

Jacob Kinnard, Iliff School of Theology



*Jacob N. Kinnard is associate professor of comparative religious thought at Iliff School of Theology, where he teaches graduate courses on the religions of India and methodological and theoretical issues in the history of religions. He holds a BA from Bowdoin College and an MA and PhD from the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (RoutledgeCurzon 1999; reissue Motilal Barnsidass 2001) and *The Emergence of Buddhism* (Greenwood 2006; reissue Augsburg Fortress 2010), and coeditor of *Constituting Communities: Theravada Traditions in South and Southeast Asia* (SUNY 2003). His current research project is a book entitled *Place Matters: Shared Images, Contested Temples, and Blurred Identities*. Kinnard is editor of the *Religion, Culture, and History Series* for Oxford University Press/AAR, and a member of the Publication Committee of the American Academy of Religion.*

I came to the study of religion by accident — literally. I took a wrong turn on the way to my first class as a freshman at Bowdoin College, thinking I was headed to a course on modern European history, and instead ended up in a seminar on the religions of South Asia. I was eighteen, a kid from southern Indiana at an elite Eastern college, and I was too embarrassed to get up and leave and thus demonstrate what a rube I was. So I stayed in that class, and was hooked; it had never occurred to me to study either religion or India, and what I found most fascinating was the way religion seemed to involve everything — literature, ritual, art, politics, identity, and so on. I have been studying religion in South Asia ever since. This serendipitous turn eventually led me to Sri Lanka, the island from which we in fact get the word *serendipity* — called by the Portuguese “Serendip,” the serene island, allegedly discovered by accident when sailors were drawn there by the smell of spices wafting off the coast — where I spent two years studying modern Buddhist monasticism. I was eventually drawn to Buddhist art at the University of Chicago, and have spent the past twenty years working on a variety of topics involving the intersections and overlapping of art, temples, rituals, and space.

I began editing the Religion, Culture, and History Series at Oxford University Press/American Academy of Religion in 2004. The Series has three interrelated aims:

1. To provide a venue for the publication of close, detailed, and analytical readings of the relationship between cultural phenomenon and lived religious experiences in places of active engagement;
2. To put forth volumes that offer critique and criticism of existing cultural representations and practices of religion and religious experience, whether these be ideological, popular, or institutional; and
3. To provide a format for constructive reworking and rethinking of established practices, institutions, and representations of religion in context.

Dominic Janes's recent book, *Victorian Reformation: The Fight over Idolatry in the Church of England, 1840–1860* (2009), is a good example of the sort of books the Series seeks. It is a very specific study of a narrow topic confined to a particular location at a particular time, but because it grapples with the conceptual and practical issues involved in idolatry and is concerned with ritual, art, and material culture, it speaks to several issues relevant across the broad spectrum of religious studies. Likewise, Andrew Dole's *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order* (2009) is narrowly focused, but he offers a reinterpretation of Schleiermacher's understanding of religion — and scholars' understanding of Schleiermacher's place in the discipline — and in the process places this analysis in the broader context of the construction of the category of religion and the history of religious studies. This volume is certainly grounded in nineteenth century theology, but because of the importance of Schleiermacher in the development of the discourse of religious studies, it is of importance and relevance to anyone in the field.

The Religion, Culture, and History Series is not limited to monographs and welcomes edited volumes that are tightly conceived and that hold together as a volume, not just a collection of loosely related individual chapters. Hence Jane Marie Law and Vanessa Sassoon's recent *Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture* (2008) brings together a collection of chapters that deal with the way the fetus is conceptualized, discussed, and treated across several religious traditions. Sassoon is also the editor of a forthcoming volume on children in Buddhist literature — an exciting project that explores a largely ignored topic in Buddhist studies, and puts this topic in a comparative context.

Although many of the volumes in the Series are grounded in very specific fields, the Series as a whole is inherently comparative. I mean that in two senses: 1) Explicitly comparative in the sense, say, of the *Imagining the Fetus* volume, which compares different understandings and

images of the fetus from a variety of religious traditions and contexts; but 2) I hope these volumes are also implicitly comparative in the sense that they are of interest to scholars outside of the specific fields to which they are located because they offer a view or theoretical critique of religion and religiosity relevant across the broad spectrum of religious studies as a discipline. A basic question I always ask myself as I evaluate a prospectus or a manuscript is “Who besides specialists in the field will want to read this book?” In a most ambitious way, what I envision are volumes that speak across the subdisciplines of religious studies: a book rooted in Biblical studies, say, that will be a “must-read” for someone working in Buddhist studies. In many ways, of course, what I am thus looking for are volumes that transgress the ways we partition the field of religious studies and the ways we train our graduate students — volumes that grapple with what Jonathon Z. Smith has called the “third term” in comparison. A book such as Suzanne Mrozik’s *Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (2007), then, is firmly grounded in Buddhist studies; and because the author is interested in the body in general and the corporeal in ethical discourse, she theoretically engages scholars from outside the confines of Buddhist studies. It is a volume that crosses any number of disciplinary lines.

The Series is, intentionally, very broad in scope, seeking to provide a venue for scholars committed to the interdisciplinary, nonreducible nature of religious phenomena. The Religion, Culture, and History Series publishes scholarly work that addresses the complex interrelationship between religious studies and cultural studies. By emphasizing the religious dimensions of culture and the cultural dimensions of religion, the Series promotes a widening and deepening of the study of “popular” culture and cultural theory, and attempts to decenter our academic discourse about religion by focusing on its particular embeddedness in a wide range of cultural phenomenon. The Series is thus open to a range of methodological approaches:

- Historical
- Comparative
- Theological
- Philosophical

In many ways what has kept me interested in the Religion, Culture, and History Series is precisely what drew me to the study of religion in the first place: the complex and messy hybridity of what we call religion, the intermingling of doctrines and ritual practices, material objects, political machinations, competing ideologies, and personal motivations and emotions.