



Colonial Secularism, Buddhism and the Continuing Violence of Burmese Women's 'Freedom'

THURSDAY,
FEBRUARY 7, 2019
4:00 - 6:00 PM
Natalie Zemon Davis
Conference Room (2098)
Sidney Smith Hall,
University of Toronto,
100 St. George Street



The idea that Burmese women enjoy greater freedom than either their Asian or European counterparts has been a persistent theme in both British colonial and Burmese nationalist discourse of the last two centuries. While Burmese feminists challenge the empirical reality of this myth of women's freedom, in this talk I will explore the history and conceptual underpinnings of this discourse and its devastating consequences. At three moments in Burmese history (late 1920s, 1950s and 2015) the defense of Burmese Buddhist women's freedom against perceived oppression of Islam, has mobilized anti-Muslim sentiment and violence. While many diagnose this Burmese Buddhist nationalism as illiberal excessive religion, I will argue instead that the discourse of Burmese women's freedom and the ways it has been used to construct difference between Buddhists and Muslims finds its origins in colonial secularism and its ways of knowing and order in the world. Working from the frameworks laid out by Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, this talk explores how colonial secularism enmeshed constructions of religion and gender in order to shed light on the current crisis in Burma.

Alicia Turner is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Humanities at York University in Toronto. Her first book *Saving Buddhism: Moral Community and the Impermanence of Colonial Religion* explores concepts of *sāsana*, identity and religion through a study of Buddhist lay associations. She is currently working on a book, entitled *Buddhism's Plural Pasts: Religious Difference and Indifference in Colonial Burma*, that offers a genealogy of religious division.

SPONSOR

Centre for Southeast Asian Studies