

RELIGION 290S

Fall, 2020

(cross-listed with ENVIRON 290S, ETHICS 390S, & ENERGY 390S)

Faith & Fossil Fuels

Examining and understanding the religious and ethical dimensions of fossil fuel use

W/F 10:05-11:20am

CZ, EI, CCI, W

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COURSE SUMMARY

Can we solve fossil fuel-related problems without understanding our complex human relationships to fossil fuels? In this course, we examine the intersections of fossil fuels, ethics, and religion in order to inform responses to the problems and opportunities presented by our use of fossil fuels for energy. With a particular (though not exclusive) focus on the modern Americas, we begin with case studies of how coal and oil have intersected with religious, ethical, and political developments. Then, we survey a number of ways scholars have understood and analyzed these relationships through the theoretical lenses of, for instance, climate change, Anthropocene, environmental justice, extractivism, and cultural development theories. Students draw on these historical and theoretical tools to analyze a case of interest. How should their case be understood? How can course material inform students' ability to think ethically toward effective and fitting forms of action in response to their chosen case?

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What forms of human enlightenment and social order have fueled and been fueled by fossil fuel usage? How is your moral and social imagination shaped by using coal and oil for energy? What is good and right action in an age of fossil fuel extraction?

From climate change and the Anthropocene to resource conflicts and environmental justice movements, the extraction, use, and waste of fossil fuels is shaping and reshaping social, political, and ecological relations around the world to planetary effect. As the local and planetary problems associated with fossil fuel usage have become more apparent in recent decades, social movements, policy proposals, governance regimes, and business innovations have emerged to

mitigate their effects and replace or complement them with alternative energy sources. Examples include Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns, cap-and-trade policy proposals, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, clean coal technologies, the climate justice movement, and the UNFCCC Paris Agreement, to name a few. Yet solutions-oriented thinking risks misinterpreting the problem and overlooking the complex relationships human societies have developed with fossil fuels. For instance, the great shift in energy sources from wood to coal coincided with Europe's great shift from the "Dark Ages" to the "Age of Enlightenment," which coincided with processes of industrialization, urbanization, modernization, racialization, secularization, privatization, colonization, democratization, etc. The historical coincidences are many and deep. Any movement to replace, repair, or complement fossil fuels must understand how deeply our imaginations have been shaped by our relationships to fossil fuels. Can we solve fossil fuel-related problems without understanding our complex relationships to fossil fuels?

In this course, we explore the intersections of fossil fuels, ethics, and religion, with a focus on the Americas from the colonial encounter to today, in order to enrich modes of analyzing and reasoning about action in response to fossil fuel challenges. We examine the religious and ethical dimensions of fossil fuels in order to supplement the predominant ways in which fossil fuels are analyzed as a technical or policy problem. Climate change policy debates, for instance, tend toward a global analysis that foregrounds experientially-distant phenomena, such as sky, weather, glaciers, and carbon units in the atmosphere that only a small, highly trained set of scholars with special instruments. The only responsible agents of effective action large enough to address such problems are likewise agents of the market, state, or international entities with a sufficient command over lands, resources, and human behavior. But do such forms of analysis render invisible the particular bodies, identities, lands, traditions, and social and ecological entanglements that take place on the ground in the places where fossil fuels are extracted, used, and wasted? When examined at these smaller scales, as some cultural anthropologists do, different dynamics emerge, including diverse groups of people draw on very different epistemic, moral, and religious traditions to understand and respond to fossil fuels, and their social and ecological effects.

This course invites us to consider various scales and the ethical and religious dynamics that thus come into view. We will supplement climate change analysis by equipping students with the theoretical, conceptual, and historical tools to deliberate and act in a world that is ordered to a great degree around the extraction, production, and consumption of fossil fuels. According to social theorists, historians, and scholars of religion and theology, fossil fuel usage and its problematic effects are more than technical matters demanding technological and policy solutions alone. Rather, they are also matters that touch on fundamental questions and deeply held convictions about the human in relation to the earth and time; the relation between being and becoming; conceptions of nature and materiality; the nature of moral and political agency;

the forces understood to be at work in history; and the ways human knowledges of the world condition human action in the world.

The first part of the course introduces the religious and ethical dimensions of fossil fuels through case studies of coal and oil. The second part of the course surveys various ways of theorizing the religious and ethical dimensions of fossil fuels in the humanities and social sciences. Both parts are designed to inform how we think ethically toward effective and fitting forms of action. As such, both the case studies and theories are intended to inform students' final project in which they select and examine a case of interest.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will be able to examine the religious and ethical dimensions of particular fossil fuel-related phenomena using multiple historical and theoretical frameworks, including climate change, Anthropocene, Marxist, energy, cultural development, environmental justice, and extractivist theories;
- Students will be able to perform a process of ethical reasoning about fossil fuel challenges that includes problem description, inquiry, identification of moral agents, and coming to moral judgments;
- Students will be able to articulate the ways that coal and oil shaped and were shaped by religious, social, material, technological, and political developments in the making of modernity;
- Students will be able to discuss fossil fuel challenges as not only technical, scientific, and policy problems, but also as problems that implicate conceptions of human-earth relations, being and becoming, nature and materiality, moral and political agency, human ways of knowing, and cosmology and ontology.

COURSE TEXTS

(The following is a non-exhaustive sample of course texts, many of which will be read only in part, not as a whole)

Barry, Joyce M. "A Small Group of Thoughtful, Committed Citizens: Women's Activism, Environmental Justice, and the Coal River Mountain Watch," *Environmental Justice* 1.1 (2008): pp. 25-33.

Callahan, Richard J., Jr., Kathryn Lofton and Chad E. Seales. "Allegories of Progress: Industrial Religion in the United States." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.1 (2010): pp. 1-39.

- Cone, James. "Whose Earth is it, Anyway?," in *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response*, eds. Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 23-32.
- de la Cadena, Marisol. "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond 'Politics,'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25.2 (2010): pp. 334-370.
- Dochuk, Darren. *Anointed With Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America*. New York: Basic Books, 2019.
- Freese, Barbara. *Coal: A Human History*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2003.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), Part 3: Politics, pp. 119-162.
- Haraway, Donna. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." In *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): pp. 159-165.
- Hulme, Mike. "Climate Change: Varieties of Religious Engagement," in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, eds. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 239-248.
- Jenkins, Willis. *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013.
- Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), Intro & chapter 5.
- Malm, Andreas. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016).
- Shove, Elizabeth and Gordon Walker, "What is Energy For?: Social Practice and Energy Demand," *Energy & Society* 31.5 (2014): pp. 41-58.
- White, Leslie A. "Energy and the Evolution of Culture," *American Anthropologist*, New Series 45.3.1 (July-Sept, 1943): pp. 335-356.

White, Jr., Lynn. "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, New Series 155.3767 (March 10, 1967): pp. 1203-1207.

Williams, Delores S. "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 24-29.

Witt, Joseph D. *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation: Attendance at all class meetings is expected. If you are absent, please provide an explanation. Participation is not only a matter of speaking in class but also of listening to classmates.

Weekly Reading Reports: Unless otherwise stated in class, for each week (starting with our second week) write a 250-word response to the assigned readings for that week. Weekly report prompts will vary as they are intended to prepare you for your case study project (e.g. "summarize the author's argument" or "compare and contrast"). The readings listed under each week below are to be read *prior to* that class session. *Two weeks of reading reports can be missed without penalty.*

Case Study of the Religious & Ethical Dimensions of Fossil Fuels:

Beyond the assigned weekly readings, your assignments for this course revolve around a particular case study (the details of which are to be discussed in the class) that you will investigate, analyze, and assess using both your own outside research as well as the concepts and theories covered in the course. Regardless of the case chosen, analysis ought to attend to the religious and ethical terms and practices used by people who publicly engage some fossil fuel issue, and the ways in which those terms resonate with or challenge academic scholarship on and theorizing of fossil fuels.

1. *Case Selection:* Speak with and get approval from course instructor for your choice of a topic related to religion, ethics, and fossil fuels. The focus of your research and writing ought to be the religious and ethical dimensions of fossil fuels. Your case can be a policy, an organization, a campaign, a social phenomenon, a concept, a geopolitical context, a historical intersection, or a tradition, such as the following:
 - *Policy* - e.g. The Stream Protection Rule; or the Appalachian Community Health Emergency (ACHE) Act

- *Organization* - e.g. Interfaith Power & Light (pro-climate action interfaith response to global warming); or the Cornwall Alliance (anti-climate action evangelical organization);
 - *Campaign* - e.g. The “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign by the Evangelical Environmental Network; or the campaign by Bill McKibben and Rev. Lennox Yearwood of Hip Hop Caucus to oppose the Keystone XL Pipeline
 - *Social phenomenon* - e.g. religious dimensions of the protest at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline, #noDAPL, such as the “Sacred Stone Camp” or the meaning and use of the phrase “water protectors”; or climate science denialism and American fundamentalism
 - *Concept* - e.g. the language of a “sacrifice zone” as it is often used to describe places and communities that bear the brunt of fossil fuel’s costs; or the Andean indigenous concept of *buen vivir/sumak kawsay* and how it is taken up by non-indigenous environmentalists as an alternative to fossil fuel-dependent models of development; or “energy” or “resource nationalism” as a way of understanding the relation between fossil fuels and civil religion
 - *Geopolitical context* - e.g. Middle East oil and political Islam (not a focus of our course, but a topic such as this will be approved if the student can make a convincing case, such as previous studies in this area); or indigenous and social movements around oil and gas extraction in the Amazon
 - *Historical intersection(s)* - e.g. coal mining and the 19th century doctrine of manifest destiny/American exceptionalism; independent oil and 20th century fundamentalist political religion; the 16th century shift to coal and the European Reformations
 - *Tradition(s)* - e.g. an ecowomanist or ecofeminist approach to a particular fossil fuel issue; or Reformed or Roman Catholic debates about fossil fuels
2. *Case Description*: Write a 4-5 page description (Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced, regular margins) of your case study in which you 1) identify, using the categories in #1 above, what kind of case it is, 2) provide a narrative description of the case, 3) delimit the geographical and historical context of the case, 4) briefly state the one or more religious and ethical dimensions that the case foregrounds, 5) state whether or not your case has generated scholarly attention, and 6) name the significant groups related to your case.
 3. *Annotated Bibliography*: To prepare you for your final case study paper, identify and summarize **three scholarly texts** (e.g. monographs, peer-reviewed articles, edited volumes) and **three primary source materials** (e.g. public statements, speeches/interviews, news reports, social media posts, documentaries) related to your case study topic. You need not have read these closely before writing the annotated bibliography, but you should be familiar enough with them to write three short

paragraphs about each text: 1) summarize the text, 2) assess and evaluate it in comparison to the other texts, and 3) reflect on its usefulness to your final project.

4. *Paper*: Building on the case description and the annotated bibliography, write a 10-12 page paper (Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced, regular margins) on your case study topic in which you not only survey what others say, but also form your own conclusion regarding the nature of the problem (i.e. what is going on) and what ought to be foregrounded in public deliberations over what is to be done about it. Students can choose to write papers that are either empirical or normative in nature.
 - Sample outline of an empirical paper: 1) describe the case and the problem(s) it generates, 2) engage with theories, course concepts, and research to compare different ways of understanding the problem, 3) argue that some particular way of understanding the problem is necessary in order to most effectively address it.
 - Sample outline of a normative paper: 1) describe the case and the problem(s) it generates, 2) engage with theories, course concepts, and research to understand the problem within a meaningful narrative or vision, 3) identify who or what demands ethical attention in this case, and 4) come to a judgment about what ought to be done and by whom.
5. *Class Presentation*: Give a 5 minute presentation (live or pre-recorded) on your case study during the final day of class. Since these presentations will be prior to the due date of the final paper, you are not expected to have any firm conclusions. A brief feedback period after each presentation is intended to help garner support from your classmates as to potential avenues for drawing a conclusion.

COURSE SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION

Week 1: Getting our bearings

PART I: CASE STUDIES - Coal & Oil

Week 2: The human history of coal

Week 3: Mountaintop removal in Appalachia

Week 4: Oil & religion in American and global context

Week 5: Ethics & religion in coal & oil

PART II: THEORIZING RELIGION, ETHICS, AND FOSSIL FUELS

Week 6: Climate Change & Anthropocene

Week 7: Marxism & Capitalocene

Week 8: Energy & Society

Week 9: Environmental Justice & Extractivism

Week 10: Science, Religion, & Action

Week 11: Religion & Modernity

END MATTERS

Week 12: Class presentations on students' case studies

Week 13: Concluding discussion