

Religion & Webinar Teaching Resources

Religion & Environmental Catastrophe

February 16, 2023

[YouTube Link](#)

Overview:

As a result of human activities, the Earth system is undergoing dramatic change and a disruption of the climate, signaled through mega-fires, depleted natural resources, and mass extinctions. At the same time that there are religious denials of climate change and other human-induced environmental catastrophes, there are also religious calls to restore and respect the environment and the other creatures who live here and to turn to more sustainable practices in order to address pressing global-scale environmental problems as well as the social problems they worsen. This conversation will address the American religious landscape and its myriad responses to environmental catastrophe.

Host: Andrea R. Jain (Indiana University - Indianapolis)

- Andrea R. Jain, Ph.D. is professor of religious studies at Indiana University, Indianapolis, editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and author of *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (Oxford 2014) and *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (Oxford, 2020). She received her doctorate degree in religious studies from Rice University in 2010. She writes about capitalism, religion, sex, and society in our contemporary world. Jain's current work, including the book project and documentary film *Predation*, offers an anti-capitalist critique that centers questions about our current planetary crisis with special attention to the relationships between human and other-than-human animals. She's a member of the Finite Futures team, which aims to design and implement a new model of generative, public-facing, multidisciplinary engagement at the nexus of religion, technology, and justice in the Anthropocene. Her contributions focus on the capitalocene, that is, the uniquely disastrous changes that are a consequence of the social values and practices of late capitalism.

Panelists:

Timothy Beal (Case Western University)

- Timothy is a writer and scholar in religious studies whose work explores matters of religion, ecology, and technology. He is Distinguished University Professor, Florence Harkness Professor of Religion, and Director of h.lab at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. He is author of many books including, *Religion and It's Monsters*, *When Time is Short*, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* and more.

Sarah Pike (California State University, Chico)

- Dr. Pike's research has focused on ritual studies and new religious movements, and she has authored numerous articles and book chapters on contemporary Paganism, ritual, the New Age movement, the Burning Man festival, spiritual dance, environmental activism, and youth culture. Much of her current research focuses on the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Her ethnography of contemporary Pagan festivals, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, was published by the University of California Press in 2001 and *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* was published by Columbia University Press in the Contemporary American Religion Series in 2004. It was named a Choice "Outstanding Academic Title." My most recent book, *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism*, was published by the University of California Press in 2017.

Jenna Wagner (Case Western University)

- Jenna is a recent graduate of Case Western Reserve University with a degree in Biomedical Engineering and a Mechanical Design and Manufacturing Minor. She is enrolled in Case Western's Masters of Engineering Management program for 2022-2023. Jenna researches the functional areas of business and management while using her critical thinking skills and technical engineering background to prepare for real-world problem solving and decision making.

Sources mentioned in episode:

[The Denial of Death](#) by Ernest Becker

- "The Denial of Death is a 1973 book by American cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker which discusses the psychological and philosophical implications of how people and cultures have reacted to the concept of death. The author argues most human action is taken to ignore or avoid the inevitability of death."

The Last of Us, Television Show

[Astrotopia](#) by Mary-Jane Rubenstein

- "A revealing look at the parallel mythologies behind the colonization of Earth and space—and a bold vision for a more equitable, responsible future both on and beyond our planet."

[When Time Is Short](#) by Timothy Beal

- "With faith, hope, and compassion, acclaimed religion scholar Timothy Beal shows us how to navigate the inevitabilities of the climate crisis and the very real—and near—possibility of human extinction. What if it's too late to save ourselves from climate crisis?"

[Joanna Macy](#) is an environmental activist, author, and scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. She is the author of twelve books.

Thomas Berry was a Catholic priest, cultural historian, and scholar of the world's religions, especially Asian traditions. Later, as he studied Earth history and evolution, he called himself a "geologist".

Related teaching resources from website:

[Capitalism and American Religion](#) Syllabus by Lincoln Mullen

[Religion & Animal and Food Justice](#) Webinar by CSRAAC

[Religion & Nature in America](#) Syllabus by Brett Grainger

[Religion and Machines](#) Webinar by CSRAAC

[Religion and Science](#) Lesson from ARDA (Association of Religion Data Archives)

Show Notes & Main Points

1. A religious response to an environmental catastrophe. What it can teach us about environmental change and responses to it.
 - Sarah: The wildfire in 2018 in California. Local churches played an important practical role and spiritual role. People would get food and essentials they needed, “they were the boots on the ground” before the real help came. For all kinds of people, they became places to help.
2. Dominion over land aspect: how do we navigate that?
 - On one hand is dominion (human exceptionalism) and one hand is become smaller in our footprint to make less of an impact.
 - Tim: Dominionism is a response to catastrophe, an immortality vehicle, a project that seeks to deny the reality of our finitude. Getting out of problem-solving mode into a possibility mode.
3. How are the topics we study or talk about impacted by our own ideas around climate change?
 - Tim: I grew up in nature and ranger stations, and fires were often and personified. A lot of my interest in horror and religious experiences might have come from some of these experiences.
4. Relationship between climate catastrophe and punishment. How do different religious communities define these catastrophes as punishment for human action or a lack of human action?
 - Sarah: A lot of communities have an idea of “getting what we deserve” and guilt. Sometimes the communities of new age and pagan can blame the Abrahamic religions and capitalism but also mimic some in their ideas. Sometimes punishment can be remarkably similar. What's a constructive response to guilt or punishment?
 - Jenna: There is often a creation and destruction story so it makes sense that we would want a story line to life. In some destructive things it's just how it's meant to be, not necessarily punishment.
 - Andrea: It is politically instrumentalized. Not necessarily punishment for what we did, but for what “they” did.
5. How do people avoid responsibility for climate change by politicizing it and making it about the “other.”

Assignment Ideas (Whole Video)

1. Examine a recent environmental catastrophe or an environmental related incident, find where it intersects with religion. After examining and investigating the relationship, write a paper or create a project around that relationship. How do we see religion in these

moments of catastrophe? Where does religion take place in these moments, is it new or old ideas? Who has access to religion and its efforts?

2. Look at different lamentation artworks, how are the emotions portrayed? What impact can it have on viewers? Based on the video, why is this emotion important, and what can it offer to people who are grieving?

Discussion Questions (Whole Video)

1. Examine a local or state environmental catastrophe. Where can we find religion at play? Are there various kinds of relief programs, shelters or more that we see religion being involved in? How do local people rationalize, understand, or grieve the catastrophe?
2. How do people avoid responsibility for climate change by politicizing it and making it about the “other.” In what ways can we see this play out in our communities or our country?
3. Discuss the impact of different creation stories on the environment. From ideas around world trees, dominion, Mother Earth, and Father Sky from the Navajo tradition, and so many more, how do these stories impact the way people view and act towards the environment and environmental catastrophes?