

Course Title: 19th Century Unitarians and Nature
Instructor: Sheri Prud'homme
Units: 3

Preliminary Syllabus

At the forefront of 19th century North American liberal Christian efforts to use all of humankind's faculties to interpret "the Divine Book of Nature" were many Unitarian ministers. This course will illuminate key aspects of Unitarian theologies in the mid-nineteenth century as they depicted the relationship among God, nature, and humankind, with close attention to the American Transcendentalists. Participants will explore the complexities of the Transcendentalists' positions commonly seen as polarized between advancing self-cultivation and focusing on efforts for the common good. Participants will explore how the Transcendentalists' theological heirs translated their nature-loving theology into acts of love on behalf of actual nature and will analyze the resources inherent in this theological heritage, assessing its adequacy in light of current ecological crises. Throughout the course, we will trouble the 19th century Unitarian's understanding of wilderness and their notions of a hierarchy of being, which privileged European-American Protestant Christians above all else. Online course using varied modalities. Weekly reading and assignments, final paper/project, and regular online participation required.

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will understand the major influences on the nineteenth century Unitarians' understandings of nature.
- Students will have analyzed the ways key nineteenth-century Unitarian theological contributors constructed the relationship among God, nature, and humankind and the implications of their theologies for religious practices, community life, and moral action.
- Students will have evaluated the perspectives found in this theological heritage for their adequacy in providing relevant historical grounding for contemporary efforts to address the ecological crises of our time.

Required Texts:

Cherry, Conrad. *Nature and Religious Imagination From Edwards to Bushnell*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by David M. Robinson. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

Gatta, John. *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Articles to be made available on Moodle:

Albanese, Catherine. "Having Nature All Ways: Liberal and Transcendental Perspectives on American Environmentalism." *Journal of Religion* 77, no. 1 (January 1997): 20-43.

Holmes, Steven J. "John Muir, Jeanne Carr, and Ralph Waldo Emerson : A Case-Study of the Varieties of Transcendentalist Influence." *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* 25 (1998): 1-25.

Excerpts to be made available on Moodle from these texts:

- Albanese, Catherine. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Dorrien, Gary. *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Frankiel, Sandra Sizer. *California's Spiritual Frontiers: Religious Alternatives in Anglo-Protestantism, 1850-1910*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Gura, Philip F. *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and Literature in the New England Renaissance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981.
- King, Thomas Starr. *Christianity and Humanity: A Series of Sermons, 4th Edition*. Edited by Edwin P. Whipple. Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880.
- King, Thomas Starr. *A Vacation Among the Sierras: Yosemite in 1860*. Edited by John Hussey. San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1962.
- Marsh, George Perkins. *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. New York: Charles Scribner, 1864.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.
- Richardson, Robert D. Jr. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

Course Outline:

Section One—Varieties of influence (four weeks)

In these early weeks, we will explore some of the streams that converge around the 19th century Unitarians and their understanding of nature.

Typology and the Puritans use of language

European conversation partners—Coleridge and German Romanticism

Swedenborg and his notion of correspondence

Section Two—Channing's notion of self-culture and Emerson's *Nature* (three weeks)

While the Transcendentalists are often read as revolting against the prior generation, much of their thought was ushered in on the shoulders of those who had come before them. We will explore the connections and disconnections between Channing and Emerson, and then conclude this section by focusing on *Nature*, as it was extremely influential to the American Transcendentalists and other Unitarians attending to the "divine book of nature."

Section Three—Thomas Starr King and Sarah Orne Jewett (or other novelist) (two weeks)

The transcendentalist ideas about nature dispersed among Unitarians in a variety of ways. The Pacific Coast in the mid-nineteenth century provides a fascinating place for

Transcendentalist-inspired theology to encounter nature in vivid ways. Exploring Thomas Starr King's nature sermons will add new layers to our unfolding analysis of nineteenth-century Unitarians' theologies of nature. Women often accessed the conversation through poetry and novels, and we will read an excerpt from one such novel in this section.

Section Four—Practical implications in the nineteenth century (two weeks)

In this section we will explore the ways themes common to a contemporary understanding of environmentalism or ecological justice were addressed or not by nineteenth century Unitarians. We will read a selection from a non-Unitarian writer, George Perkins Marsh, to gain a sense of what was understood as human kind's possible impact on nature at the time. We will investigate Starr King's efforts for Congress to protect Yosemite and other kinds of conservation and protection measures. In this section we will explicitly trouble the nineteenth century Unitarians' understanding of wilderness and their notion of a hierarchy of being, which privileged European-American Protestant Christians above all else.

Section Five—Bringing it home (three weeks)

In what ways are the perspectives found in this theological heritage adequate in providing relevant historical grounding for contemporary efforts to address the ecological crises of our time, and in what ways do they fall short? These are the questions we will explore in the final section and through the final papers and projects.