
The Editorial: The Bulletin of the '90s—It's the End of the Field as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)

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Now if you had bet that I would reference the song “Losing My Religion” for this installment of The Editorial, I’m sorry to disappoint. While also being a catchy bop by the late 20th century alternative band, R.E.M., it strikes me as simultaneously too on the nose and off the mark for a reflection on the *Bulletin* of the 1990s. The 1987 song that I’ve referenced here became a smash hit as part of the 1996 soundtrack to the apocalyptically uplifting film, *Independence Day*.

The 1990s was a complicated era of great change for what was called, at that time, the *CSSR Bulletin*, one that set the stage for much of what our current readers understand to be the study of religion today. As I’ve shared in previous issues of this 50th Anniversary volume, the *Bulletin* was once a widely read publication of a North American organization of scholarly associations known as the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (previously titled the Council on the Study of Religion or CSR). The institutionalization of the field in this part of the world was more of a network of guilds with varied specializations in the academic study of religion rather than “the big tent” model associated with the massive American Academy of Religion (Tweed 2006, 288, n. 1).

Today’s assumption of a joint annual meeting of the AAR and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) with affiliate members gathering under its institutional umbrella may be a useful way to view the North American field in late November when the meeting traditionally takes place. But a historical look coterminous with the *Bulletin*’s history suggests that through much of the year, the North American field was also a network of multiple institutions collaborating for mutual benefit.

In fact, when we recall just how recently the National Association of Biblical Instructors rebranded as the American Academy of Religion—that is 1963, just shy of sixty years ago—it is not surprising to recall that the AAR was but one constituent member among many in the *CSSR*. In 1975, the AAR, SBL, and CSR actively discussed collaborations such as a mutual publishing and

service center, to further cooperation and each group’s resources (see “Committee of Fifteen” 1975, 2). I suspect one could write an intriguing history of the North American field that places broader networks like the *CSSR* and the International Association for the History of Religions rather than that of a single society. And as I’ll explain later, such wouldn’t be the first major research project to have at least some of its genesis in *Bulletin*.

Various reconfigurations of the *CSSR* and its member organizations led to a variety of changes during the long 1990s. In 1985, the publishing headquarters of the *CSSR* moved from Wilfrid Laurier University, in Ontario where it was founded, to Mercer University near Atlanta. It would soon move again in 1992 to Valparaiso University in Indiana (and again in 2005 to Rice University in Houston). To put this move in perspective, the physical changes involved the transition of physical meeting minutes, publishing contracts, subscription records, back issues, business invoices, hardware, software, and office supplies. The “Cloud” was not even a fantasy. And just a little food for thought—on the back cover of a 1996 issue of the *CSSR Bulletin* 25.3–4 is a snapshot of a homepage accessed via Netscape Navigator, the popular web browser of the time. Above it is a header that says “Check out the *CSSR* WebSite—under development at www.cssr.org,” a link that is still live to this day.

Aside from how we once spelled “WebSite” or spelled out “www” (that stands for “world wide web,” you may remember), isn’t it quaint that we once thought that the internet was never not under development? Anyone who manages a website today knows the work is never done. Websites have to be maintained. They have to be updated with new information. Someone has to refresh the aesthetics to keep up with the times—add some Flash here...now that’s too flashy... make it minimalist...how can we be more accessible?, etc. There’s good ol’ fashioned elbow grease underneath all such efforts.

And there is certainly a lesson for us today. Like so many websites of the 1990s, the publication that is the *CSSR Bulletin* could have crashed. *But it didn't!* Through all of the hiccups of transition, this publication somehow managed to stay online. There are likely many reasons for this, but on this occasion, I want to highlight some symbols that may point to a few of them.

The 1992 move of the CSSR's publishing headquarters from Mercer University to Valparaiso University was accompanied by a sidebar on the cover—a list of the constituent and affiliated societies of the CSSR (“Cover.” 1992, 33). Watson E. Mills, Managing Editor and CSSR Executive Officer titled his final editorial, “Endings and Beginnings,” concluding the piece with this field-conscious summation of the CSSR:

Co-operation in pursuit of common goals and the shaping of ideas and methodologies are two of the guiding principles that have shaped the work of the Council. By joining together and consolidating talents and resources, the constituent societies that make up the CSSR have been able to accomplish things that no one of them could have ever realized alone. This unique role is beneficial to the membership of each constituent society as well as to the entire field. Because of its long history of contribution and because of the talent and energy of its officers and editors, I believe the CSSR is positioned to make an even greater contribution in the years to come. (Mills 1992, 34)

Included in this sidebar and vision were the American Society of Missiology, the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, the Catholic Bible Association, the Catholic Theological Society of America, the College Theology Society, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, the North American Academy of Liturgy, the North American Association for the Study of Religion, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, the Society of Christian Ethics, and the Council on Graduate Studies in Religion.

Starting in 1996 with Volumes 25.1–2 and 3–4, the *CSSR Bulletin* added a splash of color to its cover along with a new orientation in its main offerings. This coincided with a passing of the editorial torch from Managing Editor David G. Truemper to Co-Editors Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Murphy, along with John Strong as Assistant Editor for Department and Society News.

John Cartwright, CSSR President of the time, described the “McCutcheon-Murphy-Strong team” as a burst of new energy and fresh ideas that warrant anticipation of excellence” (Cartwright and Truemper 1996, 1). The editorials in Volumes 25 and 26 of the *CSSR Bulletin* in my reading are an important record and model for anyone looking at balancing the necessities of continuity and innovation.

And while there was a lot of excitement for a web presence for the CSSR—predating the popular *Religion Bulletin* blog by some 15 years—the *CSSR Bulletin* of the mid-nineties became a hub for discourse on the shape of the North American field.

For example, Tina Pippin was teasing out potential collaborations between scholars and activists in *CSSR Bulletin* 24.1 5–9 (1995). *CSSR Bulletin* 26.3 (1997) featured the likes of Arvind Sharma (50–51), Eric J. Sharpe (52–60), Jonathan Z. Smith (60–61), Robert A. Segal (61–64), Delwin Brown (64–66), and Ninian Smart posing ideas about the relationship between theology and religious studies (66–69). Robert N. Bellah and Paul Boyer were wrestling with questions about the culture wars, the public square, and the academic study of religion in *CSSR Bulletin* 27.1 (1998). That same issue also introduced “TheStrip,” a website launched by graduate students at the University of Colorado who described it as “at once an online journal (though we use the term reluctantly) for the academic study of religion and culture and a platform for experimentation and instruction regarding the relationship between the academy and the internet” (Choi et al. 1998, 7).

Additionally, the *CSSR Bulletin* from time to time published excerpts of soon-to-be released works. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan was complicating the notion of religious freedom in *CSSR Bulletin* 28.2 (1999, 41–42). And readers got a sneak peek at Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press 2000), Donald Wiebe's *The Politics of Religious Studies* (St. Martin's Press 1988), and Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth: Narrative Ideology, and Scholarship* (University of Chicago Press 1999) among others. I list many of these names and works as a nod toward a history of the field that would make the 1990s, in some scholars' estimation, the origins of the theory wars in the North American academic study of religion. Destructive metaphor aside, there's something promising about this happening in a single publication read by scholars across subfields. We hope that the *Bulletin* of the future will continue to deliver on this

promise. And in this issue of the *Bulletin*, we do our part by continuing to look forward while looking back.

We are excited to have the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria (CSRS) share some of their work with us. Director Paul Bramadat tells us a bit about the Centre's history in The Guild. We also are pleased to feature an exchange between award-winning author Esi Edugyan and the CSRS's own Tim Lilburn as part of The Interview. Their discussion, "Writing and the Great Change Upon Us" is from the CSRS's John Hall Lectures and the first of their popular Values for a New World series.

In The Buzz we returned to the question of graduate education in the time of COVID-19, this time posing it to Editorial Board member, Suzanne Owen of Leeds Trinity University.

In this installment of The Conference, we have partnered with the North American Association for the Study of Religion to bring you research presented virtually at its 2020 annual meeting. Wesley J. Wildman, from the Center for Mind and Culture at Boston University presents a bibliometric analysis of the scientific study of religion (SSR). F. LeRon Schults deploys computational modeling and simulation (CMS) to theorize about secularization. And Daniel D. Miller of Landmark College investigates Christian Nationalist opposition to Trans and Gender Nonconforming persons.

We've also gone back to The Archive to bring you a pedagogical piece focused on effective grading from the late Ira H. Peak Jr. (d. 2015), who at the time held a position at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

And back by popular demand, Sage D'Vice answers a reader's question about the virtues of peer-review... or lack thereof.

In the next issue we will celebrate fifty years of the *Bulletin* with some blasts from the past,

including retrospectives. And from there it is on to the 21st century....

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