

CALL FOR PAPERS:

Ways of Knowing

The Fourth Annual Graduate Conference on Religion
at Harvard Divinity School

October 22-24, 2015
Cambridge, MA

The Science, Religion, and Culture program at Harvard Divinity School announces the fourth annual graduate student conference in the study of religion. Inaugurated in 2012, this multi-day event is made up of dozens of thematic panels that cross religious traditions, academic disciplines, and intellectual and theological commitments. In addition, the conference features special panels on professionalization, addressing both academic and non-academic careers, and a keynote address. The conference aims at promoting lively interdisciplinary discussion of prevailing assumptions (both within and outside the academy) about the differentiation, organization, authorization, and reproduction of various modes of knowing and "doing" religion.

Last year, 136 students and early career scholars representing 68 graduate programs from across the United States and around the world gathered to present their research. Following the success of our previous conferences, we invite graduate students and early career scholars to submit paper proposals from of a variety of theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary approaches. We seek papers that explore religious practices and modes of knowing, especially in relation to authority, rhetoric, tradition, ritual, material culture, and pedagogy. We welcome the use of all sorts of theoretical tools, including discourse analysis, gender theory, race theory, disability theory, postcolonial theory, performance theory, and ritual theory. Papers may focus on any period, region, tradition, group, or person. They may address a set of practices, texts, doctrines, or beliefs. Projects that are primarily sociological, anthropological, theological, ethical, textual, historical, or philosophical are welcome, as are projects that draw on multiple disciplines.

Possible approaches include, but are not limited to, the following: 1) an exploration of a specific way of knowing, being, and engaging the world in relation to religion; 2) an historical, sociological, and/or anthropological analysis of the cultural processes that support a specific religious discourse or practice, its authoritative structures, and/or its strategies of inclusion and exclusion; 3) an analysis of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexuality, and/or gender with respect to religious texts, practices, or performances; 4) a comparative examination of religious texts and/or their interpretations, with attention to the historical, sociopolitical, cultural, and/or intellectual contexts that mediate and delimit different interpretative strategies and practices; 5) an analysis of the interplay between religion and scientific, moral, and/or legal discourses, practices, and authorities; 6) a theological construction or analysis of a particular normative framework, which critically and/or comparatively engages one or more religious traditions, 7) a critical analysis of the scholarly production and dissemination of knowledge on religion.

Special Call for Papers

In addition to the General Call for Papers, the conference will also feature four thematic modules. Several panels will be devoted to each of the following themes:

Religion and Crisis

The contemporary moment is frequently described in language of crisis, whether economic, environmental, moral, or political. These crises, and responses to them, are transforming the lives of religious persons and communities around the globe, whether through the dispersal of refugees, the reshaping of landscapes, climates, and economies, or the formation of social movements. This module seeks to gather analyses of religious engagements with crises past and present. These might include crises within a religious tradition or community, religious responses to environmental, economic, social, or political crises, the spiritual or ethical crises of individuals, crises within the scholarly study of religion or the humanities, or challenges to these frameworks of crisis. We welcome a broad range of papers that address this theme from a range of methodological approaches and in the context of various traditions, historical periods, and geographical regions. Proposals might also interrogate the relationship between narratives and metaphors of crisis and religious or theological frameworks, the place of crisis in apocalyptic theologies or movements, or the methodological stakes of focusing on crisis as an "event."

The Promise and Peril of Textual Religion

In antiquity, committing orally transmitted religious traditions to writing had obvious benefits for preservation and promulgation. For instance, the death or forgetfulness of the tradition's human bearers no longer threatened its continuity so directly. However, this stability introduced a new tension between living religious experience and crystallized religious text. This module invites papers that address the role—sometimes productive, sometimes problematic—of textuality in religion, spanning any religious tradition from antiquity to the present. Questions for consideration include: What epistemological issues are at stake in the interpretation of religious texts as opposed to other forms of religious experience? How do religious traditions navigate questions of human and divine authorship of their texts? Are religious texts "literature," and what role should literary theory play in religious studies? How do religious texts impact community and communal structures? How have notions of canon developed over time? What does it mean to be a "textual religion," and is this different from simply a religion that has texts? How have questions of textuality prompted religious renewal or rebellion? In the broadest terms: what are the promise and peril, the opportunities and limitations, of textual religion?

Magic/Science/Religion

The categories of magic, science, and religion have traditionally been carefully demarcated as distinct methods of human knowledge and relation to the world. Recent trends in scholarship have profoundly challenged these strict definitions, paying greater attention to the complex realities of actual societies and practices. This module seeks to advance this interdisciplinary conversation through contextual studies informed by the unstable relation among these

categories. What consequences stem from problematizing magic, science, and religion and situating them in social reality for scholars of religion? How do texts, practices, or discourses traditionally placed under one of these categories exceed and transgress their assigned boundaries? What is the relevance of this conversation outside the walls of the academy, in ways that effect larger political or social discourses in which these categories still operate? Possible approaches might include, but are not limited to: 1) historical studies that seek to contextualize how specific texts deploy these categories in variable and sometimes problematic ways, 2) anthropological, archaeological, or ethnographic studies on the rituals and practices commonly labeled under these categories, 3) theoretical or methodological interventions which seek to redefine, rectify, or abandon any or all of these categories. Accepted contributions will ideally advance the discussion of these complex categories in innovative and subtle ways, going beyond simple calls for categorical abstinence or abnegation.

Food Practices across Religious Traditions

Whether amidst celebration, mourning or commemoration, food and eating have played a significant role in structuring and implementing religious practices and enhancing religious experience. It is not only the presence of food that matters, but also its absence either in the form of food taboos for specific religious events or long-term restrictions for individuals whose group-belonging hinges on abstinence from specific types of foods. The contributions should explore continuity and change in local and transnational practices of consumption, ritual food as highly charged symbolic media with the power to reinvigorate communal bonds or commemorate significant historical events, food as a moral and ethical category, food preparation and consumption as revelatory of gendered, political and socioeconomic processes and food as a powerful means of interacting with and experiencing the sacred. Topics might include: feasting and thanksgiving tables across religious traditions, food taboos and fasting, food offerings in various celebrations, food symbolism in religious rituals. Proposals that address food practices in African and African Diasporic religious traditions are particularly encouraged, including proposals that take a comparative approach to these traditions.

Submission Options

Individual Papers: Please submit a 300-word proposal explaining the topic, main argument, and methodology of the project. Please specify whether you are submitting your proposal to the General Call or to one of the Special Call modules. Individual papers will be organized into panels and should not exceed 20 minutes in delivery.

Pre-Organized Panels: Proposals for panels on a particular topic may include three to five papers. Please submit: 1) a 300-word summary of the focus and purpose of the panel, and how each paper contributes to the overarching theme; please specify whether you are submitting the proposal to the General Call or to one of the Special Call modules; 2) a 300-word proposal for each paper as explained above; 3) the name and contact information of the panel organizer/chair.

Proposals due by July 17, 2015 at <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/gradreligionconference>
Any inquiries can be directed to Kirsten Wesselhoeft, Conference Coordinator, at wesselh@fas.harvard.edu.