



**CALL FOR PAPERS**

**“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**

**23–26 July 2009**

**Conference Description and Thematic Focus**

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?

### **Keynote Lectures, Session Types, and Deadline for Submitting Proposals**

A number of keynote lectures will address the conference topic from various angles. For a detailed description of the panels with featured speakers, as well as the most recent list of confirmed speakers, see <http://www.religionandnature.com/society/pdf/ConferenceDescription+Speakers.pdf>.

In addition to the sessions with featured speakers, the conference will have four types of sessions:

- Paper sessions, consisting of individual papers arranged in a session by the organizers;
- Organized sessions, prearranged on the basis of proposals for a thematic session;
- Presentation of ongoing PhD research, to give graduate students the possibility to present their work and discuss it with a larger audience.

The organizers are open for the exploration of new forms of sessions—breaking up strict formats and improving the communication on the panel, as well as the communication with the audience—and invite participants to make suggestions in this regard.

Proposals can be submitted for all four types of sessions. Proposals preferably address the conference theme directly; however, proposals whose topics fall outside the conference theme will also be considered.

The deadline for submitting proposals is 4 January 2009. Paper proposals should not exceed 500 words and must be accompanied by an abstract (for the program book) of no more than 150 words; session proposals should not exceed 1,000 words. Please send your proposal as an email attachment (Word or rtf file) to [issrnc2009@gmail.com](mailto:issrnc2009@gmail.com). Only electronic proposals will be considered.

## **Schedule for Conference Planning and Registration**

- 4 January 2009: Deadline for submitting proposals;
- 1 February 2009: Notification of acceptance of papers;
- 1 February 2009: Early registration for the conference starts;
- 1 April 2009: Early registration ends and normal registration starts.

## **Organizing Committees and Contact**

Three committees are responsible for the organization of the conference. Please consult the conference website for updates.

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, Cathrien de Pater, and Annick de Witt.

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).

## **Conference Director**

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**For latest information and news, see the conference website at**  
[www.religionandnature.com/society/conferences.htm](http://www.religionandnature.com/society/conferences.htm)