



**“Religion, Nature, and Progress”**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the**  
**International Society for the**  
**Study of Religion, Nature & Culture (ISSRNC)**  
**at the University of Amsterdam**  
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Sponsored by:



UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM



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## Background

The initiative for the conference "Religion, Nature and Progress" is the result of an on-going academic effort to come to an understanding of the intersections between religion, nature, and culture. Such understanding is especially critical in view of the rising concerns about dwindling biocultural diversity and climate change. The international public debate is concerned with a simple, yet indispensable and pressing question: How might humanity achieve greater social equity as well as environmental sustainability? The context of threatened habitats and increasing cultural homogenization makes such concerns evermore pressing. The currently emerging academic field covering these intersections may contribute to the intensifying efforts around the world to counteract the loss of cultural and biological diversity by testing new interdisciplinary models that are based on a spiritual, humanistic, social, and ecological framework on the one hand, and on rigorous academic contextualization and critique on the other. It was with this background that the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC) started its activities in the fall of 2005. This was preceded by the publication of the award-winning *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005)—a result of a worldwide interactive academic process.

The ISSRNC is a community of scholars who are engaged in critical inquiry into the relationships among human beings and their diverse cultures, environments, religious beliefs and practices. The Society facilitates scholarly collaboration and research, and disseminates research findings through regular conferences and the affiliated *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* (London: Equinox Publisher). An inaugural conference "Exploring Religion, Nature, and Culture" was held in Gainesville, Florida, USA, in April 2006, followed by a second conference in Morelia, Mexico, in January 2008, titled "The Re-enchantment of Nature across Disciplines: Critical Intersections of Science, Ethics, and Metaphysics." Both conferences were attended by over 200 participants from over two dozen countries and were characterized by lively interdisciplinary debate on a wide range of subjects in an energizing atmosphere. Highlights were published in the *Journal*. Based on this success, the Board decided to organize a third conference in the Netherlands in 2009, this time on the theme of 'progress' in relation to the Society's core themes.

## Explanation of Conference Theme

The intrinsic relation between ideas of progress and the impact that such progress has on ecosystems and natural environments is a central aspect of discussions about the ecological crisis. Notions of progress can take on quite different meanings, from economic progress to social improvements to progress in the natural sciences; religious discourses, too, often make use of metaphors of progress.

Usually, these discussions seem to imply that the concepts involved—progress, nature, crisis, etc.—have a clear and simple meaning. Closer reflection, however, reveals that such concepts are themselves elements and products of a larger discourse, or worldview, that conceptualizes 'nature' and the human relation with it in a particular way. Many underlying presumptions and evaluations have a long history in (Western) culture, and often they are informed by religious views on the status of nature and humanity, views that vary widely and are often contradictory to one another. The Western background of these concepts is apparent and should be the object of critical investigation.

This international conference addresses 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 vis-à-vis the current debates on climate change, environmental policy, and cultural development. It is increasingly acknowledged that religions and metaphysics, which inform worldviews and notions of progress, have played and still play an important role in these debates and that a clear understanding of them is indispensable for policies and practices striving to solve the environmental, climate, and other crises. The overall theme provides a spectrum of subtopics and questions that can be engaged in a critical dialogue among various disciplines, such as the academic study of religion, history, anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, the natural sciences, social sciences, economics, politics, architecture, urban planning, etc.

The conference will take place in Amsterdam, situated in one of the most densely populated areas in the world, facing many ecological challenges that ask for reflection and active response. The Netherlands have a long history of 'improving nature,' from protection against sea water to creating new land and learning to set up natural environments in highly populated spaces. The city of Amsterdam has committed itself to an ambitious plan of environmentally sustainable development. Therefore, the conference theme, although international and global in perspective, fits the conditions of this modern western European city very well.

The following questions will be addressed:

- What does 'progress' mean? What are the parameters of progress and what are they based on? Which different conceptualizations of progress exist worldwide? And what does progress mean with regard to nature? Is nature in need of improvement or salvation? Or has nature to be protected from the impact of human activity? And is that 'progress'?
- Controlling nature has for centuries—particularly in Western societies—been identified with 'progress.' How can this be explained? And are recent notions of 'managing planet earth' perhaps new versions of the same idea, put into a more environmentally positive form?
- Talking of progress seems to imply improvement and an ultimate goal that has to be achieved. What are the underlying principles of evaluation and diagnosis? Are they self-evident or do they have a contested and changing genealogy? What are the cultural and intellectual sources where ideas of progress come from?
- Many concepts of progress apply a model of time and salvation that is based on religious worldviews and traditions. How do ideas of salvation history and religious apocalypticism interact with secular notions of progress and of nature?
- Cross-cultural comparison shows that in different cultural contexts there exist different ideas regarding progress. Are contemporary concepts of progress typically Western? Do certain religious traditions lend themselves more naturally than others to endeavors to 'improve' nature and humanity?

## **Subtopics, Approaches, and Featured Speakers**

The conference topic is open enough to invite contributions from various academic fields of research and perspectives; but it is also focused enough to foster a dialogue among these perspectives that will enrich the scholarly debate and will open new vistas for future research. Distinguished scholars from different disciplines and from different countries and cultural backgrounds will share their ideas about the conference topic. To operationalize the discussion, the conference theme is divided into four subtopics and fields of research.

It is the intention of the organizing committee to organize a separate panel on the specific historical, cultural, and political situation of the Netherlands.

*a) Ideas of 'Progress' and Nature in Western Perception: Historical Genealogies*

The first subtopic addresses the genealogy of the concept of progress in its Western—particularly European—context. Historical analysis reveals that there is a close relation between religious and philosophical ideas on the one hand, and the human engagement with, or appropriation of nature on the other (*Naturaneignung* in the Grohs' apt terminology; see Groh & Groh 1991; Groh & Groh 1996; Groh 2003; von Stuckrad 2007; see also Worster 1983 and 1994). 'Perfecting nature' is a concept that is ultimately dependent on religious ideas about the meaning and end of history (Merchant 2003); its impact can be seen not only on the field of religion, but also in science (Newman 2004), in the shaping of landscapes by human intervention (Schama 1995; Blackbourn 2006; on the Netherlands see also van Gelderen 1998; van den Berg & Casimir 2002), and in political decision making and urban planning (van den Berg & Koole 2006; Narayanan 2008).

Confirmed featured speakers:

- Ruth and/or Dieter Groh, University of Konstanz (Germany); tentative title: "The Interdependence of Theology and Nature from the Old Testament to the Renaissance"
- Donald Worster, University of Kansas (USA): "John Muir and the Religion of Nature"
- William R. Newman, Indiana University at Bloomington (USA)

*b) Religion, Nature, and Progress in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Comparative Approaches*

The second subtopic brings in a cross-cultural dimension. The contributions in this area compare Western concepts of progress with non-Western approaches. While the notion of progress fostered scientific and economic development in European and North American societies, it also enhanced the ecological problems that modern societies are facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Boersema 2008; Schouten 2005). What is more, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a process can be observed that created a mutual dependency between Western and non-Western cultural systems; on the one hand we witness an 'export' of Western concepts due to colonial discourses, on the other hand we see a process of 'Easternization of the West' (Campbell 2007) that reveals the impact of non-Western concepts on European and North American cultural discourse (on India see Haberman 2006). These dynamics are only insufficiently described as 'globalization' in a 'postmodern setting' (Benthall 2008; Witoszek & Stráth 1999); in fact, they are much more complex and lead to a number of inter-cultural questions that are addressed in the contributions to this conference area.

Confirmed featured speakers:

- Jonathan Benthall, Kings College, London (UK) (emeritus): "Progress and circumscription in the greening of Islam"
- Colin Campbell, University of York (UK): "The Easternization of the West and the Rehabilitation of Nature"
- Odeh Al-Jayyousi, World Conservation Union (IUCN), regional director West Asia/Middle East (WAME) (IUCN Regional Office, Amman, Jordan): "Re-thinking Sustainability and Progress: Islamic Perspectives"
- Matthijs G. C. Schouten, Nature Conservation and Plant Ecology Group, Wageningen University (The Netherlands): "Care or Cultivation: The Concept of Progress in the Monastic Ideal of Buddhism and Christianity: the Impact on Nature"
- David Haberman, Indiana University (USA)

c) *Alternatives to 'Progress' and Alternative Visions of 'Progress'*

Since the notion of progress has an identifiable Western genealogy, it is particularly interesting to look into cultural contexts that do not share the same genealogy or that explicitly intend to move beyond the idea of progress. This is the case with indigenous traditions that address change in history and nature in a different way than Western traditions do (Selin 2003; Dove et al. 2003; Tiedje 2008); but it is also true for projects and movements within Western societies—including radical environmentalism (see Taylor 2001a and 2001b; Harvey 2006)—that propagate what they regard as alternatives to the notion of progress.

If the organizers succeed in bringing the three speakers with an indigenous background to Amsterdam, this session will be divided into two.

Confirmed featured speakers:

- Kristina Tiedje, University of Lyon 2 (France), perhaps collaborating with indigenous leader (Nahuatl/Mestizo) from Mexico
- Robin Wright, University of Florida (USA), perhaps collaborating with a Baniwa Shaman from the Brazilian Amazon
- Bron Taylor, University of Florida (USA); tentative title: "The Progress of Nature Religion"
- Graham Harvey, the Open University, UK; tentative title: "Progressive Animism: Sustaining Diversity among the Co-Creators of the World"
- Agnes van den Berg, Alterra Center, Wageningen University (The Netherlands)

d) *Philosophical and Conceptual Reflection on 'Progress'*

The notion of progress should not only be engaged in its historical genealogy and cultural contexts, but also in its function within philosophical and ethical discourse (Callicott 1994). Criticisms of progress, as well as the ideologies that actively propagate the idea of progress, are making use of normative criteria in the development of human culture and its relation to the non-human world. The fourth section explicitly looks into the conceptual frameworks and philosophical debates that underlie the very notion of progress. Critical responses to the philosophy of 'deep ecology' (Katz et al. 2000; Witoszek & Brennan 1999; Birnbacher 1997) and reflection on environmental claims and their normative background in general (Barry 1999a; Barry 1999b) form part of this group of contributions.

Confirmed featured speakers:

- Nina Witoszek, University of Oslo (Norway)
- John Barry, Queen's University Belfast (Northern Ireland)
- Eric M. Katz, New Jersey's Science and Technology University (USA); tentative title: "The Paradox of Progress: Domination and Autonomy"

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 Blackbourn, David, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: Norton 2006).  
 Boersema, Jan J., "How Green is Progress? The Need for Science and Religion in Sustaining Biodiversity," in: Willem B. Drees, H. Meisinger & T.A. Smedes (eds.), *Creation's Diversity: Voices from Theology and Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2008), 133–155.

- Callicott, J. Baird, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994).
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- Groh, Dieter, *Schöpfung im Widerspruch: Deutungen der Natur und des Menschen von der Genesis bis zur Reformation* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2003).
- Dove, Michael R. et al., "The Global Mobilization of Environmental Concepts: Re-thinking the Western/Non-Western Divide," in: Helaine Selin (ed.), *Nature across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures* (Dordrecht: Kluwer 2003).
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- Harvey, Graham, *Animism* (New York: Columbia University Press 2006).
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- Merchant, Carolyn, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York & London: Routledge 2003).
- Narayanan, Yamini, "In a City Like Delhi: Sustainability and Spirituality," PhD dissertation, Murdoch University (Australia) 2008.
- Newman, William R., *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004).
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## **Schedule for Conference Planning and Registration**

Online registration for the conference opened 1 February 2009. The early registration fee (until 31 March 2009) is 250 EUR for members and 320 EUR for non-members (150 EUR for student members and 210 EUR for non-member students). You can also register for the dinner on Saturday evening in the center of Amsterdam.

Registration includes program book, conference bag, reception, two lunches (Friday and Saturday), and coffee/tea breaks.

To register, go to

[http://www.parthen-impact.com/eventure/welcome.do?type=participant&congress=30\\_NRP](http://www.parthen-impact.com/eventure/welcome.do?type=participant&congress=30_NRP)  
and follow the instructions there.

To make your hotel reservation at discounted prices for the conference, please go to

[https://www.raihotelser-vice.com/compass/external/index.cfm?&meeting\\_ID=1186&Meeting\\_ID\\_Code=759813157](https://www.raihotelser-vice.com/compass/external/index.cfm?&meeting_ID=1186&Meeting_ID_Code=759813157).

## **Organizing Committees and Contact**

Two committees are responsible for the organization of the conference.

The *Scientific Committee* consists of Kocku von Stuckrad, Jan Boersema, Bron Taylor, Tineke Nugteren, Kristina Tiedje, and Sarah Pike.

The *Local Committee* consists of Kocku von Stuckrad, Jan Boersema, Tineke Nugteren, and Cathrien de Pater.

The administrative organization of the ISSRNC Conference is being taken care of by the Conference Office of the University of Amsterdam. For questions pertaining to logistical organization (registration, fees, accommodation, schedule, etc.), please contact the Conference Office at [conference@uva.nl](mailto:conference@uva.nl), or +31 20 525 4791. For all other questions please email [issrnc2009@gmail.com](mailto:issrnc2009@gmail.com).

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