**Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities: Take One**

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**Attunement to Being Acted Upon**

The recent July 2015 encyclical by Pope Francis on climate change provides an opportune moment to consider what climate pedagogy might look like for those of us who teach in the Humanities. We can put aside the controversy and conversation surrounding it, which has been largely focused on whether the Pope should intervene on secular matters and what ramifications his message has for Catholics and non-Catholics. The more significant contribution of the encyclical, as we see it, is that it provides a pathway for thought, a means for us to cross scales to be able to implicate individual lives and actions within a phenomenon that has been largely perceived as a scientific construction, distant, abstract, and far in the future. The pathway that Pope Francis proposes is not surprisingly grounded in spirituality and takes the words of God as spurs to relate individual lives to human suffering. We are urged to anticipate the large scale of suffering already underway, now much intensified because of climate change, through the means of our personal capacity for suffering. Pope Francis terms this mode of anticipation “ecological conversion.” We might understand this in the following way: we can imagine how hunger, thirst, weariness must feel like for the wider community through the fact that our bodies know these experiences. We have to renew these experiences, further intensify them, to be able to grasp the dimension that climate change introduces to them. Climate change is nothing new. It is already in our experiences. We have to learn to be attuned to it to produce change in ourselves.

Dale Jameson in his 2014 *Reason in a Dark Time* provides another pathway for thought, comparable in some ways to that of Pope Francis. Showing how the conversation on climate change has by and large failed to arrive at any meaningful global plan, he urges us to avoid the threat of nihilism that this perspective might bring. To succumb to nihilism is to assume that a single global model was the only way forward. Rather he suggests that evolving an individual climate ethics is as necessary to produce urgency in one’s actions as learning to continue in a flagging global process. The virtues he foregrounds are those of humility, temperance, mindfulness, simplicity and so on. He writes: “The virtues do not provide an algorithm for solving the problems of the Anthropocene, but they can provide guidance for living gracefully while helping to restore in us a sense of agency” (2014: 8).

These are very modest proposals, even somewhat conservative and apolitical, to undergo ecological conversion by means of one’s experiences of suffering, and to inculcate virtues that enable a sense of grace and agency but in the course we planned and taught Spring 2015 and whose syllabus we have affixed to the end of this paper, we wanted to bring such as modesty to our approach to climate pedagogy. We did not wish to directly teach on this phenomenon called climate change as we risked either an anthropological tendency towards deconstructionism or an activist tendency towards didacticism. We wanted to see how a sense or even an intimation of climate change as already in our experiences and shaping our future horizons could bubble up from within a larger discussion on the evolution and mobilization of the concepts of religion, ethics and political theology within the anthropological canon, if thought could be nudged in that direction. And we had a rather minimal understanding of what the sense of climate change could be, such as, the sense of being caught in a system with its own momentum, the sense of being buffeted by micro-forces; or, the sense of the loss of a world. You will quickly realize that all of these are about attunement to being acted upon rather than acting, much like the experience of suffering and the threat of nihilism. Our idea was to see how we could both view this mode of being, that is, of being acted upon, as problematic and in need of changing in some circumstances but also as positive and animating or even simply productive in other circumstances. Our interest was also to excavate gestures and postures that one might call religious or ethical with respect to this mode of being, that could add to those say provided by Pope Francis and Jameson, specifically ecological conversion and the cultivation of virtues to orient us better towards climate change.

These may sound like enough objectives for one course but there were more considerations. We were working with some pre-set parameters on what had to be taught and how. Naveeda was interested to model how, in order to teach on climate change, one did not have to cast aside all that one had learned in making oneself a scholar of a region of the world or a field of inquiry but rather to draw a new attentiveness into one’s existing corpus of knowledge. She was trained as an anthropologist of South Asia with a specific focus on religion. So she wanted to explore how she could teach the anthropology of religion, giving students a robust sense of the debates that had animated this subfield, while drawing them into a re-purposing of the debates for our present and future. Swayam, a graduate student in the department who had been assigned to the course as a teaching assistant but who became a co-instructor through his involvement in crafting the syllabus, was least interested in climate change. His interests were to bring philosophy, specifically 19th and 20th century continental philosophy of ethics, into conversation with anthropology to draw out their different ways of addressing similar questions at moments of catastrophe and crisis. And we were asked to make this course be about introducing undergraduates to the genre of anthropological writing called ethnography.

So we had to affect a fine balancing act among a history of anthropology, anthropology in conversation with philosophy, ethnography as a genre, and climate pedagogy. As this was a 200-level course we could not assume any prior knowledge of anthropology among the students but in being limited to 20 students we were assured of the opportunity to engage in considerable discussion. We met twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes each class, with the first class devoted to unpacking a major text and the second led separately by Swayam and myself in two groups of ten to allow us to go deeper into conversation on the text. Students made presentations in the second class, relating a theme from the reading from a video clip from say YouTube to show how they were making connections.

In what follows we lay out the sections and transitions that organized the course now titled: Ethnographies: Everyday Religion and Ethics. The inclusion of the qualifier “everyday” was important to signal that we were interested in everyday and ordinary uptakes of religious and ethical concerns and to keep attention on the fact that this course too was within the rubric of the everyday, their everyday, and was an opportunity for their individual uptakes.

**Organization of the Course**

The three sections were organized sequentially to: consider ways in which religion perdures within the social as being more than just a practice amongst other practices; return to an earlier historical moment in which the crisis and demise of religion (specifically in its Christian mode) was articulated as a simultaneous crisis to rethink our ethical relations with each other as human beings without any available mediation via a transcendent category; consider several ethnographic contexts in which such ruptures in the social whether in the form of witchcraft accusations or as cultural devastation prompts questions of how the social is subsequently made durable and lasting; and move to contemporary discussions of political theology that returns to the conceptual inseparability of the religious from the ethico-political to form intellectual and practical responses to issues of our globalized present.

For the first part we returned to canonical understandings of religion in anthropology, notably by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. While both had distinct concerns about the way and the context within which religion was seen as a constitutive part of our social undertakings, both emphasized its removed location from being something to which one voluntarily submits. Instead, they considered religion as a foundational and lasting presence precisely because they detached this continued presence from individual human practices of worship. Durkheim, writing in the context of the First World War and the resultant fragmentation of Europe into its polarizing national formations, considered religion as being the unspoken glue that guaranteed the adherence of individuals to their respective collectives. The distinction between the sacred and the profane which Durkheim considers the elemental factum of religion and which he traces to totemism, the most elementary form of religion, not only survives the transformation of totemism into our more contemporary religions of the book, but also becomes more sweeping via a co-alignment of the social with the nation. This force that binds a person to the collective is the force of the religious that impinges upon the individual from the outside through the form of the social, while also arising as it were from within the individual as something that the individual itself binds oneself to.

Weber who also was interested in considering how religion survives the transformation into modernity without us having to necessarily do the work to ensure its survival, shifted emphasis from the language of force with which religion swoops us into a collective whole to the language of spirit with which religion remains a more silent presence within the lives of individual people in capitalist modernity. Noting the simultaneous overarching historical processes of a disenchantment of the world and the asymmetrical development of capitalism between the US and European nations, Weber sought to understand this uneven development as a symptom of unequal significance placed on worldly life in Protestantism and Catholicism. With the oncoming of Protestantism signaled by Luther’s translation of the Bible into German, the notion of “calling” and its development into the doctrine of predestination engendered a continual commitment to the worldly affairs of work that was seen as a distraction from more spiritual matters in Catholicism. Thus, the “spirit of capitalism” had as its basis not purely an economic motive but also bore an elective affinity to the ‘Protestant Ethic’ that explained the disparate development of capitalism across the world.

This withdrawn nature of religion indexed by the vocabulary of ‘force’ and ‘spirit’ in Durkheim and Weber respectively, was brought within the precincts of a more organized rationality by Geertz and Asad, the following two readings, albeit differently. While for Geertz, religion not only served to bind community by its symbolic and ritualistic function but also to generate a cosmological ‘order’ with which the world could be meaningfully explained as an order of factuality, Asad precisely sought to question this naturalization of meaning that Geertz assumed and asked what are the authorizing processes of power that render religion meaningful in the first instance. For Asad, the emphasis was not so much on who authorizes what but the necessity of such authorization. The very distinction between the religious and the secular had a precise historical location in the history of secularism in which priority was accorded to demarcating religious from what is secular so that the former could be made the exclusive domain of the private as opposed to latter which would form the knowhow of public deliberation. This distinction between the religious and the secular and the containment of the former within acceptable limits was strikingly illustrated by Winifred Sullivan’s ethnography, next on the reading list, of a legal case around the burial practices of a particular community in Florida where the point of contention revolved around the placement of religious artifacts, such as the crosses and stars of David, in cremation grounds that were owned by the city. For Sullivan, the onus on these people of constantly being demanded to find a determined mode of authorization to prove the validity of their burial practices meant that religion never belonged properly to the domain of individual practice but always to the realm of public authority. However, what was also striking in Sullivan is her placement of ‘death’ as being a particularly fraught event in which authorized religious injunctions could never exhaust the many forms that individual religious beliefs might take. This placement of death as soliciting a particularly religious response not only emphasized the under-shadow of the life-giving forms that religion took in Durkheim, Weber, and Geertz, but also was a fruitful occasion to return to the historical moment in which the demise of religion was asserted through the announcement of the death of god. These themes were further engaged through a viewing of Robert Gardner’s ethnographic film *Forest of Bliss* (1986) in which the event of death saturated everyday life in Benares, India in such a way as to make insistent the creative and heterogeneous modes of inviting it into the various domains of life, ritual, economic and social.

Our next reading was one of Nietzsche’s pithy later texts, *Twilight of the Idols,* in which he provides a most vitriolic assessment of Christianity and its caretaker in the figure of the priest. By making this life contingent on an after-life, Christianity emptied life of all immanent meaning that it could have had and made it into reactive phenomena that was meaningful only insofar as it was an aberrant addition to the after-life where all possibility of salvation was held. For Nietzsche, the denial of the fact of death was a condition of the provenance of the after-life, and so if there was to be found any affirmation of life it had to be preceded by an almost nihilistic acknowledgement of death as the final end. This overcoming of nihilism as a necessary step towards a recognition of ‘life in its plenitude’ is also the logical step in Badiou’s ethics, but with the added disposition he has towards affirming the human subject through that which we precisely don’t share with animals, the capacity for an ascent into the infinite rather than through a shared communion of death. For Badiou, the possibility of ethics after the death of god has to be maintained not within our make-up as finite subjects but in our potential to be infinite or divine-like through which we are able to suspend the predicates of our existence and give up ourselves to the oncoming of an encounter that fractures our existing ways of comprehending the world. This encounter is what Badiou calls the ‘event.’ However, while Nietzschean affirmation and Badiou’s embracing of the future in its utter strangeness work as philosophical dispositions to a catastrophe, it leaves us with a picture of ethics the social contours of which remain unclear. Hence, in our next section, we brought onto bear our initial emphasis on the social and its ethical undertones to particular instances of catastrophe in which what is precisely at stake is the insistence of social relations in conditions in which they have become emphatically attenuated. Here we read the three ethnographic monographs by Favret Saada, Lear, and Stevenson and watched the 2014 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Favret Saada in her ethnography of witchcraft accusations in rural Bocage speaks about her inability to maintain her role as a detached observer in conditions in which the only way to remain a part of the social was to be involved in the elaborately imbricated network of witchcraft accusations. Even though the relations between the bewitched, the witch, and the enunciator who made the diagnosis of bewitchment were nothing but antagonistic and hostile, the only way in which one could persist within them was as Favret Saada puts it “being caught” in them; efforts to separate and extricate oneself often lead, as Favret Saada shows through striking ethnographic instances, to a form of social and possibly even biological death. Lear in his account of the Crow Indians speaks about the impossible choice that the Crow Indians had to make between suffering a physical annihilation of their tribe in the hands of the neighboring tribe or an ontological destruction in which their entire order of values and way of life would be erased in lieu of something new. The indomitable task that the Crow Indians faced was to re-learn and recreate the very sediment of their world from the ashes of their traditional way of living that had spanned and served them for centuries before the unprecedented possibility of its destruction became inescapable. This radical reconstruction of life is only possible if one is able to embrace what Lear calls ‘radical hope’. Stevenson in her book contrasts the bio-political efforts of the Canadian state to keep the Inuit people alive after two historical epidemics, that of tuberculosis in 1940’s and of suicides in 1980’s, by displacing them onto sanatoriums, and the ethical efforts of the people left behind to maintain relationships between themselves and the loved ones who are now dead. What comes into stark relief is the strain between the state’s management of the biological lives of people while rendering them lifeless in all other capacities and the attentive ways in which those who are left behind find shared forms of life with those who are dead that allows the latter to continue living on. In all the three texts, one notes the crumbling of the certainty and sanctity that Durkheim placed at the heart of social relations in a time of crisis when achieving the continuity of the social can entail an abandonment of everything that one had thus far valued. Following upon the three ethnographies, the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* well illuminated the antagonisms entailed in the management of biological life by the state at the expense of distinct forms of life. The six year old Hushpuppy gathers together the tatters of her life after each encounter with the state, stitching them with the folk stories generated off the changing climate to produce a vision of what grace and agency might look like in the face of the new.

It is at this juncture of thinking about the arrival of the new and the unprecedented that we turn to the section on political theology not so much as a return to the theological in its purity but to see how one might then mime from within it resources that had thus far remained unrevealed. In this context we read an essay by Singh and Khan each to bring our peregrinations on the notion of ethics to bear on the question of the non-human and of climate change generally. Singh provides us with an ethnographic analysis of how the occasion for the arrival of a neighborly god elicits a conversion of the Sahariyas, a former tribe of bonded labors, into vegetarianism and teetotalism. The Sahariyas themselves are marked with extreme poverty and the region in which they live is characterized by continually dwindling resources, but they don’t see their conversion to vegetarianism as a means of managing thrift. Instead, the occasion for the arrival of god, whose name is Tejaji, is also an occasion for a shift in moral values in which vegetarianism and tee-totalitarianism are not considered virtues of frugality that one is forced to adopt but rather are signs of a more vital form of life that one embraces as a necessary response to it. Khan in her essay shows how Muslim farmers living on the continually eroding and accreting silt islands of Bangladesh express disbelief at the imported discourse of climate change from the West, while finding readings within the narratives of fables and creation in Islamic thought to continually expand the periphery of their social bounds. In particular she shows how the otherwise repulsive figure of the dog finds a way of becoming incorporated into the life world of the Muslim farmers by the simple contingency of the dogs being placed on the same eroding silt lands as them. This unbeknownst coming together of two beings tied by their mutual fate of being present on the same piece of erratically vanishing land and the responsive gestures that this ‘mutual-fatedness’ demands congeals in a singular instant the conceptual apparatus through which the course aimed to shift from a discussion of religion and ethics to that of climate change. Announcements of the death of god, eruptions of ways of life, and the steady approach of climate change as becoming an increasingly urgent predicament not only entails stretching the bounds of who we incorporate into our social spaces but also amounts to rethinking, as we saw throughout the course readings, the manifest form of these social relations themselves. A persistent thread of this course, thus, was to consider ways in which how any invitation that brings the non-human into the folds of our lives will always involve returning to our more fundamental presuppositions of what it means to keep beings together.

At the tail end of our course, Freddie Grey’s homicide in the hands of the police brought on riots followed by peaceful demonstrations in Baltimore, the home of the university. The university closed down for several days leading us to lose some class time but also injecting a new urgency into our conversations. Even as we brought to the foreground the necessity to orient ourselves towards climate change in a Nietschean mode, that is, not to embrace the nihilistic view of life on this earth as ‘done for’ or death as a means of escape to the after-life but to face it as a condition of our own making, to be rendered real, fragile and embraceable, we sought to do the same for the violence in the city. The riots reminded us that concerns over climate change cannot be allowed to eclipse ongoing struggles for social justice and where possible they had to be thought together.

**In Conclusion, the Student Evaluations**

By and large students reviewed the course positively. We received very praiseful comments from them that indicated we succeeded in helping them think newly about issues: “Its not often that a class truly shifts my focus or gives me a genuinely new perspective of the world. This class not only showed me new concepts, new ways of thinking about old concepts, but also gave me motivation to work towards a minor in anthropology. The professor and the TA did a phenomenal job and I consider thisone of the best classes I've taken at Hopkins so far.” What worried a little in the comments was their level of generality. It may be that the evaluation form does not lend itself to any meaningful exchange between instructors and students, however, when only one person makes the following comment, “it was actually about climate change,” you have to wonder whether they got the punch line or not. But as is in the nature of coming to appreciate how one is acted upon, it may be slow in the coming but we hope we have given them and ourselves further pathways for thought towards change through the animation of such concepts as ‘force,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘power,’ ‘life in its plenitude,’ ‘event,’ ‘being caught,’ ‘radical hope,’ and ‘mutual-fatedness.”

This paper is gratefully dedicated to the students of AS070.273 Ethnographies: Everyday Religion and Ethics (Spring 2015), who asked that they be so acknowledged in this brief meditation.

**Ethnographies: Everyday Religion and Ethics**

**Instructor**

Naveeda Khan

**Teaching Assistant**

Swayam Bagaria

**Description, Pre-requisites and Outcomes:**

This course introduces students to the anthropological genre of the ethnography, which may be crudely characterized as a detailed description of a people or a society or a condition at a particular moment in time. We read classic and contemporary ethnographies to ask what are its identifying markers, how have these changed, what comprises evidence, how are theoretical claims made through description, and how are they positioned or mobilized within wider debates and conversations.

The theme of “religion and ethics” guide the choice of ethnographies providing students with the contours of a debate within anthropology conducted through, of course, ethnography alongside more explicitly theoretical anthropological writings and writings from outside of the discipline.

The juxtaposition of ethnography with other modes of writing is to help us to compare and contrast in order to develop a feel for identifying, reading and writing ethnography ourselves. One of our five writing assignments will be explicitly ethnographic. This juxtaposition will also provide us with examples of how ethnography can be made to speak to larger debates and emergent issues.

Students do not need to have any former knowledge of either anthropology or ethnography or the theme of religion and ethics prior to the course. At the end of the course they should be able to read anthropological texts closely, be familiar with a debate within anthropology and have some experience with doing ethnography.

**Required Books:**

1. Max Weber Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Penguin Classics 2002)
2. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan The Impossibility of Religious Freedom (Princeton 2007)
3. Friedrich Nietzsche The Anti-Christ Soho Books 2013
4. Alan Badiou Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil (Verso 2013)
5. Jonathan Lear Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation (Harvard University Press 2008)
6. Jeanne Favret-Saada Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage (Cambridge University Press 1981)
7. Lisa Stevenson Life Besides Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Artic (University of California 2014)

**Required Reading:**

1. Emile Durkheim Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Book 2, Chapters 1, 6, 7
2. Clifford Geertz “Religion as a Cultural System” from The Interpretation of Cultures (Basic Books any edition) 87-125
3. Talal Asad “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” from The Genealogies of Religion (Johns Hopkins Press 1993) 27-54
4. Bhrigupati Singh “Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration in Popular Hinduism: A Study in the Political Theology of the Neighbor” in American Ethnologist 2011, 38(3)” 430-450
5. Naveeda Khan “Dogs and Humans and What the Earth Can Be” in Hau 2014 4(3): 245-64

**Part One: Religion and its Critique**

**Week 1**

Introduction:

Emile Durkheim Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Book 2, Chapters 1, 6, 7

**Week 2**

Max Weber Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Discussion of Durkheim and Weber

**Week 3:**

Clifford Geertz “Religion as a Cultural System” from The Interpretation of Cultures (Basic Books any edition) 87-125

Talal Asad “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category” from The Genealogies of Religion (Johns Hopkins Press 1993) 27-54

**Week 4:**

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan The Impossibility of Religious Freedom Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3 (pp1-88)

**Week 5:**

Sullivan contd. Chapters 4, 5 (89-163).

Film: Robert Gardener’s City of Bliss (1986)

**Week 6**

Friedrich Nietzsche The Anti-Christ

**Part Two: The Turn to Ethics**

**Week 7:**

Alan Badiou Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil

**Week 8:**

Jeanne Favret-Saada Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage Part 1 and II (3-96)

**Week 9:**

Favret-Saada contd. Part III (97-224)

**Week 10:**

Jonathan Lear Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation

**Week 11:**

Lisa Stevenson Life Besides Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Artic Prologue, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 3 (vii-viii, 1-100)

**Week 12:**

Stevenson contd. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and Epilogue (103-174)

Film: Benh Zeitlin’s Beasts of the Southern Wild(2012)

**Part 3: Political Theology: A Turn Towards the Changing Climate?**

**Week 13:**

Bhrigupati Singh “Agonistic Intimacy and Moral Aspiration in Popular Hinduism: A Study in the Political Theology of the Neighbor” in American Ethnologist 2011, 38(3)” 430-450

Naveeda Khan “Dogs and Humans and What the Earth Can Be” in Hau 2014 4(3): 245-64