The Editor’s Corner is an occasional space for the editors of the Bulletin to share their own brief musings on theoretical or professional issues facing the discipline. Most of the short essays included, such as the one below, will first appear on the Bulletin’s blog. Our hope is that this section will open fresh lines of dialogue, debate, and theoretical reflection, with the editors playing a role as interlocutors with Bulletin readers (much as they do on the Bulletin’s blog).

As the editor of the Bulletin for the Study of Religion, I am delighted to share the recent announcement that Equinox Publishing (our publisher) and the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) (our affiliate society) have entered a two-year agreement to include an online subscription to the Bulletin for NAASR members beginning next year. This new benefit of membership is a huge step forward for one of my goals for the Bulletin; i.e., to get a copy of the Bulletin into the hands of every NAASR member and to encourage members to actively use the Bulletin as a space to explore and debate the academic study of religion. I want to express my thanks to the executive council and especially to our publisher (such amazing generosity to promote the Bulletin) for taking this step. The full announcement can be found on the NAASR website (http://naasr.com/).

A few years ago when Craig Martin (who co-edited the Bulletin with me and now serves as executive secretary of NAASR) and I discussed establishing an affiliation between the Bulletin and NAASR, we were both convinced that such an affiliation was a natural one. Both the journal and the society share a similar vision for the academic study of religion, a concern over the condition of our profession, and a dedication to promoting theoretical work as necessary for religious studies. Even when the Bulletin was known as the CSSR Bulletin and NAASR was just one of the various societies attached to the journal via the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (other societies included, e.g., the Catholic Biblical Association, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, College Theology Society, Council on Graduate Studies in Religion, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, Society of Christian Ethics, and Theta Alpha Kappa — National Honor Society for Religious Studies and Theology), it was really NAASR that was reflected in the articles published and topics covered in the Bulletin. And it was mainly NAASR affiliated scholars who served as key editorial figures shaping and directing the journal since the early to mid-1990s.

The vision of a journal—and of the editors of a journal—has a profound impact upon the conversations and interactions within a discipline. Many years ago, while a doctoral student at McGill University, I served for four years as the editor of another journal, ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University. In my last editorial introduction—entitled, “Is There Room for Theory in Religious Studies?” (2003)—I argued for the importance of theory for our field; that without theory to guide our engagement with data we are left with nothing more than a horrific mess that a future generation of scholars will need to clean up. I still agree with my views on the necessity for discussions on theorization and methodologies. And it is that conviction that I have brought to my editorship of the Bulletin. More specific for the Bulletin, let me share the following comments on the role of a journal in shaping a field of study.

What does all this have to do with religion? And, furthermore, what does this have to do with a religious studies journal? If religious studies explores those social authorizing and normative processes that invoke mythical, sacred, mysterious, and transcendent conceptions, then it is necessary to look at those conceptions as social authorizing and norma-
tive processes (cf. Eagleton 1991). In order to accomplish such analytical agendas, to move from understanding insider beliefs to explaining such beliefs for delimited outsider problem-solving questions, theory is absolutely essential. Indeed, theory is unavoidable. Without a process of theorization, there is no operating table on which to utilize our methods of study. And just like an operating table where we need a delimited focus in order to function, so also with theorizing religion. Without theory, our playing with methods on “religion/religions” results not in the construction of knowable knowledge, but rather a big, yucky mess that some future generation of scholars will have to clean up.

Theory matters. And, perhaps, more important than theory is the ability and willingness of scholars to dialogue about theory. It is in the generating of discursive space that such a question—“Is there room for theory in religious studies?”—becomes relevant for a scholarly journal to address. Publishing is one of several venues within which we (re-) construct, (re-) produce, and (re-) form the academic study of religion. The classroom, the conference setting, and public channels of discussion (such as public lectures, the media, or serving on government advisory committees or as expert witnesses in courts) are all important sites for creating and maintaining an academic self-understanding or identity. Publishing, however, is a classic venue for such dialogue, especially between scholars. Journals, such as ARC, allow such dialogues to emerge, or establish the boundaries of such discussions. As the senior editor of this journal, it is, in part, my job to determine what “fits” the journal and what doesn’t. Such limiting processes, grounded in a particular sense of identity of the journal and of the field that it serves, affects submission and solicitation decisions. Those decisions (“this is not a scholarly work,” “this would fit better with a theological, confessional journal,” “this is an outstanding contribution that needs to be published,” etc.), when taken with similar decisions made by other editors and publishers, play an important role in shaping or defining the field.

Therefore, the question “Is there room for theory in religious studies?” is a vital one for any editor of a religious studies journal. (Tite 2003, 9-10)

When I consider the affiliation between NAASR and the Bulletin, the same question remains vital, perhaps even more than with ARC. Like our sibling publication, Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, the Bulletin continues its historical role as a venue for critically reflecting on the academic study of religion, promoting the testing and application of theory, sparking debates in scholarship, and rattling the cages of the profession. We strive to be provocative more than enlightening, to spark rather than flicker, and to allow scholars from a range of experiences, approaches, and professional locations to have a voice in the shaping of their own profession. Of course, any religious studies journal should do the same, but too often that work is left to the side. Thus, I firmly believe that the Bulletin has a vital role to play in the field of religious studies.

And that role nicely aligns with the goals of NAASR. We are mutually supportive of each other. With this new subscription arrangement, it is my hope that more NAASR members will not only read the Bulletin but also contribute to the Bulletin’s work. I want to encourage members to take advantage of this new membership benefit. Read the articles we are publishing, follow our blog postings, and jump into the conversations, debates, and work that we are doing. We are always looking for articles, review essays, pedagogical reflections/tips, panels of papers, and, of course, people to contribute blog posts. This is your journal and your field of study. Let’s continue to work together to shape that field so that future generations won’t have a big, yucky mess to clean up.

References


Notes

1. My comments here, and in the quote below, build on an apt analogy, drawn from and inspired by Foucault’s The Order of Things (1994, especially xvii, 132-34), of an “operating table.”