

Nature & Spirituality in Popular Culture

The University of Colorado; June 2013

(RLST-3820 Topics in Religious Studies: Nature/Spirituality/Culture)

INSTRUCTOR

Professor Bron Taylor (Ph.D.)
Visiting from the University of Florida
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LOCATION|TIME

Monday through Friday, 9:15 a.m. - 10:50 a.m., Humanities Room 270

OFFICE HOURS

Office hours: Daily after class, by appointment.

DESCRIPTION

Course Description

Focusing on the period since Walt Disney began making animal-focused documentaries and animated films in the 1930s, up through the blockbuster motion picture *Avatar* (2009), this course examines religious, spiritual, and political dimensions of artistic productions, scientific representations in museums, and other cultural inventions (such as theme parks), in which nature takes center stage. We will explore the cultural tributaries, influences, and controversies such productions engender, for they constitute important ways that environmental ethics, and quests for environmentally sustainable livelihoods and lifeways, are expressed and promoted. The course will enhance students' abilities to interpret these cultural productions and their evocative power, and explore their own reactions to these social phenomena.

Purpose and Objectives

- 1) complicate and thus make more critical and sophisticated what students understand by terms like religion, spirituality, nature, and popular culture.
- 2) provide students with an understanding of different ways to study beliefs, perceptions, and practices related to what people variously construe as religion or spirituality.
- 3) illuminate the ways in which religion, spirituality and nature-related values are constructed, expressed, and contested in popular culture.
- 4) facilitate the development of students' own critical and ethical engagements related to their understandings of the world and their place in it.

Course Outline

The course will unfold in three main endeavors: (1) understanding worldviews (2) developing analytic frameworks, and (3) analyzing social phenomena at the intersection of religion, spirituality, nature, and popular culture. Specifically:

Worldviews / Cosmovisions ~ Perceptions about the biosphere & universe, the human place in it, and the meaning of it.

- I. 'Religion', 'Spirituality', and the 'family resemblance' school of social analysis
 - A. Hybridity and Bricolage
- II. The Natural Dimension of Religion
 - A. Nature and the origins of religion
 - B. Sacrifice, insecurity, and the experience of prey
 - C. Awe, wonder, mystery, and meaning
- III. Ecological adaptation and religious belief
 - A. Maladaptive religious/cultural systems
- IV. Main types of religious belief and perception
 - A. Animistic, Pagan & Indigenous
 - B. Axial Age Religions
 - C. Asian / Vedic, Buddhist, Confucian, Polytheistic
 - D. Western / Abrahamic
 - E. New, Emerging, and Contemporary Religion/Spirituality
- V. Globalization, pluralism and new forms of religious hybridity
 - A. New Religious Movements
 - B. The Cultic/countercultural Milieu
 - C. The Environmental Milieu
- VI. Nature Religion (understandings and examples of)
 - A. Catherine Albanese's Nature Religion in America
 - B. 'Nature as Sacred' nature religions:
 - C. Paganism
 - D. New Age
 - E. Secular and Scientific Nature Spiritualities (often versus other ones)
- VII. Green Religion (and the Greening of Religion Hypothesis)
- VIII. Dark Green Religion

Lenses for Analysis: Strategies and explanatory frameworks

- I. Theories of Myth and Popular Culture
 - A. Cultural productions, including film, as mythmaking
 - B. Cultural productions, including film, as religion
 - C. Cultural productions, including film, as ethics
 - D. Popular culture as religious battleground

- II. Lived Religions
- III. Sacred Space
- IV. Eschatology, Apocalypticism & Millenarianism
- V. Structuralism
- VI. Critical schools
 - A. Feminist and race/ethnic analysis
 - B. Post-modern and post-colonial analysis
- VII. Environmental Ethics (diagnoses and prescriptions about our environmental predicaments)
 - A. The elements of ethics (the ethics analysis chart)
 - B. Types of environmental ethics

Examples of Nature & Spirituality Popular Culture

Examples will begin week two and continue throughout the course (see the class schedule).

READINGS

The required books can be found inexpensively from online and other used booksellers, as well as at the University bookstore. Additional articles will be available via online links.

Required Texts

Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010). In addition to this book, at your leisure during this course, view and listen to some of the 'dark green' [nature-venerating video](#) and [nature-venerating music](#), and other [supplementary materials](#), at the book's website.

Daniel Quinn, *The Story of B* (Bantam, 1997)

Michael Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy* (NY/Warner 1993)

Bron Taylor, ed., *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (WLU Press, 2013) (selections to be made available by instructor).

Bron Taylor, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005/2008), selections to be made available by instructor.

Recommended supplemental books

Adrian Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (WLU Press 2013)

John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York University Press, 2003)

Jeffrey Cripple, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

REQUIREMENTS

Movies and Documentaries

Students will view motion pictures both in class and outside of class. Students will be required to have access to a motion picture delivery and/or streaming service, such as Netflix, to view movies that are assigned but that will not be shown during class time. Some of those that are to be viewed outside of class may be provided during special 'movie nights' or after the morning class; others may be available online.

Preparation, Discussion and Participation

Students are expected to be up to date with their readings and to actively participate in the class (worth 5% of the grade). The points for this part of the class will be awarded at the end of the class.

Exams

There will be a midterm and a final exam, worth 30 and 40% respectively, which will be taken in-class, with diverse questions to respond to, including essays sections. The exams will be comprehensive, with questions drawing on any classroom experience or assignment that occurred previously.

Research Paper and optional Slideshow Presentation

Students will prepare a 2,500-4,000 word research paper, which will comprise 30% of the course grade. In addition to this essay, students may submit a related slideshow illuminating the social phenomena analyzed in the written paper. Excellent slideshows will receive bonus points and outstanding ones (with student permission) may be added to the course syllabus as examples and resources for future classes. Slideshows will be prepared with powerpoint or other slideshow presentation programs or online services.

In your paper you will focus on one or more aspects of popular culture, examining the ways in which it (or they) seek to evoke or reinforce spiritual perceptions and beliefs related to the environments that we inhabit. (These environments can be either what we normally consider to be natural and pristine or dramatically modified by our species.)

Use the theoretical lenses presented in the class to make *an argument* about the social phenomenon under investigation, or draw on other analytic perspectives you have learned elsewhere, or develop your own analytic approach as you make your argument. Build your argument on evidence you bring forward and consider carefully views and evidence contrary to your own perspective (if any such is extant); done well, considering competing points of view will make our argument stronger.

The best papers will often include a library search for scholarly articles or books that illuminate your subject matter but this is not absolutely necessary. Some things you may wish to focus upon nobody has analyzed with the kind of focus we are taking in this class. You may, therefore, be plunging into a completely novel area, using lenses learned in or beyond this class as heuristic (interpretive) devices.

Consider what the artists themselves are trying to argue, convince you of, evoke in you, and call you to action regarding. Alternatively, you may elect to focus on the audiences who experience these productions. Consider also whether the social phenomena in question are advancing not only a spiritual approach to nature but also a political ideology, namely, ideas, aims and assertions that constitute a socio-economic-political program. Doing so will also bring into focus the perspectives with which your subject matter is in contention. Good questions to ask include: What do the producers of what you are examining think is at stake? With whom are they in contention? Can their means of artistic expression be considered 'technologies of the sacred' and if so, how? If there is a view of where humanity went wrong spiritually and with regard to nature, what is it? And if they are explicitly or implicitly envisioning or advocating a certain kind of future (e.g., a utopian or 'ecotopian hope), what would it be?

To decide on a research project it would be a good idea to carefully review the entire class schedule to see what is coming up, as well as the "Additional Resources" section at the end of this syllabus.

Hints: In some cases the theoretical approach and arguments found in *Dark Green Religion* will be helpful as you work up your own paper. Do these arguments and the evidence mustered for them seem compelling? Does your own focus evidence such arguments? Or, does your research cast into question those findings? Alternatively or additionally, *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* might be helpful to you analytically because it exemplifies the sorts of analyses I am looking for in your own papers. You may, therefore, find it helpful to read ahead to find the range of issues it explores that may also be ripe for analysis in your own research.

You are by no means restricted to the many possibilities to be found in the syllabus but being familiar with it may trigger ideas about things you know about that would be fitting. I especially like learning about things I had no idea even existed!

Finally, do not assume that you must focus on social phenomena in popular culture that promotes environmental concern and action. Much of popular culture is indifferent to and a distraction from any environmentalist agenda, and some is in direct opposition to such an agenda, including due to religious, political, and moral beliefs that view environmentalist worldviews as religiously, politically, and ethically misguided or even dangerous.

The more innovative and creative your research paper is, the better argued and evidenced, the better your grade for it will be; the same applies to your slide show presentation if you elect to do

one to complement your research paper. If your paper is exceptional, I may encourage you to develop it further in order to submit to a scholarly journal, including the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, which I edit.

Students who submit a draft of their research paper will receive feedback and be allowed to revise and improve it, before the final due date. Students are encouraged to review Professor Taylor's [writing well guide](#), and [Josh Sowin's Guide to Writing Well](#).

Extra credit

Students are encouraged to submit additional resources that illuminate course themes, books, motion pictures, comic books, photographs, music, youtube and other online films, with short descriptions of their relevance. Those making contributions to this course or future syllabi for it will receive extra credit points, according to their significance.

EVALUATION

Points Possible for Required Assignments

Assignment	Proportion of Course Grade
Discussion/Participation	5%
Research Paper	30%
Midterm	30%
Final	35%

Calculating Grades

At the end of the semester, the total number of points earned by each student will be divided by the total number earned by the highest-scoring student. The resulting percentage will be used to calculate each student's grade for the course. Put in a formula, it looks like this:

$$\frac{\text{the score of each individual student (your score)}}{\text{(divided by) the highest score earned by a student}}$$

The percentage arrived at by means of this formula will be evaluated according to the following scale:

A	≥95
A-	90
B+	87
B	83

B-	80
C+	77
C	73
C-	70
D+	67
D	63
D-	60
F	≤59.99

This kind of scoring is fairer than many other forms of grading because: (1) It is based on what students actually achieve rather than some preconceived standard held by the professor; (2) Each student can receive a high grade; (3) Hard-working students will not be penalized for staying in a demanding course full of equally industrious students. With a traditional curve, demanding courses that “weed out” less industrious students, leaving hard-working ones, can unintentionally harm good students putting them in competition with each other. This will not occur in this course. To further insure fairness, any extra credit points will be added to the individual student’s score, *only after the highest score earned by a student has been established*. This ensures that the extra credit earned will not increase the difficulty of the grading scale. *I reserve the right to lower or raise course grades based on classroom contributions or upon absences. I also reserve the right to change course requirements.*

Late or Missing Assignments.

Students who do not make discussion posts on time will not receive credit for them. Students who cannot take an exam on time for medical reasons, or deaths in their families, must inform the course instructors before the exam of the reason for their impending absence and provide evidence verifying the reason. No accommodation will be made after the fact apart from a contemporaneous accident immediately prior to the exam.

Academic Dishonesty. Students engaged in any form of academic dishonesty will be subject to other disciplinary measures. Students are expected to know what constitutes plagiarism and to understand and avoid inadvertent forms of it that can occur by cutting and pasting quotations from various texts on the world wide web and elsewhere.

Accommodation for Disabilities: Students requesting classroom accommodation must first register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide documentation to the student who must then provide this documentation to the Instructor when requesting accommodation.

Reviewing exams. Academic dishonesty is so pronounced that faculty need to take precautions to ensure the integrity of exam processes. For this reason, in some classes, exams or parts of them will not be returned, but students may review them during office hours. At the end of the semester, work that was available for student pickup will be available in the Religion Department

office in Anderson 107 for 30 days after the official date that grades are posted by the registrar. After this time, they will be recycled.

SCHEDULE

Note: All readings are to be completed before the class date/week under which they are listed. This schedule is subject to change so rather than printing it, I recommend bookmarking and using only this online syllabus and consulting it regularly.

June 3 & 4 ~ Cosmogony and Ethical Order

Assignments/Readings

Selections from [Genesis 1-12](#) (which includes commentary from Professor Taylor).

Andrew Fiala's and Matt Wiebe's articles about '[Creation Myths in the Ancient World](#)' and the '[Creation Story in the Hebrew Bible](#).'

Daniel Quinn, [Animism: Humanities Original Worldview](#)

[Popular Culture](#) itself is defined in different ways so we begin by looking at a discussion of the term in Wikipedia, an online source that some would and others would not consider to be an expression of popular culture

Bron Taylor's [Introductory Lecture](#) (week one)

Recommended: William French, [Rousseau](#)

Assignments/Personal Viewing

Documentary: [Zeitgeist the Movie](#) (view Part I, 13:21-40:10; you may also watch more of the film if you wish.)

Presentations

Lecture: Worldviews & Cosmovisions; Cosmogonies and Ethical Order (part I).

June 5 & 6 ~ Competing Cosmogonies (Paganism focus)

Assignments/Readings

Lynn White Jr., [The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crises](#)

William French, [Francis of Asissi](#)

Graham Harvey, [Paganism](#) and [Contemporary Paganism](#)

Bron Taylor's [Overview of Daniel Quinn's Ishmael](#). This book was the inspiration for the motion picture "Instinct", and it precedes chronologically *The Story of B*.

Daniel Quinn, *The Story of B*, Bantam, 1997 (begin reading)

Further / recommended reading:

Recommended: [Lynn White biography](#) and article about the [Lynn White Thesis](#)

Robert Heinland, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1981)
Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993) (compare with Ecotopia; a motion picture is in the works).

Presentations

Lecture: Worldviews & Cosmovisions (part II).

Movie: Brother Sun, Sister Moon (1972).

Movie (online): [Bambi](#) (1942)

Documentary (online): [Divine Women: When God Was a Girl](#) (2012). This 58 min documentary is part one of a BBC Series on goddesses in religion. While not the focus of the documentary, the scholarship upon which this documentary draws has influenced and inspired contemporary Paganism, especially Wicca.

Recommended movies: [Dumbo](#) (1941); *The Color Purple* (1985), 2 hours, 34 minutes.

June 7 & 10 ~ Battle of the Cosmogonies (Animism focus)

Assignments/Readings

Daniel Quinn, *The Story of B*, Bantam, 1997 (complete)

Graham Harvey, [Animism Today](#)

Bron Taylor, [Disney Worlds at War](#)

Dana Lyons, [Tree Music](#), and the related song, [The Tree mp3](#)

Presentations

Lecture: Worldviews & Cosmovisions (part III), *Ishmael*, *The Story of B*, and the Revival of Animism, and some classical lenses for analyzing and explaining religion, including the Sacred/Profane binary.

Movies: *Pocahontas* (1995); and *Left Behind: The Movie* (2001)

Recommended movie: *Instinct* (1999), excerpts

Recommended documentaries: *Disney True Life Adventures* (1950s), *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954) excerpts; *Oceans* (DisneyNature) ‘extra features interviews’; *Gates of Heaven* (1978, Dir. Errol Morris)

June 11 & 12 ~ Dark Green Nature Religions

Assignments/Readings

Dark Green Religion, Preface, Readers Guide and Introductory Chapter (ix-12), Chapter 2, Dark Green Religion (pp. 13-41)

Jo Pearson and Sarah Pike, [Wicca](#)

Presentations

Lecture: More Lenses for Analysis of Religion, Nature, and Popular Culture

Movies: *The Wicker Man* (1993); *The Lion King* (1994) (or next week)

Online movie: [The Mists of Avalon](#) (2001); *online*,

Recommended Movies: If you liked the *Wicker Man*, see *The Wicker Tree* (2011).

June 13 & 14 ~ Religion and Nature in North America; and New Age Spirituality

Assignments/Readings

Dark Green Religion in North America (Ch 3., 42-70)

Michael York, [New Age](#)

Michael Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy* (NY/Warner 1993) (begin reading)

Note: *The Celestine Prophecy* was also produced as a movie; it was a critical and commercial failure, but you many find and watch it if you wish: *The Celestine Prophecy* (2006)

Recommended readings:

[Rachel Carson's nature religion](#), selected readings

John Muir, [Cedar Keys](#) (written from the Florida Gulf town by this name)

Presentations

Lecture: Yet More Lenses for Analysis, including from *Nature Religion in America* by C. Albanese.

Documentary: *I Am* (2010), Directed by Tom Shadyac

Recommended documentaries: *RamDass | Fierce Grace* (2001); *Afterlife* (2011) (promotes reincarnation based on supposedly scientific approach to near-death experiences).

14 June: Deadline for submitting proposal for research paper.

June 17 & 18 ~ New Age Nature Spirituality

Assignments/Readings

Bron Taylor, [Celestine Prophecy](#)

Jose Arguelles, [Harmonic Convergence](#)

Michael Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy* (NY/Warner 1993) (conclude reading)

Bron Taylor, [The Hundredth Monkey](#)

Presentations

Lecture: Lenses for Analysis (part III)

Documentaries : *In the Light of Reverence* (2001) (Wintu Mt. Shasta segment; perhaps Hopi/ Four Corners segment)

Movie: [Mindwalk](#) (1990) [link is to youtube version; credits begin @1:47:45.]

Documentary (*recommended*): What the Bleep Do We Know? (2004).

Review online documentaries related to the Mayan calendar and the New Age interest in it):

- 2012: Science or Superstition (2009) [New Age genre; see especially the first 41 and last 15 minutes, which is a good reflection of new age visions for an enlightened partnership society].
- [Cracking the Maya Code](#) (Nova/PBS, 2008), 78 minutes [A far more scientific examination of the Mayan calendar and supposed prophesies.]
- [The Mayan Word](#) (2012) online documentary, 64 minutes) [Provides contemporary Mayan perspectives about the end of the world, especially, that we are destroying our planet and need to work together to create a new beginning. Critically engages New Age views.]

Recommended movie: The Butterfly Effect (2004)

June 19 ~ Mid Term

MID-TERM EXAM; IN CLASS

June 20 ~ Radical Environmental Nature Spirituality

Assignments/Readings

Dark Green Religion, Ch 4. Radical Environmentalism (71-102).

John Seed, [Re-Earthing](#)

Listen to [radical environmental music](#) at the DGR website.

Presentations

Lecture: the Art, Music, and Radical Environmental Nature Spirituality

Movie: Butterfly (2000), 79 minutes (or excerpts), and/or If a Tree Falls.

Online movie: [Pickaxe](#) (1999); view online

Recommended Films about resisting deforestation and species extinctions: FernGully; The Last Rainforest (1992), 76 minutes; Hoot (2006); The Big Trees (1952); The East (2013).

Further reading (optional)

Bron Taylor, [Resacralizing Earth: Environmental Paganism and the Restoration of Turtle Island](#), in *American Sacred Space* (1995), 97-151.

Bron Taylor, [Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide?: Radical Environmentalism's Appropriation of Native American Spirituality](#), *Religion* 27(2):183-215, April 1997.

Recommended documentaries:

If a Tree Falls (2011): documentary about the Earth Liberation Front activist Daniel McGowen, who worked with Bill Rogers (Avalon), who is discussed in *DGR chapter 4*.

June 21 & 24 ~ Surfing Spirituality and other Outdoor Nature Spiritualities

Assignments/Readings

Dark Green Religion, Ch 5. Surfing Spirituality (103-126); optional [supplemental materials](#).

Samuel Snyder, [Fly Fishing as Nature Religion](#)

Greg Johnson, [Rock Climbing](#)

Kocku von Stuckrad, [Mountaineering](#)

Presentations

Surfing Spirituality slide show and motion picture excerpts.

Documentaries: In the Light of Reverence (2001); 1:26 & 1:12-1:15. (Lakota/Blackfeet/Rock Climber-‘Devil’s Tower segments); Step into Liquid (2003) excerpts;

Music and Video: See the [DGR surfing spirituality venue](#), as well as Eddie Vetter and Perl Jam’s ocean venerating [Amongst the Waves music video](#), and the [lyrics](#). *Recommended*: [video of Kelly Slater and Eddie Vetter](#) and their conservation efforts at Trestles surf break in California; also relevant is much of the [Surfing Music](#) at the website devoted to it.

Movie Night or Online: Point Break (1991); Golf in the Kingdom (2010)

Recommended movies: Minds in the Water (2011), Intentio (2012), Five Summer Stories (1972), Whale Rider (2002), Soul Surfer (2011).

Additional Resources

[Surfing History](#) from the Surfing Heritage Foundation

Recommendations (from Sam Snyder on fishy spirituality):

You tube videos about Bristol Bay, which UF Religion and Nature graduate Dr. Samuel Snyder is trying to defend (4-5 minutes each).

- [Casting for Conservation in Bristol Bay](#) (and) [The Live Cast](#) (see also) [Red Gold](#)

Blogs:

- Erin Block’s [Mysteries Internal](#)
- [MoldyChum/reelpure thoughts](#)
- Chris Hunt’s [Eat More Brook Trout](#) (who recommended the following film):

Motion Pictures:

- Motion picture [A Deliberate Life](#) (film’s website); [download the movie here](#).

Books:

- Books: David James Duncan, *River Why* (Snyder does not recommend the movie based on it); and Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (1976).

24 June, last chance to submit draft of research paper for comments and suggestions before turning in final version (by 30 June, see below).

June 25 & 26 ~ Pantheism and Gaian Naturalism; and Nature Spirituality at Museums & Theme Parks; Comic Books and Children’s Television

Assignments/Readings & Viewings

Ch 6. Globalization with Predators and Moving Pictures (127-154)

Ch 7. Globalization in Arts, Sciences, and Letters (155-179)

Bernard Zaleha, [Pantheism in American Popular Culture](#) (esp. p. 82f)

Jack Loeffler, [Edward Abbey](#), “Either everything is divine, or nothing is” (p.2)

[Pantheism Net](#) of the World Pantheist Movement (see especially the [WPM Statement of Principles](#))

Presentations

Documentary (in class): Journey of the Universe (2001), 56 minutes.

Movie night (or netflix): Stigmata (1999), 98 minutes

Nature Spirituality at the Nation’s Theme Parks, Tourist Attractions, and Museums (Professor Taylor’s slide show, online).

David Attenborough Segment

- [Sir David Attenborough - the story behind Life on Earth - BBC](#): Here, Naturalistic Animism is exemplified in Attenborough's famous encounter with Mountain Gorillas, during which he said, “There is more meaning and mutual understanding in exchanging a glance with a Gorilla than any animal I know. We’re that similar. Their sight, their hearing, their sense of smell, are so similar to ours that we see the world as they do.”
- Yet, ecstatic experiences like this do not prevent him from seeing the violent side of nature and facing head on those who wish he would attribute it to a divine being: [Sir David Attenborough on nature, worms, predation, and those who believe in a beneficent God](#) (2.23)
- David Attenborough [on Darwin and the Tree of Life](#) blames Genesis as the root cause of the despoliation of the earth.
- [David Attenborough’s favorite moments](#) (*recommended*, worth perusing)
- [Symphony of Science music videos](#) (at least view, ‘We’re all connected’ and ‘The Unbroken Thread’), then look at the other music there, such as ‘Holy Now’, and Tracy Chapman’s music video, [Heaven’s Here on Earth](#).

Recommended movies:

American Beauty (1999); Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012)

Julie Sweeny’s (standup comedy video), Letting Go of God (2006)

Recommended documentaries:

[Cosmos: A Personal Voyage](#), episode 1 of 13 (1980, TV); series re-mastered and updated in 2009 and is available by DVD; Excerpt from The Sacred Balance: [Astronaut’s View of Earth](#).

Recommended:

[A Walk Through Time](#) (online version of museum-like exhibition on cosmological and biological evolution originally produced by the Hewlett Packard company).

June 27 & 28 ~ The Cultural Battle over Religion (and Nature) in *Contact* and *Avatar*

Assignments/Readings (and viewings)

Documentaries and commentary:

Amazon Watch, [Defending the Rivers of the Amazon](#) with Sigourney Weaver (2010), 10:39).

[Avatar: A Message from Pandora](#) (James Cameron on protecting the Amazon) (optional, 20:00)

Indigenous rights websites: [Indigenous Environmental Network](#); [Amazon Watch](#) (optional)

Selected readings from *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (made available by instructor):

Required readings:

- B. Taylor, Prologue: *Avatar* as Rorschach; and Introduction: The Religion and Politics of *Avatar*
- Britt Istoft, *Avatar* Fandom, Environmentalism, and Nature Religion
- Chris Klassen, Becoming the ‘Noble Savage’: Nature Religion and the ‘Other’ in *Avatar*
- David Landis Barnhill, Spirituality and Resistance: Ursula Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* and the Film *Avatar*
- Lisa H. Sideris, I See You: Interspecies Empathy and *Avatar*
- B Taylor, Truth and Fiction in *Avatar*’s Cosmogony and Nature Religion

Recommended/optional:

- Matthew Holtmeier, Post-Pandoran Depression or Na’vi Sympathy: *Avatar*, Affect, and Audience Reception
- Rachele K. Gould, Nicole M. Ardoin, and Jennifer Kamakanipakolonahe’okekai Hashimoto Transposing the Conversation into Popular Idiom: The reaction to *Avatar* in Hawai’i
- Joy H. Greenberg, *Avatar* and Artemis: Indigenous Narratives as Neo-Romantic Environmental Ethics
- Daniel Heath Justice, Afterword.
- [Avatar and Nature Religion](#) from the DGR website
- Alexander Zaitchik, [To get the gold, they will have to kill every one of us](#), Salon, 10 February 2013.
- Martin Ball, [Why Psychedelics Make Avatar More Sophisticated](#) (no date)

Presentations

The Young Turks, “[Why Are Some Christians Mad Over Avatar?](#) (afraid of the competition?) (4.5 minutes).

Movies: *Avatar* (2009);

Movie Night: Contact (1997); online, 2 hours, 21 minutes

Recommended Movie: Dances with Wolves (1990), 2 hours, 18 minutes.

Research paper, and optional slide show, due by 10 a.m., Sunday, 30 June

July 1 & 2 ~ Religion & Nature in America's National Parks; and Religion, Nature and the environmental future

Assignments/Readings and Research

Ch 8. Terrapolitan Earth Religion (180-199)

Ch 9. Conclusion: Dark Green Religion and the Planetary Future (200-222)

Presentations

Lecture on Civil and Terrapolitan Earth Religion

Documentary:

- The National Parks (2009), excerpts.

Some things to remember when viewing the National Parks excerpts:

These things are dealt with in parts of the 12 hour series that are not included in the excerpts:

- 1) Their establishment, in most cases, depended upon the violent subjugation and displacement of the indigenous populations already living there.
- 2) Their establishment would not have happened, or at least to the extent and within the specific time frames, were it not for both commercial interests (railroads and tourism, for example) and nationalism, including its ideology of 'manifest destiny.'
- 3) The Parks also include historical and cultural sites, and examples in many places in America.
- 4) Episode 2 has more historical information about John Muir's battle against the Hetch Hetchy dam in Yosemite National Park. Before the 1906 earthquake in California, which led to most of San Francisco being burnt to the ground, it looked as though he would win that battle, but afterward, the public switched to supporting it, being misled into believing that the water from it was needed to safeguard the city. Brokenhearted, Muir died soon afterward. But historians say for the most part his loss solidified the notion that National Parks should be off limits to commercial incursions.
- 5) Wallace Stegner is one of the countries greatest western writers. He is often quoted in the documentary but the excerpts shown do not introduce him.

Some things to be aware of and consider when viewing the excerpts:

- 1) Many of the cultural sites promote and reinforce patriotism and civil religion, which are in turn often linked to the exceptional natural landscapes and used to foster both we feeling and place feeling, and sometimes even superiority, over other people and places. Is a 'civil earth religion,' or a 'terrapolitan earth religion' expressed and promoted in the parks, or a narrower nationalistic civil religion, or neither?
- 2) Notice how different the reactions of people are to nature, that these reactions are to at least some extent 'socially constructed', namely, a reflection of the preexisting cognitive and cultural frames people bring to the experience. This was seen in the history chapter in the *Dark Green Religion* book; What examples of it to you see in this film?
 - a. E.g., some people were and are horrified and by wild, sometimes geothermal nature, others find the sublime in the continent's wild places, others find evidence for the grandeur and goodness of God.
- 3) In a section not excerpted, the National Park Ranger Sheldon Jacobs discussed how he had no connections with wild places growing up in Detroit, but was immediately moved and captured by them on his first visit to Yellowstone National Park. At the time of the filming he was an interpretive ranger in Yosemite National Park. A good question when considering his mystical experiences with the Bison in Yellowstone is whether for him, that was a socially constructed experience, or a more personal one grounded in an experience, and a felt relationship, with the beings and place where Bison still are allowed to live.

- 4) Are there examples of animistic or Gaian spiritualities *depicted in*, and even *expressed by* the filmmakers, in this documentary? If so, where/when?
- 5) What role did photographers and landscape painters play in expressing and promoting nature spirituality and the establishment and protection of National Parks?

July 3 ~ Religion, Science and Life After Death

Assignments:

Prepare for final exam

Presentations

Movie (in class – be on time!): *The Fountain*, Darren Aronofsky (2006), 96 minutes

Documentary (online): *Call of Life*

Recommended film: *Tree of Life* (2011)

Recommended youtube documentary: [There's No Tomorrow](#) (2012) (produced with support from the [Post Carbon Institute](#)).

July 5 (last day of class)

FINAL EXAM; IN CLASS

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional resources, such as links to podcasts, music, slideshows, video, music, and websites, will be made available here during the course. Students are encouraged to send their own ideas for resources to the course instructors.

WRITING WELL

[Joshua Sowin's 'A guide to writing well'](#)

[Bron Taylor's Writing Well Guide](#)

SCHOLARLY BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Verlyn Flieger, "Taking the Part of Trees: Eco-Conflict in Middle-Earth," in *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth*, (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 2000. 147-58).

Lee Gilmore, *Theatre in a crowded fire: ritual and spirituality at Burning Man* (University of California Press, 2010)

David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000)

John May, ed, *New Image of Religious Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

Eric Mazur, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film* (ABC-CLIO, 2011)

Margaret Miles, *Seeing and believing: religion and values in the movies* (Beacon: 1996).

Joel Martin & Conrad Ostwalt, eds, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate, eds., *The Religion and Film Reader* (Routledge, 2007).

S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (Wallflower Press, 2009).

Graham St. John, *Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality and Psytrance* (Studies in Popular Music) (Equinox Press, 2012). (engages trance and psychedelic, nature-related shamanism)

Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

Gregory J. Watkins, *Teaching Religion and Film* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

NOVELS

Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood: A Novel* (Bloomsbury, 2009. London: Virago Press, 2010).

Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: Putnam, 1961).

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (New York: Harper, 2012).

Michael Murphy, *Golf in the Kingdom* (New York: Viking, 1972).

Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple: A Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

DOCUMENTARIES

Nature-venerating (and/or conservationist)

American Buffalo: Spirit of a Nation (1999)

I Am (III) (2010), Tom Shadyac.

Greenfire: Aldo Leopold (2011)

In the Light of Reverence (2001)

Journey of The Universe (2001)

RamDass|Fierce Grace (2001)

The National Parks: America's Best Idea (2009f)

The Sacred Balance (2002); based on David Suzuki's book by this title, narrated by him.
Excerpts are available on youtube: [part 1](#); [part 2](#); [part 3](#); [part 4](#); [Astronaut's View of Earth](#); [Science and Spirituality](#).

The Vanishing Prairie (1954)

Thinking Like A Watershed (1998)

What the Bleep do we Know? (2011)

THEATRICAL MOTION PICTURES

Nature-venerating/mystical, pantheist, etc.

[Films that capture the Mystical Experience](#) (10 recommendations)

American Beauty (1999)

Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012)

Evan Almighty (2007)

Fern Gully (1992)

Golfing in the Kingdom (2010)
On the Road (2012)
Tree of Life (2011)
The Fountain (2006)

Pagan, Wiccan, Druidic

The Secret of Kells (2009); animated
The Mists of Avalon (2001); *online*, [part 1](#); [part 2](#)
The Wicker Man (1973)
Dancing at Lughnsana (1998)

Animistic

[Dumbo](#) (1941)
Bambi (1942)
Fern Gully (1992)
Once Upon a Forest (1993)
The Lion King (1994)
Pocahontas (1995)
Spirited Away (2001)

Nature Religion & Dark Green Religion

Avatar (2009)
Epic (2013)
Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (2002). Peter Jackson (Director).
Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Rings. (2001) Peter Jackson (Director).
Spirit Bear (2005)
Grizzly Man (2005)

New Science/New Age

I Am (2011)
Mindwalk (1990)
The Butterfly Effect (2004)
What the Bleep Do We Know? (2011)
The Fountain (2006)

Apocalyptic and Dystopian (cf. Ecotopian/Utopian, and also Apocalyptic and Dystopian, and Natural Disasters / Phenomena)

Alive (1993)
Planet of the Apes (2001)
12 Monkeys (1995)
Fight Club (1999)
Hunger Games (2012)
Left Behind: The Movie (2001), and sequels

The Perfect Storm (2000).
Twister (1996)
Volcano (1997)
Wall-E (2008); animated.

Outdoor recreation & adventure (Surfing, climbing, fishing)

Way of the Ocean (2011), 62 minutes, 'explores the connection between man and sea through a visual feast of poetic motion'
Salmon Fishing in Yemen (2011)
Step into Liquid (2003)
Minds in the Water (2011)

Science Fiction

Dune (1984), also a book and 2000f TV series.
2001, A Space Odyssey (1968)
Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)

Paranormal phenomena (including near death, reincarnation, extra-terrestrials, ghosts, etc).

Afterlife (2011)
DMT: The Spirit Molecule (2010)
Signs (2002)
12 Monkeys (1995)

Asian Nature Spiritualities

Princess Mononoke (1997)
The Matrix (1999)
Star Wars (1977)

VIDEO GAMES, COMPUTER APPLICATIONS

[Captain Planet](#)

Game of Thrones Companion
DMD (or [Shadows of the Damned](#))

COMIC BOOKS

Some are relevant

PERFORMANCES & FESTIVALS

Burning Man
Raves
Welcome Ceremony, World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002)

THEME PARKS

Many are relevant: Disney, Bush Gardens, Sea World, etc.

WEBSITES

Professor Leslie Sponsel's [spiritual ecology](#) website has many resources pertinent to this class and its projects, including a recent course, [available here](#).