Article

Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalayas

February 16, 2024

A multiyear initiative focused on the impact of religion on environmental protection and policies

The Himalayas are sacred to at least five Asian religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and the Indigenous Bon tradition of Tibet. Yet this list barely skims the surface. Given the rich diversity of traditions and practices within the region, scholars at the India China Institute at the New School between saw the Himalayas as an "ideal laboratory." Serving as a focal point for a discussion on the intersection of climate change and local culture, Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH) was a multiyear initiative between 2010 and 2013 aimed at expanding understanding of the relationship between local religious beliefs and practices and sustainable environment policies. The project created opportunities for knowledge sharing and scholarship on the complex role religion plays in environmental protection.

Exploring "Lived Religion"

Over the past two decades, the concept of "lived religion" has become an important component of new research approaches in the sociology of religion and religious studies. Moving away from understanding religion solely via textual sources and from predefined notions of religion, the emphasis on "living" entails delving into ethnographic and

historiographic methods. The lived religion approach calls for a focus on daily practices and habits that people see as spiritual or religious rather than canonical or institutionalized definitions of belief and doctrine.

> ***This epistemological approach can be compared to what in past scholarship was thought to be the exclusive domain of religious specialists–in other words, that of prophets, priests, shamans, and monks. Exploring "lived religion" focuses on ordinary people as religious actors, and how they integrate their many concerns and the lives of their communities into a spiritual and religious practice and set of beliefs.***
>
> —From About ERSEH



Source: Ujwal Hollica via Unsplash

Public Symposia and Conferences

The initiative's projects generated knowledge went beyond the academic enterprise to a general audience and contributed to the ability of individuals, institutions, and communities in the Himalaya region to engage and address contemporary issues of sustainable environmental policymaking. Published reports, public programs, and international conferences in the United States, India, China, and other countries in the region

disseminated findings from the project's fieldwork and applied research.

Climate Change and Everyday Religion in the Himalayas was one of the first international symposiums under this initiative, cohosted by the India China Institute, in partnership with Parsons. Participants included leading scholars and experts from India, Nepal, Pakistan, and China. The event took place on November 18, 2011, and was open to the New School community and the general public.

On March 7 and 8, 2013, the conference Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH) featured the works-in-progress of ongoing research in the Indian, Nepali, and Chinese Himalayas that the India China Institute coordinated in conjunction with the Henry Luce Foundation. The event additionally hosted a double panel of independent researchers presenting original papers on work that engaged ERSEH themes.

The conference took an open approach to the understanding of geographic boundaries and demarcations of the Himalayas. Instead of borders, it centered linkages between everyday religion and environmental sustainability in rapidly developing Himalayan urban centers, which need increased scholarly attention. In engaging these themes, the conference also sought to promote cross-disciplinary approaches, conversations, and collaborations.

Read the Event Program

This event was cosponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation and the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS).

Click here to watch Part One of the ERSEH Conference

Click here to watch Part Two: Concepts and Debates