

**Title:**

Religion, Place, and Pedagogy: Establishing a Bio-Regional Network of Teacher-Scholars in Religion and Ecology

**Abstract:**

How can religious and theological learning be deepened by sustained attention to and engagement with the particular place in which education is happening – and with particular attention to ecological contexts more broadly? What challenges and opportunities greet teachers of religion and theology who seek this kind of deepened engagement through place-based pedagogies<sup>i</sup> integrated with other models of teaching and learning?<sup>ii</sup> This project will establish a network of inquiry-driven scholars and teachers interested in the powers and stories of particular places, histories, geographies, and cultures shaped by – and shaping – religious experiences and expressions in the southern United States. The project will advance existent place-conscious pedagogical approaches at the intersection of religion and ecology in response to today's crises in sustainable living.

**Presenting Questions or Problems:**

How might a region-specific network of diverse teacher-scholars in religion and theology benefit the professional and scholarly life of our colleagues in the American Academy of Religion? How might such a network support and reconceive best practices of place-based pedagogical practice, reflection, and assessment? Integrating critical questions of sustainability, economic, ecosystem, and equity with relevant pedagogical approaches, what innovations in pedagogy would this network advance? Would a regional network of teacher-scholars provide more robust and diverse models? How might our interactions highlight crucial contributions from religion and theology to these global challenges?

We believe this network will draw and stimulate participants to commit to a consortium of creativity deeply attuned to the ecological and cultural particularities and needs of the southern United States through teaching and learning. For example, as bell hooks notes, we must engage seriously the complexities of race and culture in the South as they relate to place-based learning: “Everywhere I journeyed,” she writes, “the world of environmental activism was characterized by racial and class apartheid. In those locations no one ever assumed that black folks cared about land, about the fate of the earth. ... Individual black folk who live in rural communities, who live on land, who are committed to living simply, must make our voices heard.”<sup>iii</sup> To teach and learn about the intersections, challenges, and potentials of religion and ecology in this bio-region, we need a broad web of teacher-scholars and the AAR provides a powerful first step.

**Larger Context of Work:**

This grant would support the establishment of a regional network of teacher-scholars who have worked with – or who are interested in exploring – place-based and experiential pedagogical models in the areas of religion and ecology. The network will include educational settings ranging from undergraduate-only colleges to seminaries to institutions with graduate-level programs in religion and theology. Through shared scholarship, informal connections, and encounters at academic meetings, teacher-scholars know the deep benefits of sharing stories, strategies, frustrations, and discoveries about teaching and learning. An increasing number of us longs to strengthen our efforts in teaching religion and ecology through such connections. Establishing this sustainable network of

teacher-scholars dedicated to these questions will not only support and deepen the educational work of sustainability in the southern region of the United States, but will also foster constructive pedagogical scholarship and understanding of religious traditions, issues, and values to which the American Academy of Religion is committed. With the support of the AAR, this network can impact regional policy development in sustainability through engaged and place-based classroom formats.

Over the course of the past two years, we three faculty members at Emory (Jennifer Ayres, Cory Andrew Labrecque, and Bobbi Patterson) have begun conversations about our own work in religion, pedagogy, and ecology—more specifically, pedagogy and place.<sup>iv</sup> Although we each have different locations in the university (Candler School of Theology, the Center for Ethics, and Emory College and the Laney Graduate School) we have discovered common interests and common challenges. Sharing scholarship and pedagogical models, we not only learned from each other, but also imagined the potential for education and academic innovation drawn from a bioregional network of scholar-teachers in religion and theology interested in pedagogy and place.<sup>v</sup> Emory's commitment to this area – particularly through the University's Office of Sustainability Initiatives – demonstrates suitability for convening this conversation. We are eager to learn from and share with colleagues in other institutions. This year, we invited some colleagues in other institutions to join us in the initial exploration phase, and are eager to expand, deepen, and continue this work, particularly as it would support the scholarship and teaching in the southeast region of the American Academy of Religion.

### **First Steps Already Taken:**

In the spring of 2012, during the annual meeting of the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR), we gathered a small group of scholar-teachers who were interested in and/or had already begun working with these questions and place-based pedagogies. A dozen participants attended and contributed to this gathering, and expressed interest in joining an ongoing network of colleagues. These participants came from Emory University, the Interdenominational Theological Center, Agnes Scott College, Elon University, West Virginia Wesleyan College, University of Georgia, Rhodes College, University of Alabama, and Western Kentucky University. They also represented a wide range of disciplinary approaches, which will strengthen our efforts.

In February 2013, we were awarded a \$2500 grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to bring together seven scholars – from Emory University, University of Florida, Southwestern University, Western Kentucky University, and Mississippi State University – for a two-day consultation (May 17<sup>th</sup> to May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013) for further discussion of this project. Our goals for this gathering included: (1) measuring interest, resources, and desired outcomes for a southern bio-regional network of educators in religion and ecology; (2) beginning the development of a repository of place-based and experiential pedagogical models to be shared among network participants; and (3) nurturing relationships among a diverse array of scholar-teachers who share commitments to the use and improvement of place-based and experiential pedagogy in higher education. This small group will now serve as an initial steering committee to help establish and engage a growing network of teacher-scholars who are interested in religion and place in the South.

## **Project Goals:**

Goals for this grant project:

- Establish a southern bio-regional network of educators in religion and ecology;
- Foster shared leadership in this network;
- Further develop and improve an on-line repository of place-based and experiential pedagogical models to be shared among network participants;
- Begin a conversation about defining and designing assessment strategies for these place-based pedagogies;
- Continue to develop our blog, which will serve as a creative and dynamic space for network participants to share discoveries, research, and quandaries as they continue to work on place-based and experiential pedagogical models at the intersection of religion and ecology. This informal medium will nurture the development of collaborative scholarship of teaching and learning.

## **Outline and Design of Activities:**

To host this next development in the establishment of a Southern Bioregional Network on Place-Based Pedagogies in Religion and Theology, we will:

- Develop a correspondence list of teacher-scholars in the region who have contacted us and expressed interest in our initiative and work, or whom we hope might be interested in future collaboration;
- Host a two-day consultation (in the spring of 2014) with invited teacher-scholars from around the region. This group will augment our existing steering committee. We have already approached some participants, who are very interested. Each participant in the consultation will bring a case study from their teaching experience, a syllabus or lesson plan for sharing and discussion. We will also discuss strategies for assessment.
- After the consultation, we will strengthen our blog by inviting these additional participants to post syllabi, lesson plans, articles of interest, and other resources.
- Develop initial plans and strategies for our 2014 SECSOR gathering.

## **Evaluation Plan:**

- A survey from participants addressing the process, shared decisions, and future plans; and
- An assessment of blog activity and resource-sharing

## **Plans for Dissemination:**

The data gathered through this next phase will be disseminated in three ways:

1. The blog that we develop will serve as a space for network participants to share and communicate as they continue to work on place-based and experiential pedagogical models at the intersection of religion and ecology.
2. After our consultation in the spring, we will host another gathering at the 2014 SECSOR meeting, during which we will share what we have learned thus far in a panel or workshop format.
3. As we proceed with the project, we can imagine co-authoring an article or collection of essays exploring the regionally-specific themes associated with place-based pedagogy in the southern United States.

**Line Item Budget:**

Mileage for regional participants (@.55/mile)	\$
Food and drink costs	\$
Airfare for partners from furthest distance	\$
Housing Costs	\$
Administrative costs (e.g., blog set-up; hire a Graduate Assistant)	\$
<b>TOTAL FUNDS REQUESTED</b>	<b>\$</b>

**Budget Narrative:**

Our budget reflects our primary goal, which is the building of a supportive, sustainable, and fruitful network of teacher-scholars in religion and ecology. The best way for us to begin this work is to gather, face-to-face, to share and imagine together how we might build a collegium that will enhance our own teaching and contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning at the intersection of religion and ecology, more broadly. We will be using a colleague's mountain home to house part of our group; the rest will stay in a rental home next door. This will lower our housing costs and enable us to offer more funds to support travel costs for participants.

**Selected Bibliography:**

Ball, Eric, and Alice Lai. "Place-Based Pedagogy for the Arts and Humanities." *Pedagogy* 6.2 (2006): 261-287.

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Orr, David W. *Hope Is an Imperative: The Essential David Orr*. Washington: Island Press, 2011.

O'Sullivan, Edmund V., and Marilyn M. Taylor, eds. *Learning toward and Ecological Consciousness: Selected Transformative Practices*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

Patterson, Barbara A.B. "Performative Pedagogies: Religion and Ecology, Wilderness Spirituality." *Religious Studies News* (2011).

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<sup>i</sup> The Rural School and Community Trust offers an insightful description of what we mean by place-based pedagogy here: "'Place-based' education is learning that is rooted in what is local – the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in teaching and learning. Place-based educators have discovered that this local focus has the power to engage students academically, pairing real-world relevance with intellectual rigor, while promoting genuine citizenship and preparing people to respect and live well in any community they choose." Furthermore, David Gruenewald identifies the aim of place-conscious education as "an educational revolution of reengagement with the cultural and ecological contexts of human and nonhuman existence." See David Gruenewald, "Accountability and Collaboration: Institutional Barriers and Strategic Pathways for Place-based Education," *Ethics, Place, and Environment* 8.3 (2005): 261-283; 264 in particular. See also

David Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 40.3 (2003): 619-654; 645 in particular.

<sup>ii</sup> Other models would include service-learning, civic engagement partnerships, contemplative pedagogies, inquiry-driven approaches, etc.

<sup>iii</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 45, 47.

<sup>iv</sup> Some of this conversation was sparked by research that Molly Jensen is doing, with the support of a Wabash grant, on establishing a laboratory of pedagogy of place in her institution, Southwestern University. She has been traveling and observing programs around the country. We continue to be in conversation with Molly about her research and how we might collaborate across southern and southwestern regions.

<sup>v</sup> We have been helped in our initial imagining conversations by wisdom, experience, and shared models from Jean MacGregor, the founder and administrator of The Northwestern Curriculum for the Bioregion Initiative project.