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Book Review: *Re-imagining South Asian Religions:
Essays in Honour of Professors Harold G. Coward and
Ronald W. Neufeldt*

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BOOK REVIEWS

***Re-imagining South Asian Religions: Essays in Honour of Professors Harold G. Coward and Ronald W. Neufeldt.* (Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions, volume 141.) Edited by Pashaura Singh and Michael Hawley. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013, xxv + 302 pp.**

THE volume has its origins in a two-day conference in 2011 at the University of California, Riverside, on the theme “Re-imagining South Asian Religions.” The presentations are now published as a tribute to Harold Coward and Ronald Neufeldt, given that the editors and many of the contributors (mainly from Canada, some from the US) are among those taught or advised by Coward and Neufeldt. The collection fittingly opens with “Reflections on the Field” in which Coward and Neufeldt themselves discuss the study of South Asian religion: Coward by means of a descriptive analysis of his own *guru-śiṣya* relationship with Professor T. R. V. Murti, and Neufeldt by means of a discussion of the evolution of various South Asian program units at the AAR whose processes of both specialization and synthesis are, he argues, necessary for the task of re-imagining the field.

After these introductory reflections, there are a further eleven essays arranged under three thematic headings: New Orientations, Globalization, and Pedagogy; Performance and Memory; and History, Encounter, and Exchange. They discuss aspects of Sikhism (some four essays), Hinduism (three essays), as well as dimensions of Jainism, Tibetan Buddhism, Theosophy, and Indian Christianity – each with the intention of questioning and re-imagining

key terminology and received frames of reference in order to suggest alternative interpretations. Three of the four discussions of Sikhism have far-reaching implications. In “Re-Imagining *Sikhi* (‘Sikhness’) in the Twenty-first Century: Toward a Paradigm Shift in Sikh Studies,” Pashaura Singh argues that the privileging of “the ‘normative’ khalsa trajectory ... from which others diverge is in itself a Sikhism refracted through a western Orientalist lens (as is the term Sikh-ism) and speaks nothing of the Sikh tradition’s rich, plural, and inclusive past.” (27) He illustrates his point by drawing attention to a range of creative and sometimes newer *Sikhi* forms and expressions that demonstrate the diversity of Sikhness. In “Pedagogy in the *Janam-sakhis*: ‘Teaching texts’ Moving Past Old Categories,” Toby Braden Johnson persuasively deploys aspects of literary criticism, especially genre analysis, in order to re-read the *janam-sakhis* (the birth-stories of Guru Nanak) as interpretive and didactic texts and not merely supposed narrative history. “Each new work on the *janam-sakhis*’ stories seeks to present, in their own way, a specific understanding of the Guru’s life.” (90) And in “‘Performance’ and ‘Lived Religion’ Approaches as New Ways of ‘Reimagining’ Sikh Studies,” Charles Townsend reports on his observations of musical performances of the *Guru Granth*

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Sahib. He interprets these by means of “lived religion” (Hall, Orsi, *et al*), “performance” and “speech-act” theories before concluding that “Sikh performances of *Gurbani kirtan* are an observable, outward enactment of internal religio-cultural meaning, and, simultaneously, a means by which religio-cultural meaning is created, (re)interpreted, and ‘internalized’ by ‘insiders’ of the religion.” (188)

Many readers of *JHCS* will also turn to several other contributions that focus on Hinduism and India. In “Rewriting Hindu Traditions from Global Perspectives,” Vasudha Narayanan persuasively argues the necessity of re-imagining Hindu identity and experience by means of “the multiple Hindu traditions in many parts of the world.” (67) After tracing four major migrations from India over some two millennia, Narayan is able to demonstrate how global Hindu perspectives of “sacred space, architecture, gender issues, performing arts, social divisions and arrangements, porous boundary between ethnic groups, and vernacular traditions” (85) often enlarge and challenge any received understanding of Hinduism based on supposedly normative accounts from India alone. And then there are two more specific studies. In her lengthy and detailed “Re-imagining Religious History through Women’s Song Performance at the Kāmākhya Temple Site,” in Assam, Patricia Dold examines the long-established women’s liturgical tradition at the temple in order to challenge the conventional scholarly view (championed by Hugh Urban) that *bhakti* both softened and superseded the tantric tradition there. Paul Younger’s “Re-imagining Hindu Beginnings in Canada” records and reflects on the stories of South Asian immigrants into Canada and the unexpectedly complex and

difficult establishment of temple communities in the 1960s and 1970s. In his “The Indianness of Christianity: The Task of Re-imagination,” Dyron Daughrity seeks an answer to the question “Is Christianity an Indian Religion?” He points out that there is no definitive way to understand ‘national’ religions or to answer the question “Whose religion is Christianity?” He offers a lengthy summary of the complex, layered history that established Christianity in India before concluding that “[m]ost Indian Christians today have no connection to missionaries from the west and little reason to assume their faith is anything but Indian. ... Christianity in India has indigenized, and the seminary faculties, publications, charities, clergy and ethos all reflect that fact.” (254f) However – in this reviewer’s opinion – even this conclusion, along with his appeal to the universal dimension of Christian faith, surely needs to be tempered by asking “re-imagining” questions such as: Is Christianity an Indian religion *in the same way* that Hinduism is? Would Daughrity be prepared to conclude that Islam is an *American* religion, or Hinduism a *British* religion? His generally balanced discussion of anti-Christian violence, religious conversions and Hindu nationalism is somewhat relevant but his appeals to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (and Harold Coward and inter-faith dialogue generally) do seem strained. Finally, mention must be made of Tinu Ruparell’s “The Politics of Perspectivalism: *Anekāntavāda* as a Counter-anthropologising Strategy” in which he opens with the claim that “re-imagining South Asian religions is yet a far off fantasy, since understanding the religions of the continent of India is still conducted, promulgated, and vetted assuming largely western categories of ontology, rationality, relevance, and teleology.”

(49) After a restatement of the usual rejoinders to the Orientalist critique, his own suggestion is “to develop and explicate *anekāntavāda* [the perspectivalist Jaina doctrine of ‘no one view’] to show how it can be used as a hermeneutic of suspicion of typically western standpoints and the epistemological and political commitments with which they are imbricated. This will pave the way for the future work of re-imagining South Asian religions.” (50) This he begins to do with insight and skill.

Overall, this is a wide-ranging and at times bracing examination of what one of the editors

calls “established viewpoints, many of which are the products of the presumed universality of non-Indic analytic categories and methods” in the study of South Asian religions (xxv) – and by means of a range of theoretical and methodological approaches. A full index is provided and the volume is almost completely free of spelling and grammatical errors.

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***Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions.* Edited by Tracy Pintchman and Corinne G. Dempsey. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015, xi + 221 pp.**

MY first experiences as a Lutheran entering the cathedrals of Cologne and Florence and much later temples in Tirupati and Chidambaram were transformative. The experience of material objects as radiant with the numinous (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) came rather late to me, and all the more powerful for that. *Sacred Matters* argues that the Enlightenment and Protestant origins of religious studies and the current near obsession with textualism as the chief academic approach to religion needs help: this slim volume wishes to direct more scholarly attention to physical *stuff of religion as practiced*: visuality, materiality, objects, images, clothing, dance, song, amulets, rags, and flags.

This relatively new focus, *interdisciplinary material cultural studies*, beginning in the 80s, has been applied to both Western and Eastern religions. Examples include Joanne Waghorne and Norman Cutler’s *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone*

(1985), Colleen McDannell’s *Material Christianity* (1998), Richard Davis’ *The Lives of Indian Images* (1999), and William Keenan’s *Materializing Religion* (2006). For those unfamiliar with the long list of contributions to the field, this book of essays could be a useful place to start. For those already schooled, *Sacred Matters* offers a charming selection of materials: the half-human, half-serpent, image of Patañjali in modern yoga studios, Jesus in full lotus, camphor production for Hindu *pūjā*, the glass eyes distinguishing sectarian Jain images, Goddess *śāligrāmā* stones in Michigan and Tamil Nadu, red threads and metal hands among Muslims in Andhra Pradesh, and Buddhist robes and bowls in Theravāda.

What can be learned by considering such a hodgepodge of odd objects? Edited volumes can suffer from lack of cohesion. Pintchman divides the volume into two sections: Chapters 1-5 focus