



Fostering Excellence
In the Study of Religion

A Quarterly Newsletter for AAR Graduate Students
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From the GSC: New Opportunities for AAR Graduate Student Members

The Graduate Student Committee has been working assiduously over the past year on ways for graduate students to be engaged with the AAR. This has primarily been through developing additional networking venues and opportunities for presenting and publishing work. We want to take a moment to bring you up to date on these new opportunities.

First, if you are “on Facebook,” we encourage you to become a member of the AAR Graduate Student Group. This is a good place to network, find announcements and voice your concerns to the GSC and wider student community. In addition, we initiated a “Town Hall Meeting” for students at the 2008 Chicago annual meeting to capture student ideas and queries.

Second, there are two publication venues especially for students. You are probably familiar with the “From the Student Desk” column in the AAR’s *Religious Studies News*. In addition, the GSC has launched this newsletter, *Speaking of Students*. You can learn more about making submissions to these two outlets in the last item below. While the column and the newsletter are primarily for AAR student members, you can also submit scholarly research to the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, whose editor, Charles Matthews, has expressed a desire to publish more student work. Furthermore, the *JAAR* is always in need of book reviewers. Submission information is available online at:

http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/jaarel/for_authors/index.html.

Third, the GSC is working on a number of projects that will foster the professional development of the AAR’s student members. One such project — “Religion Beyond the Boundaries” — was launched at the November annual

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meeting. Its purpose is to provide a venue away from the meeting for students to present on topics that intersect with a wider public audience. In Chicago, for instance, GSC member Annie Blakeney-Glazer's lecture on the history of Christianity and sports provided some prospective for understanding why so many football players take a knee after scoring a touchdown or thank God in the post game interview. GSC members Whitney Bauman and Cameron Jorgenson also made presentations. The new forum both provides students with a venue to present cutting-edge research and furthers the AAR's mission to bridge the gap between academic and public understandings of religion.

Another project is the AAR Graduate Student Essay Prize. Developed in consultation with the Publications Committee, this prize will be awarded for the first time at the 2009 annual meeting for the best student essay, which will then be sent to the *JAAR* editor for publication consideration. The winning student also will receive a monetary award and be honored at the annual awards ceremony.

Finally — something that is still in the conceptualization stage — we would like to organize an edited volume that focuses on being a graduate student in religious studies. The idea is to have 10 to 12 chapter-length essays on the existential, practical, spiritual, and intellectual challenges and joys of getting a PhD in religious studies. We can imagine a number of questions being raised such as: Why a PhD in religious studies in this day and age? How do I get a PhD in religious studies without breaking up with my significant other? What intellectual and spiritual transformations occur in the process of writing a dissertation? We envision this publication being a useful guide for those who are in PhD programs in religious studies and those who are considering one. The book may also find a wider audience with graduate students in other disciplines and those outside of the academy who are curious about religious studies.

We want to know what you think about these new and developing efforts and what other programs would be helpful for you. So please do not hesitate in contacting the committee:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Committees/Graduate_Student/default.asp.

See you in Montreal!

Whitney A. Bauman
GSC Chair

Nichole Phillips
Student Director

Spring is for Students: Regional Meetings Provide More Access and Opportunities

By Brian K. Pennington

My initiation into the AAR began when I was an M.T.S. student at Emory's Candler School of Theology. I had petitioned to get into a PhD seminar in biblical archaeology whose professor required attendance at a particular session of the regional AAR meeting whenever it was held in Atlanta. Fresh from my undergraduate theology degree, I found the experience intimidating and the papers well beyond anything I could imagine composing myself. While later PhD coursework trained me in crafting and defending academic prose, my grad

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school participation in southeastern regional meetings acculturated me to the academy in equally significant ways. I began to give papers regularly there, and I made many acquaintances who became valued friends and colleagues.

At some point after I graduated and took a position at a college in the region, I was asked to chair the history of religions programming section. My experience as a section chair introduced me to the programming and governance practices of the AAR and helped me make contacts in the region and beyond as I put paper sessions together. After serving five years in that capacity, I was elected into the regional presidential line and eventually became the elected director of the southeastern region.

On the basis of my own experience and observing the work of others in the region, I think it is primarily in terms of socialization to professional life that the regional meetings offer important advantages to graduate students over the national meeting. With considerably smaller gatherings and leaner, more accessible governing practices, the regional AARs provide many opportunities for meaningful student participation. I like to stress that the regional AAR is the real AAR. In many respects regional meetings and regional governance replicate the real circumstances and relationships that professional life in an academic department entails. The national meeting, with its high-profile plenary sessions and competitive atmosphere, hardly represents actual professorial life, nor does it aim to. Regional gatherings are typically collegial affairs with smaller sessions animated by real give-and-take. Because their attendees come from the same and neighboring institutions, they provide opportunities for networking, collaboration, and sustained professional friendships.

The specific opportunities the regional AAR meetings offer to graduate students are many. They give students the opportunity to present papers, thereby gaining experience and opening a new line on the CV. In future job applications, participation at the regional level demonstrates that others regard your work as relevant and compelling, that you have sought feedback from colleagues, and that you have been proactive in entering the guild. Regional meetings are also considerably less expensive to attend than the sprawling national meetings housed in luxury hotels in major cities. Because competition is less intense and getting a paper accepted more likely, the regional meetings offer students more opportunities to present and to do so in less pressurized circumstances. Finally, one explicit mission of many regional bodies is to welcome and initiate students into life in the academy. Graduate students are, after all, the future colleagues and interlocutors of the teaching and research faculty there.

The AAR has 10 regional affiliates. While each of them is governed in slightly different ways and operates by its own by-laws, they are fully functioning elements of the AAR. Most hold an annual meeting in the spring featuring academic paper and panel sessions, with paper proposals due the previous fall or winter. Some regions meet independently of the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL); others are "commissions," that is, they share governance and meeting space with other regional organizations such as the SBL and the American Schools for Oriental Research. Some meet in hotels; some at host institutions. Each has an elected president who is responsible for programming, a governing board, and a regionally elected director who serves as representative to and liaison with the AAR board of directors.

(Brian K. Pennington, associate professor of religion at Maryville College in Maryville, Tenn., is chairman of the AAR's Regions Committee and the elected director of the Southeastern Region.)

Here's a list of the 10 regional organizations, the dates and locations of their annual meetings, the states and provinces they include, and links to their calls for papers and, where available, their Web sites and 2009 conference programs.

Eastern International Region, May 1-2 at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, NY. Includes Ontario and Quebec, Canada, and western Pennsylvania and New York state outside the New York City area.

Call for papers:

www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Eastern_International/call.asp

Mid-Atlantic Region, March 26-27 at the Radisson Hotel at Cross Keys in Baltimore, MD. Includes the New York City area, eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, northern Virginia and Washington D.C.

Call for papers: http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Mid-Atlantic/call.asp

Midwest Region, April 3-4 at Dominican University in River Forest, IL. Includes Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and the eastern two-thirds of Missouri.

Website: http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Midwest/Website/

2009 conference program:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Midwest/Website/program.asp

New England-Maritimes Region does not have an annual meeting but instead co-sponsors conferences proposed by its members. Send conference proposals to Grove Harris at groveharris@post.harvard.edu. The regional organization, which includes all the Canadian Maritime provinces and New England states, also helps sponsor teaching workshops and a series of lunches or dinners focusing on the works of regional authors.

Website: www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/New_England-Maritimes

Pacific Northwest Region, April 24-26 at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA. Includes British Columbia, Alberta, the Yukon Territory, Washington, Idaho, Oregon and western Montana.

Website: <http://www.pnw-aarsbl.org/>

Call for papers:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Pacific_Northwest/call.asp

Rocky Mountain-Great Plains Region, March 6-7 at Regis University in Denver, CO. It offers a \$1,000 Regional Scholars Award for PhD students or recent PhD recipients. Includes eastern Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, western Kansas, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico.

Website: <http://moses.creighton.edu/aar/index.html>

Call for papers:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Rocky_Mountain-Great_Plains/call.asp

Southeast Region, March 13-15 at the Sheraton Chapel Hill in Chapel Hill, NC. Includes West Virginia, Kentucky, Southern Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

Website (with 2009 conference program): <http://www.secsor.appstate.edu>

Southwest Region, March 7-8 at the Marriott Hotel (DFW International Airport) in Irving, TX. Includes western Missouri, eastern Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas and Louisiana.

Website (with 2009 conference program): <http://www.swcrs-online.org/>

Upper Midwest Region, March 27-28 at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. Includes the Northwest Territory, Nunavut, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin.

Website: <http://www.umw-aarsbl.org/>

Call for papers:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Upper_Midwest/call.asp

Western Region, March 21-23 at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, CA. Includes California, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii and Pacific islands.

Website: http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Western/Website/

Call for papers:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Regions/Western/Website/call.asp

Northwestern Student Conference: Religion and Identity

The regional meetings are not the only venues this spring for religious studies graduate students. Northwestern will hold a conference April 24-25 at its campus in Evanston, Ill., called "Religion and Identity."

The conference aims to explore the increasingly visible role of religious identity in the international and political landscape. Though sponsored by the Northwestern Religion Department, the conference will feature papers from across the humanities and social sciences. Broadly conceived, "identity" offers a particularly rich point of discussion for graduate students who approach religion from a number of different fields, including philosophy, anthropology, history, gender studies, political science, sociology, and psychology. For more information go to:

<http://www.religion.northwestern.edu/news/ReligionandIdentity.html>.

Job Hunting: Tips from the Other Side

AAR member Dr. W. Michael Ashcraft is an associate professor in the Philosophy and Religion Department at Truman State University in Kirksville, MO. Having served on seven faculty search committees at the small, public arts and sciences institution, he has written a piece offering advice to graduate students who are applying for jobs in academia. Though his observations are primarily concerned with the application and interview process at a school like Truman, which focuses on teaching ability more than research and publishing when evaluating job candidates, any neophyte academic job hunter will find his piece useful. The full article is posted at [the AAR Web site](#). What follows here is a summary of his major points.

- Your goal is to convince the search committee that you fit their criteria, not that the school fits yours. To that end, read the job application carefully and take it seriously. Your application materials should address every criterion mentioned in the ad and should include all documents

requested. On the other hand applications that focus too much on attributes and abilities not specified in the job or that include materials not requested are more likely to be passed over.

- The purpose of the cover letter is to quickly convince the reader that you are qualified for the job as advertised. Be honest and straightforward. Don't inflate your abilities or the significance of your achievements but don't minimize them either or apologize for perceived deficiencies. And be specific whenever possible.
- The cover letter is also a good place to address any unique or unusual circumstances that might be an issue with a search committee — if you earned your degree more than five years ago and are just now applying for a full-time teaching position, for example, or if your degree is in a discipline other than the one of the department to which you are applying.
- While you should not try to control what recommenders say in their letters, you should offer suggestions to help them craft helpful letters.
- Good letters should indicate that the recommenders have first-hand knowledge of what they say about you. Make sure that a recommender who knows your research but not your teaching does not speak about the latter, and vice versa. This is why it's important to make sure that your recommenders, as a group, can address all aspects of your academic abilities. Candidates applying to institutions where undergraduate education is the primary focus will be at a disadvantage if their letters as a whole ignore or give only passing notice to their teaching abilities.
- Search committees are looking for people who will be their co-workers, possibly for years. It's important that your letters of recommendation give a sense of how you function as a colleague. Anecdotes and examples can be very persuasive.
- If you get a preliminary interview, prepare by researching the department and the school and then coming up with a list of potential questions. But don't be overly scripted. Being able to think on your feet is important. To that end, you might have some friends help you prepare by posing some of the questions you anticipate but also adding their own surprise questions. You might also ask them to role-play different kinds of personalities.
- Be prepared to talk specifically about your teaching experience and approach. It is also important to be able to address research and/or pedagogical activities that you see growing out of your dissertation project, especially if you can incorporate students into research activities.
- Willingness to embrace university service — responsibilities beyond the classroom — is an important attribute. If you have taken on such duties as a student, find a way to mention them in the interview.
- The on-campus visit is a marathon in which you will meet dozens of people, both formally and informally, over the course of a day or more. Preparation is essential. This includes not only research about the school and department but also thinking about both the mundane (what to wear) and the crucial (the focus of your guest lecture).
- Don't use the guest lecture to show off how much you know. Use it to demonstrate how well you can teach. Those who evaluate you — both faculty and students — will be especially interested in your communication skills. They will be looking to see if you can express yourself in language that is plain and straightforward, that doesn't insult the intelligence of your audience, yet doesn't dilute the complexity and importance of the topic.

Dr. Ashcraft's final piece of advice is to be as transparent about yourself as possible throughout the application process. Teaching is a vocation of self-revelation and self-discovery. It requires introspection done conscientiously and without reservation. The process by which you arrive at the place where teach should be marked by the same transparency and candid presentation as teaching itself. Again the full article is at:

http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Committees/Graduate_Student/apply.pdf

Calls — or Desperate Pleas — from New Student Editors

Carl S. Hughes is the 2009-2010 editor of the "From the Student Desk Column" in *Religious Studies News*. He is a third-year PhD student in theological studies in the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University.

Carl welcomes submissions for the FSD column from across the graduate student membership of the AAR. The FSD series seeks to give voice to the distinctive experiences, insights, and challenges of the AAR's student members. Submissions should not exceed 800 words and should be written in an accessible and relatively informal style. Writing for RSN is a great way to build your CV and to get your name and some aspect of your story before the eyes of the entire membership of the AAR.

FSD articles can cover a vast array of themes. You can address timely matters like the impact of the current economic crisis on graduate students and job seekers. You can share a quirky, rewarding, or eye-opening experience that you had as a graduate student. You can dish out gallows humor about the bleaker aspects of graduate student life. You can reflect on the unique academic challenges and gifts that arise from your distinctive personal background or subject area. You can suggest hard-won advice on how to manage work and family, navigate the AAR annual meeting and more.

To submit your essay — or to ask any questions about deadlines or appropriate topics — please e-mail Carl at cshughe@emory.edu.

Charles Bernsen is the 2009 editor of this new publication, *Speaking of Students*. He is a fourth year PhD student in the history and critical theories of religion at Vanderbilt University.

SOS aims to report news about religious studies programs and students as well to provide practical information related to the academic life of religious studies students. Charles is looking for short news items about calls for papers, upcoming student conferences, grant application deadlines, grants and other awards, and interesting events or innovations at religious studies departments. *Speaking of Students* also seeks news articles recapping student conferences such as the one at Northwestern or that highlight the work of individual graduate students.

In addition to news items, each issue will carry an article or two like the one by Dr. Ashcraft that address practical concerns or interests of graduate students in the field of religion. Possible topics include managing one's dissertation committee, the search for funding or reducing isolation and promoting camaraderie among graduate students.

To send news or suggestions about practical issues that you would like to see
SOS address, please e-mail Charles at cbernsen@comcast.net.

View this newsletter online at:

<http://community.icontact.com/p/aarweb/newsletters/gradstudents>