

EDUCATION FOR THE ECOZOIC: EMERGING DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF ECOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY, AND RELIGION¹

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Earth is in the midst of a great transition: humanity, having become a planetary force, is now shaping both its own future and the long-term future of millions of living species. The magnitude of this process demands broad societal transformation—a challenge that occupies many of the world’s most vibrant thinkers and visionaries. Spiritual traditions, too, are engaged in the transformation of consciousness and society. As the moral force of the world’s religions joins with the insights of the ecological sciences, humanity finds itself at the very center of the deeply mysterious process by which the Earth community is revitalizing itself.

—California Institute of Integral Studies



With these words, the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), a small private university in San Francisco, California, in 2013 launched its interdisciplinary graduate program in Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion (ESR) offering master’s and doctoral degrees. The new program’s mission was to “explore the role of worldviews, philosophies, and religion in understanding and responding to interconnected global ecological crises . . . in

¹ This piece is an excerpt from a previously published article (Allison 2024).

service of a more just, sustainable, and flourishing future,” all in the larger context of the cosmic epic of the Universe’s 13.7-billion-year evolution (CIIS 2014).

The work of “geologist” Thomas Berry (1914-2009), who argued that the environmental ills of late modernity arose from a disconnection between religions that value the transcendent realm from the specific, material needs of the Earth and its beings, provided foundational inspiration for the program. ESR students and faculty study, among other subjects, the development of varieties of “ecologically sensitive spirituality” across various inherited and emerging traditions that contribute to renewing “religious-spiritual traditions in the context of the integral functioning of the biosystems of the planet” (Berry 2009, 135-136).

Two of the founding faculty members of CIIS, the mathematical cosmologist and storyteller Brian Thomas Swimme and the anthroposophist and former president of CIIS Robert McDermott, had studied with Berry. The collaboration between Swimme and Berry led to the publication of *The Universe Story* (1992). Berry had also mentored the founders of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, during their graduate study. Swimme and Tucker later produced *The Journey of the Universe* (2011). Tucker and Grim, in turn, mentored Elizabeth Allison, the founding and current chair of ESR.

In 2019, the ESR program commemorated the continuing influence of Thomas Berry on the field of religion and ecology with a Religion and Ecology Summit celebrating the launch of a new biography of Thomas Berry on the tenth anniversary of his death (Tucker, Grim, and Angyal 2019). Speakers included colleagues, students, and friends of Berry like Tucker, Swimme, McDermott, the spiritual theologian Matthew Fox, the poet Drew Dellinger, and Sister of the Earth Toni Nash, CSJ (CIIS 2024).

Lessons from a Decade of Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion

Over the past several decades, the emerging transdisciplinary fields of religion and ecology (e.g., Tucker and Grim 2001), religion and nature (e.g., Taylor 2010), and spiritual ecology (e.g., Sponsel 2012) have reshaped thinking about human-Earth relations, exploring the complexity of attitudes and practices related to the nonhuman world in both inherited and emerging religions and spiritualities. Having been founded more than a decade ago, the ESR program is an elder among the more than twenty academic programs devoted to the field of religion and ecology (Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology 2024). Since 2018, seven new programs in religion and ecology—including four in 2022 alone—have been launched in the United States, indicating increasing demand and interest in this

growing field that can contribute to the emergence of the Ecozoic. Over the past decade of experimentation and reflection, the ESR faculty, staff, and students have learned many lessons about transdisciplinary graduate education, emerging directions in the field of religion and ecology, and pathways toward the Ecozoic.

Generative Eco-Spiritual Conditions Create the Context for the Future to Emerge

The Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion program emerged from collaborative and generative socio-intellectual and geo-ecological conditions. A diverse, generous, broad-minded cadre of interested scholars, nourished by dramatic and awe-inspiring landscapes as they thought together, midwifed the nascent program. Social psychology research has shown that experiences of awe and wonder contribute to more pro-social and collaborative behaviors (Keltner and Haidt 2003). The ecological, geographical, and spiritual context—the soaring mountains of New Mexico where spiritual leaders and teachers pass on their wisdom, the wild rocky coasts of California where leading human potential thinkers have gathered for decades, the abundant lands of the fertile San Francisco Bay ecotone tended for millennia by the Ohlone peoples—contributed to the emergent program.

From the founding insights and practices of spiritual connection to place, investigation of a sense of place, long excluded from serious academic and philosophical reflection (Casey 2009), has become an important theme of student and faculty research in the program (Casanova 2023; Forbes 2022; Wellman 2022; Allison 2015a, 2022). The observation that human societies are ontologically intertwined with their surroundings (cf. Basso 1996) shapes studies that seek to understand the qualities of place that influence specific understandings of religion and ecology. As climate change reshapes ecosystems and landscapes, research explores how such changes may influence religious and spiritual practices, and human experiences of value and meaning (Allison 2015b).

Transdisciplinary Education Is Central to the Ecozoic, Requiring Specific Intellectual Skills

Transdisciplinary education that incorporates religion, spirituality, and ecology into one interwoven curriculum encourages (and requires) faculty members and graduate students to drop preconceptions about the superiority of their home disciplines. The ESR program has included faculty with backgrounds ranging from theology to cosmology to anthropology to environmental science. To bridge disciplinary chasms, students and scholars must suspend prior assumptions to embrace “beginner’s mind” (Suzuki, Dixon, and Baker 1970) as

they learn new terms, methods, and approaches. This requires curiosity and humility, as well as patient, thoughtful, generous dialogue. Meta-cognition and self-reflexivity are required to make explicit one's habits of thought and disciplinary practices and to make these legible to others. Employing methodological pluralism, ESR graduate students draw on a diverse array of methods, including those that situate the scholar in the research, such as autoethnography, as well as textual analysis, arts-based research, ethnography, participant observation, philosophical argumentation, narrative analysis and more, to illuminate issues at the intersection of religion and ecology.

Transdisciplinary thinkers must practice reflexivity to become aware of blind spots and gaps in their thinking. Transdisciplinary approaches require attention to the differing ontologies and epistemologies of religions on the one hand and to social, political, and biophysical approaches to ecology on the other. ESR students and faculty direct attention to examining the ontologies and epistemologies that undergird their thinking, making visible the different epistemological principles that guide various disciplinary approaches. Bringing awareness to the ontological and epistemological foundations of the claims of various academic disciplines helps identify ways that different disciplines may speak past one another. Trained epistemological mediators—those who can build bridges between Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge, and humanistic, social scientific, and biophysical knowledges—are necessary for navigating the varying epistemological foundations of various sources of knowledge (Allison 2015b).

Global Connections Enrich Ecozoic Education

While the ESR program is rooted in the generative landscapes that birthed it, online education extends its reach across the global noösphere to unite leading edge thinkers including international graduate students and working professionals who cannot leave career and family commitments to move to San Francisco, one of the most expensive housing markets in the United States. The program has included students from Australia, Bali, Canada, China, England, Korea, Zambia, and Zimbabwe and has received inquiries from every continent except Antarctica. A community of like-minded innovators is essential for testing out new ideas: annual in-person retreats allow for face-to-face community building, while robust use of online discussion forums, community Zoom calls, and video presentations allows students to build community online.

Critical and Constructive Approaches Create the Careers of the Future

With its central focus on understanding the role of worldviews, philosophies, spiritualities, and religions in responding to global ecological crises in service of a more just, sustainable, and flourishing future, the ESR program has employed both critical and constructive approaches in its research and teaching. While students critically analyze religious texts and ecological practices, critique of the status quo is insufficient to bring about a world of greater ecological flourishing. Students constructively imagine, create, and iterate new alternatives, practicing “active hope” (Macy and Johnstone 2012) to bring forth the social and structural changes necessary of the Ecozoic era. Graduates are creating the careers of the future that blend rigorous knowledge of the causes and consequences of global ecological change with moral insight and compassion developed through studies of religion, spirituality, and contemplative practice.

Climate Justice Is Vital to the Field of Religion and Ecology in the Ecozoic

As climate change accelerates and the effects of pollution and biodiversity loss become more apparent—leading to the identification of a global “polycrisis” (Lerner 2023)—the urgency of critical, constructive responses centering on



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justice is greater than ever. Pope Francis's two encyclicals on climate change assert that current consumption trends cannot continue, and the highest consumers have a moral obligation to change their patterns (Pope Francis 2023; Pope Francis 2015). Strategies for inclusive, just, resilient adaptation that consider the specificity of culture and place, as the Standing Rock Sioux water protectors have done, are urgently needed. Examining the teachings and practices of nondominant religious and spiritual traditions, "everyday" or "lived" religion, and Indigenous cultures and philosophies has become important to ESR students and faculty who take intersectional approaches to social and ecological justice, creating space for a multiplicity of narratives and approaches, and seeking to broaden the array of interlocutors in religion and ecology.

Funding Is Needed to Broaden and Extend the Field

As is often the case for humanistic fields of study, greater funding is needed to support student scholarships and fellowships for domestic and international students and student and faculty research on emergent issues such as the spiritual implications of the global melting of ice, the "vegetal turn" in philosophy and theology, and queer spiritual ecology. Greater funding, especially for under-represented students who can bring religious and ecological literacy into environmental work, and those who wish to do field research, would support the critical work of developing culturally relevant pathways to ecological resilience. Supporting the development of new applied projects at the intersection of religion and ecology would help students and alums create the Earth-healing careers that are needed to promote resilience, religious response, and spiritual renewal in relation to climate change.

Reflection, Re-Evaluation, and Renewal Are Critical to Continued Vibrancy

New scientific challenges and discoveries call for reflective thinking in religion and ecology. Emerging ethology has offered greater insight into animal minds, suggesting ways in which they may share some moral and emotional capacities with humans, which may in turn affect human ethical judgements (Bekoff and Pierce 2009; Safina 2015). Likewise, the "vegetal turn" in the humanities has drawn attention to the agency of plants, correcting the Western ontological and extractive tendency to see plants and trees as mere resources (Paco et al. 2020; Kimmerer 2013). Climate change and geoengineering, extractive industries, Large Language Models, artificial intelligence, CRISPR, genetic engineering, and

mass extinction of species are reshaping our understandings of life with concomitant implications for religions, spiritualities, and worldviews.

Contemplative Practice and Pedagogy Help Sustain Scholars and Activists in the Ecozoic

The incorporation of ritual and contemplative practices, such as yoga, tai chi, chi gung, and meditation, into the planning process for the ESR program has allowed intuitive and spiritual insights to arise. Silent contemplation, allowing access to the “fertile void,” is elevated in many spiritual traditions, as well as in Otto Scharmer’s secular *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (2007). In the practice of Theory U, collaborators open their minds to release assumptions, open their hearts to sense new possibilities, and open their willingness to intuit yet-unrecognized possibilities. New insights emerge in quiet receptivity to be crystallized into new ideas that can be prototyped and iterated into new initiatives (Scharmer 2007). The efficacy of this practice commends it to any group or institution, including higher education, pursuing innovative evolution. Likewise, the thinking, feeling, and willing yogas of the Bhagavad Gita and the esoteric teachings of the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner all assert that these three human faculties must be in alignment for effective, inspired, and sustained action (R. McDermott, pers. comm., Oct. 27, 2023, see also McDermott 2015).

As climate change and global ecological degradation demand new attitudes, practices, and ways of being to meet unprecedented challenges, contemplative practices can expand the mind to identify creative, novel possibilities. Amid increasingly destabilizing socio-ecological change, time-tested contemplative practices help maintain equanimity, clarity, and focus. Research suggests that deftly incorporated contemplative practices have the potential to make science and environmental studies classrooms more welcoming and inclusive for students from diverse backgrounds (Allison 2023; Bohorquez 2023).

Since Thomas Berry’s time, pathways to the Ecozoic have become even more fraught and uncertain. As the Earth community traverses the knife’s edge between the Ecozoic and the Anthropocene, generative practices of active hope and cultural reinvention serve as bulwarks against the ecocidal trajectory of business as usual. Drawing on a multiplicity of narratives, practices, and approaches, transdisciplinary scholars and practitioners of the multivalent fields of religion and ecology, religion and nature, and spiritual ecology call forth expansive visions of flourishing. These fields offer the interdisciplinary integument and topical expertise to make critical interventions toward intersectional, just, and vibrant futures for all life.

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