

# Symbiotic Grace: A Faith Renewed

Interdisciplinary Studies Conference | Winter 2024



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## SCHEDULE

### THURSDAY, JANUARY 18

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9:00 – 9:15 a.m.	<b>Opening in the Gym</b>
9:15 – 10:30 a.m.	<b>The Symbiotic Story of Creation and Humanity</b> <b>Dr. Aminah Al-Attas Bradford</b>
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	<b>Breakout Discussions</b> See Moodle for assigned rooms
1:30 – 2:45 p.m.	<b>Falling Away from a Symbiotic Story</b> <b>Dr. Aminah Al-Attas Bradford</b>
3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	<b>Breakout Discussions</b> See Moodle for assigned rooms

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### FRIDAY, JANUARY 19

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9:00 – 9:15 a.m.	<b>Opening in the Gym</b>
9:15 – 10:30 a.m.	<b>Symbiotic Story of Salvation</b> <b>Dr. Aminah Al-Attas Bradford</b>
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	<b>Breakout Discussions</b> See Moodle for assigned rooms

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## KEYNOTE LECTURE DESCRIPTIONS

### The Symbiotic Story of Creation and Humanity

Over half a century ago, intellectuals began pointing to Christian beliefs about humanity and salvation. Christianity is accused of overestimating the centrality and superiority of humanity while diminishing and marginalizing the rest of the world. With teachings about humans being made in the image of God, and with the story of a God who chooses to become human, and with humans narrated as those who are “very good,” how else are Christians supposed to engage the “natural world”? Are a thriving planet and thriving Church at odds? Or are they symbiotic? Over the past two decades, new understanding of the microbiome suggests that being human has never been a single-species project. In this first session we explore some of the historical roots of anti-environmentalism in Christian thought and turn towards modern microbiology to find just how deep the symbiotic story of creation and humanity runs.

### Falling Away from a Symbiotic Story

The doctrine of the fall can be interpreted in different ways, which not only informs our view of humanity and our view of everything else, but also our view of how to recover from it. When we narrate the fall as a sinking down into our more animal natures, it’s hard to imagine how God might use tiny microbial animals to make us more like God. Recentering the fall as a story about Eden’s two trees will help us understand our symbiotic state as well as Christianity’s complicated history with environmental stewardship. Meanwhile, the tangled history of theology and epidemiology (how we understand disease, including Covid-19) unwittingly influences how Christians engage everything from the theological problem of pain to the politics of the pandemic, creating little-understood resistances to viewing ourselves as part of God’s symbiotic story.

### Symbiotic Story of Salvation

If the Church’s anti-environmental attitudes are as old as the tradition itself, where do Christians turn to learn to better reflect the image of God who is the original symbiotic event? In this final lecture we turn to the story of our microbiome to begin to recover from the lie of our independence. We also discover the way God mediates grace symbiotically, suggesting that our symbiotic relationship with microbes is not only a biological matter but also a sacred one. Returning to the beginning of our series we discover the multi-species work of imaging God.



### **Dr. Aminah Al-Attas Bradford**

Dr. Bradford is a research scholar at NCSU where she works in the department of Applied Ecology blending issues of science and religion and hosting cross-disciplinary conversations. She is currently writing a book on the Spirituality of the Microbiome. She has worked in Higher Education for eighteen years and worked in Chaplain's offices for more than eleven years. Dr. Bradford is also a Fellow at the Berggruen Institute where she serves as an ethics and religion consultant. In her spare time Dr. Bradford loves to walk in the woods, work in her ceramics studio, best her husband and two daughters in Farkle Championships, and start reading books. Recently she started reading Thích Nhất Hạnh's *How to Sit*, Sandor Ellix Katz's *Fermentation as Metaphor*, Halldor Laxness' *Independent People*, *When Women Were Birds* by Terry Tempest Williams, and *Gathering Moss* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. She will not finish any of these...but she will try.

### **I.S Course Instructions**

We are excited to follow up our Fall IS Conference by having Dr. Aminah Al-Attas Bradford with us. She will take us on a journey to unpack how our changing biological understanding of humanity in relation to the rest of creation (our symbiotic nature) might change the Christian theological understanding of our relationship to the rest of creation, the fall, and salvation.

The format of the conference will involve listening to Dr. Bradford as a community in the gym and then breaking into groups to discuss the ideas she is presenting with faculty and staff. Three lectures, three discussions, many opportunities to renew our minds.

### **PASSING I.S.**

1. Attending the conference in person is best for those not attending the retreat. To pass you must attend all three keynote presentations and three breakout sessions (attendance will be recorded). You do not have to write an essay if you attend the required sessions in-person.
2. Online participants can fulfill their requirement by watching the three recorded keynote presentations which will be posted after the conference. They will then be required to write a 1,200 word essay due Friday, February 16. The essay topic will be posted after the conference and papers need to be uploaded to Moodle.