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# A Decade of Earth-Centered Scholarship and Activism

*Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion at Ten*

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## Abstract

Origin stories reveal the myriad causes that converge to birth a new initiative. On the occasion of its tenth anniversary, this essay looks back to document the context and intellectual lineage out of which the Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion graduate program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) emerged in 2013, and suggests some possibilities for the future of transdisciplinary education and the fields of religion and ecology (e.g. Tucker and Grim 2001), religion and nature (e.g. B. Taylor 2010), and spiritual ecology (e.g. Sponsel 2012) more broadly.

## Keywords

religion and ecology – spiritual ecology – religion and nature – transdisciplinary – pedagogical innovation – graduate studies

High in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico, 8600 feet above sea level, a group of professors from diverse colleges and universities around the United States met at the Lama Foundation retreat center to discuss a new praxis: contemplative environmentalism. Paul Wapner, a political scientist at American University, and Robert McDermott, professor of philosophy and religion at California Institute of Integral Studies, had convened the

group in the summer of 2010 with a grant from the Fetzer Institute to establish intergenerational academic mentoring for scholars concerned with issues of ecology and justice. As such, the retreat attracted both well-established and junior faculty who quickly formed close bonds through living close to the land in tents and eating organic produce that the small residential crew coaxed from the rocky mountain terrain. The scholars discussed the contributions of various forms of contemplation, from art to meditation to chanting to movement practices like tai chi and yoga, to the academic field of environmental studies (Warren 2013).

Into this sacred land, visited by pilgrims, retreatants, and teachers from diverse religious and spiritual traditions over decades, a whisper of an idea was breathed: what if an academic program could lead graduate students in exploring, analyzing, and advancing the intersection of religion, ecology, environmental studies, contemplation, and spirituality? A growing recognition that global environmental degradation was more than a political economic, and scientific program—it was also a moral and spiritual problem (Berry 1999; Tucker 2001; Kellert and Speth 2009)—suggested that greater attention to interior, subjective, and spiritual aspects of environmental change could invigorate the environmental movement.

Origin stories reveal the myriad causes that converge to birth a new initiative. On the occasion of its tenth anniversary, this essay looks back to document the context and intellectual lineage out of which the Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion graduate program at the California Institute of Integral Studies emerged in 2013 and suggests some possibilities for the future of transdisciplinary education and the fields of religion and ecology (e.g. Tucker and Grim 2001), religion and nature (e.g. B. Taylor 2010), and spiritual ecology (e.g. Sponsel 2012) more broadly.

## 1 A New Graduate Program in Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion

Less than a year after the Lama Foundation gathering, Joseph L. Subbiondo, then president of the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, California, issued a call for several new graduate programs, including one focused on ecology and religion. By 2013, the graduate program in Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion (ESR) accepted its first cohort of students. This new program would contribute to the blossoming transdisciplinary field of religion and ecology, which had been developing since the Forum on Religion and Ecology coalesced in the late 1990s, following a series of ten conferences at the Harvard Center for the Study of the World's Religions which explored the teach-

ings of world religious traditions about ecology and nature. Harvard published the papers presented at the conferences in ten edited volumes, nine in English and one in Japanese on Shinto (Foltz, Denny, and Azizan Haji 2003; Tiros-Samuelson 2002; Chapple 2002; Grim 2001; Hessel and Ruether 2000; Tucker and Berthrong 1998; Tucker and Williams 1997; Chapple and Tucker 2000; Girardot, Miller, and Liu 2001). The Forum on Religion and Ecology, now based at Yale, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2023.

Interest in the study of religion and ecology at CIIS was piqued when the founders of Forum on Religion and Ecology, the professors Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, taught religion and ecology courses at CIIS during academic appointments at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California (2001–2002 and 2004–2006). Tucker and Grim received honorary doctorates from CIIS in 2005.

The seeds of religion and ecology had been planted decades earlier, during their doctoral studies in the history of religions, when Tucker studied first with Thomas Berry for her master's degree and then with Wm. Theodore de Bary at Columbia for her Ph.D., while Grim did his Ph.D. with Berry (1914–2009). A self-described “geologist” and cultural historian at Fordham University, Berry was inspired by Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary perspective and his exhortations of intimacy between humans and the Earth community (Tucker 2006; Tucker, Grim, and Angyal 2019). Berry also mentored the mathematical cosmologist Brian Thomas Swimme, a professor at CIIS from the early 1990s until 2023, in ecology. Berry and Swimme co-authored *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (Swimme and Berry 1992). Building on Berry's inspiration, Swimme and Tucker created the award-winning film *The Journey of the Universe*, and a book of the same title, in 2011 (Swimme and Tucker 2011).

In addition to Tucker, Grim, and Swimme, Thomas Berry had mentored the anthroposophist and philosopher Robert McDermott, president emeritus of CIIS (1990–1999) and chair of the Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness graduate program at CIIS (2012–2019). With Paul Wapner, McDermott hosted the conference at the Lama Foundation, attended by, among others, Sean Kelly, professor of Integral Ecologies at CIIS, and their new colleague, just completing her first year as a CIIS faculty member, Elizabeth Allison.

Between finishing her master's and embarking on her doctorate examining religious influences on environmental policy in Himalayan Bhutan (Allison 2009), Allison met Tucker at a religion and environment event hosted by the Garrison Institute in 2003. Having read Tucker's book *Buddhism and Ecology* (Tucker and Williams 1997) in the process of discernment about grad

school, Allison recognized that religion and ecology was the academic home of her work, and recruited Tucker as an outside reader of her doctoral dissertation.

In New York's Hudson Valley, the Garrison Institute is devoted to applying the insights of contemplative practice, together with scientific knowledge, to contemporary social and environmental challenges, through programs and public events. Allison had been introduced to the Garrison Institute's co-founder Jonathan Rose (Rose 2016) by her master's thesis advisor, the late Stephen R. Kellert (see, e.g., Kellert and Farnham 2002; Kellert and Wilson 1993) and had worked as a research fellow at the Garrison Institute during grad school. A comrade in the contemplative environmentalism field, the Garrison Institute celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2023.

Allison enthusiastically accepted Subbiondo's request to launch a new graduate program in religion and ecology, which would offer both master's and doctoral degrees, imaging the type of transdisciplinary graduate program she had dreamed of while traversing New Haven's Prospect Street between Yale Divinity School and Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (now Yale Environment School) as a joint degree master's student before Yale's religion and ecology program, guided by Tucker and Grim, emerged in 2006 (Guerrette 2022).

Geographically complementing existing programs in religion and ecology in eastern North America, such as the doctorate in religion and environmental studies offered at Drew Theological Seminary since the late 1980s, the certificate program at the Elliot Allen Institute of Theology and Ecology at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, the doctorate in religion and nature available at the University of Florida since 2002, and the Yale program, the ESR program would be the only religion and ecology program in the western part of North America, nurtured by the innovative spirit of the San Francisco Bay Area, home to both the 1968 Summer of Love and the techno-optimism of Silicon Valley, and the first to name "spirituality" as part of its purview.

CIIS, a small private university, is the kind of collaborative, creative, integral space where new transdisciplinary programs can emerge. The new program at CIIS would focus attention on the biophysical, social, and spiritual aspects of ecological change and explore the role of religion and spirituality in responding to ecological change. With an integrated curriculum, incorporating religion, philosophy, cosmology, spirituality, and ecology, it would be bolstered by its proximity to other related graduate programs at CIIS such as Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness (PCC); Women's Spirituality; and Anthropology and Social Change. Like Schumacher College in the United Kingdom—inspired by

*Small is Beautiful* author E.F. Schumacher—which has offered ecological education uniting head, heart, and hands since 1991, CIIS students would participate in intimate courses, engage in applied projects, and endeavor to transform ecological thinking.

Interested faculty, including Swimme, McDermott, the philosopher and theologian Jacob Sherman, and Allison developed a vision for the program, announcing: “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” (CIIS 2014).

CIIS faculty announced the creation of the program at a reception at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in San Francisco, in Nov. 2011, at a well-attended reception that generated much interest and conversation (Allison and Carfore 2016). The CIIS Board of Trustees formally approved the new program in spring 2012. The graduate program launched with a mission to “explore the role of worldviews, philosophies, and religion in understanding and responding to interconnected global ecological crises ... in service of a more just, sustainable, and flourishing future,” all embraced in the larger context of the cosmic epic of the Universe’s 13.7 billion year evolution (CIIS 2014).

As the inchoate program took shape, guidance from some of the Lama Foundation attendees who reconvened in summer 2011 and 2012 for a seminar on Ecology, Spirituality, and Social Justice at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and again at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California in early 2014, helped define an emerging practice of “contemplative environmental studies,” as well as the contours of the new transdisciplinary program (Allison 2015b; Wapner 2016; Richey and Wapner 2017). Participants in these seminars represented a range of universities, geographical locations, academic disciplines, and theoretical commitments (see Table 1), providing a broad perspective on the developing program, contributing significantly to its ultimate shape.

TABLE 1 Academic diversity of influences on ESR program: participants in ecology, spirituality, & justice seminars, 2010–2014 (alphabetical order)

Name	Position in 2010	Position in 2023
Paul Wapner, co-host	Professor, political science, American University	Emeritus
Robert McDermott, co-host	Professor, philosophy and religion, CIIS	Emeritus
Elizabeth Allison	Assistant professor, philosophy and religion, CIIS	Professor & Chair of Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion, CIIS
Evan Berry	Assistant professor, philosophy and religion, American University	Associate professor, environmental humanities, Arizona State University
Susan Clarke	Professor, political science, University of Colorado—Boulder	Emerita
Rebecca Kneale Gould	Associate professor, religion, Middlebury College	Associate professor, environmental studies, Middlebury College
Matthew Jelacic	Assistant professor, environmental design, University of Colorado—Boulder	Global Climate Change Migration and Urbanization Expert
Elizabeth McAnally	Doctoral student, Philosophy, Cosmology, & Consciousness, CIIS	PhD, Editor, <i>Forum on Religion and Ecology Newsletter</i> and website
Michelle McCauley	Professor, psychology, Middlebury College	Interim Executive Vice President and Provost of Middlebury
Dan McKanan	Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist senior lecturer, Harvard Divinity School	Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist senior lecturer, Harvard Divinity School
Nawang Phuntsog	Professor, elementary & bilingual education, California State University—Fullerton	Emeritus
Jacob Sherman	Assistant professor, philosophy and religion, CIIS	Professor and Chair, philosophy and religion, CIIS
Jeff Warren	Meditation teacher	Meditation teacher

## 2 Transdisciplinary Education

Founded in 1968, following the Summer of Love of the “San Francisco Renaissance,” the California Institute of Asian Studies (CIAS) was established bridge Eastern and Western thought. Later renamed CIIS, the new institute joined philosophy, religion, and psychology with the integral yoga teachings of the Indian guru Sri Aurobindo, as taught by Haridas and Bina Chaudhuri who traveled from Kolkata, India to help create transformative educational pathways (Segall and McDermott 2023; McDermott 2017). “Integralism” was the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and CIIS founder Haridas Chaudari, “based on the yogas of the Bhagavad Gita—knowledge, love, and selfless action,” which, when applied to higher education, “refer[s] to multiple ways of thinking, love of humanity and Earth, and work on behalf of the evolution of consciousness,” according to Robert McDermott, president of CIIS from 1990 to 1999 (McDermott 2024). Over five decades, CIIS has honed expertise in “integral education”—“learning that integrates all aspects of the person: cognitive, emotional, physical, social, cultural, and spiritual” in an “environment open to, and encouraging of, the synthesis of ideas and experience” (CIIS 2024c).

Throughout its history, CIIS has been guided by Seven Commitments (see Table 2). Three of these—Commitments 1, 2, and 4—speak directly to scholarly work that transcends, disrupts, and enlarges scholarly and intellectual boundaries, inviting the “whole person” into teaching, learning, and research. In the context of CIIS, transdisciplinary education is understood as that which emerges from discipline and also transcends the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines, drawing on multiple approaches and perspectives to understand an issue (CIIS 2024a).

This foundation of integral and transdisciplinary education created fertile soil in which a graduate program that transcended disciplinary boundaries to focus on humanistic pathways of caring for Earth and its beings could flourish. Numerous CIIS departments offered collaboration and support. CIIS Professors Jim Ryan and the late Steven Goodman in Asian & Comparative Studies; Mtumbo Mpanya in Anthropology; and Brian Thomas Swimme, Robert McDermott, and Jacob Sherman in PCC all contributed courses to the ESR program, which blended Asian religions, Christianity, western esotericism, cosmology, anthropology, and critical environmental studies to examine the intersections of ecology, spirituality, and religion.

Faculty developed Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that guided the program through its first decade. These SLOs focused on the acquisition of knowledge about global ecological change and the field of religion and ecology through transdisciplinary coursework that would help students integrate and

TABLE 2 CIIS Mission and Seven Commitments

CIIS facilitates radical transformation through unique and dynamic educational experiences in the service of self, society, and Earth. We also commit to living our seven cherished values, and in so doing lay the foundation for a strong and unified community built upon wisdom, trust, and collective spirit (CIIS 2024b).

1. Embody integral approaches to learning and research.
2. Affirm and elevate spirituality.
3. Advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and social and ecological justice.
4. Embrace multiple ways of knowing, learning, and teaching.
5. Cultivate innovation and sustainability.
6. Nurture and support a flourishing and cohesive community.
7. Foster transformative integral governance.

apply knowledge to their own scholarly and activist commitments (Table 3).  
 With master's and doctoral students taking coursework together, the first four of the six SLOs guided both MA and PhD students, with the final two SLOs oriented toward doctoral dissertation work. ■ "Figure" changed to "Table", ok?

Centered around the challenge of bringing greater harmony and resilience to human-Earth relations, the new program echoed the exhortation of Columbia University religion professor Mark C. Taylor to “create problem-focused programs” that would consider “vexing practical problems” in the context of “philosophical, religious and ethical issues” because “beliefs shape practices as much as practices shape beliefs” (M.C. Taylor 2009).<sup>1</sup>

In the integrated curriculum, master's and doctoral students participate in six units of core courses together: “Theory and Method in the Integrative Study of Religion and Ecology” and “Ecology in a Time of Planetary Crisis.” Beyond these two required courses, doctoral students take three additional units of research methods and work with their faculty advisors to design a personalized curriculum aimed at their research objectives, drawing from courses in ecology, spirituality, and religion, as well as courses throughout CIIS.

<sup>1</sup> Taylor had previously been a professor of religion at Williams College, where Allison completed her undergraduate major in religion, with a concentration in environmental studies, having taken her first religion course with Taylor: a course called “Nothing.”



TABLE 3 2013–2023 Program learning outcomes: outcomes 1–4 for MA students, outcomes 1–6 for PhD students

Student learning outcomes	Subgoals
1. <b>Commit to a flourishing future:</b> To acquire skills and insight to transform practices, worldviews, and consciousness in service of a more just, sustainable, and flourishing future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students will be able to identify and articulate some of the conditions contributing to ecological crises and will be able to propose healing alternatives.</li> <li>2. Students will be able to investigate the current ecological crises from within the perspectives of religions and spiritualities, and will be able to critically analyze religious and spiritual traditions through ecological lenses.</li> </ol>
2. <b>Generate insight into current conditions:</b> To contribute to the emerging field of religion and ecology by participating in this growing field of academic inquiry and activism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students will be able to write well-argued papers that engage with the deep insight into the human condition held by religions, to analyze the gaps and distortions in consciousness that lead to environmental and social degradation.</li> <li>2. Students will be able to produce academic papers and conference presentations that connect ideas and practices within the world's religions and spiritualities with ecological manifestations.</li> </ol>
3. <b>Practice transdisciplinarity:</b> To develop the knowledge and wisdom to respond to ecological devastation from healing integral and transdisciplinary perspectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students will understand and navigate the epistemological challenges in studying religion and ecology together.</li> <li>2. Students will be able to integrate research approaches from a diversity of perspectives (e.g., religious and spiritual traditions, historical context, and social and biophysical scientific perspectives) applied to specific ecological situations.</li> </ol>
4. <b>Application and integration of knowledge:</b> To apply and integrate topics and issues studied in the Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion program into a coherent theoretical and/or activist stance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students will be able to articulate connections between their spiritual and intellectual journeys, and the larger goal of global well-being.</li> </ol>
5. <b>Advance scholarly inquiry:</b> To contribute to the emerging field of religion and ecology, in which they will generate new knowledge, enriching a growing field of academic inquiry and activism (PhD students only)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students will be able to demonstrate thorough knowledge of an ecological theme or issue, contextualized in a religious, spiritual, and/or philosophical milieu, by passing a comprehensive exam.</li> <li>2. Students will be able to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of a religious, spiritual, or philosophical tradition, broadly defined, in relation to ecology, by passing a comprehensive exam.</li> <li>3. Students will be able to create scholarly papers and public presentations appropriate to multiple audiences (scholarly, religious, government, professional, activist).</li> </ol>

TABLE 3 2013–2023 Program learning outcomes (*cont.*)

Student learning outcomes	Subgoals
<p>6. <b>Offer original contribution:</b> To produce an original work of publishable quality scholarship that advances ideas from a transdisciplinary perspective, demonstrating mastery of relevant fields in both religious/spiritual studies and ecological studies (PhD students only)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students will be able to present the research and ideas at the core of the dissertation in a well-organized and persuasive public presentation within the CIIS community, and at a public conference or event outside of CIIS.</li> <li>2. Students will be able to make an original contribution to scholarship in the emerging field of religion and ecology by writing a dissertation that offers a substantial and original contribution to scholarship and is certified as such by at least two ESR faculty members. Dissertation is not to exceed 250 pages.</li> </ol>

The 36-unit MA curriculum guides students to complete six units in one religious or spiritual tradition; three units in each of the disciplines of ecology and philosophy; three units within feminism, globalization, and justice; and nine units of general electives drawn from the School of Consciousness and Transformation, CIIS's graduate school. MA students complete six units of capstone courses: an internship with an environmental organization, and the Integrative Seminar, in which they prepare and present a public talk on a topic related to their studies.

The transdisciplinary approach of the ESR program attracted broader public interest through the Religion & Ecology Summit annual public conference launched in March 2016 with an initial grant from the American Academy of Religion (McDermott 2016). More than one hundred scholars, students, and activists crowded into CIIS's Namaste Hall to discuss issues at the intersection of religion and ecology as they pertained to the San Francisco Bay Area (Paden 2016). These annual Religion and Ecology Summits generated positive connections, discussion, professional development for ESR graduate students, and plans for future collaboration among attendees until the covid-19 pandemic forced a pause in 2020 (CIIS n.d.).

Following the shift to online education in 2020, the Religion and Ecology Summit also moved online to focus on "Indigenous Lifeways, Cosmologies, and Ecology: Connecting to Past, Restor(y)ing Present & Future" in 2021 (CIIS 2021). The sixth Religion and Ecology Summit, focused on "Queer Ecologies and Religions," was planned for April 2024.

### 3 Lessons from a Decade of Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion

The study of religions and spiritualities can offer insights into the human role and response to global ecological change. Over the past few decades, the fields of religion and ecology, religion and nature, and spiritual ecology have grown to include diverse approaches, methods, and topics. After ten years of graduate education in Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion, and the transition from a fully in-person graduate program to a fully online program, much has been learned about transdisciplinary graduate education, and emerging directions in the field of religion and ecology.

#### 3.1 *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-thinking cadre of interested scholars, nourished by dramatic and awe-inspiring landscapes as they thought together, midwived 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 support from the Fetzer Institute that allowed scholars to think together, in peaceful, generative landscapes, away from the pressures of daily life, created space for the emergence of creative new possibilities. In this way, 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.

Likewise, the incorporation of ritual and contemplative practices, such as yoga, tai chi, chi gung, and meditation, into the four shared seminars of the planning process allowed intuitive and spiritual insights to arise. The importance of silence and the “fertile void” in creative organizational change and development has been well-described in Otto Scharmer’s *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (2007). According to Sharmer, Theory U is a practice by which collaborators open their minds to release assumptions, open their hearts to sense new possibilities, and open their willingness to intuit the yet-unrecognized possibilities that may exist (Scharmer 2007). From the insights received through quiet receptivity, practitioners then crystallize insights into new ideas that are then brought into reality through prototyped and iterated initiatives (Scharmer 2007). The efficacy of this practice commends it to any

group or institution, including especially higher education, pursuing innovative evolution. Shamer's process here mirrors the thinking, feeling, and willing yogas of the Bhagavad Gita as well as the esoteric teachings of the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, asserting that all three human faculties must be in alignment for effective, inspired, and sustained action (R. McDermott, pers. comm., Oct. 27, 2023, see also McDermott 2015).

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 2015c, 2022b). 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 2015d).

### 3.2 *Transdisciplinary Education Requires Practices of Intellectual Humility*

Transdisciplinary education that incorporates religion, spirituality, and ecology into one interwoven curriculum encourages (and requires) faculty members and graduate students willing to drop preconceptions about the superiority of their home disciplines. 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 that can reach across disciplines. This requires patient, thoughtful, generous dialogue, along with the self-reflexivity to bring attention to one's habits of thought and disciplinary practices and to make these legible to others. Employing methodological pluralism, 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 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. In coursework, 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 2015d). Building bridges between different ways of knowing both is a matter of justice for non-Western peoples, and a matter of survival in a time of rapid socio-ecological change. CIIS embraces pluralistic approaches and building bridges between diverse epistemologies in the fourth of its Seven Commitments: “Embrace multiple ways of knowing, learning, and teaching” (CIIS 2024b).

### 3.3 *Online Education Expands the Reach of Religion and Ecology*

Following the enthusiasm for the Forum on Religion and Ecology’s online courses on world religions and ecology (Forum on Religion and Ecology 2024b), broad interest in studying religion and ecology online was evident. The ESR program became an experiment in online education when the covid-19 pandemic forced a quick pivot to online teaching in February 2020. Since then, the program has found that the online format is better able to include graduate students from around the world, as well as those 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. Online education has brought a wider range of educational and experiential backgrounds into the program. The return of annual in-person retreats in 2023 created an opportunity to build community face-to-face, while robust use of online discussion forums, community Zoom calls, and video presentations allows students to build community online.

Graduate study in ecology, spirituality, and religion has been appealing to students from beyond the United States. The program has included students from Australia, Canada, China, England, Korea, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Inquiries have come from every continent but Antarctica.

### 3.4 *Critical and Constructive Approaches Are Needed to Create the Careers of the Future*

With its central focus on understanding the role of worldviews, philosophies, and religion 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, they also construc-

tively image, create, and iterate new alternatives, finding that critique of the status quo is insufficient to bring about a world of greater ecological flourishing.

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. Applied initiatives created by graduates include the Deep Water Initiative, dedicated to building the academic field of Religion and Ecology through educational film and transformational media programs (<https://www.dwinitiative.org>), Outlandish!, a program empowering LGBTQIA+ youth by fostering a deeper connection to the natural world (<https://www.queerlifespace.org/outlandish>), and Wild Women, which works to “educate and empower women and girls in the outdoors while building resilient communities” (<https://www.wildwomen.net>).

### 3.5 *Climate Justice Is Central to the Field of Religion and Ecology*

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 justice is greater than ever. Strategies for inclusive, just, resilient adaptation that considers the specificity of culture and place are urgently needed. The publication of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* energized students and faculty, providing a concrete example of the public significance of religion and ecology in dialogue (Pope Francis 2015). The climate activist Bill McKibben called this document one of the most significant of the 21st century (McKibben 2023). The 2023 release of Pope Francis’s second encyclical on climate change, *Laudate Deum*, asserts that current consumption trends cannot continue, and the highest consumers have a moral obligation to change their patterns (Pope Francis 2023). Climate change—particularly, the social, cultural, and spiritual perceptions and responses to climate change, as well as obstacles to addressing climate change—has become a central theme of nearly all current doctoral students’ work.

Students and faculty have taken intersectional approaches to social and ecological justice, understanding these to be intertwined, and seeking to broaden the array of interlocutors in religion and ecology. Students and faculty bring attention to the contributions of BIPOC communities, standing with communities on the front lines of climate change such as the Standing Rock Sioux water protectors and low-income communities of West Oakland seeking environmental justice, as well as those of animals, plants, and fungi, drawing on the latest scientific research on plant and animal communication.

### 3.6 *Funding Is Needed to 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. Greater funding, particularly 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 to climate change.

### 3.7 *Reflection, Re-evaluation, and Renewal Are Critical to Continued Vibrancy*

In 2023, faculty affiliates of ESR met to discuss the internal program review of ESR, including a review of the mission and student learning outcomes. The program's mission, now ten years old, was created in a very different, pre-pandemic context when the inchoate program was guided by a different faculty composition.

In the intervening decade, Professor Steven Goodman had died, and Professors Jim Ryan, Mtumbo Mpanya, Robert McDermott, and Brian Swimme had all retired. In addition to Allison and Sherman, new faculty had become affiliated with the program, including Professor Charlotte Sáenz, a decolonial social ecologist also teaching in the undergraduate Interdisciplinary Studies program; Professor Rachael Vaughan, an ecopsychologist also teaching in the School of Professor Psychology and Health; Professor Chantal Noa Forbes, focusing on Indigenous lifeways and ecology; and Professor Laura Pustarfi, focused on critical plant studies and arboreal philosophy.

Through several meetings in fall 2023, the new composition of faculty, together with the Program Coordinator, Charlie Forbes, a master's graduate of the program and co-founder of the Deep Water Initiative, reviewed the original mission statement and Student Learning Outcomes. The mission statement was found to be too wordy and no longer reflective of the program that has emerged over the past decade. The evolution of student and faculty research and teaching had honed and sharpened the focus of the program. Faculty recognized the importance of teaching methods and practices for bridging epistemological boundaries and consciously wove this emphasis into the learning outcomes.

The group developed a new mission statement to guide the program in 2024 and beyond:

TABLE 4 2024 revised Program Learning Outcomes: outcomes 1–4 for MA students, outcomes 1–6 for PhD students

1.	Gain insight and understanding into historical and current socio-ecological conditions.
2.	Navigate across disciplinary boundaries within a diversity of traditions, knowledge systems, philosophies and worldviews.
3.	Engage with transdisciplinary ecological scholarship and activism.
4.	Practice imagining, creating, and living into a just and flourishing future now.
5.	Advance scholarly inquiry in the environmental humanities. (PhD)
6.	Contribute to the field of ecology, spirituality and religion by producing original and publishable scholarship. (PhD)

The Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion program empowers students in exploring the contributions of religions, spiritualities, and philosophies to our planetary socio-ecological crisis. Our transdisciplinary program equips students with the skills and knowledge to imagine, create, and transform practices, worldviews, and lifeways in service of a just and flourishing human and more-than-human future.

This group also streamlined and simplified the Program Learning Outcomes for 2024 and beyond (Table 4), responding to evolving best practices for program learning outcomes, as well as the need to have a less complicated map of the program.

In the decade since its founding, the ESR program has become one of the elders of more than twenty programs in the field of Religion & Ecology (Forum on Religion and Ecology 2024a). Since 2018, seven new programs in Religion & Ecology—including four in 2022 alone—have been launched in the United States, indicating increasing demand and interest in this growing field.

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). Geoengineering to address climate change, artifi-



cial intelligence, and CRISPR and genetic engineering are reshaping our understandings of life and have implications for religions, and social and material effects on biological ecosystems.

### 3.8 *Spirituality Complements Intellectual Inquiry in Religion and Ecology*

Amid increasingly destabilizing socio-ecological change, time-tested contemplative practices can help maintain equanimity, clarity, and focus. The community of praxis for contemplative environmental studies established at the Lama Foundation nurtured a pedagogical seed of contemplative education that landed in the fertile soil of the integral and transdisciplinary context of CIIS. In some courses, students engage in practice of the spiritual traditions they are studying. In others, instructors incorporate contemplative practices into coursework to help students absorb alarming information about environmental change without becoming withdrawn, shut down, or emotionally dysregulated as can often be the case when confronting devastating news.

Building on their time at Lama, Upaya, and Esalen, Rebecca Kneale Gould and Allison developed a workshop on incorporating contemplative practices into the environmental studies classroom shared with other professors at conferences (Allison and Gould 2014, 2016; Allison 2015a; Allison et al. 2022; Allison 2022a). 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).

As climate change and global ecological degradation call forth new attitudes, practices, and ways of being to meet unprecedented challenges, contemplative practices can expand the mind to identify creative, novel possibilities. Transdisciplinary scholars and practitioners of the multivalent and flourishing fields of religion and ecology, religion and nature, and spiritual ecology have the broad vision, interdisciplinary integument, and topical expertise to make critical interventions contributing to more just and flourishing futures for all.

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