Earlier this year, Netflix cross-referenced the streaming service’s own promotional calendar with my viewing habits (and God knows what else) to determine that I might enjoy the 2022 limited series *Anatomy of a Scandal* (developed by David E. Kelley and Melissa James Gibson). The legal procedural-meets-thriller is adapted from a novel by Sarah Vaughn (2018) and exhumes a well-bred conservative Minister of Parliament’s history of sexual violence, thoroughly covered up by his layered privilege of elite class, academic, and governmental membership. The show pits his stature and charisma against his faithful wife’s growing suspicions and a guileful prosecutor for the Queen’s Counsel.

Call it an occupational hazard, but when I watch TV, I have a hard time not making connections between what I’m viewing and what I teach. And the risk of this increases with a coming semester and a due syllabus. While *Anatomy of a Scandal* has no shortage of moments from which I could spin a lesson on social politics, I found myself fixating on…well, seemingly silly things. For instance, the show figuratively goes behind the scenes of the British courtroom to show the Queen Counsel’s prosecutor and defense not only talking with each other amiably, but also donning the gowns and wigs required in the courtroom. But what really got me was how the proceedings commenced with a clerk heralding the judge’s entrance with the phrase, “Be upstanding!” Viewers familiar with U.S. procedurals will know well the cognate phrase, “All rise!”

For myself at least, the formality and uses of the former phrase in American speech prodded me to think about the mutual gesture as laden with more than an idea about appropriate physical posture. It is a call for a certain genre of behavior—e.g. “Don’t goof off!”, “Be respectful!”, “Pay attention!” “Come to order!” The clerk all but dictates that now is the time to have the genteel embodiment of, as Americans think of it, an upstanding citizen as opposed to those guilty of lacking such stature. Standing up and rising for the occasion is a way to at least appear upstanding until truth outs otherwise. Skirting the edges of my own media-informed American habitus brought home for me the importance of reexamining the legacies or—thinking with Naomi Goldenberg’s research (2013)—vestigial states and social statuses that humans exhume in attempting to advance a cause.

Turn to the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Carson v Makin* (2022). The case revolved around the parameters of the state of Maine’s school voucher program, which allowed families to use an allotment of tax funding earmarked for public schooling to pay instead for private school tuition. Prior to the ruling, Maine permitted this school choice initiative so long as institutions were accredited and nonsectarian. Up for debate was whether such vouchers could be used for schools run by religious organizations, specifically in an area where there are no public schools. The highest court in the land determined that Maine’s threshold for acceptable schools in this case violates the constitutional right to the free exercise of religion guaranteed under the first amendment. Thus, the plaintiffs should be free to use their vouchers at accredited sectarian schools.

For scholars of religion housed at public institutions in the United States, the ruling draws into question the role of prior court cases such as *Abington School District v Schempp* (1963) and *Lemon v Kurtzman* (1971) which called for public entities to remain nonsectarian on account of the First Amendment’s establishment clause (i.e., the insistence that “Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion…”). These cases arguably shaped the conditions under which the non-confessional academic study of religion in the US could be distinguished from sectarian approaches and thus fit to be taught at publicly funded institutions of higher education.

Remarks in these cases have been helpful for articulating the place of our work within the broader university. In reading the Court’s opinion in *Abington v
Schempp, Associate Justice Tom Clark said, “it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.” This is a line many departments in public universities have used to communicate what they do to students, colleagues, and administrators unfamiliar with the field (see McCutcheon 2016 as well as the websites of George Mason University and the University of Colorado-Boulder).

Works by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2016) and Sarah Imhoff (2016) question the weight this case had in the concretization of the field and departments. For them, the weight of Justice Clark’s subjunctive take is not unlike the former Secretary of State’s oft-cited admiration for the study of comparative religion, “I often say that if I headed back to college today, I would major in comparative religions rather than political science,” a line similarly pointed to by no shortage of departments (e.g., Boston University’s reference to the Kerry’s maxim as it appears in a 2015 op-ed for America: The Jesuit Review). That is to say, it is not a mandate or a rubric, but one of many possible talking points drawn upon in marketing what we do.

And now the field in America is missing a leg it once enjoyed in presenting itself as being upstanding in the court of our intellectual peers, reminding us how significance is impressed not intrinsic. On this I’m sure many of you have thoughts, and I implore you to send me an email with them so that we can publish them in the Bulletin. And in this issue, I think you’ll find some pieces that will stir the pot on what makes for a compelling and upstanding study of religion today.

In The Interview, I sat down with Donald Wiebe to hear about his professional journey and the lessons he’s learned about institution-building. Beyond his research on the philosophy of religion and the scientific study of religion among other topics, many of our readers will recall that he has served in major leadership positions at the University of Toronto, the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), and the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAAASR, which he co-founded). We also discussed his understanding of the study of religion in the modern research university and the extent to which debates within the IAHR support or jeopardize it.

Given the rumblings in the IAHR, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the field in North America, The Archive returns with Charles Eliot Vernoff’s 1983 essay, “Naming the Game: A Question of the Field.” Vernoff (d. 2013) sketches eight dialectics for conceptualizing the field while also presenting some propositions for how scholars might go forward in defining and defending our place in the university. We leave it to you to see how far we have come since the writing of that piece.

We think there are no shortage of insights to be gleaned from these pieces. And one thing that is clear is that purpose-centered adaptation is what keeps the field from becoming a relic. Thus, we have some dispatches from sites where such nimbleness is on display.

In The Department, Carl Raschke shares how he and his colleagues at the University of Denver have revamped their MA program in light of the era of Covid and Zoom.

Editorial Assistant Jacob Barrett chatted with Brian Carwana, Executive Director of Encounter World Religions, a non-sectarian educational consultancy based in Ontario, Canada for facilitating learning about religious diversity and literacy in the public sphere. The Profession looks at how Carwana has drawn upon his doctoral training in religion in politics to advance his career.

Jeri Wieringa is back with The Download, your micro-primer on the digital humanities. In this issue she expands upon her response to a recent Religious Studies Project episode on Christopher Cantwell and Kristian Petersen’s edited volume, Digital Humanities and Research Methods in Religious Studies: An Introduction (DeGruyter 2021).

And we have two pieces focused on graduate students. In The Conversation, Editorial Assistant Erica Bennett interviewed some of the graduate research assistants who worked on Uncivil Religion, a collaboratory digital resource created by the University of Alabama’s Department of Religious Studies and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. There we learn about their experiences while Sage D’Vice has thoughts on how to be an effective teaching assistant.

With pieces like this, we trust that you’ll see the Bulletin as your resource for traversing the field and engaging in an upstanding study of religion, one indelible to the university and beyond.

References