How shall we live? What is just? What is sacred? Where can we find truth? How can we best steward the world and care for all its inhabitants, human and non-human alike?

In this special topic course, we take a sociological look at the history and interrelationship of three of the most culturally powerful realms of reasoning on these deep and abiding questions: nature, faith, and community. From Buddha to Darwin, from Lao-Tzu to Thoreau, from Mohamed to Einstein, from Gilgamesh to the Bible, we will consider the past, present, and future of these great ideas in their social, and therefore political, context.

Check your absolutes at the door, however. You can pick them up again on your way out, but during the class we will strive as best mere humans can to be open-minded about the thoughts of others and ourselves. As well, the ultimate physical or metaphysical correctness of these ideas are questions we leave for outside the classroom. Our concern is for their social origin and for the social use to which we put them.

We will read widely, skipping like stones across the shimmering pool of millennia of mulling these matters. We will bounce our minds off samples of the writings of the ancients – including the ancient Sumerians, Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Chinese, Mayans, and more – as well as those of Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment thinkers. And we will be guided along the way by the insights of historians and sociologists of religion, nature, and science.

Each week of the course will begin with a lecture on Tuesday, introducing the week’s focus and sketching its social and historical milieu. For the second class session, each student will attend a discussion section to develop their own responses, in dialogue with others, based on their weekly intellectual journal. The course will also include a midterm exam and a final exam, each with an in-class and a take-home component.

**COURSE ORGANIZATION**

*Nota bene*—Check the separate “section syllabus” for additional details on course organization and procedures.
**Student Evaluation**

Your grade for this course will be based on the following: the weekly intellectual journal (30%), the midterm (25%), the final (25%), and class participation (20%), with deductions for unexcused absences. (See special requirements for graduate students, described below.)

**Weekly Intellectual Journal**

The point of the weekly intellectual journal is to give you a chance to develop your own views on the readings and lectures, to communicate those views to the class, to demonstrate your command of what we’ve read thus far, and to keep you up-to-date with the material in the course. The format is simple: Write a critical appraisal of around 250-350 words (longer is just fine; shorter is not) of some particular theme in the week’s readings and lecture, and email the result to your muddle (see below) by Wednesday midnight, with a cc to Loka Ashwood, the course TA. It is important to develop one theme or argument, rather than a scatter of observations. Also, it is important to document your theme or argument and to explain your reasoning, rather than offering opinion.

Here’s a nice thing: We will drop your two lowest grades out of the 12 total weekly entries. (There’s no journal entry due for week 1, week 8, or week 15.) Another way to put it: You can choose to take two weeks off from writing one entirely!

Note that for Thanksgiving week, the journal assignment will follow a different format, which is described on the course web site.

**Muddles**

Each muddle will be a group of 3 or 4 students, who are expected to read each other’s intellectual journal entries before section and to “muddle through” them. Each section will begin with a meeting of the muddles, who will afterwards bring issues for discussion forward to the entire section. We will periodically re-organize into new muddle groups over the course of the semester.

**Readings**

In most weeks, there will be both primary and secondary sources to read, of varying difficulty. You should expect to put in 4-5 hours each week doing the course readings. Plan for it.

**Midterm and Final Exams**

The midterm and final will each consist of in-class identifications and take-home essays, based on the readings and lectures. For the take-home component, we encourage you to meet and discuss the questions with others; the only constraint is that you must put your answers in your own words. Note that the final exam will be cumulative, although it will emphasize the second half of the course.

**Class Participation**

Your grade for class participation will not be a measure of how loud you were, or of how often you spoke. Rather, it will reflect the extent to which you were “there.” We will evaluate your “thereness” based on our subjective assessment of your engagement, including the quality of your listening, in muddles and class discussions. If things don’t seem to us to be going well for you in this area, we will let you know.
**Attendance**

Attendance will be taken daily in lecture and section. You may miss two lectures and two section meetings. No excuse or explanation needed; just don’t show up. However, additional absences will not be excused, except in exceptional circumstances. Each absence beyond two each from lecture and section will lower your grade by 2 points. If you are late to lecture or section by more than 10 minutes, you will be considered absent for the day.

**Electronic Devices**

You’ll want to bring a paper notebook for keeping notes in during class. Ordinarily, we prohibit electronic devices, such as laptops, phones, or tablets during lecture and discussion section. If a student has particular needs that require her or him to use an electronic device, she or he must discuss it with the TA prior to class. If a student uses an electronic device during class without permission, that student will receive a zero for participation and attendance for that class meeting.

We recognize it may seem terribly autocratic to make this rule, but laptops and cells can easily get out of hand in a lecture course, distracting you and others.

**Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct**

While some of the readings will be difficult or unfamiliar, your weekly intellectual journals and the material for the take-home portion of your exams must be uniquely yours, in your own words, and cited fully and properly. Any form of cheating or plagiarism is absolutely unacceptable and intolerable in this class and in the entire UW System. We expect you to familiarize yourself with your rights and duties as a UW student, and about the consequences of cheating at: www.wisc.edu/students/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html.

We will not accept lack of knowledge regarding these guidelines as an excuse.

Note that the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology is licensed to use anti-plagiarism software. This software is extremely accurate, comparing student work to a database of previously submitted work, on-line sources, and published academic materials. Be aware that we may choose to run your intellectual journal entries and test answers through the software.

Every year, instructors in our department catch students committing plagiarism. It is an immensely uncomfortable experience for all concerned, and can affect a student’s career for years afterwards, even permanently. It’s not worth it. Really.

**An Additional Requirement for Graduate Students**

We require graduate students in the course to write a final paper in the range of 3500 to 5000 words (14 to 20 double spaced pages) analyzing how social constructions of nature, faith, and community shape their field of graduate work, or their graduate research. We welcome a wide range of specific approaches to this broad topic. This paper will be worth 20% of the final grade of graduate students. The midterm and final will be worth 15% each, instead of the 25% each for undergraduates. Grades for class participation (20%) and weekly journals (30%) will count the same as for undergraduate students. A **topic statement** (1-3 sentences) is due at section in week 7; an **abstract with a preliminary references list** is due at section in week 10; the **final paper** is due along with the essay section of the final exam.
Course Books
Required:

Recommended: I’ll be providing PDFs of the required portions of these books, in an effort to hold down costs, but you may want to purchase them for your own library.

Getting Ahold of the Books and Readings
All of the books for the course are available at the Rainbow Cooperative, 426 West Gilman Street. The other readings will all be available on the password-protected “materials” tab at the course site: [http://www.michaelmbell.net/CES-541/home.html](http://www.michaelmbell.net/CES-541/home.html)

**Course Schedule and List of Readings**
(All readings subject to change. Check the course website for the latest news! As well, the course site contains links to supplemental materials.)

**Nature**

**Week 1 (9/2, 9/4-5): The Conundrum of the Absolute**

*Secondary source*

*Primary sources*
Week 2 (9/9, 9/11-12): Nature Before Nature
Secondary sources

Primary source

Week 3 (9/16, 9/18-19): First Nature
Secondary sources

Primary sources
Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching. Ursula Le Guin, trans. [Place]: Shambhala; Har/Com. Whole book!


Week 4 (9/23, 9/25-26): The Danger of Nature
Secondary sources


Primary sources

Hitler, Adolf. On-line video.


FAITH

Week 5 (9/30, 10/2-3): YHWY’s Transformation
Secondary sources

**Primary source**


**Week 6 (10/7, 10/9-10): Why Jesus Never Talked about Farming**

**Secondary sources**


**Primary sources**


One page from the *Talmud*. On-line.

**Week 7 (10/14, 10/16-17): The Axial Age and the Splitting of the Ancient Triangle**

**Secondary sources**


**Primary sources**


Plato’s *Timaeus* 27c-34a. On-line.

**Week 8 (10/21, 10/23-24): Midterm exam**

Week 9 (10/28, 10/30-31): Off the Axis? Hinduism, Islam, and Aztec and Mayan Religion

Secondary sources


Primary sources
Selections from the *Qur’an*. On-line.
Selections from the *Hadith*. On-line.
Selections from the *Bhagavad Gita*. On-line.
Selections from the *Rig Veda*. On-line.
A selection from *The Upanishads*. On-line.
A selection from the *Popol Vuh*. On-line.

Week 10 (11/4, 11/6-7): Paganism, Magic, and Folk Belief in the Modern World

Secondary sources


Primary sources
Read two fairy tales! On-line.

COMMUNITY


Secondary source

Primary source

Week 12 (11/18, 11/20-21): Denying Science: Religion and Identity

Secondary source
Primary source

A few websites on contemporary deism, theism, and creationism. On-line.

Week 13 (11/25, no sections): The Greening of Religion
Secondary sources
A few web sites, plus your own research, on currents trends in the greening of religion, associated with a special assignment for this week, described on the course website.

Primary source

Thanksgiving Break Nov. 27-30

Week 14 (12/2, 12/4-5): Awesome Coolness and the Politics of Nature
Secondary sources


Primary sources
Lakota Shaman, speaking on the subject of Wakan Tanka (the “Great Mystery”). On-line.

Lucretius, circa 99-55 BCE. Selection from *On the Nature of Things (De Rerum Natura)*. On-line.

Week 15 (12/9, 12/11-12): The Multilogics of Truth

Week 16: Final Exam

In-class component: *December 16th*, 7:25-9:25pm. Essay portion due at the start of the in-class component.