

Empowerment and the Sacred: An Interdisciplinary Conference

Institute for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, University of Leeds
24th-26th June 2011

Leeds, United Kingdom

Call for Papers

Please submit 300-word abstracts, accompanied by a 100-word biography, for 20-minute papers to the conference organisers, Shivani Rajkomar and Lori Shelbourn, at cfp@empowermentandthesacred.com. The deadline for submissions is 20 February 2011.

The Situation

Discussing international responses to the ‘resurgence of religion’ in our time, [Talal Asad](#) has argued: ‘If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable’. In the ‘straightforward narratives’ of which Asad talks – and in Enlightenment discourses of ‘reason’, ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’ more generally – religion, spirituality and the sacred have customarily been pitted against empowerment and emancipation, in political, cultural and intellectual terms.

At this present historical juncture, then – when the secularist orientation of global futures is increasingly being called into question – a vital need presents itself for cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary debate about the role that the sacred has, does and can play in our understanding of the possibilities of personal and collective agency, power and change.

Conference Aims and Objectives

This conference will bring together scholars, professionals and arts practitioners to investigate the ways in which sacred traditions – in diverse cultural and historical contexts – have shaped discourses, practices and narratives of empowerment, emancipation, social change, resistance and survival.

We ask: How do different sacred discourses and practices frame and/or extend the possibilities of agency – socially, spiritually, imaginatively and corporeally? What variant conceptions of the spheres of activity have they produced – whether temporal, spatial, cultural, cosmic, public and/or private? And what role have religious and spiritual traditions played in political discourses and counter-discourses of class, gender, race, sexuality, cultural identity, humanism and human rights? Where sacred traditions have challenged the limits of secular reason, what alternatives have they suggested for cognition, representation, and even rationality? And how have they ‘empowered’ different artistic practices? Does the ‘commitment to social justice’ necessitate the ‘translation’ of sacred realities into ‘disenchanted histories’, in order to maintain dialogue with modern institutions (Dipesh Chakrabarty)? Or does a ‘conception of creativity in dialogue with the sacred’ enable an interrogation of ‘forbidden territories within ourselves’ as well as ‘the sacrosanct territories of our institutions’ (Wilson Harris)? Do sacred traditions themselves provide the premises for imaginations of cross-cultural and inter-faith community that differ from secular multiculturalism?

Issues and Themes

We welcome papers, especially from postgraduates and early-career researchers, that address issues of the sacred and empowerment. Topics may include, but are by no means limited to:

- Concepts of Agency: God, gods, spirits and the divine; the human/extra-human; identity, and 'imagined communities'; actors, heroes/anti-heroes, role models and leaders; somatic/spiritual powers.
- Performances of Power: artistic, cultural, political, ritual; protest and activism; violence/non-violence.
- Histories and Historiography: colonialism and the postcolonial; globalization; materialism; memory.
- Sacred Texts and Authority: interpretation, translation, intertextuality; secular/religious criticism; freedom of speech, blasphemy, and taboo.
- Place, Space and Environment: sacred sites and land rights; nature, geography, topography, archaeology.
- Difference and Dialogue: orthodoxy/the unorthodox; syncretism, inter-faith and cross-culturalism.
- Justice and Judgement: ethics, morality, legality; sacred-secular/inter-faith arbitration.
- Secular/Sacred Power and the State: private/public spheres; policy-making and pedagogy.
- Re/Conceptualisations: 'sacred', 'secular', 'post-secular', 'religion', 'magic', 'spirituality', 'myth' etc.
- Action, Motivation and Practice: choice, desire, sacrifice and faith; freedom/constraint.
- Epistemologies and Aesthetics: faith, rationalism and science; representation and the unrepresentable.