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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New York University Core Curriculum
Office Location: 19 University Place B07

Office Hours: Monday 1:15pm-3:15pm

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 humanity’s relationship to the nonhuman world 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 (15%)** 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 (30%)** Each week you will be expected to write a two-page response (double-spaced in 12-point Times New Roman font) 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 (3-4 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 Take Home Exam worth 25%. This assignment is expected to be 8-10 pages double-spaced and will be submitted on NYU Classes by the final day of class. In this exam you will take what you have learned during the semester and apply it to particular religious tradition and texts to analyze their environmental ethic or world depiction. We will work on building the tools and writing skills necessary to complete this exam throughout the semester.
- Papers should be double-spaced in 12-point Times New Roman font 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
➢ Amitov Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 1-24, 68-73, 81-84
Questions: What is the Anthropocene? What challenge does it pose to the stories we tell about ourselves as humans and the ways in which we come to narrative our personal and collective lives? What is the relationship between religion and ecology, and religion and story? Why is the novel so resistant to narrating climate change or ecological catastrophe? Do religious texts resist the Anthropocene like the novel? According to Miller, what is the condition of modernity and how does religion resist this?

Week of Feb 3- What is the Anthropocene?
➢ Clive Hamilton, Defiant Earth, vii-xi, 1-66, 136-162
Questions: When reading, pay attention to the place of religion of Hamilton’s schema. What is the Anthropocene for Hamilton? How does Hamilton construct his vision of what the human being is and what we should do in relation to the Earth and each other? Is religion really something of the past and was the enlightenment was Hamilton says it is? Is modern religion really only operative as a quietist agent, complicit with the status quote as Hamilton claims?

Week of Feb 10- Religion, Politics and the Anthropocene
➢ Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 108-162
What has been the role of the moral in modern politics according to Ghosh? What is role of religion in this? What role does Taylor see for religion or spirituality? Do Ghosh and Taylor have different understandings of what religion is?

Week of Feb 17 NO SEMINAR

Week of Feb 24- What is Religion?
Questions: What do we think of religion after these readings? Is it only something of the past, a yolk to shake off? What other elements comprise religion(s)? Are there other types of religion than those traditionally thought of? What does the Gross reading off us? Can religion offer insights about the Anthropocene when read in a new light? Do any of these readings show us a different side of religion that rubs against the status quo?

**PAPER I DUE**

Week of March 2 - Do Animals Have Religion? And Indigenous Religions and Ontology


March 9 - The Great Divide and Daoism


**Week of March 16 - Spring Recess**

*Part 2: Hebrew Bible and Judaism*

Week of March 23 - Hebrew Bible

- Genesis 1-5, 9, 11.

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

- Numbers 22; Exodus 23:5; Deuteronomy 22:1-7; Mishnah Bava Metzia 2:10; Bavli Bava Metzia 32a-33a; Bavli Bava Metzia 85a

Week of April 6- Sabbatical Year in Biblical and Jewish Rabbinic Sources
➢ Exodus 23, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 23:11; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 23:11; *Sifra be-Har* 1:8; *Mishnah Shevi’it* 9:2-3; *Tosefta Shevi’it* 7:10;
➢ Selections of texts on Roman animal divination.

**PAPER II DUE**

*Part 3: World Religions and Ecology*

Week of April 13- Christianity
➢ Mark 1; Philip 3:2; 1 Corinthians 15:32; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 9 Romans 12; Origen *Against Celsus* 4:54-60, 92, 95; Augustine *On the Morals of the Manicheans* 2.17; Augustine, *The City of God* 1.8.

Week of April 20- Islam
➢ Qur’an 2:30; 7:31; 17:27-29; 6:165; 28:77 33:72; 55-7-9
➢ Richard C. Foltz, “‘This She-Camel of God is a Sign to You:’ Dimensions of Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Culture,” in *A Communion of Subjects* (eds. P. Waldau and K. Patton; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 146–159.

Week of April 27- Hinduism.
➢ *Bhagavad Gita* 1-6, 10, 13, 15; *Yogasutras* 2.1-40

Week of May 4- Buddhism and a World of Pedagogy

Questions: Based on the three readings what types of worlds or ontologies do Buddhists imagine? Please elucidate three different modes of existence based on the readings and root each of them in a different primary text or Buddhist principle, using the secondary readings as support.

Week of May 11- Conclusion
FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE