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## Editor's Note

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The logo for the journal JAAR, consisting of the letters 'JAAR' in a stylized, hand-drawn, serif font.

ARTICLES AND ESSAYS ON  
THE THEME “ON THE FUTURE  
OF THE RELIGION IN THE  
ACADEMY”

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## Editor’s Note

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With this issue editorial responsibility for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* passes from the gifted and wise hands of Glenn Yocum and his staff into my hands and those of my colleagues. The *JAAR* we receive from Professor Yocum is in exceptionally good shape: financially sound, extremely well respected, with a subscription base of about 10,000. Glenn and his associates have very good reason to be proud. My first word must be one of thanks, for all the work of Glenn and others.

But the *JAAR* must not rest on its laurels. A change in editorial staff is a good time to step back and reflect on what we might do, where we might go, and what we must face. The *JAAR* has unique opportunities at present, but it also faces unique challenges. I will discuss these opportunities and challenges in turn.

### CONTEMPORARY OPPORTUNITIES

The *JAAR* has an opportunity to contribute to the deep understanding of our world and the religious traditions and movements that play so large a part in it. And indeed never in the *JAAR*’s history has religion been so prominent a factor in the public consciousness as it is today. This

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shift in public awareness is tied, in part, to the general exhaustion of most non-religious ideologies. A number of ideological systems that framed many people's understanding of history in the twentieth century, such as fascism and Marxism, have gone belly up. Other ideologies, such as global liberal capitalism and various forms of secular nationalism, seem bankrupt to some, while they are the objects of near-religious devotion to others. As the ideological landscape changes, the perduring presence of religions, and the resurgence of religious themes, grows more visible, or at least less avoidable.

These changes have been pronounced both in the United States and abroad. In the United States the public prominence of religion has risen to heights it last reached in the 1950s, but this time with a diversity that vexes any easy categorization into Will Herberg's famous typology of "Protestant, Catholic, Jew." With the United States an increasingly immigrant nation once again, religions never before prominent on the American scene, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, have made their presence known; other immigrants have transformed American Christianity and Judaism. In addition the upsurge of "spirituality," particularly as it is connected to consumer capitalism, bears significant, though uncertain, import for society. On the world stage (or rather, to "the world" as contemporary Western intellectuals, academics, and policy elites understand it) religion has "gone public" in a number of obvious ways. Where once the Huntingtonian "clash of civilizations" thesis seemed patently false, many people now give credence both to the idea of religious "fault lines" as ways of mapping the world and to the idea that religious identities are the most fundamental form of self- (and other-) ascription employed by much of humanity.

Certainly the world is ever changing. But recent years' changes seem to have come at a faster clip than before, and they seem to have dislodged some of the *idées fixes* of the past half-century. For example, whatever the future of religion in the world, it will not follow the received metanarrative of a secularization that is inevitable, uniform in character, and trundling relentlessly toward one form of "modernity." In fact there are multiple "secularizations," diverse "secularisms," and varied counter trends of "de-secularization"; all these merit attention on their own terms. The procrustean presumption of a monochromatic (and unquestionably good) secularization has colored our understanding of religion and framed our inquiries, in ways we rarely if ever recognize. But more recent scholarship gives the lie to that assumption. Beyond that, no one can reasonably predict what will happen to our religious landscape, even in the near future. Christianity will be decisively shaped by South America, Asia, and Africa; Islam will be profoundly shaped by

its presence in Europe and South-East Asia; and Hinduism's roots in an incredibly dynamic India will remain crucial even as the religion becomes ever more global. But the impact of these transformations remains to be seen.

In all these ways and more the coming years will require us to ask fundamental questions. And the *JAAR* should be *the* preeminent academic journal where we can ask those questions and pursue their answers.

Last but by no means least, the recognition of the importance of religion in the present and future has implications even for our understanding of the past. In recent years scholars across the disciplines have directed increased attention to the role of religion throughout human history. Historically trained scholars in religious studies clearly have a fundamental role to play in thinking both about the past in itself, as well as in its relationship to the present and future. First-rate historical scholarship in the history of religions, East and West, will always play a vital role—as attested by the recent tumults enveloping scholars of the history of Indian religion and earlier controversies in European and American religious history. No doubt other controversies are just over the horizon—for, as odd as it sounds, very little matters more to us than what we *used* to do or to be. As ever humans are historical beings, and it is by understanding our histories and by appreciating the obscurities and contradictions of our history that we will understand ourselves and our world.

All these issues, and more, are proper topics of the *JAAR*, as it wants to understand the past, present, and future of religion(s) as global phenomena. Every scholar's work—no matter how “antique,” microscopic, or putatively esoteric—takes on crucial importance in light of contemporary realities; all scholars can contribute, in various ways, to the furthering of issues of common concern to the manifold interests, commitments, and research agendas collected under the (rather broad) canopy of “the study of religion.”

## DISCIPLINARY CHALLENGES

The *JAAR* confronts a challenge peculiar to its place in the discipline: It is less a journal than a meta-journal. “Religion scholars” occupy multiple subfields—subfields with diverse interests, different criteria for scholarship, and sometimes frankly conflicting research agendas. Furthermore, most if not all of these subfields have developed journals of their own, in whose pages the main conversations of those subfields take place. The emergence of these more specialized journals

has caused something of a crisis of identity for the *JAAR*. Many scholars view the *JAAR* as a home for “generalist” statements that descend from platitudes only occasionally and with difficulty and a hodgepodge of specialized articles whose quality may be unquestioned, but whose connection to each other, or to some common research interests, is typically obscure.

The *JAAR* thus embodies something of a wager. It wagers that there is such a field as “religious studies.” Whether or not the field has the ontological distinction of being a “natural kind” of enquiry, the *JAAR* maintains that there is at the very least pragmatic, epistemological value in collecting the various styles and approaches of scholarship that regularly go under the rubric of “religious studies.” Ours is a fugitive discipline, and many of us, from diverse ideological and religious viewpoints, think “religion” itself is a dubious conceptual artefact for the scope of topics to which it is applied. Hence, scholars of religious studies will likely never be fully at home in our “own” field. But that is a condition to be exploited, not mourned; for if we have no proper and completely satisfying home, neither do we consider anything naturally off-limits. Our nomadic peregrinations may be turned to good effect by stimulating lively interchange with others throughout our field and beyond it. Theologians ought to have something to say to anthropologists of religion and vice versa; Foucauldian students of African religion and Patristics scholars (and scholars of Late Antiquity, too) can share research interests and swap methodological and material insights; Buddhologists and Hebrew Bible researchers may find themselves scrounging around in each others’ bibliographies for useful clues. Ideally, we are always keeping one eye open for what is going on elsewhere in academia, as well as in reality.

### OUR GOAL

The *JAAR* intends to publish the most insightful, profound, provocative, and ground-breaking scholarship concerning the study of all things that go under the capacious conceptual category of “religion.” It has been and should be the journal of record in religious studies, in which readers will find the best new work on issues and debates that are already of considerable interest today. When scholars want to know the *status quaestionis* on matters of central concern in work on religion, they should reach for the *JAAR*; when historians seek to know what were the main issues occupying scholars of religion at a point in time, the *JAAR* issues from those years should be their first source.

But the *JAAR* also seeks research on those issues whose significance is yet underappreciated. Hence, it will look to publish work that draws on under-examined literatures and fields of study. It will also publish articles

on issues already deemed important but written from new and surprising perspectives; that construct conversations across religious traditions and across scholarly disciplines; that seek to see over the horizon of the fashionable to recognize issues of real and rising import.

The *JAAR* seeks vision. Those whose vision is clear and long-sighted will, we hope, always find a forum for their proposals amid our readership. The work we want exemplifies the deep intellectual rigor of much scholarship in religion but knows the difference between rigor and rigor mortis. We must not just produce yet more disconnected, atomistic goblets of knowledge, whose implications for the rest of our world are left unspoken; if we do that we do little but reinforce the stale and narcissistic disciplinary protocols of our small corner of the vast intellectual bureaucracy that is the modern academy.

Work in the *JAAR* should, therefore, bear a particular stamp. The ideal *JAAR* article is actually two articles in one. It must be rooted in some real issue, which will usually—but not necessarily—mean a topic centrally within the confines of a particular subdiscipline. But it will also speak to issues in other areas of religious studies and have implications for the field of religious studies as a whole. Furthermore, the ideal *JAAR* article should look over the horizon and do deeper work—work that not only contributes to the live questions of religious studies but also speaks to the realities of the world we inhabit. What sorts of methodological problems should we be worrying about? What sorts of issues are bypassed or overlooked today? How can new approaches change our way of thinking and looking at things? What is religious studies overlooking today that it ought not overlook? In short a *JAAR* article *must matter*. And we aim to make the *JAAR* a place where every article matters in this way.

## THIS ISSUE

As a start this first issue of our new editorial team's term is dedicated to discussing "The Future of the Study of Religion in the Academy." The theme is intentionally broad. We understand its scope to include but not necessarily be limited to:

- (i) Debates about the character of the category of "religion," in its scholarly, scientific, ideological, and phenomenological status;
- (ii) Debates about the proper forms of inquiry into various religious topics, such as "participant" versus "outsider," the possibility of "neutral" or "objective" standpoints, and the possibility of a religiously based standpoint for investigating religious traditions;

- (iii) Debates about the role of religious themes and objects of study in disciplines outside religious studies (such as apocalypticism in historiography, secularization in sociology, or commentary and textuality in literary studies); conversely, the usefulness for religious studies of approaches, methods, or materials drawn from other disciplines (not just philosophy, literary studies, history, and anthropology—but also evolutionary psychology, political science, economics, sociology, cognitive science, etc.);
- (iv) Debates about the ultimate purpose of the forms of inquiry typically gathered under the title “religious studies”: How is such inquiry related to other forms of inquiry? How is it distinct from them? Are the origins of that discipline and other cognate disciplines rooted in particular religious or political backgrounds that should trouble our use of them? What are the particular complexities of relating religious studies to tradition-grounded forms of inquiry, such as Christian theology, Buddhist theology, or Jewish or Muslim thought? Is religious studies an inherently comparative discipline, or how should comparison be understood within its canopy? Finally, what are the implications of all this for one’s understanding of the purpose of the academy in general, and how (or whether) the academy lives up to that purpose?

Our ambitions for these articles were large. We wanted each to be programmatic, to speak to a particular approach, and to attempt to explain why that approach may be an attractive one for others to emulate or at least to engage. We wanted them to reflect upon methodological aspects of that current scholarship they think most promising, or most problematic, in the study of religion in the academy. And as part of this project, in order to encourage real discussion, we asked each author to respond to another’s piece and then gave the author of the primary article a chance to reply to this response. The articles that follow are the product of our provocations.