

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 11, 2016

2015 American Academy of Religions Conference Reflection

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2015 American Academy of Religions Conference Reflection

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A “CJBS News Blog” contributor asked me to draft a brief reflection about attending the 2015 American Academy of Religion Conference in Atlanta, Georgia from November 21-24. As a first-time attendee, I found that the formal contours of the experience stood out: the format, the hierarchies, and the roles. It was a potent glimpse of the signs that show where I fit into a much larger pool of professionals. The format, norms, and rituals of a setting like an academic conference will likely recede into the background as the years go on, but for a newcomer they are particularly salient.

As a first-year MA student focusing on Buddhist studies at the University of Toronto, I was also viewing the experience through the lens of the authors we have been reading, and considering how the conference format relates to the methodological concerns that are becoming slowly more familiar to me. Self-consciousness of this point of view, and an understanding roommate, made such observations humorous for the most part. The shape of the Marriott conference base, for example, is sharply reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon that Foucault so famously featured in *Discipline and Punish*.

When taking just a few days off from the first semester of graduate school, it was difficult to find myself out of place without hearing echoes of Bourdieu (my habitus and this field are not an easy match, I am wearing my pajamas compared to everyone else at this event, and so on), or to watch so many seasoned scholars performing repetitive conference activities without viewing these patterns through the lens of ritual theory. I found myself wondering how these scholars might have felt at conferences early in their careers. They are people I look up to so much, thinkers who I imagine to be well spoken and knowledgeable.

This hotel, joined by tunnels to other nearby hotels, housed a bustling sea of scholars, running from sessions to lunch and back again each day. Other conferences I have attended in Medieval studies were based at off-season universities, with some outdoor jogging component: I would run from the dorm to campus buildings in the sunshine, huffing and puffing my way into sessions with moments to spare. The Atlanta conference was more contained, with the sessions that I attended taking place in windowless rooms, some underground, in a series of hotels connected by tunnels. I was lost several times, and gave out incorrect directions at least once, convinced that I had finally mastered the tunnel system.

The AAR program this year included several rich sessions with Buddhist studies components. “Female Lives and Narratives in Tibet: New Materials and New Perspectives” (Tibetan and Himalayan Religions Group) featured a number of exciting papers taking different approaches to women in Tibetan life literature (Sarah Jacoby presiding, with Janet Gyatso responding). “Data-Driven Approaches in Contemporary Buddhist Studies: Perspectives on Textual and Praxis Lineages” (Buddhism Section) with Jiang Wu responding, included three scholars from Canadian universities among its panelists, with James Apple (University of Calgary), Christopher Handy (McMaster University), and Christopher

Jensen (McMaster University) contributing to a conversation that challenged many of my own presuppositions about how we deal with categories and historical trends in relation to new tools for data-driven research in the humanities. In both of these panels, the generous respondents played an important role, both synthesizing the contributions and asking big questions about implications for the field.

One of the last sessions I attended before my departure was “Women and Buddhist Philosophy” (Buddhism Section and Buddhist Critical–Constructive Reflection Group, Buddhist Philosophy Group, Feminist Theory and Religious Reflection Group). Scholars in this session, which was particularly well attended, brought a number of different approaches to questions of gender and Buddhist philosophy, and to the location of Buddhist philosophy in academic departments. The spirited question and answer session following the presentations signaled to me that there would be an ongoing conversation about the issues brought up by the speakers. It was a session that, productively, seemed to prompt up more questions than answers.

Addressing such questions of placement and context for the study of Buddhist philosophy in academic departments, Constance Kassor from Smith University began her talk with an observation that called out the peculiarities of our own environment:

Academic communities function based on certain established cultural norms and practices. In Tibet, for example, the study of Buddhist philosophy involves regular meetings of people in robes who debate in courtyards; in the United States, it involves regular meetings of people in suits who read papers in hotels.¹

¹ Constance Kassor, “Rhetoric and Marginalization Through a Tibetan Buddhist Perspective” (public talk, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA, November 2015).

Kassor's work focuses on Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, with an emphasis on the fifteenth-century scholar Gorampa Sonam Senge. I had attended the talk in part because of my familiarity with her work in Tibetan language teaching, where she is a compassionate presenter of grammatical nuances, but was then surprised and happy to find someone echoing recognition of the particular environment that I was just now learning to navigate. She said:

As seemingly different as these cases are, each operates based on certain sets of assumptions that are shared among their wider community of scholars. The problem with this is that certain kinds of assumptions and cultural norms can result in the marginalization of certain kinds of people and viewpoints.²

Dr. Kassor went on to raise the issue of Buddhist philosophy being marginalized by philosophy departments. At the same time, I started asking myself what kinds of contributions we might be missing in the conference setting, and what types of formats might expand on these more established conventional practices.

As the weekend came to a close, and the AAR sent out a survey including questions about inclusion of other types of sessions to make the experience more interactive, I started to ask myself what processes might bring out the collaborative, spirited approaches that I find in smaller arrangements with colleagues in the field. The AAR seems to be interested in these issues of interactivity and format. At the same time, I look forward to the "regular meetings of people in suits who read papers in hotels," with all the new interactions and reflections that will bring.

A warm thank you to Dr. Constance Kassor for sharing quotations from her paper with me for this post.

² Ibid.

Bibliography

Kassor, Constance. "Rhetoric and Marginalization Through a Tibetan Buddhist Perspective." Public Talk at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA, November 2015.