

## Call for Papers: “Uses and Abuses of Power in Alternative Spiritualities”

Harvard Divinity School’s Program for the Evolution of Spirituality is delighted to announce that our spring 2023 conference will be organized around the theme of “Uses and Abuses of Power in Alternative Spiritualities.” We welcome proposals for papers, panels, workshops, and performances related to this theme, or to other aspects of alternative and evolving spiritualities. **We expect the conference to be in late April 2023, and will post exact dates on our website as soon as they are confirmed!**

Our conference will explore 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. We welcome proposals that explore only one side of this reality as well as those that explore the connection between the two sides. **We especially welcome proposals designed 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 define “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. Presentations on new religious movements, indigenous spiritualities, diasporic traditions, and spiritually-oriented social movements are all welcome!

As is true for all of our programming, we welcome proposals from spiritual practitioners and leaders, from scholars working in many disciplines, from social change activists, and from artistic creators. Proposals developed by groups of people representing more than one of these categories are especially encouraged.

Some of the topics that we hope will be addressed in this conference include the following:

- In what ways are alternative spiritualities empowering or healing for people who have been marginalized on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, or other aspects of their identities?
- In what ways do alternative spiritualities counter or reinforce existing imbalances of power?
- How do power dynamics shape the use and appropriation of spiritual practices across cultures? (Note: We anticipate that this will also be the main theme of our 2024 conference!)
- What are the most significant ways in which alternative spiritualities disempower or cause harm to their participants?
- What ethical, theological, or other understandings of power have emerged in alternative spiritual movements?
- Are certain spiritual practices inherently abusive? These might include the shunning of former members, confessional practices that involve the collection of compromising information, or the subordination of disciples to spiritual teachers?

- What resources are available to spiritual leaders and spiritual organizations that wish to reduce their potential to cause harm?
- Do scholars have a role to play in helping spiritual communities avoid harmful practices?
- What lessons might anti-cult activists and new religious movement scholars learn from one another?
- How do the “charismatic” forms of power and authority in emerging spiritual movements differ from the “bureaucratic” power structures in more established religions? Are there certain abuses of power that are more widespread in emerging spiritualities?

Proposals may be for individual academic papers (20 minutes in length), prearranged panels including 2-5 academic papers, workshops (60 minutes in length), or artistic performances (30-90 minutes in length). Each proposal should include a 500-word description, a 100-word abstract (suitable for inclusion in the conference program), and a 50-word biography of the presenter. **The deadline for proposals is December 15, 2022. Proposals submitted by October 15, 2022, will receive a decision by November 15; proposals submitted by December 15 will receive a decision by January 31, 2023.**

We especially welcome proposals from undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral students. To this end, we will offer a limited number of \$300 honoraria to students who submit especially strong proposals, and who are willing to attend the conference in person and to assist with chairing conference sessions. Students who wish to be considered for these awards must submit a full text of their paper in addition to the abstract.

To ensure access to all who wish to participate, we will hold a fully hybrid conference with no registration fees.