

Call for Papers

**MATERIALITY AT THE INTERSECTION OF
ECOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES**



Fruit of Lotos Nelumbo nucifera, Botanischer Garten Linz/ Austria @ Iswal

Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, 21-23 May 2024

The artificial separation of the humanities from the so-called hard sciences needs to be challenged with ever more strength in the face of the current environmental crisis – a cultural, epistemological, axiological, as well as ecosystemic crisis. According to Peter Finke (2006), the disciplinary divide is clearly defused when talking in terms of “cultural ecosystems”, which emerge in coevolution with natural cycles and generate their own patterns of consumption and circulation of matter and energy. From this perspective, religion and philosophy, but also art and literature, are such cultural ecosystems. Looking across the nature-culture and human-environment relations through the lens of the environmental humanities challenges the established epistemologies of the disciplines concerned. It becomes thus relevant to ask: to what extent do religious and spiritual philosophies interact with other ecosystems in an age of far-reaching ecological crisis? What impact do artistic and literary representations of various forms of ecomysticism have on how we think about and navigate the surrounding environment? What is the contribution of a cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue to a renewed appreciation and even veneration of nature that does not renounce practical and socio-political implications?

On the one hand, a prominent trend in ecocriticism – the so-called “material turn” – seems to exclude possible interactions with religious and spiritual approaches to the environment. On the other hand, spirits as much as stories can be seen as coming to matter – as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014) as well as Kate Rigby (2014) have convincingly argued. That is to say, materiality should be interpreted as an entanglement of interconnected human and more-than-human agencies and discourses, between and through which some kind of affectivity, or vitality, or indeed spirituality, freely moves. In this view, even a subjective mystical experience is part of a material interaction. Not by chance, the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all (material) things and events is central in many spiritual traditions. The ultimate, indivisible reality manifested in all things, and of which all things are parts, is variously referred to as *Brahman* in Hinduism, *Dharmakaya* in certain Mahāyāna texts of Buddhism, and Tao in Taoism. Even in European Christianity, especially in Francis of Assisi and in Thomas Aquinas’ theology, God is present everywhere in everything. Similarly, Islam and Judaism celebrates the sacredness of all created things. Moreover, the spiritual dimension of material ecocriticism resonates with a number of Indigenous peoples’ cultural narratives. The interconnectedness of all things is only one among many concepts that, arising from different and yet comparable religious traditions, bears the potential for a fruitful understanding of humanity’s relationship with the more-than-human worlds – together with the notion of *kenosis* (i.e. ‘emptying’ of self), cross-species gratitude, benevolence, compassion, and harmlessness, to name but a few. Finally, in the last few years there has been a rising interconnection between religion and ecology, in both institutional religions

(e.g. the Catholic *Laudato Si*) and alternative religious movements (e.g. the new phenomenon of Ecospirituality) (Becci 2021).

In this international, cross-disciplinary conference, we aim to investigate the literary, philosophical, anthropological, and political aspects of an ecological rematerialisation of religions and spiritualities, in dialogue with the ever-growing academic production related to the connection between religious thinking and environmental praxis (Jones 2005; Taylor and Kaplan 2005; Lodge and Hamlin 2006; Jenkins 2010; Bellarsi 2011; Runehov and Oviedo 2013; Grim and Tucker 2014; Armstrong 2022).

Themes

We invite papers in English covering a range of periods and across different cultural contexts.

- religions and ecology
- cross-cultural ecological epistemologies
- environmental theories and practices
- religion and ecology in world literature
- ecospirituality and the arts
- ecomaterialism and ecofeminism
- dialogues between religion and science
- transspecies and postcolonial struggles in a postsecular world
- planetary ethic
- ecological mythopoesis

Organizers

The conference is organized jointly by the Giorgio Cini Foundation (the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities), Ca' Foscari University of Venice (The New Institute, Centre for Environmental Humanities – NICHE, the Center for the Study of Lived Religion, and the Department of Asian and North African Studies), the University College Dublin, and Harvard Divinity School (Center for the Study of World Religions).

Abstracts and Texts

Abstracts up to 300 words, accompanied by a short CV, should be submitted in English by the 1st of February to civilta.comparate@cini.it. A notification of acceptance will be forwarded by the 1st of March.

Timetable

1. Abstracts (300-500 words maximum) and CVs to be received by 1 February 2024.
2. Notifications of acceptance will be given by 15 February 2024.
3. The conference will be held 21-22-23 May 2024.

Practicalities and Funding

The organizers will provide accommodation on San Giorgio Island, coffee breaks and lunches for all participants. Participants will arrange and pay for their own transportation. Extra funding may be available to cover the travel expenses of a limited number of scholars who cannot obtain funding from their own institutions. If extra funding is needed, please indicate this in the email with which you submit your abstract. The Library of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualities will appreciate it if participants can bring and donate one book they authored or in which they have participated.

CONTACT: civilta.comparate@cini.it

References

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- Iovino, S. and Oppermann, S. (2014) ‘Introduction: Stories Come to Matter’, in Iovino, S. and Oppermann, S. (eds.) *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–17.
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- Runehov, A. L. C. and Oviedo L. eds. (2013) *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, Dordrecht: Springer Reference.
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