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Syllabus: Creation-Evolution, the Sacred, and Creative Living

Meadville/Lombard Theological School—D. Min. Program

July 10-14, 2006

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This science and religion course will explore contemporary and ancient understandings of the sacred, the origins of the universe, and human meaning and purpose. It will examine a variety of narratives regarding how our world was created and will consider how such narratives themselves might have been created. With this information we will ask how science and religion can be yoked together to help us in our daily living and in the lives of churches.

Course Goals.

1. Increase our understanding of the current scientific picture of cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution and of how human beings have created this “epic of creation.”
2. Increase our understanding of creation myths from a variety of cultures and how myths of original creation relate to creating in our world today.
3. Explore ways in which the creation stories of science and religions can be used to enhance the lives of people and the life of churches in relation to the well being of other life forms and the infrastructure of our planet.

Required reading for class sessions.

1. Eric Chaisson, *Epic of Evolution: Seven Ages of the Cosmos* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
2. Charles Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1963). Selected chapters.
3. Karl E. Peters, *Dancing with the Sacred: Evolution, Ecology, and God* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2002).
4. Karl E. Peters, *Science and Spiritual Transformation* (six short sermons that have been submitted for publication, 2006).
5. Selected articles from *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* and other sources in a packet for the course.

Course requirements.

1. Read Peters *Dancing with the Sacred* ahead of time as background reading for the entire course. Be prepared to discuss its ideas in class in relation to various topics that arise. Fulfilling this requirement will help meet goals 1-3.
2. Read Chaisson *Epic of Evolution* and Long *Alpha* ahead of time, and write two focus papers—a one to two-page paper on a particular chapter of each book. The task of these papers is to help focus class discussion. This focus paper should not be a summary of the chapter. It should be a lifting up for discussion one or two ideas or questions that the participant thinks worthwhile. After registering, participants will be asked to consult with the instructor and to write focus papers on different chapters. Fulfilling this requirement will help meet goals 1-2.
3. Attend and participate in all class sessions. Fulfilling this requirement will help meet goals 1-3.
4. Write paper on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor. The main goal of the paper is to explore how religion and science can be used together to enhance the lives of people or church communities in harmony with other forms of life and with planet earth. With this goal in mind, three types of papers are envisioned as possibilities: a) a review essay that is a critical analysis of a book, set of books, or series of journal articles; b) a constructive theological paper that uses various sources in religion and science to develop the participants own position on a topic; c) an applied theology paper that uses religion and science resources to develop materials to enhance the well being of individuals (e.g. meditations) or of church communities (e.g. religious education or worship materials). Due by September 15, 2003. Fulfilling this requirement will help meet goal 3.

Course structure.

1. **Advance Preparation:** After you have read the syllabus you are invited to make suggestions regarding specific topics they would like to discuss on Days 3-5. Suggestions can be sent to kpeters909@aol.com.
2. **Classes will meet** in the morning (9-12) and afternoons (3-6). Early afternoons and evenings will be free for study, research, and meetings with the instructor. Times can be adjusted as long as we meet 6 hours a day.

Day 1—July 10:**The Scientific Epic of Evolution**

The evolution of the universe from a scientific perspective: Topics for consideration include: stages of cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution; how evolution occurs; methods of scientific inquiry leading to the

evolutionary picture; the world view of scientific naturalism; and problems and promises of science for human meaning and purpose.

Some big questions to help organize this part of the course.

1. What has it taken to create us and bring us to this time and place? (“The 14 billion Year History of Me.”) Peters, chapter 10 should help orient you on this question/topic.
2. How do we know about what it has taken to create us? (What methods do scientists use to find out about the 14 billion year history of “us”?)

Morning: Cosmic evolution from the big bang to planet earth. Brief opening presentation by Karl Peters. Presentation of focus papers and discussion of Eric Chaisson, pp. 3-189.

Afternoon: Biological and cultural evolution. Presentation of focus papers, and discussion of Chaisson, pp. 190-368.

Day 2—July 11:

Morning: Cultural, moral, and religious evolution. Presentation of focus papers and discussion of Chaisson, pp. 369-442, and of William Irons (packet).

Afternoon:

Creation Myths and Meaning

We’ll discuss some traditional religious stories of creation in relation to questions of human meaning and purpose. We’ll ask how the narratives might have been constructed, how they relate life today to ultimate beginnings, and how ancient myths may or may not be helpful in the lives of individuals and the life of the church.

We’ll begin by comparing **mythical thinking** with **scientific thinking**. Presentation of focus papers and discussion of mythical thinking, Ian Barbour (packet) Long pp. 11-12, 15-33, footnote on p. 4, and **Emergence and World-Parent myths** in Long, pp. 35-53, 57-63, and 69-98.

Day 3—July 12:

Morning: Presentation of focus papers and discussion of **Chaos and Cosmic Egg myths** in Long, pp. 109-128, 130-132, 134, 142-145, **Creation from Nothing Myths** in Long, pp. 146-169, and Bernard Batto (packet) on the mythology of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan as the context for Biblical ideas about creation. Open discussion of whether and how the scientific account of creation in Chaisson might be the basis of a new myth.

Afternoon:**Theological-Philosophical Framing of the Scientific Epic**

How the scientific epic of creation can be religiously interpreted to help provide meaning, moral direction, and hope for people today. Discussion of various interpretations: religious naturalism, Ursula Goodenough (packet); naturalistic theism, Karl Peters, chapters 4-8, personalistic theism, Arthur Peacocke and Ann Pederson (packet); pantheism, Paul Harrison (packet); panentheism, Arthur Peacocke (packet). We also will discuss reasons for personal vs. non-personal models of the sacred in using Loyal Rue (packet), Gordon Kaufman (packet), and Sallie McFague (packet).

Day 4—July 13:**Special Topics**

Morning: Evolutionary thinking, spirituality, and worship. Discussion of evolution and creation spirituality and evolution and spiritual transformation using ideas from Brian Swimme (packet), Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd (packet and websites), and Karl Peters, *Science and Spiritual Transformation*. Using these readings we will ask how we can use evolutionary thinking to inform preaching and worship.

Afternoon: Beginning of **discussion of other topics selected through participant-teacher dialogue** in correspondence during weeks before the class. These will be listed in an updated syllabus as soon as they are determined. Some possible topics are a) the evolution of morality, b) evolution, religion, and human health, c) our relation to the natural world and environmental problems, d) sacred writings and evolution, e) evolution, God, and evil, f) science-religion and religious education, g) the future of human creating and life on planet earth. Participants should feel free to suggest other topics that are interest to them.

Day 5—July 15:

Morning: Continuation of discussion of special topics.

Afternoon: Continuation of discussion of special topics. Discussion of what we have accomplished and of writing projects.

- 3. After class sessions:** Writing a paper on a topic chosen by the participant in consultation with the instructor. Due September 15, 2003.

Bibliography.

The following bibliography is **not required reading**. It is my work in progress that will give you some idea as to what is being published in various areas related to science and religion. It may provide you with some ideas for your own research and writing. I welcome your suggestions about materials to be added. *Karl E. Peters*

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Research News and Opportunities in Science and Religion

Science and Christian Belief

Science and Religion Forum

Science and Spirit

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www.aaas.org/spp/dser AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) Program of Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion

www.asa3.org American Scientific Affiliation

www.beliefnet.com Belief Net

www.union-psce.edu/carlhowie The Carl Howie Center for Science, Art, and Theology

www.cis-ca.org Center for Islam and Science

www.columbia.edu/cu/cssr Center for the Study of Science and Religion

www.counterbalance.org Counterbalance Foundation

www.ctns.org Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Berkeley.

<http://dialogos3.tripod.com> Dialogos: An Interactive Journal of the Sciences, Philosophy, and Theology

www.esssat.org European Society for the Study of Science and Theology

<http://www.evolutionarychristianity.org> Evolutionary Christianity

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www.iras.org Institute on Religion in an Age of Science

<http://itest.slu.edu> Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

www.kalam.org Kalam, Muslim World Science and Religion Program

<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~theo0038> Karl Heim Society

www.metanexus.net Metanexus Institute

www.prchfe.org Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics

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