Whenever I teach, I strive to leave students with more questions than answers. I want them not only to appreciate the significance of “religion” within any analysis of culture, politics, and social formation, but also—indeed even more so—to recognize that even the study of religion is an act of discourse. All knowledge-building, I tell them, is historically and culturally contingent. How people conceptualize and approach their taxons, such as “religion” or “culture,” is as important as what they study. Indeed, the how determines the what. Thus to study religion is to study the construction of knowledge including the creation of “data” or objects that need to be understood and theorized. Often these course goals rattle many of my students, especially those who have entered a course hoping for a purely descriptive walk-through of religious traditions along with solid definitions and tightly maintained categorical boundaries. For those who embrace the rattling experience, they often leave such courses with a different perspective on not only religious traditions but also religious studies. My hope is always that they will take further courses in the department, but not to learn about “religion” as much as to treat those courses and faculty as data to theorize.

Over the past seven years that I’ve edited the Bulletin, I have been delighted to see how contributors continually rattle the theoretical and methodological frameworks that scholars use in our field of study. So much energy and insight hit the pages of our journal and blog as contributors question and theorize not only the data of our study but the very ways that we construct and study religion. This issue of the Bulletin offers a range of such “rattling moments” within a set of exchanges on topics facing the study of religion. We begin with an exchange between Nicolas Roubekas and Sarah Rollens on theoretical challenges facing the study of ancient religion, notably when the phenomena under analysis cross disciplinary boundaries, while facing modern theoretical challenges to the use of “religion” in the study of past cultures. Readers will also want to watch for Roubekas’ Theorizing Ancient Religion (Studies in Ancient Religion and Culture, London: Equinox, forthcoming), which brings together a range of contributors debating such theoretical challenges. Our second set of rattling exchanges is a review essay by Andrew Kunze with a reply from Michael Altman on Altman’s recent book, Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu (2017). Once again, this exchange raises insights into how cultural categories are utilized in cultural analyses and identity politics. Jessica Radin then rattles those theorists who strive to rattle in her provocative look at NAASR’s Theory in a Time of Excess (2017), edited by Aaron Hughes. Radin challenges us to consider the intersection of scholarship, including theorization in scholarship, with broader political and social upheavals that shape the world within which we do our work. Finally, this issue closes with an interview between Alexey Rakhmanin and Kevin Schilbrack. This interview on Schilbrack’s approach to a philosophy of religion is being published in both English (in the Bulletin) and in Russian (in Research in Religious Studies).

All of these exchanges offer fresh perspectives for theorizing the study of religion. As Jesse Stone’s 1954 hit song “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” exhorts, we need to shake things up, rattle the pots and pans, and never remain in our comfort zones “looking so nice.” The call to challenge our theoretical and methodological comfort zones is vital not only for those studying data, but also, perhaps more so, for those engaged in the work of theorization. Often, we cease to shake, rattle, and roll once we’ve rattled some pots and pans in our field of study, becoming as banal theoretically and methodologically as those we have rattled. In reading these Bulletin pieces, I am delighted that contending voices are coming together both to rattle and to be rattled.

Philip L. Tite
Editor, Bulletin for the Study of Religion

References
