

SYLLABUS

RELST-UA.244 , Spring 2022

The Fall of Nature in Western Religions

Monday/Wednesday, 9:30am-10:45am

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Office:

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Office hours: Wednesdays 11:30–1:30 pm, by appointment

Course Description

If the humankind has entered a new geological age called the Anthropocene, one shaped and conditioned by human activities since at least two centuries ago, what has been the role of Western or Abrahamic religions? What will be the fate of faith confronted with the unprecedented human-made transformations in nature and history as the sites of divine revelations? This course studies the fundamental ideas in Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions of nature, creation, history, environment, and the very idea of human action that have pervaded longstanding practices devoted to the domination or “occupation” of nature. We will examine key theological positions and philosophical statements by reading primary sacred and exegetical texts in each of the three major monotheistic religions. We will delve into their different accounts of the genesis of the universe and the natural-historical world, of the meaning of God’s transcendence, of the economy of the divine plan, and the productive and destructive activity of human beings as God’s “trustees” on earth. Our goal is to grasp the wide-ranging crises of the present age, or, the fall of nature, from a deep historical and philosophical perspective afforded by the archives and ideas of monotheism.

Objectives

The path that we will take in our journey starts with two stories by Kafka where the idea of the language of animals figures and ends with a movie about the fall of the human word in a decaying nature. The main houses in our course include the Bible and the Quran’s stories of genesis and creation, and key interpretations of them by Philo of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, and Avicenna within Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, respectively.

Like any other journey in humanistic studies, you will learn how to read a text closely, place it in historical, cultural, and political contexts, and explore its relation to other texts in a comparative manner. You also learn how to bring out the presuppositions and assumptions behind words, arguments and interpretations, dogmas and opinions about

abstract and concrete issues, from the concept of creation to the politics of combatting the climate change. In virtue of these skills, we intend to look at the present climate crisis from a philosophical and historical perspective to realize what has contributed to its core strategic beliefs and ideological standpoints. This will help us better situate ourselves in the context of the present endeavor to defer or dispel a total apocalypse on a planetary scale.

Evaluation:

Reading the texts, attending the class, and participation in discussions: 15%

Biweekly one-page responses to an assigned text or a related question: 15%

Mid-term essay on choice of assigned topics, 6-8-page: 25%, the essay outline due one week earlier: 5%.

Final paper on a topic you can start developing around or after you wrote your mid-term essay: 12-15-page: 35%, outline: 5%.

Presentation (individually or in group) on our readings: an *extra 5%*

Readings:

These two books (the exact editions as specified) are required for the course, which you can find at the NYU bookstore:

Augustine, *Confessions*, second edition, trans. F. J. Sheed, Hackett, 2997.

Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*, trans. David T. Runia, Society of Biblical Literature, 2006.

All other texts will be made available on Blackboard.

Schedule

Week 1	Nature: Between God and Mother
Jan 24	Introduction
Jan 26	Franz Kafka, “The Burrow” (short story)
	Luce Irigaray, <i>Elemental Passions</i> , Forward, pp. 1-5.
Week 2	Naming the Crisis: the Anthropocene
Jan 31	Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind” (2002)
	https://www.nature.com/articles/415023a

Feb 2 The Assisi Declarations (1986)
<http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/the%20assisi%20declarations.pdf>
(A Collection with further Statements: *Faith in Conversation* (1995, published 2003):
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/570441468763468377/pdf/269751Faith0in0Conservation010paper.pdf>)

Week 3 Nature as Creation: A Divine Story

Feb 7 The Bible, Genesis 1-3.

Feb 9 The Quran (excerpts)

Week 4 The Jewish Interpretation of Creation

Feb 14 Philo, *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*,
§§1-44, pp. 47-56.

Feb 16 *On the Creation*, §§62-130, pp. 61-80.
Genesis Rabbah, Chapters I. pp. 1-13

Week 5 The Law of Nature and the Law of Moses

Feb 21 **President's Day — No Class Today**

Feb 23 *On the Creation*, §§ 134-the end, pp. 82-93.

Week 6 The Christian Interpretation of Creation

Feb 28 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book Eleven, I-XI, pp. 233-241.

Mar 2 *Confessions*, XII-the end, pp. 241-257.

Midterm Paper Outline Due

Week 7 Reading Heaven and Earth

Mar 7 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book Twelve I-XIII, pp. 261-268.

Mar 9 *Confessions*, XX-the end, pp. 275-286.

Midterm Paper Due

Week 8	Spring Break— No Classes
Mar 14	
Mar 16	
Week 9	A Judeo-Christian Tradition Formed
Mar 21	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , Book Thirteen, I-XIX, pp. 289-304.
Mar 23	<i>Confessions</i> , XXIX-the end, pp. 316-321. Paul Tillich, “Theological Developments in the Ancient Church,” in <i>A History of Christian Thought</i>
Week 10	The Antinomy of Creation: The Philosopher and the Believer
Mar 28	Aristotle, <i>Physics</i> , II. 1-2, pp. 236-240, & II. 7-8, pp.247-251.
Mar 30	Moses Maimonides, <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> , II. Chapters 20-23, pp. 312-322.
Week 11	An Islamic Interpretation of Creation and History
April 4	Ibn Khaldun, <i>Muqaddimah</i> , Chapter 1: “Human Civilization in General,” First to Fourth Prefatory Discussions, pp. 45-65.
April 6	<i>Muqaddimah</i> , Fifth to Sixth Prefatory Discussions, pp, 65-91.
Week 12	The Historical Content of ‘Creation’
April 11-13	Peter L. Berger, “The Process of Secularization,” in <i>The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion</i> , pp. 123-146.
Week 13	But a Strom Is Blowing from Paradise: Allegories of Fall
April 18	Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Thesis 1.
April 20	“Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” Thesis 9.
Week 14	The Created Nature Colonized
April 25-27	Screening and discussing the movie <i>Where the Green Ants Dream</i> by Werner Herzog (1985)

Final Paper Outline Due

Week 15

A New Nature Out of the Ruins?

May 2-4

Donna Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene"

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>

May 9

Conclusions

Final paper due May?

Bibliography

Augustine. *Confessions*, second edition. Trans. F. J. Sheed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2997.

Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, abridged edition. Trans. Franz Rosenthal. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967,

Kafka, Franz. *Collected Stories*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1993.

Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Tans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2 vols. Trans. Shlomo Pines. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion*. New York: Random House, 1967.

Tillich, Paul. *A History of Christian Thought: From the Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*. Ed. Carl E. Braaten. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

Crutzen, Paul J. 'Geology of Mankind' *Nature* 415, 23 (2002).
<https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a>

Philo of Alexandria. *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*. Trans. David T. Runia. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006.

Genesis Rabbah, 2 vols. in *Midrash Rabbah*. Trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon. London: Soncino, 1939.

Irigaray, Luce. *Elemental Passions*. Trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Haraway, Donna. "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene." E-Flux no. 75/2016.

Movie

Where the Green Ants Dream. Werner Herzog, dir. Tango Entertainment, 1985, 105 min.

ACCOMMODATION

Disability Disclosure Statement: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

There are deeper reasons than the legal ones why using other people's works without giving them credit must be avoided. Among them is that plagiarism amounts to alienating one's own freedom, one's sense of activity and self, to someone else, adopting their words in a way that could run the risk of being forever irrelevant to oneself. Borrowing ideas, words, formulations from others, even thinking with other heads (as a writer once put it), belongs to the act of thinking and writing, but you must always cite any quote, whether it is from an academic journal or TikTok, and there are simple rules for citing each and every medium. For instance, you can use the Chicago style. Here is a link to stylistics and reference.

Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Cheating (adapted from the website of the College of Arts & Science, <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html>):

“Academic integrity means that the work you submit is original. Obviously, bringing answers into an examination or copying all or part of a paper straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. But there are other forms of cheating or plagiarizing which are just as serious — for example, presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written); writing a sentence or paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else's idea(s) without a reference to the source of the idea(s); or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance). Receiving or giving help on a take-home paper, examination, or quiz is also cheating, unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects).”