

Monday, April 11th, 2022

Nexus Centre (SN 4022) & Zoom ([register here](#))

9:00am – Coffee / Registration / Welcome

SESSION ONE: 9:15-10:45am (Chair, Barry Stephenson)

Secularism in Theory and Practice

Rebecca Ralph (History, MUNL) – From Sectarian to Secular in Seven Years: An Examination of the Sudden End of Newfoundland’s Denominational Education System

In late July of 1997, Liberal Premier Brian Tobin announced a snap referendum on secularizing the denominational school system for September. He got his desired result with over 70 percent voting in favor of abolishing denominational education. While Tobin’s predecessor Clyde Wells had initiated the process of education reform by calling a Royal Commission on Education in 1990, the escalation from reforming the system in a way that maintained a relationship with the churches to total secularization of education governance surprised many. For over 150 years, due regard was given to the church-state relationship and the institution of denominational education, which begs the question why in 1997 did the province end its partnership with churches in education? This paper will examine how the political process of reforming the denominational school system in the 1990s marked a radical change in Newfoundland and Labrador that was deeply informed by the province’s citizen’s and institution’s different understandings of rights within Canadian society and changing attitudes about secularisation and deference to religious leaders.

Princess Ntim Boateng (Religious Studies, MUNL) – Discrimination of Religious Minorities in Secular Ghanaian Schools

Religious discrimination is one of the most recurring issues many students experience in secular Ghanaian schools. This paper examines the challenges and prejudices experienced by students from minority religions, primarily of African Indigenous Religions and Islam. I argue that an educational model masked under biased Christian ideals demeans the secular state’s constitution and fundamental human rights. Moreover, these masked Christian ideals are embedded in rules and policies have contributed to several ongoing atrocities in Ghana. Irrespective of the state’s secularity, students from minority religious groups are expected to succumb and assimilate to avoid altercations with the authorities. Considering this context, I discuss traditional communitarian values that emphasize human dignity and the importance of community and personhood, as well as the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the African Union and the United Nations, as a way to address these issues.

Jennifer Selby (Religious Studies, MUNL) – On how Secular & Immigration Policies Emerge in the Marital Lives of Women of Algerian Origin in France and Québec

Scholars have long shown how recent secular laws that curtail religious signs - namely in 2004, 2011 and 2021 in France, and in 2019 in Québec - have had significant impacts on racialized women’s daily lives, regardless of whether they are visibly religious and/or practicing (see Scott 2007, 2018; Fernando 2014; Selby 2014; Jouili 2015; Jahangeer 2019). Based on interviews with cis-gender heterosexual women of Algerian origin in a Parisian suburb and in Montréal, Québec from 2011-2019, I aim to show how these laws shape how choice and love are imagined. I compare how immigration policy and secular grammars and governance in these nation states are manifest in women’s intimate lives, namely in their marriage partner preferences. I argue that how the ways these immigration and *laïque* laws in France and Québec imagine gender and position race can be read in how my interlocutors articulate how and who they love and/or marry.

Michelle Rebidoux (Religious Studies, MUNL) – Liberal Secularism and the Concept of Transcendence: Entertaining James K.A. Smith’s Undeveloped Possibility

This presentation will engage key figure in the Radical Orthodoxy movement James K.A. Smith’s work on the idea of liberal secularism as a Christian heresy. Smith unfolds in a fascinating chapter of a recent book that, while all the core values of liberal secularism have their roots in Christianity, detached from those roots such values have undergone a deterioration. His work is aimed at revitalizing (or at least educating his audience about) the true Christian foundation of liberal secular culture. However, at one point in the chapter (in a brief footnote), he expresses his willingness to entertain the fact that the same core values might also be found in their authentic form, under other names, in other religious traditions, though he does not follow up this possibility. This presentation raises questions concerning how such an undeveloped possibility might be entertained more fully, what such a discourse might look like, and to what extent some concept of “transcendence” (and how that would be defined) is necessary for the robust functioning of an ethical system.

KEYNOTE: 11am-12:30pm (Chair, Jennifer Selby)

Thinking through the politics of relation and resistance: South Asian women and the racialization of religion in Canada

Nadia Hasan (NCCM) and Sailaja Krishnamurti (Religious Studies, SMU)

Studies of gender and religious communities in Canada must begin with an examination of the specific processes of racialization of religion that are at work in their formation. Discourses of multiculturalism and inclusion, and experiences of racism, violence, and the settler colonial state shape and reshape the ways that people define their lives, relations, and communities. In this talk, we will draw on two case studies of South Asian Muslim and Hindu women in Canada to examine how these women cultivate their religiosity, in relation to processes of racialization of diasporic communities, and within the context of official multiculturalism in Canada. The two groups that we discuss are very different in their relationships to transnational religious communities. While one group tries to claim model minority status, the other tries to reject that imposition - but each works to carve out a way to resist some forms of hierarchical social relations.

12:30-1:15pm – **Lunch (served – please [pre-register](#))**

SESSION TWO: 1:15-2:45pm (Chair, Prasenjit Debnath)

On Names and Words

Patricia Dold (Religious Studies, MUNL) – Fierce, Sweet, Intense: how should scholars speak of ‘Kali’?

This paper attempts to identify and dissect a problem of labelling encountered in the academic study of Hindu traditions. In scholarly considerations of various representations of the goddess Kali, for example, we are informed that, apparently, she has been cleaning up her appearance and behaviour over the centuries so that "she" has become "softened," "sweetened," or "tamed." Such declarations sweep aside all manner of complexities inhering in any given representation of "the goddess Kali," including contextual complexities. Here, I want to ask if such labels also reflect racist, colonial or perhaps neo-colonial attitudes on the part of scholars. I pose this question in the context of my participation in a project launched by Amy Allocco (Elon University) and Xenia Zeiler (Helsinki University), who propose shifting scholarly language toward "sweetening and intensification" as "two converging and diverging currents in contemporary Hinduism." As a ground for this discussion, I will draw upon hymns to Kali/Kamakhyā preserved and performed by women residents of to the town of Kamakhyā, Assam.

Thomas Seibel (Religious Studies, MUNL) – A Viral Goddess: Coronā Devī Narratives in the News

During the first 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic, online print and video news sources announced the emergence of new Hindu deities related to the Corona virus. Rituals dedicated to both iconic and aniconic forms of “Coronā Devī” reportedly occurred in several communities in states, spanning from the Northeast to the South of India. This work-in-progress paper draws on scholarship of Mariyammān, Śītalā, and AIDS-Ammā to consider Coronā Devī in the context of a tradition commonly referred to as ‘disease goddesses,’ to which she is discursively linked and situated.

Jackson Rigler (Medieval Studies, MUNL) – An Exploration of the Vedic Creation Hymn "Nāsadiya Sūkta" (Rig Veda 10.129)

The Nāsadiya Sūkta is a poetic text which comes to us from within the Rig Veda, the earliest known collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns. While it can be read superficially as a creation myth of the universe, the hymn really offers a set of deeper insights into the metaphysical thought of the early Vedic adepts. It demonstrates the presence of a cosmic humility in these philosopher-poets and their questioning of nature, being, and the essence of life. Comparisons can be drawn between the Nāsadiya’s own indefinite allusions and that of other textual traditions, such as the Dao De Jing. This might show how these metaphysical inquiries of reality have existed contemporaneous with more rigid mythologies far into the past as much as they do today.

Ariella Markus (York University, Interdisciplinary Studies) – Three Generations Later: Jewish Hungarian Immigrants Reclaiming Religious Traditions in Nova Scotia after the Holocaust

In 1944, a woman on her way to a concentration camp hastily writes a postcard and throws it out the window of a cattle car. Three generations later, her great-granddaughter’s writing is published in a Holocaust autobiography.

In the 1990’s, a Holocaust survivor re-names herself with a Jewish name of her own choosing. Three generations later, this name is formally inscribed on her great-granddaughter’s birth certificate.

When a woman takes action in her own life, she may never know how far-reaching the impact will be. My research traces the life of Steven and Feri Markus, two brothers who survived the Holocaust together. By reading Steven Markus’ autobiographical book, *Miracle Postcards: Two Brothers in Wartime Hungary*, one is able to find clear examples of the women in the Markus family being act agents during the time period of the Holocaust, and the long-lasting effects that this had on their female descendents. Jewish women are a sub-sect of a population that is already marginalized. It is therefore especially important to hear their stories and to approach this topic in an intersectional way. My research also discusses the importance of names, and the social significance of having both formal and informal names. All of these things lead to the following thesis: when a woman reclaims a religious tradition to reflect the circumstances in her own life, it opens up opportunities for other women to do the same. Her actions are significant and have inherent value, and they also draw additional significance from future events that have not yet occurred.

SESSION THREE: 3:00-4:30pm (Chair, Patricia Dold)

Media and Mediums

Jessica Gibson (Religious Studies, MUNL) – Queering the Canon: Chitra Ganesh’s “The Eyes of Time” as a Revelation of Silenced and Erased Voices and Bodies in the Hindu Narrative

Chitra Ganesh's "Eyes of Time" (2015) is a location-specific mixed media installation piece that was exhibited at the Herstory Gallery in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum. Ganesh's piece incorporates cultural artifacts, mechanical objects, textiles, and painting. The installation portrays, at its centre, a re-imagined image of the goddess Kali as a representation of the passage of time, fluidity of identity, and Shakti. The images depicted in this installation have a phantasmagorical quality, intertwining themes of modernity and tradition, social and technological progression, and cultural memory. Ganesh's identity as a queer feminist artist and as a member of the Indian diaspora offers an alternative perspective on cultural memory and Hindu tradition, historically rooted in patriarchy. By revealing her own re-imaginings of Kali and reclaiming cultural artifacts, Ganesh challenges the colonial lens of the global north, often applied to cultures considered as 'Other'. My methodology considers how art works as a vehicle to explore and communicate narratives that are previously untold in traditional cultural canons. Ganesh's work does this effectively and compellingly by showing her audience bodies, voices, and perspectives that are outside of the bounds of conventional and traditional canons. I use photographs of her installation, interviews, scholarly articles, reviews, artist statements, newspaper articles for critical and community receptions for my analysis. In addition, I examine her installation using the feminist phenomenological lens demonstrated in the work of Sara Ahmed, and the theory of hauntology put forth by Mark Fisher to invoke and unpack cultural memory. This paper interrogates how museums replicate contemporary colonial views, and how voices like Ganesh's challenge the white gaze through creative and meaningful re-claiming, re-imaginings, and re-interpretations of cultural memories, narrative, historical material and artifacts.

Siddan Chandra (Independent Scholar) – I Hail the Black Lingayath

Black Lingayath is a new concept that updates Lingayathism - a reformist/revolutionary anti-caste, anti-priest Hindu sect that originated in a movement led by Basava, a statesman and poet in mid 12th century Karnataka, India - by passing it through the filter of the 21st century social justice movements, especially Black Lives Matter. 'I Hail the Black Lingayath' offers a bricolage of a new minoritarian (as per Deleuze and Guattari), base materialist (as per Helene Cixous and George Bataille), heterogeneous, anti-fascist and pacifist world view for the 21st century by referencing ideas from Indian and Canadian Indigenous cultures, Jainism, reformist Hinduism, Islamic aesthetics, French base materialist feminism, queer culture, transgenderism, 60s American counter culture, Civil Rights Movement and recent global social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Arab Spring, Occupy and Fridays For Future.

Daniel Murray (Religious Studies, MUNL) – Fandoms of the Possessed: Taiwanese Spirit Mediums on YouTube

In 2017, HBO Asia's debuted its first original program in collaboration with the Taiwanese network IFA. The miniseries entitled *The Teenage Psychic (Tongling shaonü)* follows the life of a high school student Xie Ya Zhen, portrayed by the popular actress and singer Kuo Shu-yao, who is also a spirit medium in a local temple. Following the finale of the first season, HBO Asia released a documentary entitled *The World behind the Teenage Psychic (Tongling shaonü beihou de shenyin shijie)* about temple culture in Taiwan featuring a young woman named Zhang Mingyi who was an actual medium. Since the release, Zhang has attracted the attention of various local media outlets, including getting possessed on talk show appearances, and her associated temple's YouTube page has received close to 200,000 subscribers. This has led to a number of other young women to create their own similar social media presences about their spirit medium practices and other temple events.

Through an analysis of these YouTube videos, livestreams, and user comments, I consider how the practice of spirit mediumship moves through different media platforms. The expansion of media platforms for mediums has also changed their relation to their audience. It is a shift from efficacious mediums, who perform tangible miracles for their temple's clientele, to affective mediums, creating connections to an online fanbase and their digital consumption habits.

Jennifer Porter (Religious Studies, MUNL) – Hybridity, fictive anthropology and virtual religious tourism at Disney's Pandora, the World of Avatar

Pandora, the World of Avatar is a small sub-section of Walt Disney World's Animal Kingdom Park in Orlando, Florida. Based on the film 'Avatar' by director James Cameron, this corner of Disney's theme park is dedicated to the alien landscape, people, and religion of the Na'vi peoples, a fictive indigenous group. This paper will explore the implications of Disney's representations of indigeneity, spirituality, hybridity, and eco-tourism at Pandora, the World of Avatar.

On behalf of the organizing team, thank you for joining us!