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2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

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**2018 Annual Meeting of the
American Academy of Religion**

**Denver, CO
17-20 November 2018**

Scholars of religion from the United States and abroad convened in Denver from November 17-20 for the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), co-hosted with the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL). It is the world's largest conference on the study of religion, and this year's joint meeting of the AAR and SBL had over 10,000 members in attendance at over 1,000 panels, sessions, and exhibitions (<<https://www.aarweb.org/annual-meeting>>).

The Himalayan region was well-represented by papers and discussions at numerous panels and sessions hosted by units focused on Hinduism, Buddhism, and other South Asian religious traditions. The Tibetan and Himalayan Religions unit sponsored four panels. Presentations in "Mountains in Himalayan Religions" explored the place of mountains in Tibetan Buddhism. They examined the agentive and curative role of mountains for Tibetan Buddhists, how Tibetan scholars have made arguments for the authenticity of sacred mountains, how mountains are construed as symbols, and ways in which contemporary Ladakhi Buddhist communities are responding to environmental change.

Papers in the “A Woman’s Place in Buddhist Dialogues: Querying the Margins of Tibetan Literature for the In/Visibility of Nuns and Yoginīs” panel surveyed the role of Tibetan and Himalayan women in textual and contemporary discourses “in order to retrieve their presence and voices from the margins of Buddhist discourse.” Drawing from diverse textual genres and fieldwork, they analyzed how Buddhist women have been and are made in/visible in Tibetan texts and contexts that are largely organized by men. Inspired by Eliot Weinberger and Octavia Paz’s book *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, the “19 Ways of Looking at Milarepa” roundtable reflected on Tibet’s most well-known yogin and poet, Milarepa. Panelists discussed their individual translations of one of Milarepa’s songs. The conversation reflected on the aesthetics, religious dimensions, and style of the ways in which Tibetan religious songs can be rendered in English translation.

Co-sponsored with the Comparative Approaches to Religion and Violence Unit, “Religion and Violence in Tibet and the Himalayas” explored aspects of violence in Tibetan Buddhism across the Himalayan region. This panel’s speakers engaged wider academic discourses on the many dimensions and meanings of violence in Asian religions, reflecting on the methods that Tibetan Buddhists have used in deploying violence, either factual or symbolic, in rituals, contemplative exercises, textual production, and iconography.

The Religion and South Asia Unit’s “New Directions in the Study of South Asian Religions” panel examined the cultural flows of, in a nod to Thomas Tweed’s work, religious practitioners of South Asian traditions navigating differences in culture, space, and place. Subjects of inquiry included the American diaspora, Tibetan

landscapes, and the pilgrimage guides devoted thereto, and religious dance performances in Manipur. The “Religion and Aesthetics in Indo-Persian Literature” panel focused on the religious and aesthetic aspects of literary spaces between different languages and religious traditions. Topics ranged from the conceptualizations of “imagination” in Greco-Arabic and Sanskrit-Persian translation movements to the influences of Sufi and Shaiva imagery on Kashmiri poetry.

Co-sponsored with the Hinduism Unit, papers in the “Translating Texts, Transmitting Tradition: Continuity and Change in Hindu Traditions” panel explored the relationships between texts, translation, and identity, drawing attention to moments of both disruption and continuity in the lives of religious texts in Nepal, India, and beyond. The Hinduism Unit also hosted “Sanskrit and the Bhakti Movement,” whose presenters considered the role of Sanskrit poets and texts in the history of the *bhakti* movement, ranging from Kashmir to Kerala.

The Religion in South Asia Unit’s “Constructing Powerful Selves: Autobiography in South Asia” analyzed 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 to Punjab to Tibet in gaining agency in their respective social and religious worlds.

The Buddhism Unit hosted two panels related to the Himalayan region. “Animal Consumption in Context: Comparing Localized Constructions of a Mahāyāna Buddhist Animal Ethics” surveyed a number of debates in Tibet, India, Japan, and China about the ethical stakes of the use of animal products. Collectively,

the presentations identified a “fundamental ambiguity” in Buddhist ethics, demonstrating the diversity of perspectives adopted by Buddhists throughout Asian history to come to terms with the status and suffering of non-human animals. Co-sponsored with the Contemplative Studies Unit, “Buddhist Cultures of Meditation” consisted of four papers about the experiential, institutional, and cultural dimensions of meditation in Tibet, India, China, and Burma. Examinations of canonical texts, meditation manuals, monastic guidebooks, and commentarial works highlighted the diversity of ways Buddhists have made meaning of meditation.

The Buddhist Philosophy Unit’s “Philosophical Tantras and Tantric Philosophies: The Intersection of Tantra and Doxography in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism” explored Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhist commentarial literature. Its papers examined how tantric exegetes have engaged with different textual traditions in their efforts to categorize Buddhist scriptures and doctrine.

The Economics and Capitalism in the Study of Buddhism Seminar held a panel with the theme “Buddhist Responses to Capitalist Situations, Wealth and Excess, and Institutional Changes.” Presentations included analyses of early Indian Buddhism patronage, “Buddhist economics,” and economic ethics in Ladakh.

Tantric Studies’ “Bodies within Bodies: Intertextuality and the Re-Inscriptive, Re-Incarnational Power of the Goddess in Her Great and Little Instantiations” panel investigated the relationships between tantric texts and local, vernacular Śākta tantric practices and rituals. Subjects of inquiry included traditions from contemporary Nepal and eighteenth century Indian commentarial texts.

“Ritual Construction and Contestation: Navarātri Rituals and their Critiques,” hosted by the Navarātri Seminar, explored dimensions of the Navarātri festival in Nepal and India related to kingship, ritual violence, and sacrifice.

A panel on “Buddhist Material Heritage: Unexplored Questions,” sponsored by the Space, Place, and Religion Unit, overviewed the ways that Buddhists have related space, heritage, and religious tradition. The three papers’ foci covered fifteenth-century Tibetan articulations of religious and political legitimacy, post-earthquake Newar Buddhist identity in Kathmandu, and transnational Buddhist pilgrimage and tourism in India.

In addition to these panels, there were several individual papers representing the Himalayan region. A paper in the Death, Dying, and Beyond Unit’s “The Material Culture of Death, Monuments, and Memory Making” panel analyzed the role of both conscious and material agents in Tibetan funerary ritual manuals for saving the dead. A paper in the “Comparative Caregiving at the Intersection of Religion and Economy,” co-sponsored by the Religion and Economy Unit and Religions, Medicines, and Healing Unit, proffered new insights on the history of the transmission of medical traditions to Tibet during the Yuan dynasty. Lastly, a paper in a panel entitled “Video Game Development in Asia: Cultural Heritage, Religion, and National Identity” queried the ways that Nepal, its culture, and its religion are portrayed by video game developers.

A great many panels and papers about Himalayan religions were on offer at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The diversity of sources, as well as the breadth of theoretical approaches and analyses, in these presentations

of current scholarship were testaments to the rigor and vibrancy of this field. There was an appreciable growth in the representation of the region at this year’s conference, gesturing to the continued richness of the academic study of religion in the Himalayas.

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