



Research Review

Religion and Energy: Introduction

November 1, 2024

Religion is part of how societies confront environmental change: through shared narratives of a lost past, confidence in particular sources of moral authority, reliance on faith-based civil society organizations, etc. Scholarly literature and media coverage have, over the past two decades, explored the various ways that religious traditions, communities, and organizations come to bear on climate change. But climate futures involve “religion” in ways that have yet exceeded public—and in some cases, scholarly—recognition. This essay series contributes to the SSRC’s *Intersections* thematic focus on climate futures through a sustained focus on *energy*.

At its root, climate change is an energy issue involving the sources and forms of power, the byproducts of energy technologies, and technological change over time. A “clean energy future” is widely invoked as an aspirational response to climate change. Although the imaginative rubric of “clean energy” relies on a narrative of “transition,” it can also confuse change with the status quo.^{[\[1\]](#)}

New energy technologies are sometimes celebrated as ways to preserve existing social conditions, economic

systems, and ways of life habituated under fossil fuels. In these essays, we ask about the entanglement of religion and energy—as discursive spaces, as technologies for envisioning that often rely on and produce temporalities of futurity.

Engaging the Energy Humanities

The energy humanities are a key factor in increased critical attention on energy discourses and infrastructures. This relatively new area of emphasis within the environmental humanities attends to humanistic, cultural, and social configurations of energy. Since the mid-nineteenth century, energy discourse has been primarily oriented around techno-scientific epistemologies. Toward the end of the twentieth century, humanities scholars like Amitav Ghosh began to question a seeming inability or unwillingness of Euro-American authors to creatively reflect on their energy cultures as they had done with earlier imperial/economic shifts such as the spice trade.^[2] Such insights sparked an examination of the ways energy cultures had (or had not) been narrated. With focused attention on extractivism, fossil capital, and the post/colonial dynamics of oil politics, the energy humanities pursue specificity, concreteness, and particularity amidst the global, nebulous, and celestial perspectives that otherwise animate emissions-oriented climate change discourse.



Lukas Lehotsky via Unsplash

The emergence of the energy humanities has produced three insights of particular

relevance for the study of religion: 1) that before it was linked to the physical sciences and before it was synonymous with “fuel,” energy was primarily a term for poets and theologians;^[3] 2) that nineteenth-century thermodynamics rendered multiple phenomena—including the operations of steam engines, the embodied labor of enslaved humans, plantation animals, as well as cosmic forces and biological systems—as equivalent and thus fungible under the singular rubric of “energy;”^[4] and 3) that to understand the ways energy functions in contemporary society it is necessary to approach it as not merely a scientific concept or form of fuel, but a social relation.^[5] Such insights draw increased attention to the construction of meaning and values in energy discourses, the kinds of narratives and temporalities they attend, and the economic/racial/political relations they create.

These approaches highlight energy as thinkable, once again, within religious categories: as laden with meaning content; carrying affective resonances; or shaping desires, subjectivities, habits, rituals, and social relations. Theologians and ethicists have engaged energy since the mid-twentieth century,^[6] but the advent of the energy humanities marks a sea change in analyzing the meaning-making systems and socio-cultural forms of energy.

In short, energy involves not merely a set of policies, technologies, and resources that require ethical decision-making, but also a range of social signs, symbols, practices, and material relations that in turn shape the cultures and infrastructures that generate the energy in the first place.

Building on an increasing number of religion scholars engaging energy humanities discourses,^[7] this essay series provides space for conversation about the following overarching (often overlapping) approaches.



The Seven Vortexes of Energy via the [Himalayan Yoga Institute](#)

The Importance of an Energy-Focused Approach

For many scholars of diverse disciplinary orientations, “energy” is a generative concept that spans and conjoins metaphysical, infrastructural, and economic discourses. This is not a new site of exchange, but a kind of *energeia*/energy/ether/spirit cross-trafficking discourse that spans several centuries and emerges at the intersections between cultures.^[8] Historical perspectives on energy suggest that this boundary-crossing, boundary-producing concept has frequently been employed in ways that complicate distinctions between the physical and the metaphysical. As interest in energy humanities increases, we note a swelling fascination with trans- or intercultural discourses on energy. We find that the analytical tools of religion scholars—attending in particular to translation projects, tracing the genealogy of specific terms or concepts (e.g. *energeia*, *chi*, *prana*, *wakan*) across geographic and cultural landscapes while attending to colonial, imperial, racializing, and Orientalizing dynamics—are salient and valuable. From a critical religious studies perspective, such cross-cultural energy discourses are taken as points of departure for the analysis of colonial, extractivist, racializing, modernist, and Orientalizing frames. We find this in religious studies methods and critical perspectives that are increasingly important in broader energy discourses, and suggest that the interdisciplinary currents linking the energy humanities with the study of religion can open new lines of inquiry about the way different enculturated discourses about power—divine, material, place-based, political, economic, and

metaphysical—are tangled together. This is an instructive approach to environmental politics, where intersections between the natural and the religious produce potent loci of political contestation.

Energy-focused approaches build on and remain conversant with important lines of inquiry in current religious studies. Tracing the ways energy discourses, materialities, and systems influence religious discourses—and conversely, the way religious discourses inform meanings, habits, and desires for energy—contributes to emerging scholarship in critical secular studies.

The infusion of religious and theological discourses in energy's ostensibly secular vectors, including economics, engineering, and policy, provides compelling new evidence about the instability of the secular / religious binary. Eschewing simplistic secularization theses, linking energy and religion requires approaches that frame economics, politics, and techno-sciences as emergent forms of religion, rather than repressive of one another.^[9]



#NoDAPL: The Dakota Access Pipeline Protests via [Tommaney Library](#), Haskell Indian Nations University

While energy is indeed a linguistic discourse—a way of thinking and talking about matter,

movement, vitality, being, and power—it is also real and material. Energy’s infrastructures, land use requirements, zoning policies, pipelines, mines, and transmission lines make possible (and at the same time foreclose) certain modes of social and political organization. High-profile cases of Indigenous resistance to energy infrastructure or extraction like the #NoDAPL protests^[10] and #ProtectOakFlat,^[11] complex intersections of Indigenous sovereignty and energy independence,^[12] and other religiously motivated resistance to or sanctification of energy resources^[13] foreground the significance of a focus on religions in extractive zones.^[14] Energy is produced and consumed through vast and complicated networks of human activity; through systems of extraction that commodify and circulate raw materials like coal, petroleum, fossil gas, rare earth minerals, and uranium; and through immaterial forms of energy, like heat or electricity captured through wind, solar, geothermal, and/or battery technologies.

Theoretical insights from the energy humanities have the capacity to enrich scholarship on religion, helping situate religious power in the context of what Dominic Boyer has identified as energopower—how the management of life and populations today depend, often in fundamental ways, on capacities to produce and consume energy.^[15]

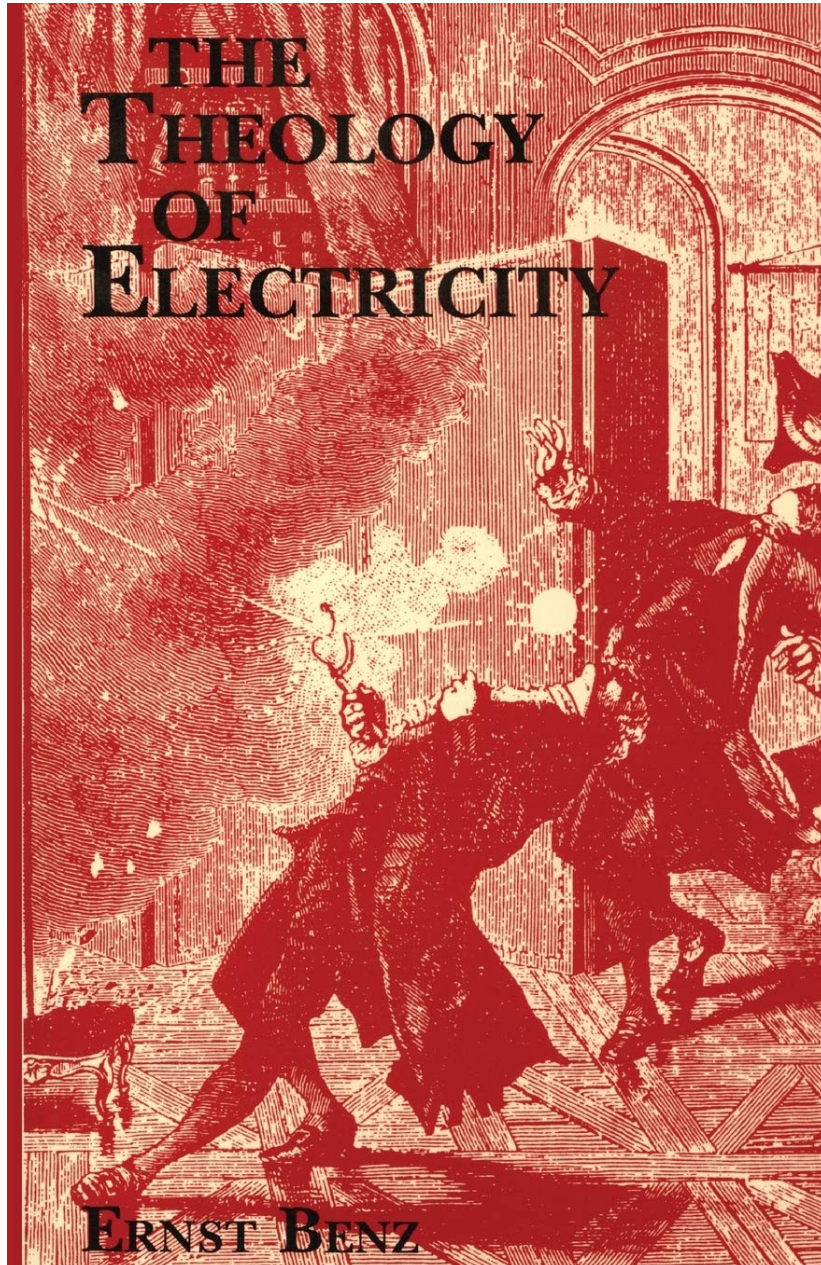
Energy in this Forum

Given the many resonances between these approaches and established themes in religious

studies, we want to highlight energy as a topical and theoretical space for new forms of reflection and exchange between religion scholars and environmental humanities scholars. The essays invited for this series reflect the generative potential of religion-energy analyses and are intended to indicate the importance of further scholarly engagement in these areas.

In the first essay, Jessica Madison Pískatá reflects on ‘energi’ as something that mediates between Soviet ideas about productivity and fuel, Nyingma Buddhist ideas about spiritually charged places and beings, and emerging cultural discourses that have to do with economic globalization, gender, and healing. In [“Provincializing ‘Energy’ at a Nyingma Buddhist Pilgrimage Site,”](#) she theorizes “energy” as a multivalent category that spans cultural differences but is not universalizable.

In our second essay, [“Andean Energy?: On Animating Forces Beyond Battery Storage,”](#) Mario Orospe Hernández invites reflection on the trans-cultural and trans-religious implications of energy transition technologies. He explores what some interpret as the Andean world’s understanding of energy—*kallpa* in Quechua and *ch’ama* in Aymara—against the backdrop of the ongoing massive lithium extraction in the Andes’ Lithium Triangle. He analyzes clean energy discourses at different sites along the lithium supply chain by thinking about the strange entanglements of spirituality and commodity extraction that power the battery industry.



Cover of The Theology of Electricity by Ernst Benz (Pickwick Publications, 1989)

A leading figure in energy humanities, Dominic Boyer offers a transdisciplinary perspective on electrical theologies for our third essay. As an anthropologist, Boyer has reflected before on the influences of electricity on the discipline of anthropology.^[16] In [“Electric Salvation,”](#) he engages and reflects on electrical theologies: theorizations of electricity as divine or

quasi-divine phenomena that mediate spirit and matter, and offers the potential of seemingly miraculous healing. First theorized by Ernst Benz,^[17] electrical theology emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries as a curious convergence of alchemical, theological, and scientific discourses. While previous engagements with electrical theology have been historical, here Boyer engages this scientific-religious phenomenon from the perspective of the energy humanities.

In “Crucibles and Conduits: Theologies of Energy and Self,” Judith Ellen Brunton engages an early technology of oil discovery for extraction: dowsing rods. Theories of dowsing included various perspectives on the proper material for rods: kinds of wood, metals, whalebones, or one’s own body. But dowsing involved more than just choosing the right material—the wielder of the rod also needed to be properly prepared, both mentally and spiritually. Brunton theorizes dowsing practices as technologies of self necessary for discovery and proper management of energy resources. In her ethnographic work on the Calgary oil industry, she finds an enduring reliance on such technologies of self in more contemporary ethical discourses about who can properly handle powerful energy resources.

‘Energizing’ the study of religion reframes climate futures, those implicit eschatologies of our time, and reveals how collective imaginations about planetary crises are refracted through different energy technologies, regimes, and transitions. Attention to the intersection of religion and energy is not an embrace of a technologically utopian naïveté that posits electrification and decarbonization as means to ecological salvation. Neither is scholarly engagement in this area an endorsement of cynical apocalypticism that consigns “climate futures” to an inscrutable transcendence. Rather, the aim of this essay series is to open space for discussion about religion and energy that attends to the immanent and the political, that theorizes the mythological qualities of contemporary climate discourse, and

insists on manifold, culturally heterogeneous climate futures.

Footnotes

[1] Simpson and Szeman, “Impasse Time.”

[2] Ghosh, “Petrofiction.”

[3] Gold, *ThermoPoetics*; Daggett, *The Birth of Energy*.

[4] Fiori, “Plantation Energy”; Jones, *Rendered Obsolete*.

[5] Szeman, *On Petrocultures*; Malm, *Fossil Capital*; Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.

[6] Illich, *Energy and Equity*; Hessel, *Energy Ethics*.

[7] Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*; Crockett, *Energy and Change*; Rowe, *Of Modern Extraction*; Amer Meziane and Adjemian, *The States of the Earth*; Macdonald, Graeme and Stewart, Janet, *Routledge Handbook of Energy Humanities*.

[8] MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination*; Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*.

[9] Rowe, *Of Modern Extraction*.

[10] Estes, *Our History Is the Future*.

[11] Paliewicz, “Thinking Like a Copper Mine.”

[12] Curley, *Carbon Sovereignty*.

[13] Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*.

[14] Rowe, Sideris, and Zenner, "Religions in Extractive Zones."

[15] Boyer, "Energopower"; Boyer, *Energopolitics*.

[16] Boyer, "Anthropology Electric."

[17] Benz, Taraba, and Benz, *The Theology of Electricity*.

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