Challenging Realities

2027 Implicit Religion US Conference

27th–28th May 2027 - Online US CST
Keynote: Dr. Dheepa Sundaram, University of Denver

Call for Papers Deadline: 26th March 2027
Decisions Communicated: 2nd April 2027

Call For Papers

> "[T]ruth" involves a politics of containment whereby "others" are contained by the judgment that they have failed the truth at the very moment that they challenge how some "truths" are given or become givens. Such judgments … also work to construct others as fearsome and threatening, such that the defence of truth becomes "a matter of life and death." (Ahmed 2003, 377)

Sara Ahmed wrote these words twenty-three years ago, but they continue to speak directly to the challenging realities we find ourselves in today as scholars of religion and as people living in the current moment. As members of society and scholars of religion we are witnessing, documenting, analyzing, and responding to challenging realities of various crises of democracy, the resurgence of populist nationalism, ongoing wars and genocides, and leaders of various kinds who twist, draw upon, and create 'truth' to ensure division through persistent judgement. For some marginalized groups and individuals that judgement renders them at risk of a decision or action that is literally life or death. For example, the removal of women's reproductive rights; the exclusion of trans people from public life and spaces; hostile environments for migrants and asylum seekers; and continued anti-Black violence. How do the communities we belong to and / or study and learn from respond to such challenging realities? What can their responses help us to better understand about people, about society, and about religion?

Challenging realities also exist and affect us as scholars and students of religion in relation to data, social media and AI. Multiple governments, corporations and institutions are selling surveillance as safety when it is in fact driven by data value. What has and will happen, more broadly, to the data gathered and held on religious individuals,

communities, and institutions? What concerns should we raise, if any? How should we factor this into our research design and analysis?

> Research shows that ad-driven antisemitic propaganda as well as other supremacist and hate ideologies (anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, misogyny, etc.) proliferate on social media platforms (Hübscher & Von Mering 2022) and in search engines (Noble 2018). One can imagine Facebook groups and pages as individual "storefronts" of information, to which the algorithm drives traffic based on user profiles and user engagement. User homophily helps create loose networks of these groups and pages that Facebook can then leverage for advertisement revenue. (Sundaram, 2023, 119)

Dheepa Sundaram details how supremacies and hate ideologies are networked and marketed in social media spaces, and, inevitably, fed into AI. What challenging realities is that creating / exposing / or having on higher education? To what extent is it leading or shaping the assault on the arts, humanities and social sciences? What impact might it have on students and scholars of religion? On religious communities and individuals? On communities that coalesce around a thing deemed special? How should we account for these challenging realities in our research design and analysis?

Implicit Religion was initially developed in the late 1960s as an approach, or set of analytical tools, to challenge the then dominant narrative of secularization (Bailey 1997). Implicit Religion is a concept that explores the sacred aspects of people's passions, commitments, and identities that are often located in the narratives they construct about themselves and others. By focusing on the complexities of religiousness in secular societies, religious communities, or things deemed special (Taves 2009) this conference will explore the role, impact, and potential purposes of challenging realities.

We invite abstract proposals on, but not limited to:

- Challenging realities in relation to environmental justice; intersectional and / or Indigenous environmentalism; climate denial; ecology and religious nationalism; faith based eco-activism; AI ecological impact.
- Challenging realities regarding universal rights frameworks, including but not limited to reproductive rights, gender including transgender, sexuality, migration, and war crimes, and the approaches of religious and nonreligious communities, activist groups, or movements.
- Challenging realities and their role(s) in the social, cultural and religious construction of disability / race / sexuality / gender / transgender or other protected characteristics.

- Challenging realities regarding religious nationalism / hate ideologies and their impact on communities / policies / practices.
- Challenging realities regarding the relationship(s) between politics and religion; politics and communities that coalesce around something deemed sacred / special.
- The role / use / misuse of social media and related challenging realities regarding shaping spiritual or sacred identity; digital / AI influences on challenging realities relating to spiritual formation, sacred identity, religious communities, groups, cultures and subcultures.
- Challenging realities for, by and within syncretic, religious communities, groups, subcultures, institutions or institutions defined regionally, or globally.
- Feminist / Womanist and / or Queer perspectives on challenging realities within / for / about / through religious communities, groups, subcultures, institutions or those shaped by an experience deemed religious.
- Challenging realities within the academic study and teaching of religion.
- Methodology and / or analytical approaches to the study of challenging realities within and / or by societies and communities where organized religion has declined or changed significantly.

Please note successful proposals will incorporate an Implicit Religion perspective in the design of the underlying study, or within the paper, to address in part or in concert: Commitment, Integrating Foci, & Intensive Concerns with Extensive Effects.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Sara. 2003. The politics of fear in the making of worlds. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(3), 37–398.

Bailey, Edward I. 1997. *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Leuven: Peeters.

Hübscher Monika, and Von Mering, Sabine, eds. 2022. *Antisemitism on Social Media*. Routledge.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York University Press.

Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton University Press.

Proposal Submission

We invite proposal submissions for either a paper or the scratch session (explained below) on the themes elaborated above, by **26th March 2027, with the conference taking place online, 27th–28th May 2027.**

The proposal form is available. Please select either "US - Paper" or " US - Scratch Session" on the form and then you will be asked to provide the following:

- **For a paper proposal**: a 300 - word abstract with an additional abridged, short-form bibliography with references to secondary literature and sources (references do not count toward the 300 - word limit);
- **For a scratch session**: a 250 - word abstract with an additional abridged, short-form bibliography with references to secondary literature and sources (references do not count toward the 250 - word limit);
- **Other information as specified**, including what we need to know in order to accommodate your participation if your proposal is accepted.

Please note while you can edit and format your entries before you select the submit button, the form **does not** allow the submission to be saved and edited later. We suggest looking at the form for context, then composing the abstract and the notes regarding accommodating your participation in a word processing document before cutting and pasting these elements of the proposal into the form.

SCRATCH SESSIONS

The Scratch Session is a dedicated panel for advanced undergraduates, MA, and early-stage PhD students to present. These are shorter papers and rather than the usual practice of asking questions of the presenters, the audience will make suggestions for further reading, pathways for improvement, scholars to explore, etc. Please follow the instructions above to submit for the Scratch Session.

About Implicit Religion US

All are welcome and encouraged to apply, regardless of academic stage or affiliation. Priority will be given to students and scholars who are marginalized through any combination of race, gender, sexuality, disability, migration status, visa status, socio-economic status or based in the global south.

There is no expectation that your presentation will be based on a finished or complete piece of work. We strongly encourage and support you presenting on a work in progress, especially if you have reached a stage in which further ideas or different voices on it would help you.

There is no registration fee. Please note we are a small organization and as such are not in a position to provide stipends for participation. We can provide you with an official letter of invite, and afterward, a letter of participation if required by your university or funding body.

Queries?

Please contact **Francis Stewart**.
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