

Annual Report: Program for Scripture and the Arts, AY 2012-2013

Overview

The program in Scripture and the Arts has successfully closed out its 2012-2013 schedule. Below is a summary of activity, which consisted of two outstanding lecture/seminars by Profs. Nicholas Watson of Harvard University and David Shulman of The Hebrew University. This year the program was able to reach out to colleagues at Boston College, Harvard, MIT, and Tufts, in addition to organizations at BU such as the BU Center for the Humanities and the Core Curriculum.

The unifying theme of this year's program has been to rethink the relationship between scripture and the literary arts. More specifically, this year's program focused on unsettling our familiar notions of "scripture" by investigating how scripture was imagined in 14th-16th century Europe and 15-17th century South Asia in specifically vernacular language materials (English, in comparison with Latin, and Tamil, in comparison with Sanskrit). The juxtaposition of these two different cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts brought into sharp focus both the parochial nature of our modern notions of "scripture" and the enduring significance of this concept for understanding aspects of the world today.

The program events this year were well attended by colleagues and students from BU and the Boston area, and lead to lively conversations, many of which were continued in other venues. The committee hopes to continue this trend next year, as the development is underway for a slate of events for 2013-2014, which is designed to complement the Religion Department curriculum and invite attendance from all levels of the university. Emily Hudson will be stepping down as Chair with the closing of this academic year, but will remain active on the program committee. Thomas Michael will take over as Chair for Fall 2013, and Deena Klepper will take over in Spring 2014.

Programming: Fall 2012

On **Tuesday, November 13, 2012** the Scripture and the Arts Program welcomed Harvard University English professor and medievalist **Nicholas Watson** for a lecture and Q & A session entitled **“Pleasure, Story, Word: Verse Bibles Before the English Reformation.”** The Program reached out to colleagues at Harvard and Boston College, as well as the BU Center for the Humanities and the Core Curriculum. About 35 attendees filled the beautiful Trustees Lounge at 1 Silber Way, and Professor Watson began to recount, using the visual aid of a projected presentation, the situation of both “scripture” and “art” in the 14th to 16th centuries in Europe. After recalling the most well-established narrative about the relationship between these two (scripture and art) in the middle ages, he then went on to explain how he seeks to “unsettle the account of western historiography” with a more “radical” understanding that hinges on “thickening our understanding of what the vernacular is and does.” Attendees to the presentation included faculty, staff, students, and noted scholars from Harvard University and Boston College. The Q & A session fostered a rich discussion revolving around the limits and boundaries of what can properly be called a Bible and/or scripture, and also whether one can more concisely historically track shifts over the medieval period in the understanding and function of vernacular verse. A well-attended reception followed the event, and later a pre-invited group of faculty proceeded to Eastern Standard for a dinner to continue the conversation.



Professor Nicholas Watson speaks to the audience in the Trustees Lounge

Programming: Fall 2013

On **Tuesday, March 5, 2013** the Scripture and the Arts Program welcomed Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Renee Lang Professor of Humanistic Studies **David Shulman** for a lecture and Q & A session entitled **"Does God Speak Tamil or Sanskrit?"** The Program reached out to colleagues at Harvard, Boston College, MIT and Tufts, and also the BU Center for the Humanities and Core Curriculum. Over 50 attendees filled the first floor of the Castle, and Professor Shulman began his talk with the provocative question "What language does God speak?" After recalling for a moment the history of the "mythology of divine speech" he went on to explain the context of Tamil hyper-nationalism that obscures the complex and intertwined nature of Sanskrit and Tamil and claims the "purity" of Tamil as the divine language. To illustrate the true complexity of the relationship between these languages, Professor Shulman led a close reading of a 17th century text by the poet Kumarakurupara which recounts the infancy of the goddess, Minaksi. He explained how the poem illustrates the "mixing" and

complementarity of Sanskrit and Tamil, while also representing the goddess herself as the Tamil language (which can also be seen as a kind of Sanskrit) made visible.

Attendees to the presentation included faculty, staff, students, and noted scholars from Harvard University and Boston College. The Q & A session fostered a lively discussion revolving around infancy poetry and the role of eroticism, how language production occurs, and the role of both current and past sectarian divisions in the understanding of divine languages. A reception followed the event, and later a pre-invited group of faculty proceeded to Eastern Standard for a dinner to continue the conversation.



Professor David Shulman reads Tamil poetry with the audience at the Castle