

EDITORIAL

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Experimental religiosities and *dharma* traditions: new directions in the study of vernacular religion in Asia and the Diaspora

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As the guest editor of this issue, I am delighted to present readers with an exciting volume of articles that provides in-depth and new ethnographic analyses of the worldviews and practices of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain religions, or “Dharma traditions.” By referencing a range of practitioners and contexts in contemporary South Asia (India), East Asia (Japan), Southeast Asia (Indonesia), and the Oceanic Diaspora (Australia), this collection engages broad human concerns about the interdependence of religion and modernity in an interconnected global world. Our contributors explore the ways in which individuals, communities, and institutions within diverse Dharma traditions interpret the momentous social, cultural, economic, and environmental changes illustrative of the reach of globalization in the twenty-first century.

The volume was originally conceived in the form of an exploratory conference panel, which I organized, and which was sponsored by the *Comparative Studies in Religion Section* of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting in 2014 in San Diego, CA. The title of that panel was “Religion at the Crossroads: Experimentation, Innovation, and Change in Hinduisms and Buddhisms as Practiced in Contemporary Asia.” With the exception of the historian of religion John Stratton Hawley, who graciously served in the role of respondent at that annual meeting, all of the participants on that panel have contributed articles to this themed journal collection. Aware that a panel on a topic similar to the one that I had proposed, titled “Being in the Borderlands: The Negotiation of Boundaries in South Asian Religious Communities,” had been held in 2012, at a meeting in conjunction with the annual AAR conference, I consulted with Purushottama Bilimoria, the panel’s contact person, to see if we could combine the papers. The result would be a themed journal that examined the issues of lived religion, change, and boundary formations in the Dharma traditions of Asia and the Diaspora. The “fruits” of our intellectual collaboration over these last 2 years have resulted in the publication of the set of articles featured in this journal symposium.

The articles examine how, and to what extent, recent global shifts in world economies, information technologies, migration, tourism, and development are shaping the messages and the methods of Asia’s Dharma traditions. Many of the articles examine how individuals and institutions reconfigure the boundaries of their religious identities and social roles in both modern and contemporary times. Using religious resources to interpret the fact, significance, and extent of social change, these diverse actors respond

to the challenges facing contemporary societies in responsible ways. Drawing on the entrepreneurial energy of emerging Asian economies (see Bilimoria and Rayner 2014; Srivastava and Kothari 2012), the Dharma traditions are experimenting with the breadth of opportunities stimulated by globalization and providing their own frameworks to conceptualize change in the contemporary world (see also the work of Chandler (2004) who discusses the interrelation of tradition and modernity in the Foguang branch of Pure Land Buddhism as practiced in global contexts).

Importantly, there are two analytical features that distinguish this volume from other scholarly investigations on the topic of globalization, modernity, and religious change. The first has to do with the foundational concepts around which the contributions to this volume focus, namely those of “vernacular religion” and “experimental religion.” The second feature has to do with the time period under consideration by the authors, which spotlights the end of the twentieth century (since the 1990s during the global market reforms; see Srivastava and Kothari 2012) until the present milieu. The hermeneutic of “vernacular religion”—developed by the folklorist and historian of religion Leonard Norman Primiano (1995)—describes the phenomenon by which the adherents imagine, interpret, experience, and express religion in everyday contexts and, through such engagements, constructively place their worlds in frameworks of meaning (see also Orsi 2003; 2005; McGuire 2008; Darlington 2012). It calls attention to local strategies of selecting and crafting lives through the use of religious idioms, values, symbols, and practices that are anchored in the mundane and are built on the foundation of intricate networks of relationships that people form with each other and with the powers they hold sacred (Orsi 2003). A vernacular religion model nuances daily negotiations of power and identity by individuals and communities and brings to light the ambiguities and creativity involved in the processes by which people use religion to create themselves and their sacred worlds (Primiano 2012).

Because I invited Primiano to participate in the AAR panel in the role of president, he has written the introduction to this themed symposium. In his introduction, Primiano extends the insights of his theoretical model, which he developed more than two decades ago in the context of Catholicism, and which has become a classic feature of ethnographies on vernacular religion in global contexts (see Bowman and Valk 2012; DeNapoli 2014; see also the recent volume on vernacular Catholicisms and sainthood in India and elsewhere edited by Locklin 2017 in honor of Selva J. Raj; see also Bilimoria 2017). Primiano’s deft analysis explains the ways in which this volume’s ethnographic research on vernacular religiosities-as-practiced in Asia pushes the study of lived religion in new directions. He also suggests avenues for further research and discussion.

Another concept examined by the authors concerns that of “experimental religion” as framed and developed by the anthropologist of Japanese religions John Nelson. In his recent ethnography on the innovative practices of temple Buddhist priests in Japan (2013), Nelson employs the hermeneutical device of “experimental religion” as a tool to understand “the sequence of decisions and steps” (21) by which people experiment with their religions. Nelson describes the means and the methods by which adherents in contemporary contexts test, research, revise, and apply religious ideas and practices to create a syncretistic expression that navigates the “crisis of identity” which the current *avatār* of globalization has been fueling in Japan and elsewhere. Since Nelson speaks about these processes and their impact in detail in his contribution to this symposium,

I will refrain from spoiling the punchline for readers. I will say, though, that I became aware of Nelson's work on experimental religion and modernity through the recommendation of another contributor to this volume, the historian of religion June McDaniel, while I was in India between 2013 and 2014 conducting ethnographic research for a manuscript project on renunciation and social change. After reading his book, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan*, I contacted Nelson about his interest in serving on the 2014 AAR panel. He agreed, and his paper, which anchored all the papers for the AAR panel, also anchors this series of explorations on experimental religion in Asia and the Diaspora.

Although the concepts of "vernacular religion" and "experimental religion" overlap, this collection places these analytical categories in conversation with each other. The articles engage this conversation through comparative discussion and analyses of Dharma traditions as imagined and lived in the contemporary Asian milieu and in light of the processes of experimentation, innovation, and adaptation taking place in response to recent globalization. The papers mostly deal with Hinduism and Buddhism, because these Dharma traditions, and Sikhism to a lesser extent (but see Bilimoria this volume), tend to be represented in religious studies scholarship in the frame of "other-worldly" religions. They are often described as concerned with the realm of the transcendent, and not with the mundane; and as traditions that view the material as irrelevant, privilege a reified spirituality in favor of meditation and liberation, and promote a life dedicated to individualistic (instead of community-based) spiritual goals. The articles on Buddhism (Nelson, Starling, and McDaniel), Hinduism (DeNapoli, Howard, Alles, McDaniel, and Bilimoria), and Sikhism (Bilimoria) question such static representations, bringing to light world-affirming narratives in these religions.

While extensive ethnographic research demonstrates the chief method tying the seven contributions together, followed by an illuminating response written by the Indologist Laurie L. Patton, who also served in the role of respondent on the 2012 panel, the authors use a variety of interdisciplinary approaches and theoretical frameworks in their analyses of experimental *dharmas* in contemporary contexts. Each article calls new attention to how experimental opportunities are conceived and enacted in theology, public discourse, ritual and rhetorical performance, organizational planning, the developing of state-based school curricula, and the use of communication technologies. Since Primiano's introduction talks about the thematic dimensions of each of the articles, I will add to his discussion simply by noting that a main goal of this volume is to advance scholarly discussions and critiques of the interdependence of tradition and innovation, and religion and modernity, as a focus and problem not only for today's global culture but also for contemporary Dharma traditions. Another objective is to show the ways that Dharma adherents are experimenting with the conventional boundaries of "dharma" in order to construct new meanings and applications that align with the challenges and concerns of the 21st-century global milieu. Literature on the Dharma traditions has often emphasized the significance of the notions of "innovation" and "change" in the transmission of religious cultural traditions. And yet, the role of experimentation in the imagining, construction, and experience of Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist *dharmas* has been underrepresented in the scholarship on Asian religions. Through use of the concept "experimental religion," this volume fills a lacuna in the current state of scholarship on ethnography, gender, religious identity, globalization, and modernization in Asia and the Diaspora.

The questions informing the investigations of this symposium are as follows:

1. How do both individuals and institutions within diverse Dharma traditions conceive of the notion of experimentation, and in what contexts can we locate experimentation in connection with the construction of meaning for religion-as-lived in contemporary Asian cultures?
2. What does it mean to experiment religiously? Do we see the construction of new theologies, ideologies, and affiliations (to name only a few examples) in the making? If so, how do such imaginings speak to, break away from, or signal socio-religious-political issues of identity, subjectivity, agency, and personhood?
3. What role does gender play in processes of experimentation and its imaginative possibilities?
4. Who has the authority, right, freedom, or privilege of experimenting with the boundaries of religions? What kinds of dialectics, discussions, and debates about power and authority arise in the processes of experimenting with religions' boundaries?
5. In what ways do the Dharma traditions of Asia and the Diaspora grapple with the ideas, institutions, flows, and challenges of (late) modernity? How do such negotiations orient modes of experimentation?
6. What are the implications of experimentation when it comes to how religions conceive and position themselves globally? What do the Dharma traditions want now that they did not want or emphasize before the "new globalization" (Taylor 2004)? Do we see more emphasis on "religious pluralism," "religious inclusivism," or perhaps "religious exclusivism"? How do discourses of transnationalism shape contemporary "performances" of Dharma in the world on the global stage? How do postcolonial critiques of religion, and specifically, dominant westernized models of culture and society, direct the nature of those experimentations? Do we see the parameters of cultural and/or religious "diversity" being stretched and reimagined in ways that may be critical of western models of globalization?
7. Finally, how can the experimentation that is occurring in Dharma traditions in a globalizing Asia inspire scholars to question their own analytic assumptions and categories about what religion means and how it is lived in this particular historical milieu? Do we find that experimentation catalyzes new realizations about the religion-secularism interface, and more precisely, debate? Is it possible that the current historical milieu is helping religious people to place the secular within a sacred canopy, rather than the other way around? If appropriate, how can a focus on experimental religion challenge standard sociological assumptions dominating the fields of religious studies and Asian studies about the state/place of religion in this new era of globalization?

It is my sincere wish that these contributions on experimental Dharmas in the global world will build understanding of international relations with Asian countries and the roles of religion and gender on Asian cultural constructions of tradition, modernity, and change. Now let us turn to the individual articles, beginning with the Introduction.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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