

Program for the Evolution of Spirituality



The Program for the Evolution of Spirituality (PES) supports the scholarly study of emerging spiritual movements, marginalized spiritualities, and the innovative edges of established religious traditions. It also prepares students for ministry in these movements. Through conferences, field experiences, course offerings, and public lectures, the program expands HDS's expertise in topics such as spirituality among the millennial generation, ecological spirituality, and the ethics of power in spiritual communities. The program is directed by Professor [Dan McKanan](#).

"Alternative Spiritualities of Celebration, Resistance, and Accountability: Engaging our Colonial and Decolonial Contexts"

2024 Conference

Dates: April 24-27, 2024

Harvard Divinity School's Program for the Evolution of Spirituality is delighted to announce that our spring 2024 conference will be organized around the theme of "Alternative Spiritualities of Celebration, Resistance, and Accountability: Engaging Our Colonial and Decolonial Contexts." We invite practitioners and scholars who identify as Indigenous, Diasporic, Settler, and/or Immigrant to join in a dialogue that works toward spiritual traditions characterized by solidarity and mutual transformation rather than colonial violence.

Our conference will explore the many ways in which spiritual practices, especially those from beyond the religious mainstream, mirror and resist the imperial contexts in which they are rooted. Given the pervasiveness of imperial, extractive and settler colonialist systems, we assume that all spiritualities have colonial dimensions and, as such, have possibilities for anti-colonial or decolonial responses.

We are grateful for the responses to our initial call for papers for the 2024 conference. We are diligently reviewing all submissions and will respond as soon as possible. Your insights and perspectives are invaluable to this conversation, and we look forward to your involvement.

Featured Past Events: Inaugural Conference on "Ecological Spiritualities"

Wednesday-Saturday, April 27-30, 2022

Harvard Divinity School's Program for the Evolution of Spirituality hosted its inaugural conference on "[Ecological Spiritualities](#)" this past April. The conference featured presentations and workshops exploring the evolution of earth-based spiritual traditions and highlighting innovative spiritual practices that are emerging in response to the painful realities of climate change, mass extinction, biodiversity loss, and the disruption of local and global ecosystems.

Speakers joined us from across the globe. They included professors and students from a variety of theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary perspectives. We also welcomed proposals from spiritual leaders, environmental activists, farmers, and others whose work places them at the intersection of spirituality and ecology. Paper topics spanned from interspecies interdependence to textual analysis to Indigenous cosmologies to spiritual appropriation to race and environmentalism to issues in contemporary paganism. We hope that through this broad range of methodological approaches, religious traditions, and geographical regions, we created space for open discussions and a fruitful opportunity for deep learning among scholars, spiritual leaders, and others who care about the intersection of spirituality and ecology.

[View schedule and recordings or learn more about the presenters and presentations.](#)

Featured Past Events: "Uses and Abuses of Power in Alternative Spiritualities"

Wednesday-Saturday, April 26-29, 2023

This conference explored a twofold reality: alternative spiritualities can be enormously empowering for the persons who participate in them, but they can also be sites of deeply harmful abuses of power. Our sessions explored both sides of this reality as we strove to foster open-hearted dialogue between people who have benefited from alternative spiritualities and those who have experienced significant harm from them.

For the purposes of this conference, we defined "alternative spiritualities" broadly in keeping with the Program for the Evolution of Spirituality's mission to support the scholarly study of emerging spiritual movements, marginalized spiritualities, and the innovative edges of established religious traditions.

[View Conference Schedule](#)

Virtual Colloquia on “Power Dynamics in Alternative and Emerging Spiritual and Cultural Organizations”

This ongoing series of colloquia features a variety of speakers, including practitioners, scholars, survivors, and activists, who come together to talk about their experiences around power dynamics, both positive and negative, in emerging and alternative spiritual and cultural organizations. Launched in February 2021 with a virtual panel on “[Abuse of Power in Alternative and Emerging Spiritual and Cultural Organizations](#),” this series reflects the Program for the Evolution of Spirituality's commitment to sponsoring scholarly conversations that fully include both practitioners of emerging spiritualities and persons who have experienced harm within spiritual movements.

We continue to host talks around complex and sensitive topics such as transparency and accountability in spiritual leadership, productive and respectful dynamics with interlocutors from marginalized spiritual traditions, and gender dynamics in intentional communities. We hope these conversations will be productive, illuminating, and empowering as well as a source of education on creating structures of accountability.

[Read more and view past colloquia.](#)

Newsletter

Stay informed! Subscribe to our newsletter using the form below.

Associated Courses and Groups

HDS 2360: Alternative Spiritualities in the United States **Instructor: Dan McKanan**

This course surveys spiritual practices and movements that have been labeled as metaphysical, esoteric, pagan, occult, harmonial, and New Age. We will begin with a historical survey of esoteric spirituality from colonial-era astrology and alchemy to New Age and neopagan traditions, then consider some leading constructive thinkers within alternative spiritual traditions, such as Starhawk and Joanna Macy. The course will also feature field trips to a variety of spiritual organizations and communities.

Course: HDS 2798: Introduction to Religion and Ecology **Instructor: Dan McKanan**

“Religion and ecology” is one of the fastest-growing subfields within the study of religion, and our approach to this topic will be broadly “ecological,” which is to say that we will attend to the interconnections linking seemingly disparate phenomena, and to the ways in which all phenomena are continually evolving in mutual relationship. This course explores the intersection between religious traditions and ecological activism, with special attention to current

conversations about sustainable agriculture and ethical eating. [View scheduled offerings of HDS 2798 in my.harvard.](#)

Course: HDS 3099: Earth-Based Spiritualities: An Anthropological Perspective
Instructor: Giovanna Parmigiani

This is a course in the Anthropology of Religion, with particular focus on contemporary earth-based spiritualities, such as Contemporary Paganism, Wicca, NewAge, and Core-Shamanism. While often misunderstood in popular culture, these religions are now part of the lives of a growing number of individuals and groups. By engaging with ethnographic works, primarily based in the US and Europe, students will get acquainted with or deepen their knowledge of the main issues, traditions, debates, and research in the field of Anthropology of Religion. [View scheduled offerings of HDS 3099 in my.harvard.](#)

Interspecies Dialogues Conversation Group

Formerly known as the Animism Reading Group, the Interspecies Dialogues Conversation Group is a discussion group centered on interspecies intersubjectivity, posthuman ethics, relational ontologies, kinship-based science, and the implications of these topics on politics, ethics, culture, and religious experience. While the primary intent of the group is academic, the group also provides validation and community for those whose spiritual beliefs include an animist cosmology. Several CSWR speakers have been invited in connection with the animism group, including David Abram, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Graham Harvey. The group was initiated by Mary Balkon, MDiv '20, under a CSWR research fellowship, and it is currently facilitated by Ph.D. Candidate [Natalia Schwien](#).

Our Emerging Selves: Exploring Self and Nature Through Creative Practice

Third Tuesday of Each Month at 7pm ET

This group offers a space for creative practitioners of all types and abilities to engage with the relationship between spirituality, art, and nature in their personal creative lives and practices. The goal is for participants to weave a deeper sense of their own interconnection with the natural world and other group members through the mediating tool of art. Before the first session, participants will receive a syllabus of class content and optional creative project prompts. Each session will start with a brief presentation of a particular piece of work chosen by the instructor based on that week, before diving into discussion and sharing of the members' work. Participants are encouraged to make work inspired and informed by the monthly prompts, but it is not required.

Animal Studies and Spirituality

Third Friday of Each Month at 3pm ET

This working group explores the role of animal studies across spiritualities and faith traditions. Through an interfaith dialogue, we seek to advance the discussions around the subject of animals

and religiosity. Themes such as human-animal relationships, animal souls, and animal rights are potential segways into the emerging scholarship of animal studies.

Indigenous Spiritualities

Second Thursday of Each Month at 4pm ET

The Indigenous Religious Traditions group, keeping to the theme of this year's PES conference focus on "Engaging our Colonial and Decolonial Contexts," will explore foundational questions at the intersections of Religious Studies, Critical Indigenous Studies, and our lived experiences. We will interrogate the continued harm of colonialism and ask questions such as: How does theft of Indigenous tribal identity impact trust and collaboration? What makes "traditional" ceremonial protocols legitimate (e.g. when matriarchal protocols are not considered, forgotten, or ignored)? How do we navigate and recalibrate while resisting and emerging from the colonial/capitalist framework? How do contemporary religious and spiritual spaces impact/change Indigenous communities? From these and other foundational questions, this group will center Indigenous and Native thought, within and beyond academia, while inviting non-Native individuals to deepen their understanding of ontologies and epistemologies which are regularly dismissed, misunderstood, or appropriated. We will engage a variety of sources that support building relationships in a genuine and good way and aspire to maintain a safe and decolonized space.

Leadership in Alternative Spiritualities (local in-person)

Third Thursday of Each Month at 4pm ET

This group will be a local in-person as a space for leaders in alternative spiritualities to explore the role of leadership in alternative spiritualities. Practitioners seeking leadership positions are those already in leadership roles are encouraged to come together and engage with sources and life experiences that empower responsible and effective ministerial and leadership skills in alternative spiritualities.

Coloniality and Decolonial Responses in Yoga and Mindfulness Traditions

Second Wednesday of Each Month at 6pm ET

In recent years, academic and popular discourse has increasingly recognized the complex intersections of coloniality within yoga and mindfulness traditions through the appropriation, commodification, and misrepresentation of these ancient practices. This working group seeks to explore the intricate layers of colonial influences on these traditions and to critically engage with methods for their decolonization. The goal of this work is to highlight areas of concern and pave the way for more inclusive, authentic, and respectful engagements with yoga and mindfulness traditions in the future.

Alternative Spirituality in Mainstream Religion

First Thursday of Each Month at 7pm ET

Alternative spiritual practices and beliefs are becoming more common in mainstream religious traditions. Practices like yoga, tai chi, Reiki, astrology, hypnosis, meditation and tarot, and beliefs in past lives, angels, and holistic medical approaches occur among practitioners of traditional religions despite not being publicly discussed and condoned by religious authorities. Join us as we discuss how these practices and beliefs may complement or challenge conventional religion.

Community Bulletin

Here, we share a curated selection of upcoming academic conferences, symposiums, and calls for papers. This aligns with our mission to serve as a hub for scholars, researchers, students and practitioners alike.

The events and activities listed in our bulletin are shared for informational purposes only and does not constitute an endorsement or recommendation of any specific event, organization, or content by our website or team. We encourage our community members to exercise their own judgement and discretion regarding their participation in these events.

2024 Communal Studies Association Annual Conference – Exploring Sexuality and Community

Join us at the annual conference of the Communal Studies Association (CSA), an interdisciplinary hub for individuals in intentional communities, historians, academics, and professionals across fields like anthropology, sociology, political science, religious studies, and more. Each year, the CSA conference is hosted at the site of a historic intentional community, offering a unique blend of historical ambiance and contemporary scholarly discourse.

Conference Theme: Exploring Sexuality and Community

Location and Date: The 2024 CSA Conference will be held at the historic Ephrata Cloister in Ephrata, PA, from October 4th to 6th.

Call for Papers: We invite submissions that resonate with the theme, offering fresh perspectives and insights into the intersection of sexuality and community living. This is an excellent opportunity for scholars and practitioners to contribute to a growing body of knowledge in communal studies.

Submission Deadline: May 17, 2024

Submit Your Paper: [CSA Paper Proposal Submission](#)

2024 Online Panel at EASA Biennial Conference – Call for Papers Now Open

Part of the prestigious European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) Biennial Conference, this event will be synchronously conducted with the in-person conference held at the University of Barcelona from 23rd to 26th July 2024.

Panel Title: Doing Anthropology Beyond Place: Digital Adaptations, Conceptual Boundaries, and Diverse Methodologies

Our panel delves into the evolving landscape of anthropology in the digital age, exploring innovative methodologies, conceptual shifts, and the transcending of traditional geographical boundaries in anthropological research.

Call for Papers: We are currently accepting paper proposals. This opportunity is ideal for those keen on presenting their research, engaging with contemporary anthropological discussions, and contributing to this dynamic field.

Deadline for Submissions: 22nd January 2024

Submit Your Proposal Here: [EASA Paper Proposal Submission](#)

For detailed submission guidelines and rules, please visit: [EASA 2024 Submission Guidelines](#)

Staff

[Dan McKanan](#), Program Director

Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist Association Senior Lecturer in Divinity

[Natalia Schvien](#), Associate Program Director

Ph.D. Candidate, Committee for the Study of Religion

Teddy Alderson, Assistant Program Director

MDiv Candidate, HDS

Matthew Ceurvorst, Assistant Program Director

MDiv Candidate, HDS

Contact

The Program for the Evolution of Spirituality
Harvard Divinity School
Divinity Hall, Room 409
Cambridge, MA 02138

pes@hds.harvard.edu

For media inquiries or requests, please contact [Michael Naughton](#) in the HDS Office of Communications.