“Public Theology, Private Devotion: the Making of the Smārta-Śaiva Tradition in South India”

Thursday, October 9, 2014
206 Ingraham Hall
Noon - 1pm

By the seventeenth century in the Tamil country, the Hindu religious landscape had experienced a radical sectarianization: the lines between communities and institutions, whether Sanskritic or vernacular, Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, were far less permeable than in previous centuries. The Smārta Śaiva tradition, otherwise known as Tamil Brahminism, is one example of an emergent religious community that constituted itself as a distinct tradition during this period of rapid sectarianization. Smārta Śaiva theologians, largely employed as court intellectuals for regional Nāyaka rulers, cultivated a devotional alliance with the newly flourishing Śaṅkarācārya lineage centered in Kanchipuram. To define the shape of their new sectarian community, these theologians crafted a doctrinal foundation for orthodox lay Śaivism, but within the confines of their lineage, adopted the esoteric practice of their Śaṅkarācārya preceptors, taking initiation in the Śrīvidyā Śākta tantric tradition. Taking the Smārta Śaiva community as a case study, I aim to demonstrate that during the early modern period, there emerged a gulf between private sentiment and public speech that marks a crucial shift in Hindu religiosity.

Elaine Fisher is a 2014-2016 A. W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Institute for Research in the Humanities and the Religious Studies Program at UW-Madison. She received her PhD in 2013 from Columbia University in Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies. Her current book project examines the role of religion in Indian early modernity, with the aim of questioning the relationship between secularization and modernity around the globe. In this forthcoming work, she aims to rethink the nature of publicity and the “public sphere” in early modern India in relation to the emergence of new sectarian communities in south India.

This event is free and open to the public! Samosas will be served!