



Fostering Excellence
In the Study of Religion

Dear Friends,

We are very pleased to present you with the inaugural issue of a quarterly e-newsletter designed expressly for graduate students! This project has been undertaken in the hope of providing a lively and relevant source of information related to student members of the AAR. Please do share your suggestions with us so that together we can make this a rich forum for the exchange of student voices.

The GSC envisions several possibilities for this electronic space, including:

- Notices of upcoming calls for papers to conferences and journals
- Notices of upcoming deadlines for major granting applications
- Notices of upcoming conferences, colloquia, and public events across North America
- Feature articles that address the needs and interests of graduate students (negotiating coursework and TA workload, time management, preparing for the job search, etc.)
- Articles highlighting the work of individual graduate students across North America
- And more!

We hope that you enjoy this new point of access into the life of the Academy. It is through your interest and participation, via the submission of notices and articles, that the newsletter will become a fertile ground for information and exchange. Please join in the conversation!

Your AAR Graduate Student Committee

Dear Colleagues,

Congratulations on this first edition of the Graduate Student newsletter. Its existence and your participation in the American Academy of Religion signal the continuing growth of sound and rigorous critical reflection on the nature and role of religion in the world. I am delighted to see this newsletter become yet another way that we think critically together in lively scholarly exchange. Your thoughts and insights, your questions and analysis make us a stronger body of scholars. I trust that you receive as much as you give to the AAR and it is good to have you in the pipeline as the next generation of scholars, teachers, activists, and world citizens.

With every good wish,

Emilie Townes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emilie Townes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Important Dates

October 31:

2009 Annual Meeting
Registration Opens

November 1-3:

2008 Annual Meeting in
Chicago, IL

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Join us on Facebook!

There is an AAR group on the social networking site, [Facebook](#). You are invited to join the "Student Members and Friends of the American Academy of Religion." This group is for past and current student members of the AAR. You must have a profile on *Facebook* to view or join the group. To join, please search for this group within *Facebook* and select the "request to join" button. Contact Director of Membership Development, [Myesha D. Jenkins](#) if you have questions. You do not need to make contact in order to join, but should make your request via *Facebook*.

Student Programming at the Annual Meeting

The 2008 Annual Meeting in Chicago (November 1-3rd) promises to be an exciting event for graduate students, with a full slate of student-related programming in the works. Here are some of the highlights:

- **Student Townhall Meeting:** "We're Bringing Sexy Back", and we want you to be a part of it! This is an opportunity for you to meet the current Graduate Student Committee, hear about new programs that are focused on the graduate students of the American Academy of Religion, and voice your concerns as a student of the AAR. Sunday, November 2nd, 1:00-2:30 p.m.
- **"Religion Beyond the Boundaries":** a series of lectures by graduate students in Religion that will take place outside the conventional bounds of the AAR Annual Meeting. Each evening of the conference - November 1-3, beginning at 7:30 p.m. - there will be a presentation and discussion geared toward a general audience. The event is being hosted by Chicago's largest independent bookseller, Barbara's Bookstore (<http://www.barbarasbookstore.com>), at their University of Illinois at Chicago location. Sponsored by the Graduate Student Committee, this event seeks to highlight the contributions of emerging scholars while achieving the AAR's goal of promoting a broader public understanding of Religion. Further details will be posted on the "Student Members and Friends of the American Academy of Religion" group page on Facebook.
- **Special Topics Forum: "If I Knew Then What I Know Now: Lessons for the First Year Teaching"**. The first year in a faculty position can be a daunting experience. This special topics forum addresses the teaching component of a faculty member's life in the academy, bringing together experienced teachers from a variety of institutional settings to share their wisdom on the first years of teaching. Following short presentations by four panelists, we will break into small groups to continue discussion on issues raised. We hope that sharing pedagogical strategies will foster best practices and excellence in the teaching of religion and theology. Coffee and light refreshments will be provided by Wabash. Please join us for this exciting event! Saturday, November 1st, 4:00-6:30 p.m.
- **Graduate Student "Saints and Sinners" Party.** Come celebrate All Hallows Eve, The Day of The Dead, and/or All Saints Day with us! Nothing is required of you other than your presence and conversation! First drink is free! Saturday, November 1st, 9:30-11:00 p.m.
- **Panel and luncheon sponsored by the American Theological Librarian Association (ATLA) dedicated to exploring careers outside the academy.** This panel features speakers from the non-profit, publishing and librarianship worlds. Saturday, November 1st, 11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. Pre-registration is required (http://www.aarweb.org/Meetings/Annual_Meeting/Current_Meeting/RSVP/ATLA/main.asp).
- **Every day of the conference: a comfortable student lounge** space in which to unwind and enjoy some free coffee (featuring a Canadian Corner where – you guessed it – Canadians can connect).

Not to mention, of course, the many panel sessions in which graduate students from all over the world will be contributing.

A complete, fully-detailed listing of student programming at the meeting is available in the Program Planners, on the website (www.aarweb.org), and will be provided in the Program Books available on site.

Students represent the cutting edge and future strength of the academy. Whether you come to the annual meeting to share your work with your peers, to make important networking connections, or to learn from others, please do come – and join in these student events!

Feature Articles

Invitation for Submissions

The AAR Graduate Student e-Newsletter needs your contributions. Please send your articles, profiles, calls for papers, updates, notices and suggestions electronically to: contact.gunn@gmail.com.

Going Home by a Different Road: Practicing the Faith in Graduate School

By Christopher D. Rodkey

I was recently talking with some high school friends, several of which did not go to or finish college, about my experiences in graduate school and teaching as an adjunct at several different colleges. Many of them were interested in what kinds of churches the “smart” professors and graduate students go to or are part of, as if smart people know something about certain churches the rest of society doesn’t. Although I know the ecclesiastical affiliations of many of my professors and student peers, I have often suspected that many weren’t really practicing a religion.

I have been around graduate schools enough—through M.Div., D.Min., and Ph.D. programs—to know that one does not have to be religious to study religion. But when I think about it, it is surprising how few of my professors and peers I would really call “religious” in terms of actively practicing a religion. This is even true in the field of theology, where one would assume some personal spiritual commitment to the ideas.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that churches find pastors with education beyond the M.Div. to be suspect, unless it’s an M.B.A. To study religion or even theology academically requires one to take seriously positions that aren’t necessarily orthodox and occasionally change our minds. I have been told over and over again by church superiors that the study of theology is dangerous, and I had to ultimately leave a denomination because of it. Is it possible that in the study of theology we open ourselves to becoming post-church, even if it is not necessarily post-Christian?

I have found myself guilty of becoming post-church. It is all too easy, while writing a dissertation on Paul Tillich and radical theology, for example, to just say, “man, the church is just *so* dead.” It is too simple to say, while listening to the controversy surrounding the preaching of Jeremiah Wright and his influence on Barak Obama, that the Bible has become unrecognizable to Christians in the U.S. (Wright, I will add, has a D.Min. from the United Theological Seminary.) Too often I go to church and question the intellectual rigor of a sermon, having been offended too many times by sermons in the past. I have become a cliché myself from my scoffing at clichés I read on church signs.

I have caught myself doing exactly what those in churches say us academics do, that is, pretentiously believe that “we” can do better,” or even more simply, “I know better because I’ve studied this stuff and ‘you’ haven’t.”

As a graduate student who wishes to both *practice* and *study* religion, I am in need of guidance of *how* one balances these things. Sure, I’m clearly aware of the literature (and advice) that says that I *shouldn’t* do both, but I have an emotional and spiritual investment in both academia and in the church. Beyond this, like many other graduate students with children, I believe that religious education is essential and formative to the faith and moral development of my child. I also long for

being part of a religious community for which is worth not staying at home to watch *Meet the Press* or read the *Times* on Sunday morning. I want to be an academic whose connections to the church are deeper than an affiliation for institutional promotional materials.

I have decided that, for now, I need to impose an attitude adjustment upon myself. I must, among other things, humble myself. Assuming that there is some wisdom to my studies, like the Magi of Christian tradition, I am trying to learn to *return home by a different path*. One should not forget that in the Gospel of Matthew, the Magi's choice to journey "by a different path" was subversive to the political and religious authorities. My higher education has made me a better person, but not better than other people! The faith walk of an academic is different than everyone else's, and I am learning that there is *différance* with everyone else's paths, too. And this is what I have in common with any handful of other subversive Journeyers with whom I might worship on a given Sunday morning.

Christopher Rodkey is finishing a Ph.D. in philosophical and theological studies at Drew University; his dissertation is titled "In the Horizon of the Infinite: Paul Tillich and the Dialectic of the Sacred." He is Lecturer in Religion at Lebanon Valley College and Pastor of Zion Goshert's United Church of Christ in Lebanon, Pa. He is a graduate of St. Vincent College (Latrobe, Pa.), has the M.Div. from the University of Chicago, and a D.Min. from Meadville Lombard Theological School (Chicago, Ill.).

Finding an Intellectual Home

By Eric Hall

Have you ever wondered what the ancient Hebrews felt, wandering between Kadesh and Shur, without a permanent spot to lay their heads? Or have you imagined what the early Bedouins endured, roaming the Arabian desert, on constant watch for shade and fresh water? I haven't, because I'm a philosopher; I've experienced it. Aside from never having to guard my migrating herds from carnivorous beasts or keep safe my family from marauding tribes, my experience in academia readily congrues with these peoples' nomadic experience. For, at least in the present day, the philosopher stands homeless.

The Lyceum's walls appear less and less in the halls of philosophy departments. The walls have been almost entirely dismantled, a brick sent here and a stone sent there, sold to the highest bidder. English claims the king's portion, appropriating that ancient Socratic art of dialectics—I believe they call it deconstruction. Social science, too, claims its fair share, seeking a monopoly on the truth of human meaning, value, and nature. And often enough, philosophy (at least of the American variety) is more than happy to leave behind these burdensome bricks, focusing its attention instead on tantalizing questions about trees falling in woods. It is this modern phenomenon that has turned an otherwise level-headed philosopher into a regular Don Quixote, wistfully wishing for a return to those golden days of philosophy. And to the best of my ability, I *have* returned by choosing to study philosophy in a department of religion. Let me explain.

As I've gleaned it from Aristotle and Plato, philosophy is primarily concerned with the love of wisdom. And though wisdom has become conflated with logic, wisdom once meant a grasp of the whole. Based on this understanding, Aristotle took up the study of beings *qua* their being, and Plato, a Good beyond being. In both cases, this search was ultimately a hunt for an ordering principle, and by this I mean God.

Because I held the above conception of philosophy, when I began to apply to doctoral programs, I faced the challenge of where to apply. Now this conundrum wasn't particularly tough in the normal sense; I wasn't too concerned with what *institutions* I should solicit. No, I had to figure out which *departments* would welcome my aberrant understanding of philosophy. For at least what I know, most philosophy departments (not all) have that hallowed religious virtue King James calls the fear of God. I had to rethink my field of study.

I proceeded to ask myself in what department God might be revealed to me. My first and most logical thought was theology; I needn't give an etymology of the term to explain why. Encouraged by my cleverness, I immediately looked into this branch of study. But upon closer discrimination of mission statements, I realized that theology departments, at least those I investigated, have well defined doctrinal agendas. While I believe myself a very orthodox Christian in some sense, I'm honest enough to know that the Church is fragmented. Orthodoxy is relative to tradition. For fear of being branded a heretic—and with so many more ways to be branded such—I had to rethink my area of study yet again.

Apart from my many anachronisms, I've never been of the mind that there exists a completely neutral department through which to learn and research. But neutrality is a quality I've neither needed nor wanted. I've only ever asked for a department whose speculative lenses were wide enough that I could work without the fear of my favorite shirt being embroidered with a giant scarlet A. Because of the multiplicity associated with the study of religion—the variegated sub-disciplines operating under the same positive genus, the diversity of method and opinion—I concluded that I could flourish intellectually in such a department. I was correct.

The department I chose seems to work under the structural auspices of Enlightenment rationale, promoting the secular study of anything and everything religious. I will not defend the Enlightenment mindset as a whole; it's a bit too new and far too totalitarian for my taste. But I will adamantly defend its crown jewel. Just as the U.S. constitution functions beneath the umbrella of negative freedom, leaving room for the individual citizen to judiciously choose his or her own destiny, so too functions the religion department. And it is this *freedom* which led me—a devout Christian yearning to unconditionally study something like philosophy—to conclude that religion offers the most intellectually open and, in this sense, most truly philosophical approach to philosophy... via theology.

So this nomadic philosopher has abandoned his tents and laid his first cornerstone, not in a department of philosophy, but one of religion. And though my true love remains philosophy, I think I'm better able to court her here than anywhere else.

Eric Hall is currently studying Philosophy of Religion and Theology in the Department of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. Eric's background is in classical and continental philosophy, which has now translated into the study of ontology, analogy, and Christology. Eric grew up in the great Northwest, and, appropriately, has moved to Mount Baldy California (the highest elevation in L.A. county). Eric spends his free time hiking and chasing bears away from his trash cans.

Meet the Graduate Student Committee

The Graduate Student Committee, formerly known as the Graduate Student Task Force, began in October 2004 as an effort to broaden the AAR's services to its student members. Historically the Student Director was responsible for presiding over the Student Liaison Group, choosing the *From the Student Desk* editor, planning student programming for the Annual Meeting, as well as any other student oriented activities, and is now charged with "routinizing" Annual Meeting student programming, increasing student programs and services, and raising student concerns within the AAR. With the leadership of a previous student director, the GSTF sought and was granted standing committee status in 2006.

The charge of the Graduate Student Committee is to address the needs and concerns of graduate students, and to promote their professional development and participation in the American Academy of Religion and the academy as a whole.

Contact information and bios of current GSC members appear below. Please feel free to get in touch!

Whitney Bauman, Committee Chair



Whitney recently finished his dissertation in Philosophical and Systematic Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA USA. His research interests span the areas of religion and ecology, religion and science and environmental philosophy. He was the 2007-2008 Research Associate for the Forum on Religion and Ecology and is the Book Review Editor for *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*. He became Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Florida International University in Miami, in the Fall of 2008. Whitney can be contacted at whitneybauman@mac.com.

Annie Blakeney-Glazer, Committee Member

Annie is a doctoral candidate at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her

specialization is Religion and Culture and she is currently completing a dissertation on American evangelical athletic institutions. During 2008-2009, Annie will be at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi on a teaching fellowship. She can be contacted at a.blakeneyglazer@gmail.com

Janet Gunn, Committee Member

Janet is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada. Her dissertation is an ethnographic study of a group of women who maintain, transmit, and shape Hindu identity in Canada through their encounters with the sacred at household shrines of their own making. Janet's broad areas of research interest include the anthropology of religion, South Asian religions, and gendered experiences of religion. She can be reached at: contact.gunn@gmail.com

Cameron Jorgenson, Committee Member

In August, 2008, Cameron received a PhD from Baylor University; he also earned a Master of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary. This is his first year at Campbell University Divinity School as an Assistant Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics. His research sets Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox theology in conversation, especially with respect to hermeneutics, spiritual practices, and the intersections between theology, art, and literature. Cameron can be contacted at jorgensonc@campbell.edu.

Nichole Phillips, Student Director and Committee Member

Nichole Phillips is a Vanderbilt University doctoral candidate in Religion, Psychology, and Culture. Her dissertation research explores the connection between death rituals, race, evangelical faith, and Southern civil religion. Her broad interests include psychology of religion, anthropology of religion, pastoral theology and gender studies. A contributor to the student developed e-magazine, www.thecallandresponse.com, Nichole can be contacted at phillipsnr@gmail.com.

Almeda Wright, Committee Member

Almeda is a doctoral candidate in Practical Theology at Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion. Her research focuses on religion & education and African American adolescent spirituality. She currently serves as the Assistant Director of the Youth Theological Initiative at Emory University and as issue editor for the Practical Matters Journal: A Transdisciplinary Multimedia Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology. Almeda can be contacted at awright@post.harvard.edu.

Myesha D. Jenkins, Staff Liaison

In addition to her work as the staff liaison for the GSC, Myesha is Director of Membership Development for the AAR. Myesha received the Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and the Bachelor of Arts in Religion and History from Emory University. Myesha blogs at (<http://butterflypages.wordpress.com/>). She can be contacted at mjenkins@aarweb.org.

