

The VU Fellowship in Ethics of the Anthropocene: Religion, Ethics, and Environmental Change

Background

The novel concept of an ‘Anthropocene’ has been proposed to denote the present epoch in planetary history, following up the earlier Holocene, as a new geological era now largely defined by the extent and direction of human activities with a profound global impact on the earth’s ecosystems. Mass extinction of living species, pollution of the oceans, and climate change are only some of the lasting distortions of planetary systems brought about by the human species. Importantly, the concept of an ‘Anthropocene’ now places humankind fully at the centre of planetary evolution, as the main driving force on planet earth – an idea that has at times been described as the ‘second Copernican revolution’.

These conceptual developments, however, raise fundamental normative questions with profound relevance for religion and ethics and for the principles that will guide the governance of the earth system. Such questions include:

- How do religious worldviews about the human-nature relation, as they are expressed in different religions and religious teachings, weigh against the predominant materialism and the increasing human power of reshaping the planet?
- How do religious traditions currently interact with shifting views of the relationship between humans and non-human animals and what moral consequences are connected to the growing awareness of their profound mutual interdependence?
- How do religious worldviews view novel (potential) problems of the Anthropocene that are brought about by technological developments, such as ‘geo-engineering’ (that is, ‘managing’ planetary systems by for instance ocean fertilization or solar radiation management), synthetic biology and nanotechnology, or new proposals of managed species migration or the de-extinction of species of which sufficient DNA is available?
- What are the implications of such normative battles for fundamental principles of equity and justice between rich and poor, as well as present and future generations?
- What is the role and impact of religious leadership in crucial environmental questions ranging from population growth (e.g., religious positions around contraception), to questions of biodiversity and water use (e.g., the recent conferences organized by the Orthodox Patriarch), to the use of nuclear power?

To examine these questions in-depth and to position them within the Anthropocene debate, major research efforts are needed. Examining the normative battles of conflicting worldviews over the human-nature relationship, their implications for governance principles, and the role of religious leadership in inspiring, guiding and directing humankind will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the

Anthropocene and the ethical approaches that can underpin effective 'earth system' governance in the twenty-first century. Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam, with its strong track-record in both studying the teachings of different religions and analysing global environmental policies, is an ideal place to engage in this research programme.

The Distinguished Senior and the Junior Fellowship in Ethics of the Anthropocene

To study these important questions, VU Amsterdam has installed a special programme for visiting researchers, the VU Fellowship in Ethics of the Anthropocene. This Fellowship is awarded on an annual basis, alternately to a distinguished senior scholar and to one or more junior scholars who are in the process of writing their PhD-thesis. The fellowships are designed to attract scholars from a variety of fields who specialize in the analysis of the ethical dimensions of global environmental change, with a particular, but not exclusive emphasis on the teachings of the major world religions, including indigenous spirituality. In addition to pursuing their research, Fellows are encouraged to participate in debates among different academic communities at VU Amsterdam and beyond. Such debates could include VU researchers involved in, for instance, theology and the study of religion, philosophy, law, social sciences, environmental studies, and earth and life sciences.

Structure of the Fellowships

The Fellowship has been established as a joint initiative by the VU Faculty of Theology and the VU Institute for Environmental Studies of the Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences, with generous support by the board of VU Amsterdam. The VU Distinguished Senior Fellowship in Ethics of the Anthropocene is a grant that allows internationally prominent scientists to visit the VU for a period of three to six months. The VU Junior Fellowship consists of a scholarship granted to one or more excellent PhD-student, which allows them to visit VU Amsterdam for up to six month and to pursue part of their project within its vibrant academic community. In order to allow for the engagement with different religious traditions and different schools of thought, fellowships will be granted only for one period and cannot be extended or renewed. The fellowship will be granted as a lump-sum payment. Office space and further office amenities at either the Faculty of Theology or the Institute for Environmental Studies of the Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences will be made available.

Application

In 2018 a senior scholar will be selected for the Fellowship in Ethics of the Anthropocene. Applications should be submitted by July 15th 2017. Please submit with your submission (a) a cover letter that details your research interests and plans for the Fellowship as well as (b) a complete curriculum vitae, including a letter of consent by your supervisor. For further information please contact either Professor Gijsbert van den Brink, head of Department of Beliefs & Practices at the Faculty of Theology (g.vanden.brink@vu.nl) or Professor Philipp Pattberg, head of the Department of Environmental Policy Analysis at the Institute for Environmental Studies, VU Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences (philipp.pattberg@vu.nl). Applications can be submitted electronically by e-mail to Ms Marjolijn Staarink at marjolijn.staarink@vu.nl. Please mention "2018 VU Senior Fellowship in Ethics of the Anthropocene" in the Subject title of your e-mail.