

18th Annual DANAM Conference 2021

Sponsored by

Dharma Academy of North America (DANAM)

19-20 November 2021

San Antonio, Texas

ALL SESSIONS TO BE HELD ONLINE (VIRTUAL)

Held in conjunction with the
2021 American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting

ABSTRACTS

FRIDAY, 19 NOVEMBER 2021

Session times in local San Antonio time (CST)

SESSION 1 9:00am – 10:45am (MV19-109)

Round Table Discussion: Dharma Traditions and Religious Equity in US Higher Education

Convener: Sachi Edwards, Soka University, Tokyo

Presider: Jeffery Long, Elizabethtown College

Panelists:

Sachi Edwards, Soka University, Tokyo

Sachi Edwards is a Lecturer (tenure-track) in the Graduate School of International Peace Studies at Soka University in Tokyo, Japan. Her research focuses on manifestations of Christian supremacy in higher education research, practice, and policy, both in the United States and in global movements to internationalize higher education. She is also the convener of both the Critical Religious Studies in Higher Education Network, and the Dharmic Scholars group out of which the current presentation grew. Edwards will speak about her research and her broad understanding of the marginalization of the dharma traditions, and the students from them, in US higher education. In particular, she can share about her previous work in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Maryland.

Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker, Loyola Marymount University

Nirinjan Khalsa-Baker is a Senior Instructor in Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. Her work examines both historic and modern Sikh devotional music with particular attention paid to the mystical and embodied realms of performative practice as well as the ideological debates and identity politics surrounding its pedagogy and history. Dr. Khalsa's ongoing research investigates how the

diversity of lived devotional practices and musical styles in the Sikh Diaspora question gendered and religious norms. Khalsa-Baker will speak from her perspective and context at Loyola Marymount University, a Jesuit institution. In particular, she can share about her experience and involvement with student organizations such as the Interfaith Council and Sikh Students Association.

Asha Shipman, Yale University

Asha Shipman is the Director of Hindu Life at Yale University. She is one of the first Hindu chaplains with a full-time university appointment in the US. Dr. Shipman also serves as the Chair of the newly formed North American Hindu Chaplains Association, and regularly speaks and writes about Hinduism and chaplaincy. Shipman will speak from her perspective and context at Yale University. In particular, she can talk about her experiences collaborating with campus organizations on programs that highlight Hinduism, serving as the advisor for the Hindu Students Organization, and providing pastoral counseling to students.

Simran Kaur-Colbert, Miami University, Ohio

Simran Kaur-Colbert is a doctoral candidate in the Student Affairs in Higher Education, Educational Leadership program at Miami University. She is also the Special Assistant to the Vice President of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion at Miami University. Her research examines the processes for developing institutional systems and infrastructure to support interfaith and religious diversity programming. Kaur-Colbert will speak from her perspective and context at Miami University. In particular, she can talk about the work she is doing related to institutional diversity and inclusion efforts across the campus, and about her research into the processes for implementing interfaith and religious diversity initiatives.

SESSION 2 11:00am-12:45pm (MV19-118)

Theme: DANAM Annual Book Launch- *Beacons of Dharma: Spiritual Exemplars for the Modern Age.* Christopher Patrick Miller, Michael Reading, and Jeffery D. Long, eds., Lexington Books, 2019.

Convener: Christopher P. Miller, Loyola Marymount University

Presider: Alba Rodriguez Juan, University of California Riverside

Panelists:

Patrick Beldio, Marymount University

Stephanie Corigliano, Humboldt State University

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, University of San Diego

Respondents: Christopher P. Miller, Loyola Marymount University and Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College

SESSION 3 2:00pm-3:45pm (MV19-227)

Panel Discussion/Book Review: Discussion of Alan Brill's *Rabbi on the Ganges: A Jewish Hindu Encounter*, Lexington Publishers, 2019

My book sought understanding into points of contact between the two religions of Hinduism and Judaism. My goal was to create a religious encounter marked by reciprocal understanding and openness. I let differences remain and acknowledge differences. I also sought to show the multiplicity and wide range of both religions. The field of the book is interfaith and interfaith relations, not history of

religions. I will gladly defer to experts including the Hindu specialists on this panel. Much of the book was to correct misapprehensions and mistakes in understanding among Jews about Hinduism. The book is in line with the broader trends in comparative theology. Big questions of truth, or religious pluralism, are specifically not addressed. That would be a completely different book. The book is as much an act of self-understanding of Judaism in juxtaposition to Hinduism, away from the comparisons to Christianity, as it is learning about another religion. *Alan Brill*

Convener/Presider: Yudit Greenberg, Rollins College

Panelists:

Ithamar Theodor, Zefat Academic College

Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Elijah Fellowship International

Raj Balkaran, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Yudit Greenberg, Rollins College

Respondent: Alan Brill, Seton Hall University

SESSION 4 4:00pm-5:45pm (MV19-302)

Theme: Concepts of God/Divinity, Including Divine Grace vs. Self-Effort

Convener: Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawai'i, Manoa

Presider: Rita Sherma, Graduate Theological Union

Panelists:

Loriliai Biernacki, University of Colorado Boulder

God as the Wall of the World: Panentheist Cosmopsychism

India's theological traditions, nurtured by centuries of vibrant inter-religious debate between atheists and theists, dualists and non-dualists, have led to a plethora of richly nuanced articulations of divinity, some of which radically alter the very idea of what "divinity" might mean. This paper focuses on a Tantric conception of divinity, Abhinavagupta's 11th century formulation of a dual-aspect monism, expressed as a cosmopsychism. For Abhinavagupta, the world with all its multiplicity derives out of a cosmopsychism, a unity of awareness that can allow itself to be splintered, fragmented into a diverse, mutually interactive multiplicity of different consciousnesses. Abhinavagupta tells us,

The category called *Śiva* is itself the body of all things. 'On the wall [of the world which is itself *Śiva*] the shining of the picture of all beings' -- This statement indicates the way that all these come to appear. And the purport of the entire corpus of scriptures means to indicate that the category *Śiva* itself is all this.

Abhinavagupta uses this image of the world as a portrait on a wall on a variety of occasions, where this panentheist multiplicity of beings unfolds out of a cosmopsychist unity.

Abhinavagupta's conception of divinity is interesting to us today especially because it affords a conception of divinity that curiously finds resonance with a number of currently popular models proposed in the wake of the incompatibilities of physicalism with quantum physics. Particularly, Abhinavagupta's dual-aspect monism shares some features with Galen Strawson's conception of physicalist panpsychism; in particular Strawson's consideration that the world is really real. Strawson considers himself a physicalist in that what exists for him is precisely physical, concrete "stuff", what he calls a, "stuff-monist" view. Abhinavagupta's model veers towards this, especially in his invocation of the idea of bodies (*vapus*) all the way up, where, as we saw, all that we see here is the body of *Śiva*, the cosmopsychist reality that splits itself to make up the diversity of the world here. The world of stuff is

real for both; for both it entails also the concrete reality of things we do not readily see, energy for Strawson, subtle bodies for Abhinavagupta.

David Lawrence, University of North Dakota

Abhinavagupta and Others on the Convergence of Divine Grace and Nondual Self-Luminosity

Nondual Saiva panentheism may be described particularly as simultaneously nondual and theistic. In approaching liberation, above its theories, symbols and rituals, it advocates no effort (*anupaya*, etc.). Here it also unites nondual self-luminosity (*svaprakasatva*, etc) with sole divine agency in *anugraha*, *saktipata*, etc. Abhinavagupta's expressions of a convergence suggesting identity between gracious, sometimes-called "cat-liberation" and nondual subitism, are found in other South and East Asian religions, though nondualisms and theisms usually reduce one to the other.

Jonathan Edelman, University of Florida

The Being of God Ripples Through the Ages: Bhagavatapurana 1.2.11 and Commentaries

This paper examines the historical development of a "trinitarian" god, a term intentionally borrowed from Christianity, in the *Bhagavatapurana* 1.2.11 with commentaries of Sridhara, Jiva, Visvanatha, Vamsidhara, and related texts. I frame this discussion as concerned with ontology or metaphysics, aesthetics, and practice, each mediated through a reconstruction of Hindu texts (*Upanisads*, *Bhagavadgita*, samkhya and yoga, vedanta, and purana). I examine the utility of terms like "transcendence" and "immanence", "monotheism" and "trinity", "divine grace" and "self-effort", "latent" and "manifest", "plurality" and "unity"—categories that characterize the study of religion and philosophy more broadly. This analysis is aimed at building comparative discussion on issues of difference within nonduality. I argue that difference and nondifference are reconciled within these commentaries on *Bhagavatapurana* 1.2.11 by appealing to a multi-layered ontology, one that posits modes of existences in god's nondual being.

Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

The Theology of Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas

The *Ramcharitmanas* of Goswami Tulsidas is the most widely read sacred text among Hindus in India and in much of the Hindu Diaspora. Consequently, the author's theological approach to Ram has greatly influenced the way Ram bhakti is understood and practiced. This is especially the case with respect to the Ramananda Sampraday, the largest ascetic order in India today and also the largest Hindu devotional school focused on Ram and on the writings of Tulsidas. This paper will investigate the way Ramanandi ascetics use his theology in blending asceticism and devotionism in their beliefs and practices. From the ascetic point of view, they believe our destiny and goal in life is to break free from bondage to the birth/death cycle, and this is accomplished through various forms of renunciation and ascetic practices, which are seen as necessary parts of the path. However, from the devotional point of view, they believe everything that happens is due to the will of Ram, and thus personal effort plays little role in one's life. Our goal is simply to surrender to the inevitability of the Divine will. This apparent conflict of theological beliefs with respect to self-effort and predestiny is, to Tulsidas and to most Ramanandis, not a conflict at all. Personal effort and struggles on the path are seen as merely manifestations of the Divine will and the Divine play.

Nikky Singh, Colby College

Guru Nanak's Concept of the Divine

Ikkoankar (One Being) expresses Guru Nanak's concept of the Divine. His imaginative leap inheres with complex currents that form the very foundations of Sikh philosophy and practice. This paper focuses on the dynamic somersaulting of its physical and metaphysical elements. How do the corporeal senses lead to a sensuous recognition of the transcendent One? How is the timeless reality realized in daily fluctuations? How does plurality configure into total unicity? Taking an aesthetic approach, I argue Guru Nanak veers away from religious conceptualizations and categories to an intimate experience with the One conducted by the five physical senses—common across genders, races, and

ethnicities. Ultimately then, what new possibilities does the Nanakian “concept” open up for our contemporary global existence?

SATURDAY, 20 NOVEMBER, 2021

Session times in local San Antonio time (CST)

SESSION 5 9:00am-10:45am (MV20-105)

Theme: Religious” vs. “Spiritual” and the Concept of SBNR

Worldwide, disaffiliation with institutional religions has increased. However, most people continue to self-define as spiritual beings. What implications can be discerned for Dharma traditions? Might Yoga and meditation be seen as forms of non-tradition-specific spiritual practice?

Convener and Presider: Christopher Chapple, Loyola Marymount University

Panelists:

Hillary Rodrigues, University of Lethbridge

J. Krishnamurti: An Implicit Current in the Contemporary Nondual Spirituality Movement (NSM)

This paper suggests that there is a robust, but mostly unrecognized, influence of the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), one of the most intriguing religious teachers of the 20th century, on the contemporary Nondual Spirituality Movement (NSM). The NSM is a generally misunderstood and maligned global religious phenomenon, typified by the teachings of such figures as Eckhart Tolle, Mooji, Rupert Spira, Adyashanti, and others. Features of the NSM deviate from mainstream religions and it has thus received marginal attention from religious studies scholars. The NSM centers on the attainment of nondual spiritual realization, whose benefits arguably include mental health, social tolerance, and a host of other personal and communal desiderata. Its origins are often traced virtually exclusively to Ramana Maharshi, because he is an oft-invoked patriarch by contemporary NSM teachers. However, Krishnamurti’s influence has mostly gone unrecognized, in part, because he was an outspoken critic of religious organizations and discipleship to religious teachers (including himself). Nevertheless, aspects of Krishnamurti’s message, such as his critique of spiritual progress and traditional spiritual techniques, are widespread within NSM approaches. This talk will offer evidence of these parallels to support its claim of a deep current of Krishnamurti’s thought within the NSM.

Kusumita P. Pedersen, St. Francis College (Emerita)

Reasons to Be “Spiritual but not Religious” in a World of Plurality

Identification as “spiritual but not religious” is often associated in the West not only with the adoption of practices from Dharma traditions but also rejection of certain understandings of “religion.” This paper first offers definitions of both “spirituality” and “religion” in an effort to clarify this picture.

“Spirituality” refers vaguely but significantly to the experiential and an “inner life” often overlapping with prayer and meditation. Drawing on Clifford Geertz and Ninian Smart, I define “religion” as a worldview and value system referring to “The Sacred,” an authority beyond ordinary reality, with a set of practices that attunes the individual and the community to the worldview and values. “A religion” has organizing structures as well as moral norms, prescribed practices and a worldview or “beliefs,” and is thus far more inclusive than “spirituality.” While for much of history spirituality may most often have been contained within “religion” this is changing. Why is this happening? One reason for leaving formal membership in a religion is exclusivism two senses: the claim to exclusive possession of complete truth, and the requirement to be affiliated to only one religion. Rejection of such exclusivism means loss of belief and disaffiliation; combined with a hunger for spiritual experience this leads to focus on contemplative practices, often of Dharma traditions. One may describe oneself as “not religious” due to the pervasive idea of religion as “belief;” the fact that exclusive membership is not a demand of Dharma

traditions also may be a factor. “Spirituality” may thus become eclectic but is still seeking to experience the Sacred. Freedom to choose and to alter practices is also part of religious traditions’ adaptation to new cultural settings – including claiming not to be “a religion.” We may wonder if the growing importance of “spirituality” may lead to change in the meaning of “religion” and/or the decline of “religion” understood as belief and exclusive belonging, in the contexts of plurality and encounter.

Anna Lännström, Department of Philosophy, Stonehill College

Contemporary Western Yoga as Spiritual Practice for the SBNR Generation: Will It Help or Hurt?

Contemporary Western yoga draws on ancient spiritual traditions, and yoga classes often present themselves as spiritual and thus different from regular exercise classes. Many of the Americans who identify as spiritual and not religious seek spiritual nourishment in yoga studios. But is that a good idea? Is yoga as we practice it in commercial yoga studios today a worthwhile spiritual practice, or has it gotten too superficial, too commercial, and too focused on the body? This paper will articulate an understanding of ‘spiritual’ and then discuss to what extent contemporary Western yoga can be part of such a practice. Several dangers will be identified, along with the potential of SBNR. However, for its potential to be realized, we need to do a much better job in nurturing the spiritual side of yoga practice than the American yoga community has done so far. This talk will suggest some ways in which the academic world might be able to help.

Jeffrey S. Lidke, Berry College

Knowledge above Dogma: Being a Tantric Yogi Scholar in the Age of SBNR

In 2017 for the first time more people in the United States identified as “spiritual” than “religious”. This broad-spectrum identification might perhaps be viewed as the result of decades, if not centuries, of historical events that can be traced at least as far back to Luther’s defiant act in 1517 of hammering his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church. In that moment, Luther set in motion the awareness that individuals can go against the tide, can stand up to institutional structures of authority, can say no to dogmatic assertions, can decide for themselves what they believe and practice. If spirituality can be defined as the core practices that lead to true wisdom or connection to the divine, then we might say that Luther established some 500 years ago that one could decide for him or herself what it means to be truly spiritual. But is the history of ‘being spiritual’ limited to the western genealogies? What about the history of spirituality in the East? How did the migration of Indian yogis and gurus to the West from the late 19th century on impact contemporary sensibilities of spirituality? And what does it mean to be a western scholar who is also an initiate of Dharma traditions? Drawing from a seminal essay by Thomas Metzinger from 2014 I intend to reflect on these and other relevant question as I explore the role that Dharma traditions have and continue to play in the shaping of this distinctive era in which traditional religions takes a back seat to a host of individualistic spiritualities. Critically assessing Metzinger’s claim that spirituality is the “opposite of religion” and is “aligned with science” I draw from a host of classical Sanskritic sources on Yoga and Tantra to illumine and nuance the idea that spirituality is a “quality of inner action” and a “mode of grounding” that constitutes a “specific epistemic stance” driven from a “desire for knowledge” (Metzinger 2014:6). Through my analysis I imagine the possibilities for how contemporary Western scholar-yogis might express their own ‘spirituality’ in ways that might expand and redefining how we pursue and understand ‘truth’ in an age that invites a Yogic transcendence of epistemic boundaries.

Veena Howard, California State University Fresno

Questions of Mahatma Gandhi to Srimad Rajchandra: Rethinking the Dialectics of the Spiritual and the Religious

Mohandas K. Gandhi’s famous quip, “I am a Hindu, I am a Muslim, I am a Jew, I am a Christian...,” did not arise from a lack of rootedness in any religion, as some may assume, but was rather deeply embedded in his spiritual life as a Hindu. Nevertheless, Gandhi’s religiosity seems to fit more in the contemporary characterization of the “Spiritual but Not Religious” (SBNR): on the one hand, he rejected religious

institutions and dogmatic laws that may cause violence; and, on the other hand, Gandhi embraced deep truths of religions, religious pluralism, and dialectical relationship with other religions. Gandhi perplexes those who want to place him in separate categories of “spiritual” or “religious.” However, I argue that Gandhi exemplifies the Dharma Traditions’ pluralistic, inclusive, and dialectical approach to religion, which encompasses both the SBNR (religious in terms of exclusive and narrow doctrinal category) and the “Spiritual and Also Religious” (SAAR, literally essence; religious in terms of an inclusive and pluralistic dharmic paradigm). In this paper, I will analyze how a Dharma paradigm—in its root meaning of sustaining harmony and upholding moral laws—allows followers to practice the essence of spirituality (*sar*, literally essence) without adhering to dogmatic rules of religion, which is evidenced by sages, saints, and philosophers of these tradition. Furthermore, by focusing on the exemplary relationship between Gandhi, a self-identified Hindu, and Srimad Rajchandra, a prominent Jain thinker, I will show how a pluralistic and dialectical Dharma approach deepens Gandhi’s spiritual insights that led him to hold fast to the truths of his own Hinduism, instead of abdicating it because of its dogmas. Such example offers a nuanced way to look beyond the popular model of the SBNR for building inclusive and pluralistic partnerships among religious traditions.

SESSION 6 11:00am-12:45pm (MV20-114)

Theme: On Spiritual Citizenship

For many scholars within the dharmic traditions, scholarship is inseparable from social concern, yet the perception of contemplation and the dharmic worldview as fundamentally world-renouncing remains, particularly within more limited contexts like courses that teach world religions, text specific studies, and even in more popular realms like yoga teacher trainings and meditation retreats. This panel will approach the topic of integrating contemplative, religious, and spiritual practice with social activism from five different angles including 1) theoretical considerations on the integration of contemplative practice and social activism; 2) globalization and cultural appropriation; 3) racial justice and healing; 4) ecospirituality and environmental activism; 5) queerness, gender, and sexuality. As part of a sustained focus on spiritual citizenship, this panel will contribute to the development of practical techniques and to the advancement of a foundational, theoretical shift in the practice and study of contemplative traditions.

Conveners: Stephanie Corigliano, Humboldt State University and Jesse Jagtiani, Columbia University

Presider: Ross O’Brien, Assistant Editor *Tarka*, Journal of Embodied Philosophy

Panelists:

Stephanie Corigliano, PhD, Embodied Philosophy/Humboldt State University

On Ecospirituality and Environmental Activism

As our earth warms and changes, one of the more prevailing challenges for activists and young students is environmental grief. Faced with the enormity of climate change, the individual can easily slip into inertia and depression. Contemplative practices offer alternative perspectives for understanding the self as not separate from the environment, as well as practices for grounding in the present moment. This talk will consider the intersection of theory and practice and how this can inform and support the environmental activist.

Oneika Mays, Independent Yoga and Meditation Teacher, Embodied Philosophy

On Race and Racism

Our spiritual practice should be the machete which clears away the things that keep us distant from ourselves and each other. How does spirituality play a role in dismantling systems of oppression? Does being a spiritual citizen require action? What role do contemplative practices play in challenging racist

ideologies and facilitating change? We'll discuss how our practices should spark an internal dialogue. A skillful practice should be the guidepost which leads us home to ourselves and each other.

Jacob Kyle, MA, Embodied Philosophy, Founder

On Queer Dharma

How do contemplative perspectives and experiences of queerness inform each other? Where do they intersect? Exploring the phenomenon of “queer dharma”, we will inquire into and outline the apparent obstacles between queerness and dharma. We will forge a new conversation between the vicissitudes of queer embodiment and spirituality, and how this conversation challenges and enriches our prevailing understandings of contemplative traditions and practice.

Neil Dalal, PhD, University of Alberta

On Globalization and Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is inextricably entangled with modern spirituality. How should we understand this relationship in light of its complex histories, different voices, and polarizing politics? How may we employ spirituality reflexively towards undoing appropriation for those who may be complicit with appropriation and those who suffer as victims of appropriation? This talk explores current perspectives and approaches and invites further conversation on how to effectively engage spirituality as healing justice.

Jesse Jagtiani, EdD, Embodied Philosophy/Columbia University

On Spiritual Activism

How does spiritual practice relate to social activism? This talk will look at the common threads that exist between the topics presented and will also consider how these diverse concerns challenge one another. Being a spiritual activist means taking part in creating change with a spirit of compassion, love, and a balance of interdependence and self-determination that involves the heart and head and cultivates a relationship with the divine.

DANAM 2021 Adjourns