

ACHIEVING GOOD LIFE¹
“RELIGION, NATURE AND PROGRESS”,
3RD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE
ISSRNC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM,
THE NETHERLANDS, JULY 23–26, 2009

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“Religion, Nature, and Progress” was the third International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, held in Amsterdam from 23rd to 26th July 2009. The ISSRN started its activities in the fall of 2005. The international public debate was and still is concerned indispensable and pressing question: how might humanity achieve greater social equity as well as environmental sustainability? This conference addressed the critical intersections of religion, nature and progress in a multidisciplinary way, in order to give insight into the different positions of these subjects both in history and in relation to the current debates, for example on environmental policy and cultural development. The six Plenary Sessions clung to the theme of the conference while the other sessions provided a spectrum of subtopics and questions for discussion: for example apocalypse, eschatology, utopia, psychedelic thinking, climate change, ecosystems, sacred spaces, scriptural religions, indigenous perspectives, forests, water, intercultural contacts, animism, pantheism, paganism.

In his presidential address Bron Taylor (University of Florida, USA) explored the present dramatic progress and growing international influence of ‘green religions’—such as nature religions, spirituality, animism, pantheism, deep ecology, Gaia and land ethics—that consider nature sacred and all organisms as kin and intrinsically valuable. He queried whether they offer pathways toward a humane and environmentally beneficent future or threaten rather than promoting biocultural diversity. This was a theme which reappeared in many other lectures, with a general preference shown for the former alternative.

Rewriting, rethinking, realizing nature

The Western background of the ‘nature’ concept and its underlying presumptions and evaluations is apparent, and should be the object of critical investigation. Controlling nature has for centuries been identified with ‘progress’. Some of the presentations investigated this topic through rewriting the history of Western ‘giants’ such as Isaac Newton and Leonardo Da Vinci. William R. Newman (Indiana University, USA) brought an argument that in very real sense, Newtonian science embodied the alchemical dream of understanding nature as a unitary organism and of working transmutations at its deepest level. Nina Witoszek (University of Oslo) asked in her presentation if Da Vinci’s perception of ‘divine nature’ could serve as a starting point for rethinking our idea of progress and reanimating the humanist agenda of sustainability? Witoszek’s presentation cast a new light on the connection between Da Vinci’s work, his unconventional religiosity, and his ecological wisdom. Donald Worster (University of Kansas, USA) later gave a lesson about John Muir

(1838–1914), who was the founder of nature conservation and the prophet of a new religion in USA. The profound connections between the new worldview and revolutionary social and political ideas could also be seen in this presentation, as in others concentrating on remarkable individuals.

Historical genealogies and ethnographic perspectives

David Haberman (Indiana University, USA) noted that although there was much diversity of opinion among influential scholars of religion and society during the nineteenth century, the principle of unilineal cultural evolution was common to most. Embedded in this shared view was the idea of *progress*, which included specifically moving away from the idea that nonhuman life forms possessed souls—or ‘spirit’. ‘Primitive’ religions were labeled pejoratively as ‘animistic’ and ‘anthropomorphic’ beliefs, which were to be abandoned in the progressive movement forward. Haberman said that today this particular notion of progress is beginning to be questioned deeply; there is renewed interest in the study of cultures that yet invest in animistic conceptions, and in reviving a range of human perspectives. As if a dialogue, Jan J. Boersema (IVM, free University of Amsterdam) argued in his presentation—with illustrative historical and economical examples—that progress is intricately bound to our Western culture and that it is neither necessary nor desirable to abandon this idea.

Drawing on ethnography, Kristina Tiede (University of Lyon, France) explored how Nahua people in Mexico perceive, understand, and cope with environmental changes. Her paper questioned Western notions of scientific progress while seeking to bring together indigenous and Western knowledge on environmental change precipitated by climate change. She argued that local Nahua knowledge about wind, rain, and drought patterns encoded in myth and ritual intersects with scientific ways of knowing about anthropogenic influences on the atmosphere. Working with a similar theme, Sanni Saarinen (University of Helsinki), discussed how rural people in the Peruvian Amazon, both indigenous and *mestizos*, do not conceptualise nature and culture as antithetical terms, but see them instead as parts of the same continuum. Their relation with nature is fundamentally social and moral in character and is closely connected to the moral ideas of ‘good life’ among people. Also drawing on ethnography, Graham Harvey (Open University, UK) introduced the new usage of the term ‘animism’ arising from respectful dialogue with indigenous knowledge about relational ontologies. The lecture addressed the question of what ‘sustainability’ and ‘progress’ might mean among animists, apparently placing Harvey among those scientists who argue that animists and their understandings of the world can contribute significantly to contemporary debates about consciousness, cosmology and environmentalism.

Academic detachments

A couple of sessions were arranged in different formats to the traditional academic conference panel. For example, “From the Shaman’s Circle to the Ivory Tower: Progress, Spirituality and Psychedelic Thinking” took the form of a large, semi-structured discussion with three main types of participants: co-convenors, invited discussants and drop-in participants. Co-convenors had each prepared a five-minute presentation and they also had invited a number of discussants with expertise in psychedelic experiences, shamanism, meditation,

ethnobiology and so forth who had received a list of discussion topics from the co-convenors before the conference. I myself joined the group of drop-in participants. The aim of the session was to explore ways of making spiritually-inspired, psychedelic thinking more mainstream so that it may help people survive and transcend the age of progress with minimal loss of life—as Anna Waldstein (University of Kent, UK) outlined in her introduction. This session was exceptional in its courageous and yet still scientific way of approaching the difficult issues raised by the conference's title. And as with other sessions, a salient notion to emerge was that progress should not only be engaged in its genealogical and cultural contexts, but also in its function within ethical discourse. What can we use or learn from different worldviews? Can we just pick whatever we want from their teachings, or should we walk the pilgrimage path from beginning to end?

H2O

A session titled 'Water and Spiritual Progress' addressed the combined issues: 'water as resource and natural and cultural artefact' and 'water as space and place of recreation, work and restoration'. The idea of progress was questioned via the depletion of freshwater resources, water and fisheries management, and the increasing damage to aquatic environments due to pollution, over-fishing, contaminated agricultural runoff or system destruction. While 'progress' in water management is mostly defined in economical and technological language, ethical, social and spiritual definitions were seen as needing to be considered on the same terms. In his paper, Dieter Garten (Potsdam-Institute for Climate Impact Research, Germany) critically reflected on the often cited 'paradigm-shift' in water management in terms of its underlying ideas of 'progress'. He outlined the formation of a new 'water ethos' focused on the role of religion/spirituality within this process. David Groenfeldt (Santa Fe Watershed Association, USA) proposed a process of 'culture therapy' to identify, understand, and apply water teachings found within indigenous spiritual traditions to help establish a shared water ethic. Robin Globus (University of Florida, USA) examined a situation facing managers of a small lake near Gainesville, Florida. She concluded by suggesting that good management should entail public discussion of the ethical implications of prospective decisions. In her presentation Sylvie Shaw (University of Queensland, Australia) examined the psycho-cultural impacts of fisheries' decline in Australia. She argued that recreational angling is sacrosanct to fishers who may not see the collective damage done to species and habitats and asked in her study how both sectors fare and respond to fisheries' change.

The presentations of this session treated many questions which are crucial in my own Oral History Ph.D. research, such as changes in the environment and the role of the researcher as intercessor for locals. My own paper "Narrative environment as a moral witness" was based on work carried out in the Finnish village of Lypyrtti, located in the Turku archipelago, where water is conceived as the centre, the fairway and the all-round essence and its pollution is emotionally expressed as nostalgia for the lost clear waters. The history of Lypyrtti is not an example of progress in cultural development but, on the contrary, a story of depopulation of a vital community over the last fifty years. Similar themes emerged during the Oral History and Ethics International Research Symposium (Helsinki, 3.–4. December 2008) when Simo Laakkonen (University of Helsinki) argued that, to date,

Oral History studies have focused on social issues rather than on environmental issues, and also that the prevalent ecological research paradigm neglects the viewpoints of local people and environmental changes in everyday life.

'Religion and the Environment' in Finland

The European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment² had its second International Conference on "Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere" in Åbo Akademy, Åbo/Turku from 14th to 17th May 2009. The European Forum "promotes scholarly and critical inquiry into the relationships between human beings and their diverse cultures, environments and religious beliefs and practices" and its second conference allowed Cultural Studies in Finland to concentrate only on environmental or ecological topics—perhaps for the first time. Thus the first key note speech was given by Erik Bonsdorff, Professor in Marine Biology (Åbo Akademi University), who pointed out that it is very important to "combine knowledge and expertise from several disciplines, and tackle the problems from multiple perspectives simultaneously in order to achieve truly integrated management options for sustainable solutions both for the entire Baltic Sea and its specific regional problems" (personal notes, 14.5.2009).

Environmental topics also highlight methodological shifts in Cultural Studies. Researchers need to rethink and rewrite the concepts, methodologies and even historical or ontological principles of their own fields. The currently emerging academic field combining religion, nature and culture may contribute to intensifying efforts to counteract the loss of cultural and biological diversity by testing new multi- and interdisciplinary models that are based on cultural, spiritual, humanistic, social, and ecological frameworks on the one hand, and on rigorous academic contextualization and critique on the other. To this end, the *Monitieteisyys ympäristötutkimuksessa* ("Multidisciplinarity in Environmental Studies") Symposium in Turku (10.–11.9.2009) was organized in an exemplary manner, allowing researchers from different disciplines to present their definitions of 'nature' and discuss questions concerning environmental problems. In this symposium it became very clear that the environmental situation also challenges researchers in this and in many related fields to (re)define their academic responsibility, a theme which has emerged from all the academic gatherings mentioned in this report.

NOTES

¹ "Rural people in Peruvian Amazon do not use the concept of 'progress' or 'sustainability', but they talk much about the importance of 'achieving good life', which is in a way equivalent with the idea of progress" (Sanni Saarinen in her presentation in *"Religion, Nature, and Progress"* conference 25.7.2009).

² The Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment was established in 2004 in order to develop an expanding cooperation of researchers in different academic disciplines on the theme of religion, nature, environment and culture.

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