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Editorial

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The editors welcome you warmly to Volume 1 No. 1 of *RoSA (Religions of South Asia),* the very first issue of this new journal. As editors we thank Janet Joyce, the director of Equinox, and her staff for backing the venture and for their work in bringing it forward. In particular we are grateful to the contributors who entrusted their papers to a new and unknown journal, and for all those scholars who carried out the exacting process of anonymous peer review. Their comments have not only ensured that the articles accepted are of a high standard, but in many cases contributed materially to their quality. We also thank Professor Richard Gombrich for suggesting the title *Religions of South Asia.* We immediately felt that any journal with the acronym *RoSA* would have an auspicious and felicitous future. *rocate sādhubhya iti rosāyā rosātvam* (the name *RoSA* signifies that it is pleasing to good people).

We hope that *RoSA* will find its place among established journals because it will meet a need. Whilst there are excellent journals dedicated to particular South Asian or Indic religious traditions, there are few which are committed to publishing articles in the general area of Indic or South Asian religions. *RoSA* will treat these traditions as mutually influential and as integral not only to the development of the cultural identities of South Asia, but also to those of many diaspora communities globally. Thus the remit of the Journal is wide. It will accept articles on traditions emanating from within South Asia and also those religions originating from outside the sub-continent which have or are developing a significant presence in South Asia: Christian, Islamic, Jewish and Zoroastrian traditions and more recent arrivals such as the Bahá'í tradition.

RoSA is also intended to address the contemporary problematic of the study of Indian religions, and to reflect the renewed vitality of scholarship in the universities and elsewhere, energized by the challenges of Orientalist, post-colonialist, post-modern, feminist and subaltern critiques. There cannot ever have been a time when the scholarly study of Indic religions has been under such scrutiny or more politically, culturally and religiously sensitive. We hope that *RoSA* will:

- Provide a space for scholars to publish their research on religions both within South Asia and the emerging diasporas
- Explore the self-understanding of these traditions and their mutual relations
- Promote enquiry into and critical reflection upon the cultural, philosophical, textual, anthropological, historical and political dimensions of these religions
- Examine the dialogue and encounter of these religious traditions with the world's spiritual traditions.

RoSA has grown out of the annual Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions which was launched in Cambridge in 1975 by Professor Karel Werner and is still going strong.[1] The Spalding Symposium has for more than three decades provided for established scholars and for doctoral students alike an intensely knowledgeable, but encouraging audience whose support is not limited to the formal sessions. By inviting distinguished overseas scholars, from South Asia and elsewhere, it has fostered many lasting and fruitful contacts. However, while *RoSA* will undoubtedly draw on papers from the annual Symposia, we invite scholars across the world to submit articles for publication.

The articles in this number more than fulfil the visions of the editors. Through them we are introduced to many of the key debates and themes that preoccupy contemporary scholars of Indic religions. We are also introduced to a variety of methodological and hermeneutical perspectives, from imaginative and creative approaches which emphasize the literary and psychoanalytical, to those which build upon meticulous historical and ethnographic analysis. There are many commonalities. Perhaps the most obvious theme stresses the challenge and pitfalls of representing religious traditions in general, and South Asian religions in particular. Several contributors draw attention to the hurt felt by religious leaders as they meet with revisionist readings of their own tradition, and to the vulnerability of scholars who sometimes face the anger of faith communities. All the contributors to this volume argue that it is important to listen to the many voices speaking for Indic traditions and to reflect the many dissenting opinions as to what constitutes authenticity. The contributors also play with ideas of continuity on the one hand and eclecticism and syncretism on the other. While Jeffrey Kripal calls

1. Publications of collected papers include *Perspectives on Indian Religion: Papers in Honour of Karel Werner*, ed. by Peter Connolly (Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica No. 30), Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi 1986; *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner, Curzon, 1989; *Symbols in Art and Religion: The Indian and the Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Karel Werner, Curzon, 1990; *Love Divine: Studies in Bhakti and Devotional Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner, Curzon, 1993; *Indian Insights: Buddhism, Brahmanism and Bhakti. Papers from the Annual Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions*, ed. by Peter Connolly & Sue Hamilton, Luzac Oriental, 1997. The latest volume is *Indian Religions: Renaissance and Renewal*, ed. Anna King, Equinox, 2007.

for a reinterpretation of the richness of twentieth-century Western 'Tantric' counterculture, Louise Child returns to the ambivalent origins of Tantrism in her exploration of Buddhist Tantric traditions. Catherine Robinson shows that researchers and teachers have unquestioningly legitimized the orthodox Sikh estimation of the Khalsa, while Eleanor Nesbitt tries to redress the balance in her discussions of ascetic and celibate groups, liminal groups and women. Ron Geaves discovers in the Community of the Many Names of God a revival of 'raw *bhakti*' rather than a syncretic new religion, similarly Fabrizio Ferrari finds in Sitala's association with AIDS continuity with her previous manifestations.

Jeffrey Kripal, in an exciting and seminal article reviews sympathetically the place of the counterculture in Western history. Asking why Tantric traditions and themes became the focus of so much Indological scholarship, he finds his answer in the broad cultural genealogy and history of many Western scholars, and in particular in the deep resonance between 'Tantra' and 'counterculture'. He then turns to the present 'reactionary phase' catalysed by immigrant elites concerned about how their traditions are perceived. How should Euro-American scholars respond to critics whose own cultural histories have been defined, not by counterculture, but by colonialism? Jeffrey Kripal recommends that we should firstly listen, and secondly historize and analyse our present moment with all the hermeneutical tools of sociology, psychology and philosophy that we have at our disposal.

Following on felicitously is Louise Child's richly textured and theorized article on the ways in which wrathful deities have helped to shape gendered identity within Tantric traditions, and particularly Tantric Buddhism. She notes that Tantra is notoriously difficult to define. While some scholars understand Tantra to be an evolving and multi-faceted category rather than a discrete object of study, the term continues to be used in ways which suggest that its most ambivalent elements are central to its early development and basic essence. Louise Child argues that it is in fact the purification of aggression that gives Tantric Buddhism its distinctive character, and its most problematic feature. She examines the evolution of the wrathful deity in Indian tantric Buddhism, arguing that such deities are related to the transformation of the emotion of anger. Most interestingly perhaps, she suggests that tantric consorts may 'consume' the negative emotional energies of each other and purify emotions such as hatred. Drawing from the theoretical perspectives of Durkheim and Mauss, Louise Child argues that it is the motif of 'incorporation' that not only gives wrathful deities their distinctive potency, but also positions them at the centre of the ambivalence that is tantric Buddhism.

Eleanor Nesbitt's work is well known not only to all serious scholars of Sikhism, but to a much wider readership. For four decades she has practised a rigorous craft of sensitive and detailed ethnography, carefully modelling in her research the understanding that diversity, syncretism and the lived reality of religion should be taken into account in religious education teaching. In

2005 she published *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, a text which has received considerable critical acclaim. It highlights the key threads in the history of Sikhs, from the Gurus and the development of the Sikh appearance, to martyrdom and militarization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the diaspora. In this article Eleanor Nesbitt reflects on the challenges she met in striving towards a balanced text which would be read by Sikhs themselves and by a general readership. She explores many of the political and social dilemmas scholars experience in representing Sikhs today.

Catherine Robinson's article explores sensitively but surely the crisis in scholarship on the Sikh tradition and the conflict with the Sikh community, the clash between Sikhs who are concerned about universities subverting Sikhism and scholars determined to uphold academic freedom. Perhaps the most original and constructive part of the article is the focus on the largely uncontested and unproblematized *Khalsa*-centric representation of Sikhism in British education. Catherine Robinson's research discloses the one-dimensional treatment of Sikhism in curriculum materials and school and examination syllabuses. She concludes by considering the prospects for the future, advocating that the nature and role of orthodoxy have to be located in a wider context of a diverse community with permeable boundaries.

Fabrizio Ferrari, like Jeffrey Kripal, feels at home with both indigenous and modern ethno-psychoanalytical theories. His article opens debate about the definition of Sitala as a 'plague goddess' and her identification with smallpox. He argues that many scholarly descriptions and interpretations of Sitala and similar goddesses are founded on a 'smallpox myth'. His ethnographic research shows that Sitala is on the contrary a fertility goddess, the mother goddess/spirit of village India who is worshipped by the whole village. In a revealing comparison Ferrari compares the educational project of AIDS-amma in Karnataka with the worship of local Sitalas who are believed to visit their sons and daughters through AIDS. AIDS-amma cannot heal, as she cannot infect people. On the other hand HIV/AIDS victims are believed to be experiencing the 'kiss of the goddess', an extreme form of love which can eventually devour them. Sitala's ritual system and myth are grounded in the paradox of the 'barren mother'. She asks to be loved once more in order to experience the remaining way of being a woman: motherhood.

The title of Ron Geaves' article on a 'Hindu' religious organization at Skanda Vale in Carmarthenshire, Wales, points to its key research question: Is the Community of the Many Names of God a globalizing *sampradaya* or a New Religious Movement? Ron Geaves addresses a range of important issues and themes in the study of Hinduism in general and Shaivism in particular – issues of Hindu and sectarian religious construction and identity. He argues that despite the apparent multi-faith ethos and mix of religions the Community is not an eclectic or syncretistic new religious tradition, and advocates that this and other such movements should be analysed in the context of twentieth and twenty-first century *sampradaya* formation in a global world.

Implicit in the article is a critique of 'New Religious Movements' as a label applied to Indian religions that have appeared in the West in the second half of the twentieth century.

The six articles thus represent many of the features that we hope to see in future issues of *RoSA:* textual study and fieldwork, broad historical surveys and small-scale investigations, examination of indigenous and outsider categorizations. Indeed, each of them shows more than one of these features. While some set out to address methodological issues and others start with particular events or movements, all are concerned with the relation between methods of study and the material studied. Above all, these articles demonstrate the vigour with which South Asian religions are being studied in Britain and elsewhere, and the clarity and rigour with which these studies are being communicated. Our hope as editors is that *RoSA* will facilitate this activity and make its results available to the world.