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## 2017 Canadian Society for the Study of Religion Conference Reflection

Rutika Gandhi

University of Lethbridge

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# 2017 Canadian Society for the Study of Religion Conference Reflection

Rutika Gandhi  
UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE

Recently, I have been in contact with the manager of the Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies. Since I was about to attend the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences 2017 meeting for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion at Ryerson University in Toronto, from May 27th – 30th, I was asked to share my experience. I must admit that the first day was a bit of a blur. I stayed at Chestnut Residence, associated with Ryerson University, which was about 15 minutes away from the various buildings where the talks were being held.

As I was desperately running around trying to find my way through the campus, I was astounded by the crowds of professionals, recognizable by the name tags that were handed out during registration. However, as I was navigating through the busy streets of Toronto downtown, I felt myself at ease. There were signs welcoming scholars, and there were volunteers at almost every corner in case anybody needed to ask questions. I was impressed with the resources that were made available to assist those who were strangers to the big city, such as myself.

As a first year graduate student pursuing a Master's degree, I have come to really understand and appreciate the importance of conferences. Although I felt like an outsider, as I was quite nervous and felt overwhelmingly underdressed, I was also strangely reassured that I belonged among these scholars. My experience was undeniably positive because of the people I got to meet and converse with made me realize that this is an incredible learning experience and that they have all been through something like this at some point in their lives. In addition to gaining experience and getting to meet like-minded scholars, I found myself in the midst of intellectual conversations and lectures. Since I am studying Buddhism myself, I will be focusing on the presentations that mostly dealt with Buddhism.

I was really excited to be around scholars whose works I have read, or have cited in my own essays in the past. The CSSR 2017 program included some fascinating presentations relevant to Buddhist studies. The first panel, titled "Buddhist Studies and Sources," featured papers by James Apple (University of Calgary), Jeff Wilson (Renison University College, University of Waterloo), and Scott Craig (University of Ottawa).

The next panel, titled "Buddhism in Place(s)," mostly included research where ethnographic work is conducted to explore different Buddhist sites. Christopher Emory-Moore (University of Waterloo), for instance, is interested in the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) founded by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. This "new Buddhist movement," as stated by Emory-Moore, "has recently appeared fundamentalistic in loud protests defending a controversial Gelukpa protector deity outside the Dalai Lama's public teachings."<sup>1</sup> However, Emory-Moore suggests that "over a

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Emory-Moore, "Casting Buddha's Net: The Merits and Limits of Modernism at a Canadian Dharma Centre" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Ryerson University, Toronto, May 27 – 30, 2017).

period of twenty-five years the NKT has grown into one of the largest Tibetan-inspired Buddhist organizations in the world with a presence in 40 countries, largely by means of a strong missionary imperative and effective missionizing strategies that are increasingly globalist and modernist.”<sup>2</sup> Emory-Moore has conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a Canadian NKT centre for this particular paper, which “examines a nuanced interplay between the movement’s conservative theological emphasis on the Buddhist path of renunciation and the community’s deployment of meditation’s this-worldly benefits in local missionizing strategies.”<sup>3</sup> I reached out to Christopher Emory-Moore via e-mail, and he was more than happy to share some information about his current project. He wanted to expand on the abstract that appeared in the CSSR 2017 program and sent me the following:

Examining a drop-in class titled “Stop Worrying, Start Living,” which consisted chiefly of doctrinal instruction on the importance of working for the happiness of future lives and liberation from cyclic rebirth, I identify a strategic linking of promotional modernism and pedagogical traditionalism whereby the local needs of Canadian spiritual seekers (e.g. stress relief) were more explicitly addressed and validated in NKT class publicity than in pedagogy.<sup>4</sup>

I am looking forward to learning more about his research since he is interested in modern Buddhism, and I feel like I learned a lot about contemporary forms of Tibetan Buddhist practice. I must admit that I knew very little about the New Kadampa Tradition, and most of my

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<sup>2</sup> Emory-Moore, “Casting Buddha’s Net.”

<sup>3</sup> Emory-Moore, “Casting Buddha’s Net.”

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Emory-Moore, e-mail message to author, June 18, 2017.

knowledge was limited to the Shugden dispute, which does not represent either sides of the debate objectively.

Following Emory-Moore, Marybeth White (Wilfrid Laurier University) presented her paper called “Re-thinking Space: The Story of Sao Si, Gender Dynamics, and Lao Buddhist Ordination Halls.” As stated in her abstract, Dr. White’s research pertains to “the mythical story of Sao Si,” and research she conducted at Wat Si Muang in Vientiane Laos and Wat Lao Veluwanaram in Ontario. Her presentation was both informative and engaging as she presented different pictures, and compared her observations between the two sites to illustrate how “notions of power, gender, and legitimacy... are not embedded within particular sites but within relationships of broader dialogues and transnational spaces.”<sup>5</sup> What I found most intriguing was the interplay between authority and gender, which was surprisingly not consistent among the two sites.

I had the opportunity to present my paper at this panel, titled “Retailing Religion: Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites as Economic Capital,” which covers an aspect of my thesis. I am interested in the process of modernization and globalization and its effects on transnational Buddhist pilgrimage sites, such as Bodhgaya. For this particular paper, I focused on developmental projects implemented by the Bihar state government and the Indian government at Bodhgaya as a means of gaining revenue through spiritual tourism. My main interests include modern Buddhism, community or sangha, as well as the significance of “religious” space; accordingly, I also presented my paper, “Spiritualizing the Internet: Online Buddhist Communities and the Sangha,” at the Research in Religious Studies 2017 conference at the University of Lethbridge.

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<sup>5</sup> Marybeth White, “Re-Thinking Space: The Story of Sao Si, Gender Dynamics, and Lao Buddhist Ordination Halls” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Ryerson University, Toronto, May 27 – 30, 2017).

After we all had the chance to discuss our research and answer questions, I had the chance to briefly speak with both Marybeth White and Christopher Emory-Moore, and I just had to let them how much I enjoyed learning about their research. They are passionate about the subject of their study, and their research is fascinating. They both handled the questions gracefully, and I can definitely claim that I learned a lot from this experience.

In addition to the two panels, I also attended a session later in the day titled “Roundtable: Discussion of Book under Development – ‘Global Buddha: Flows and Forms of Buddhist Modernity.’” Again, I had the chance to meet many of the scholars whose works I have cited quite often in my papers. The authors/panelists included Victor G. Hori (McGill University), Alexander Soucy (Saint Mary’s University), and my supervisor John Harding (University of Lethbridge). Jeff Wilson (Renison University College, University of Waterloo), who was one of the presenters at panel “Buddhist Studies and Sources,” attended this session as a respondent. As the authors began discussing their ideas for the book, they mentioned two important sections: development of Buddhist studies, and the inclusion of case studies. They also listed six themes that the book will be dealing with, including “Asian agency,” “discourses of authenticity,” and “Buddhism as a world religion,” just to list a few. The best part about this discussion was that it was informal, and the panelists were interested in gaining feedback from those who had attended. Jeff Wilson’s comments were compelling, and the discussion shed some new light on Buddhist scholarship that I had not considered before. As scholars of Buddhism, we may attempt to answer questions regarding Buddhist identity, and what constitutes authentic Buddhism or modern Buddhism. Personally, since I am interested in a site like Bodhgaya, which is influenced by various Buddhists from around the world, these questions are quite important. During this session, a comment that really stood out to me was this: “secularization of scholars of religion doesn’t

work because they do influence the religion.”<sup>6</sup> This made me realize that my research is not outside of the Buddhist world, especially if I conduct ethnographic fieldwork. Moving forward, I wish to engage in reflexivity as I conduct research and to be conscientious of my own place within the larger context of my work.

Thanks to Dr. Harding, after the discussion, I had the chance to get to know Dr. Hori, Dr. Soucy, and Dr. Wilson. They were all kind and supportive, and this experience has been nothing but encouraging. I had the chance to ask Dr. Hori about his trip to Bodhgaya, India (my research deals with this Buddhist pilgrimage site) and he shared some stories with me which were quite hilarious and informative at the same time. I also reached out to Dr. Wilson who shared some important sources with me for my own research.

I now realize how much my own perspective changed once I presented myself and I was able to calm down. I am grateful for the encouragement from my supervisor and his colleagues, as well as to the various scholars I got to meet during the conference. I feel that attending the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion at Ryerson University has been a fruitful experience, and I look forward to attending more conferences in the future.

I would like to thank Christopher Emory-Moore for sharing information about his research with me.

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<sup>6</sup> Victor G. Hori et al., “Roundtable: Discussion of Book under Development – “Global Buddha: Flows and Forms of Buddhist Modernity” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Ryerson University, Toronto, May 27 – 30, 2017).



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