First-Year Seminar-- Reading Religion in the Anthropocene: Religious Ecology and Environmental Ethics

Seminar:
FYSEM-UA 751
Spring 2020
M 3:30-6:30
Location: TBD

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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Overview

About this Course
What does the dawning of the Anthropocene--- a new geological era in which humans determine the fate of the planet – mean for our common identity? If nothing else, its realization has pointed to a new discontent with civilization and the terrifying possibility of social collapse. Some scholars and activists have pointed to foundational texts of world religions, such as the Hebrew Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Gospels, as the root causes of our current ecological crisis. Still others have pointed to these very traditions as resources for societal and personal renewal in the face of global climate change. This seminar will probe the limits of ecological awareness, intergenerational responsibility, and animal welfare in a range of religious traditions and texts including, but not limited to, the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tripitaka, and the Babylonian Talmud. Through critical analysis of these texts, with an eye towards the nonhuman, we will investigate both the accusations and the promise of these traditions. We will assess whether religious texts themselves can ever be the cause of real social and political change, or whether they only “come alive” when read and acted upon. Rather than looking for ecological strategies or ethical sayings and mandates from religions about “nature,” we will ask what different worlds are imagined by different religions and how these different worlds frame humanities relationship to the nonhuman word they are a part of. Along the way, we will explore various discourses in the environmental humanities and consider their efficacy in understanding religious texts and traditions.

Course Goals and Objectives
- Apprehend the dangers posed by climate change and other environmental degradation, humanity’s role in climate change, and the new understandings of what humanity is and its relationship to the nonhuman world that are emerging in the Anthropocene.
- Gain new understandings of religion, ritual, religious traditions, and religious texts by learning how to read religion in a world in which the old paradigm of nature versus culture can no longer stand.
- Understand the relationship between text, religion, and environmental ethic in various religious traditions.
- Learn how to read religious texts in translation with an eye towards environmental issues.
- Grasp the challenges and promises of engaging religious texts and traditions in conversation with contemporary environmental problems.
- Classify frameworks for assessing environmental issues from the standpoint of different religious traditions.
-Understand how becoming attentive to nonhumans changes the way we understand religion.
-Develop methods for locating and articulating the relationship between humans and nonhumans in religious texts and traditions.

Course Expectations

**Participation and Attendance (20%)** Attendance is required at all seminars. You are expected to come to seminar on time and having completed all the assigned readings for the relevant unit. Successful work in this course requires active participation in the seminar. If you must miss a class due to illness or for religious reasons, please let me know and contact a fellow student to find out what you missed.

**Weekly Reading Responses (15%)** Each week you will be expected to write a one-page response about the readings for the week. You can choose a quote from the readings and write about that or note a question and describe the question and what you think the answer(s) might be. We will discuss these quotes and questions in class as a group.

**Writing Assignments (65%)**
A brief description of the assignments and their methods are described here. More detailed directions will be handed out in class.

- Two Short Essays Assignments worth 15% each. There will be two short essays (4-5 pages double-spaced) assigned throughout the semester. The essays will ask you to analyze carefully a particular question or primary source. The primary source material will draw from assigned readings and new material.
- A Final Research Paper worth 35%. This assignment is expected to be 10-12 pages double-spaced and is due the final day of class. In this paper you will take what you have learned during the semester and apply it to a particular religious tradition to analyze its environmental ethic or world depiction. This will paper will involve independent research. We will work on building research and writing skills throughout the semester.
- Papers should be double-spaced in Times New Roman with one-inch margins and pages should be numbered and stapled. A separate title page is not necessary, but the first page should include your name, course number, the date, and the title of the essay.

Classroom Policies and Useful Resources

**Classroom Decorum and Use of Laptops**
Be sure to arrive in class on time and stay until I have indicated that the seminar is over. Unless there is an emergency, there is no reason to leave class early. Do not use your cellphone or other electronic devices during classes. This is discourteous to me and your fellow students and hinders your learning.

**Late Work**
The writing assignments are due on the date indicated on the syllabus. If you have a justifiable reason for requiring an extension, you must make arrangements with me before the due date. All
late work will be dropped one third of a letter grade per late day (an “A” paper due on Tuesday that is turned in on Wednesday will be given an “A-.”) Assignments over a week late will not be accepted and will be given a 0 grade.

**Grading**
Final course grades will be assigned according to the following scale: 100-95=A, 94-90=A-, 89-87=B+, 86-83=B, 82-80=B-, 79-77=C+, 76-73=C, 72-70=C-, 69-60=D, 59-0=F. (S/N: S=70%).

Paper Grades (based on the Core Curriculum):
‘A’ — a clear thesis with appropriate support from data; demonstrated mastery of theoretical methods; a conclusion that represents a substantial advance; excellent execution overall, with very few corrections needed.

‘B’ — a thesis with appropriate support, but which fails to capture some of the complexity of the ideas under consideration; a good mastery of most theoretical points, but with some details absent; an adequate conclusion; good execution requiring some revision.

‘C’ — a satisfactory statement of a problem or idea but not clearly a statement of the thesis and only marginally supported by evidence; a satisfactory familiarity with major theoretical points; a weak or missing conclusion; merely satisfactory execution.

‘D’ — less than satisfactory but passing.

‘F’ — failure to meet the minimum requirements of the assignment. Sometimes otherwise satisfactory work will receive an ‘F’ because it does not answer to the assigned topic.

Note that some papers may merit the same grade for different reasons; for example, an unsophisticated idea with excellent presentation and a complex idea with mediocre presentation may both warrant a ‘B-.’

**Academic Integrity and Plagiarism**
All student work is expected to be the original research of each student. Students should therefore familiarize themselves with NYU’s honor code (http://cas.nyu.edu/page/honorcode) and expectation of Academic Integrity (http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity). We will spend some time in recitation discussing proper ways to draw upon secondary scholarship and how to forge your own independent thinking in dialogue with earlier scholarship.  
➢ Any student who is found to have committed plagiarism will received an automatic zero on the assignment. Further cases of plagiarism will be reported to the Core curriculum office and subject to further disciplinary action.

**Students with Disabilities**
The Henry & Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (31 West 4th Street) facilitates equal access to the programs and activities of the College and NYU. Matters relating to students who visit the Center are strictly confidential. Services cover a wide range of disabling conditions. In addition to working with students who have mobility, visual, and hearing impairments, the Center assists a significant number of students with learning disabilities and many others with
chronic impairments, such as diabetes, cancer, HIV infection, psychiatric illness, head trauma, and seizure disorders. The Moses Center is staffed by a group of specialists who have a wealth of experience in helping students obtain necessary academic adjustments and accommodations based upon individual needs. In order to receive services from the Center, students must provide appropriate documentation.

**Helpful Campus Resources**

**University Learning Center (ULC)** Any NYU student is eligible to receive academic support through the University Learning Center. Conveniently located: Academic Resource Center (ARC) 18 Washington Place (lower level); University Hall (UHall) 110 East 14th Street, UHall Commons (lower level). The ULC provides individual and group review sessions for specific courses as well as Academic Skills Workshops, absolutely free of charge. Late hours are available. Learn more at [www.nyu.edu/ulc](http://www.nyu.edu/ulc).

**The Writing Center** (411 Lafayette, 998-8866) is a part of NYU’s Expository Writing Program, College of Arts and Science. It is a place where one-on-one teaching and learning occur, where work always focuses on writing. [http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html) Writing Center consultants are studying for or already hold advanced degrees. Many are published writers. They receive significant training in the teaching of writing, and they teach writing courses for undergraduates across the University. At the Writing Center, students work with consultants in private one-on-one sessions to become better writers and thinkers. Students work with consultants at every stage of the writing process and on any piece of writing except for exams. Schedule an Appointment Online: [https://nyu.mywconline.com](https://nyu.mywconline.com)

**Texts and Readings:**


➢ All other readings will be posted on NYU Classes

**Strategies for Preparing for Class**
The best strategy for this course is, of course, to READ the texts, and to do so in time for the lectures and recitations in which they will be discussed. You will get little out of the seminar if you come to them unprepared. Reading the texts for each unit in advance will allow you to come to each seminar prepared to talk, listen, think, and to ask and answer questions.

**Schedule of Seminars and Readings:**

*Part 1: Introduction- Religion, Ecology, Anthropocene*

Week of Jan. 27- Introduction to the Class and to Bobst


Week of Feb 3- Anthropocene I
➢ Clive Hamilton, Defiant Earth, vii-xi, 1-75

Week of Feb 10- Anthropocene II
➢ Clive Hamilton, Defiant Earth, 76-162.

Week of Feb 17 NO SEMINAR

Week of Feb 24- What is Religion?


PAPER I DUE

Week of March 2- Do Animals Have Religion?


March 9- Indigenous Religion, Ontology, and the Great Divide
➢ Aaron Gross, The Question of the Animal and Religion, 95-120.


Week of March 16- Spring Recess
Part 2: Hebrew Bible and Judaism

Week of March 23- Hebrew Bible
➢ Genesis 1-5.

Week of March 30- Animal Religion, Suffering, and Ethics in Biblical and Jewish Rabbinic Sources
➢ Selected Biblical and Rabbinic Sources.

Week of April 6- Sabbatical Year in Biblical and Jewish Rabbinic Sources
➢ Selected biblical and rabbinic Sources
➢ Selections of texts on Roman animal divination.
➢ Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 45-62.

PAPER II DUE

Part 3: World Religions and Ecology

Week of April 13- Christianity
➢ Selections from Gospels, Paul, Origen, Augustine.

Week of April 20- Islam
➢ Selections from Quran.

Week of April 27- Hinduism.
➢ Sections from Bhagavad Gita.

Week of May 4- Buddhism
➢ Selected Primary Texts.

Week of May 11- Conclusion

**FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE**