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2017 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

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2017 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

Boston, MA

17–21 November 2017

Scholars of religion from the United States and abroad gathered in Boston from November 17–21 for the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), co-hosted with the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL). The world's largest conference on the study of religion, this year's joint meeting of the AAR and SBL had over 10,200 members in attendance at nearly 1,400 panels, sessions, and exhibitions (<<https://www.aarweb.org/annual-meeting/2017-post-annual-meeting-survey-narrative>>).

Several units and sections broadly focused on Hinduism, Buddhism, and other South Asian religious traditions held panels and sessions related to the Himalayan region. The Religion in South Asia Unit's 'Constructing Powerful Selves: Autobiography in South Asia' explored autobiographical writing in South Asia as a mode of speech and self-fashioning. The panel's four papers covered the strategies employed by figures from Kashmir (Ben Williams) to Punjab (Chloe Martinez) to Tibet (Alyson Prude) in gaining agency in their respective social and religious worlds.

Also sponsored by the Religion in South Asia Unit, papers in the 'Gendered Traditions: Intersections

of Gender, Genre, and Religion in South Asian Storytelling' session investigated the forms and methods of women's storytelling in Himalayan and South Asian religious communities. They examined how such storytelling traditions in Nepal (Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz), the Nepal-India border region of Maithila (Coralynn Davis), and Afghanistan (Margaret Mills) have functioned simultaneously to circulate and to dismantle patriarchal discourses in women's devotional and day-to-day lives. Co-sponsored by the Religion in South Asia Unit and the Hinduism Unit, 'Modernizing the Language of the Gods: Religious Identity, Instruction, and Innovation in Contemporary Sanskrit' addressed the ways that innovations and developments in Sanskrit expressive culture today reflect changes in Hindu religious identity and in political and class identity.

A pre-posted papers session entitled 'Navaratri and the Production and Performance of Socio-Political Structures' explored the relationship between the rituals of the Navaratri festival and the economic and socio-political contexts in which they take place. Panelists' paper topics included palanquin rituals in the Kullu Valley of Himachal Pradesh (Ehud Halperin), Dasain rituals in post-monarchy Nepal (Anne Mocko), and Navaratri as a venue for performing male asceticism (Jeremy Saul).

Although not specific to the Himalayan region, the Hinduism Unit's 'The Ethics of Bhakti: Exploring Moral and Aesthetic Dimensions in the Life of Hindu Devotion' investigated the role of ethics and ethical behavior in a devotional context. This panel's papers traced the connections between ethics, aesthetics, and devotion in different traditions, and highlighted the

ways that bhakti ethics are distinct from ethics in other forms of Hindu religious expression. Co-sponsored with the Women and Religion Unit, 'Reconstructing Authority: Female Gurus Today' was a comparative analysis of the methods by which female gurus create and sustain religious authority. This session's panelists affirmed religious authority as an "ongoing, transforming relationship," and their papers demonstrated that female gurus draw from established female categories in the development of such authority.

Sponsored by the Tibetan and Himalayan Religions Unit, the 'Voices from Larung Gar' session was devoted to the Buddhist community at Larung Gar in eastern Tibet, which currently faces state-mandated reductions and restrictions in monastic population. Papers in this panel echoed this year's AAR theme, "Religion and the Most Vulnerable," as they touched upon issues of Buddhist modernism (Antonio Terrone), Tibetan Buddhist leaders' relationships with their Chinese followers (Catherine Hardie), modern Tibetan culture and the "secular" (Jann Ronis), and the institutional place of Buddhist nuns and their publication projects (Chelsea Hall).

A diverse panel of papers in the Tibetan and Himalayan Religions Unit's 'New Research on Ritual, Politics, and Possession in Himalayan Religions' session introduced scholarship on material culture (Natasha Mikles), sectarianism (William Dewey), ritual (Christopher Bell), the poetics of political writing (Ian MacCormack), and oracles (Katarina Turpeinen) in the Himalayan region. Co-sponsored by the Tibetan and Himalayan Religions and Buddhist Philosophy Units, the 'Tibetan Madhyamaka' panel explored the complexities of Tibetan

debates over the soteriological, epistemological, and ontological aspects of the “philosophy of the middle” that was received from India. Collectively, the three presenters (Michael Ium, Jed Forman, and Douglas Duckworth) wove together the philosophical import of exegetical commentators with social and political history to give further context and nuance to the Madhyamaka system.

The 'Crime and Punishment: Legal Dialogues between Buddhism and Local Society in East and Central Asia' session, sponsored by the Buddhism Unit, examined the linkages between Buddhist and “secular” legal spheres towards challenging any presumptions of a hard-lining difference between the two. Papers examined the religious and political dimensions of Buddhist kingship, as well as the relationship of monks and nuns to both monastic and state legal codes. Another omnibus session, sponsored by the Buddhism Unit, 'New Work in Buddhist Studies' was comprised of presentations on a rich array of recent research in Buddhist Studies. Paper topics included sacred space in Tibet (Ian MacCormack), lineage formation at the Buddha’s birthplace of Lumbini (Blayne Harcey), and the relationship between hell narratives, gender, and ethical advice in Tibetan epic literature (Natasha Mikles).

There were a number of thought-provoking panels for students and scholars of religion focusing on the Himalayas hosted at the 2017 meeting of the AAR. The variety of sources and content informing the many Himalaya-related papers demonstrate the vibrancy and richness of the religious traditions and communities of the Himalayan region. Moreover, these presentations’ methodologies and theoretical approaches reflect

the diversity of disciplinary approaches to the study of Himalayan religions, and point to a future full of exciting new directions and possibilities.

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