

American Academy of Religion
Professional Conduct Task Force
Draft Professional Conduct Statement
November 8, 2017

I. Preamble

The membership of the American Academy of Religion includes scholars from many disciplines who study religion in all its variety. As our Statement on Responsible Research acknowledges, we pursue our work in “diverse institutional settings, engaging varied audiences and employing different methods.” Over the last three years the AAR’s Board of Directors has sought to identify some of the values that guide and energize our scholarship and teaching. The Board has highlighted eight values of particular importance: professional responsibility, diversity, inclusion, respect, free inquiry, critical examination, transparency, and academic excellence.

The AAR has crafted policies and issued statements concerning many aspects of academic life, including responsible research practices, academic freedom, fair labor policies, non-discrimination, sexual harassment, and plagiarism, which can be found [here](#). This new Statement on Professional Conduct seeks to coordinate these policies and statements with an eye toward professional conduct. We hope this document provides a more comprehensive statement of how our values shape and govern our scholarly community.

II. Values that Guide Professional Conduct

The values we hold as a community of scholars permeate and guide all aspects of our work. We offer the following articulation of those values:

Professional Responsibility | AAR members have a professional responsibility to abide by the specific standards set out in AAR policies, conform to the requirements of their educational institutions concerning research and professional conduct, and follow all applicable laws concerning educational policy, employment, and behavior in the workplace. In addition, scholars have a professional obligation to treat others honestly, fairly, and with dignity. They also have a particular obligation to maintain integrity in all their professional interactions and diligently avoid any behavior or conduct that could exploit power or status differences (such as those between faculty and students, senior and junior colleagues, or tenure-track/tenured and contingent faculty) for any type of personal or professional advantage.

Diversity | Within a context of free inquiry and critical examination, the AAR welcomes all disciplined reflection on religion. This outlook includes two different components: one has to do with the methodological variety of our inquiries, and the other with the diversity of the persons who undertake these inquiries. At many points in our history we have underscored the importance of diversity in teaching, research, and service. Equally important is the diversity of scholars who represent different cultures, social locations, perspectives, professional standings, and experiences. These enrich and enlarge our understanding of ourselves and our community.

Inclusion | The AAR is committed to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment that values and respects the contributions of all its members. We seek to structure spaces in which differences of beliefs, identities, backgrounds, talents, capabilities, and ways of living are valued and leveraged to enhance our research, teaching, and learning. In these spaces, we challenge practices that have intentionally or unintentionally excluded underrepresented scholars and scholarly perspectives.

Respect | As a scholarly and professional value, respect manifests itself in mutual accountability – of AAR members to one another and to the organization’s stated commitments. Respect as a scholarly and professional value requires that AAR members recognize the inherent worth of each member of the organization. This obligation falls on each of us, regardless of our place in academic hierarchies. We hope that senior scholars, rather than demand respect on the basis of their seniority, earn it through the integrity of their actions and their commitment to these shared values. In turn, the value of respect also requires that those with greater power, status, and/or privilege be mindful of the experiences and vulnerabilities of those with less power, status, and/or privilege. Respect should acknowledge and accommodate the challenges and the collaborative value of lived difference to the academy, to the academic study of religion, and to civil society.

Free Inquiry | Free inquiry undergirds discovery, expansion, and discussion of ideas in our research, scholarship, and teaching. It draws from traditional and innovative models and resources through the work of active listening and candid examination of divergent ideas. Supportive and contested interpretations, whether they result in full or partial agreement, or in disagreement, deepen and enrich our understanding by generating new questions, new arguments, and new lines of investigation. Free inquiry fosters original and valuable insights through vigorous and civil debate in a spirit of critical scrutiny.

Critical Examination | Critical examination is the process of intellectual evaluation in which all scholars, regardless of their approach to the study of religion, are trained. Critical examination entails weighing evidence and arguments fairly, with an open mind to all possibilities—including our own errors and our own failures of apprehension or interpretations. In this work, we

attend to the social history of ideas as well as to the social locations of those who produce them.

Transparency | Transparency respects the complex tension between access to information and the privacy of individuals and institutions in order to protect the larger good. As a key value of our learned society, transparency promotes a culture of openness, accountability, reflexivity, integrity, and honesty. Clarity of information and the effective flow of that information foster confidence in the fairness of the processes of our organization. Transparent organizational practices can also serve to increase diversity and inclusion and invite broader membership involvement.

Academic Excellence | Academic excellence includes all of our values. In our quest for knowledge and its application in the world, we strive for those accomplishments that are most valued by our community of scholars. Such excellence involves a continuous process. We mine our fields of study for fresh insights, we engage in rigorous intellectual exchanges with our colleagues, and then we double back and re-examine our path. This work requires us to balance many things – orthodoxy and innovation, collaboration and individual genius, rigor and inspiration, and leading and following.

III. Conduct that Demonstrates our Values

Identifying values can be a useful but strictly intellectual exercise. Our Board of Directors, however, sought to identify our values in order to commend them to all of our members and to encourage their instantiation in every aspect of our life together. The AAR expects from its members – and its members expect from one another – professional conduct in all AAR activities. This includes all of our sponsored activities, such as annual and regional meetings; Board, working group, steering committee, and staff gatherings; engagement in digital spaces such as social media; and any other AAR event where members engage in scholarship, service, and employment.

If the values we discuss here are worthy of practice in the world of the AAR, they are also worthy of practice outside of the AAR – in our colleges, universities, seminaries, and divinity schools. Indeed, we believe that these values ought to be evident in every aspect of our professional lives. Our hope is that this document will encourage all religious studies professionals, in all their activities, to act in a manner consistent with these values.

Likewise, the AAR itself – as a recognized non-profit organization – must also seek to demonstrate these values in its official practices. In all our work, publically and behind the

scenes, we must routinely practice professional responsibility, diversity, inclusion, respect, free inquiry, critical examination, academic excellence, and transparency.

It is not difficult to list conduct that is inconsistent with our values: discrimination, harassment, the abuse of power for professional advantage, intimidation, threats, or violence. Rather than construct an index of unacceptable behaviors, we offer some positive examples and concrete guidance for professional conduct in scholarly research, teaching, and service.

In scholarship and research, the AAR and its members expect:

That scholars will rely on evidence in developing arguments and exercise fairness in evaluating the arguments of colleagues and students. Scholarly argumentation and exchange often require that we both acknowledge our deep academic differences and engage in various forms of critical self-reflection.

That scholars will demonstrate the value of reasoned discourse by respecting and welcoming divergent points of view, even as they subject those views to critical scrutiny. Reasoned, critical discourse fosters the fruitful exchange of differing perspectives and the production of new knowledge.

That scholars will be honest and candid, while also protecting the privacy of confidential information (including information concerning colleagues or students).

That scholars will acknowledge any intellectual indebtedness, including the work and contributions of colleagues and students (whether or not such contributions have been published), since plagiarism in any form is a breach of the most basic canons of the scholarly enterprise.

That scholars will acknowledge that, over the course of a career, research interests may shift directions. When such shifts take place, whether for a single paper or a long-term project, professional values require that scholars thoroughly familiarize themselves with the existing conversations in new areas of study and, when relevant, with the realities, perspectives, vulnerabilities, and values of the communities they study prior to engaging in their own analyses.

In teaching and advising, the AAR and its members expect:

That instructors will understand the unequal power dynamics between teacher/advisor and student and take care never to abuse that power for personal advantage, scholarship, employment, publishing, or other areas of scholarly activity.

That instructors will treat students with dignity and communicate with them in a respectful manner. This communication should include a clear statement of expectations for students and transparency about the standards by which students will be evaluated.

That instructors will take active measures to acknowledge their own implicit biases and provide thoughtful and honest assessment of the academic performance of each student on its merits.

That instructors will never expect students at any level to perform unremunerated or uncredited teaching, research, or other duties.

That instructors will provide students at every level with adequate, timely counseling and should be prepared to write honest letters of recommendation. Teachers who doubt their ability to evaluate a student fairly should decline requests to furnish such letters.

In service responsibilities to the guild, the AAR and its members expect:

That members will avoid capricious or arbitrary decisions affecting professional status, working conditions, or other professional matters.

That members will, when serving as referees of the work of other scholars in any context, judge that work fully, fairly, and in an informed manner, undertaking only those tasks for which they are qualified by education, training, or experience. Scholars who have conflicts of interest or who for other reasons are unable to review work on its merits without prejudice should decline to serve as referees or reviewers or should provide full disclosure of the relevant conflicts. Scholars with personal relationships that prevent unbiased evaluation should also decline these requests or provide full disclosure of the nature of the relationships.

With our central values in mind and having listed some concrete examples of ways in which our values shape our professional conduct, we now turn to policy and procedures. The AAR Board will spend the early part of 2018 discussing this draft document and will give careful

consideration to how the AAR should respond if and when our members fail to abide by our Statement of Professional Conduct.

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