



PLENARY SESSIONS

AAR Plenary Ballroom — Convention Center-20A (Upper Level East)

Redefining the Public Sphere: The Case of 21st-Century Islam (A23-140)

Saturday, 11:45 AM–12:45 PM

Laurie Louise Patton, Middlebury College, Presiding

This session will explore the ways in which new participants in the public sphere actually redefine it. Ever since 9-11, those working on the study of Islam have borne an extra burden and responsibility to explain Islam and connect Islam with other religious and secular traditions within the United States. How does this activity work best? How has simply being Muslim and speaking up served to re-define the public space in the United States? What are the particular challenges for the mid-twenty first century non-traditional scholar of Islam in influencing public discourse about Islam? Three scholars and activists, who work in creative spaces in between the academy and the multiple publics surrounding and intersecting with it, will share their thoughts in conversation with Laurie L. Patton, AAR President.



Linda Komaroff



Eboo Patel



Kameelah Rashad

Panelists:

Linda Komaroff, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Eboo Patel, Interfaith Youth Core

Kameelah Rashad, Muslim Wellness Foundation

Presidential Address – “And Are We Not of Interest to Each Other?”: A Blueprint for the Public Study of Religion (A23-502)

Saturday, 7:30 PM–8:30 PM

José I. Cabezón, University of California, Santa Barbara, Presiding



Laurie Louise Patton

In addition to its traditional goal of fostering excellence in the academic study of religion, the AAR’s recently revised mission statement includes a new goal of enhancing the public study of religion. But what is the public study of religion? How might we collectively (and inevitably imperfectly) define it? This AAR address will offer a blueprint. I suggest that such a public study of religion involves a renewed curiosity about, and disciplined and ethical reflection on, four things: 1) the nature of our scholarly contexts; 2) the nature of our scholarly publics; 3) the nature of power and privilege in the study of religion; 4) the nature of labor in the study of religion. I will use theory in the study of religion, philosophy of the public sphere, and poetry to draw the blueprint. As a way of gesturing to another kind of collective that moves beyond the “magisterial voice of the single leader,” our time together will involve AAR voices other than my own. I end with an exhortation to a newly energetic and different kind of curiosity as fundamental to our work as public scholars. In her poem, “Ars Poetica #100: I Believe,” Elizabeth Alexander ends with a query: “. . . and are we not of interest to each other?”

Laurie Louise Patton, Middlebury College

Expanding the Public Sphere: Plenary Conversation with Kate Bowler and AAR President Laurie Patton on Becoming a Public Intellectual (A24-140)

Sunday, 11:45 AM–12:45 PM



Kate Bowler

After Kate Bowler’s 2013 book, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, became an unexpected public hit, she was diagnosed with stage IV cancer at the age of 35.

Kate was faced with the ironic situation of “being an expert on “health wealth and happiness while being ill.” Her 2018 memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason*, is a memoir exploring that existential irony, and the ways in the American belief that tragedy is a test of character shaped her own response to illness. Now a speaker in

high demand, Kate will engage with AAR President Laurie Patton on her transformation. Their conversation will focus on what it has meant for Kate to become a public intellectual in the midst of being a scholar, teacher, mother, wife, and cancer survivor. In her own “expansion of the public sphere,” Kate has explored questions of divine will and justice in contexts far outside of academe. What has shifted in her understandings of the role of the scholar in the world? How has her own thinking about public life in America changed since she has started writing for and speaking to larger audiences? Do the questions Kate raises about the American prosperity gospel changed public discourse about illness, divine will, and tragedy?

Panelists:

Laurie Louise Patton, Middlebury College

Kate Bowler, Duke University

Creating a Public Sphere: A Conversation about Religion Online 25 Years Out (A25-146)

Monday, 11:45 AM–12:45 PM

Laurie Louise Patton, Middlebury College, Presiding



Anthea Butler

Is it possible to create comprehensive and comprehensible debate about religion on the Internet of 2019? Or are we doomed to click-bait, trolls, and the constant on-line chatter that makes compelling public scholarship about religion virtually impossible? Join AAR President Laurie L. Patton as she talks to several writers who believe it’s possible, despite the algorithms that work against us. Anthea Butler is Associate Professor at University of Pennsylvania, the author of several books on Pentecostalism in America, and a public

intellectual who uses many forms of social media to “give it to you straight...no chaser.” Andrew Henry is the founder of “Religion for Breakfast,” a YouTube channel with over 80,000 subscribers dedicated to promoting religious literacy and the study of religion online. Andrew is also the YouTube channel manager at *The Atlantic* and a PhD candidate at Boston University.

Panelists:

Anthea Butler, University of Pennsylvania

Andrew Henry, Boston University



Andrew Henry