-time student visa status, all courses adhere to the following attendance policy.

Prompt attendance, preparation and active participation in course discussions are expected from every student and synonymous with academic success. Attendance is mandatory at every class meeting for each course. Lateness or leaving class early will impact the course grade at the professor's discretion. All absences, including medical absences, will be treated the same, unless they are documented long-term conditions or emergencies. Such situations will be evaluated case-by-case by the Academic Affairs office.

### **Once-a-week classes:**

- After 1 absence, a 2% final grade reduction will be applied for each missed class.
- Missing 3 classes or more will result in an automatic failure (F).

### **Assessment Components**

Participation and Group Presentations	10%
<b>Midterm</b>	
Reading Responses weeks 2, 4 and 5	20%
Film Review	15%
<b>Finals</b>	
Annotated Project Paper Plan	10%
Project Paper	25%
Reading Responses weeks 7, 8 and 10	20%



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### **Grading**

94-100: A  
90-93: A-  
87-89: B+  
84-86: B  
80-83: B-  
77-79: C+  
74-76: C  
70-73: C-  
67-69: D+  
60-66: D  
59 or lower: F

### **Academic Integrity**

Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are unacceptable at the Rome Center and will be dealt with in accordance with Loyola University Chicago's guidelines. Please familiarize yourself with Loyola's standards here: <https://catalog.luc.edu/academic-standards-regulations/undergraduate/>. You are responsible to comply with the LUC University Catalog.

### **Late or Missed Assignments & Exam Policy**

Late or missed assignments will not be accepted for grading without the authorization of the instructor. ***As per the JFRC academic policies, students who miss any scheduled exam or quiz, including a final exam at the assigned hours will not be permitted to sit for a make-up examination without approval of the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. Permission is given rarely and only for grave reason; travel is not considered a grave reason. Make-up exams will only be given for documented absences.***

### **Accessibility Accommodations**

Students registered with the Student Accessibility Center (SAC) requiring academic accommodations should contact the Academic Affairs office at the John Felice Rome Center during the first week of classes.

### **Statement on Title IX**

The Rome Center follows Loyola's [Comprehensive Policy and Procedures for Addressing Discrimination, Sexual Misconduct, Retaliation](#) and will comply with those as indicated and instructed.

### **Email Communication**

I will do my best to reply to emails sent **during business hours (Monday to Friday, 8.00 am– 6.00 pm)**. Emails sent after 6.00 pm will be considered received the next day. The best way to communicate with me is directly: after class, during my office hour or by making an appointment via email.

**Computer, Phone & Internet Use in the Classroom Use of phones is always prohibited. Please turn your phones off when in class. Use of laptop computers during class time is permitted only for note taking, group work and class research activity.**



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**Course Schedule**

**Friday Class Days: Friday, February 6**

**Week One 01/21 i. Introduction to THEO 204 Syllabus and Today's Challenges**

***Is the Partisan Divide Too Big to Be Bridged?***

From the urban and rural divide to the partisan gulf, from religious groups to warring factions on campuses, organizations and funders are cropping up with hope for common ground.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/16/us/politics/national-divisions.html?searchResultPosition=26>

***Environmental Groups Face 'Generational' Setbacks***

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/16/climate/environmental-strategy-trump.html?searchResultPosition=17>

ii. Analyzing and illustrating terminology: 'Religion', 'Ethics', 'Ecological Crisis'

iii. Introducing Linear religions: Beginnings and Endings

**Week Two 01/28 The Garden of Eden – Utopian and dystopian readings**

i. Genesis 1-3

ii. Sayem, Md. Abu. 'Lynn White, Jr.'s Critical Analysis of Environmental Degradation in Relation to Faith Traditions: Is His "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" Still Relevant?' Journal of Ecumenical Studies, vol. 56, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–23

**Week Three Friday Class 02/06**

**Princess Mononoke – Media representations of Environmental Crises**



**Week Four 02/11 Medieval ecology: St Francis of Assisi & St Hildegard of Bingen**

- i. 'The Original Green Campaign: Dr. Hildegard of Bingen's Viriditas as Complement to Laudato Si', John Dadosky Toronto Journal of Theology, Volume 34, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. 7
- ii. Johnson TJ. 'Francis and creation', in Robson MJP, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge University Press; 2011:143-158. 9-95

**Week Five A. 02/18 Islam: Introduction to the belief system, ethics and ecology**

- i. 'Islam Contemporary Expressions', Erin E. Stiles in, Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice, Ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, 2012.



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- ii. "Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth." *Islamic Horizons*, vol. 51, no. 4, Islamic Society of North America, 2022, pp. 42–43.

**Week Six**      02/25                    **Implications of non-linear worldviews**  
**Introduction to Hinduism – cycles of life and ecological perspectives**  
**Project Plan Workshop**

- i. 'Beliefs' Anna King, from Tim Dowley ed. *A Brief Introduction to Hinduism*, pp.67-74.
- ii. 'Hindu Traditions: Dharmic Ecology', in Scheid, Daniel P., *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* New York, 2016

**Week Seven**    03/04                    **Midterm: Review and Reading Responses assignment**

-----**Spring Break**-----

**Week Eight**    03/18                    **Introduction to Buddhism -'dependent origination'**

- i. "Beliefs", from *A Brief Introduction to Buddhism*, Harris, Elizabeth J., and Tim Dowley, 2018, pp. 67–73
- ii. 'Buddhist Traditions: Interdependence', in Scheid, Daniel P., *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* New York, 2016

**Week Nine**     03/25                    **Part 1: Indigenous approaches to ecology i. Australia**

Tonkinson, R. (2012). 'Australia', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice* (eds M.D. Palmer and S.M. Burgess). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444355390.ch24>

**Week Ten**      04/01                    **Holistic ecology ii. North America**

'American Indian Traditions: Balance with All Our Relations' in Scheid, Daniel P., *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* New York, 2016, pp.162-180

**Week Eleven**   04/08                    **Part 1: Ecofeminism**  
**Part 2: Project Workshop**

Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures: Pushing the Limits of Cultural Imperialism?" *Ecofeminism*, edited by Greta Gaard, Temple University Press, 1993, pp. 295–314. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt5pf.15>.

**Week Twelve**   04/15                    **Contemporary Christian ecological ethics**

- I. 'Integral Ecology', Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter: *Laudato Si'*, 2015, pp.93-108.
- II. Scheid, Daniel P., 'Earth Rights', *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* New York, 2016, pp.101-116.

**Week Thirteen** 04/22                    **Project Presentations**



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