

**Introduction to the  
SPECIAL FEATURE**

**Shifting Origins Tales and the Construction of Knowledge:  
Papers from the Method and Theory section of the AAR  
Southeast Regional Conference**

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The following papers were presented in March of 2020 as part of one of the two panels of the Method and Theory section at the southeast regional conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Athens, Georgia, over which I had the great pleasure of presiding. The panel consisted of two presenters and two respondents, each, significantly, at very different career stages. Andrew Gardner, a PhD candidate from Florida State University – who actually defended his dissertation right before the conference – with a research interest in religion and higher education, presented on a nineteenth century extra-curricular organization formed by students of the Andover Theological Seminary, and arguing that students, non-experts, played an important role in the construction of the World Religions Paradigm. Keeley McMurray a master's graduate from the University of Alabama, who had just been accepted into the PhD program at Florida State University, interested in religious rhetoric and how this functions in American politics and law, presented on the construction of the idea of the “self-governing individual” by looking at the religious rhetorics of seventeenth century New England Puritans. Dennis LoRusso a lecturer from Georgia State University, who responded to McMurray's paper, is primarily interested in the intersection between religion and business in twentieth and twenty-first century North America, with particular attention to the way the work and workplaces shape and are shaped by religious life. The final respondent is Kat Daley-Bailey. She taught in Religious Studies for more than ten years as an adjunct and is now a full-time academic advisor at the University of Georgia with a continuing research interest in religion in popular culture, method and theory, and world religion textbooks.

While the two main papers are both challenging widely accepted origins

tales, the respondents are engaging in a constructive criticism that, even though they are taking seriously the arguments of the papers, try to push their arguments further by challenging the authors in ways that they have not previously considered. When I heard all the papers together, I thought that they would make for a good publication and so I contacted David Roberston, who I would like to thank for his interest in publishing them. The reason that I think they are worthy of publication, apart from the very interesting and sophisticated arguments that they are making, is because in reading them as a bundle one can easily notice that there is a productive, collegial and engaging collaboration in the production of knowledge. It should be evident that all four presenters are not only at different career stages, but they all work in different areas and in different chronological periods. Despite that fact, as you will notice by reading their papers, they each have something to say to each other, not on the level of the particularity of the examples, perhaps, but on the level of generalization – of method and theory. I find that when we collaborate with scholars in different career levels and with different research interests, whether in a panel, workshop, or publication it can be more productive than talking amongst scholars who work in the same field of expertise as us.

Over the years I have been fortunate to share my research and engage in discussions with colleagues who are not necessarily working in the same data set as me (my own field of expertise is in ancient and modern Greece); I have therefore gained a lot more by engaging with scholars working in a variety of data, like for example my involvement with *Culture on the Edge*, an international group that consists of scholars with multifaceted research agendas and in different career stages. These sorts of collaborations allow us not only to view our own work as examples of larger theoretical problems in need of investigation but also guard us against seeing our work as unique.

For instance, to draw an example from my own work, in the area of the ancient Greco-Roman world: often times the preoccupation when examining those long-gone worlds is to develop methods, vocabularies, etc., by which scholars can better describe and understand those worlds. It is easy to get lost in discussions with likeminded scholars concerning the descriptive particularities of a world that we are so immersed into and debating over how better to interpret texts and material artifacts of that period; viewed in this way, in fact, it is difficult to consider that someone who works in a different data set and a different historical period will have anything to contribute to our work. As a result, even if we may not explicitly admit it, we treat our data (and by data I mean the variety of historical periods, places and material we research) as unique. Instead, there is a lot

more to be gained when we view our data as examples of larger theoretical issues, issues that go well beyond our particular subfields – such as how people form, reproduce, or even contest the limits of groups, to name but a few broad examples. In that sense the respondents engaged with these two conference papers in a way that is exemplary of what constructive criticism, from outside one's own specialty, ought to look like. At the same time, as scholars we are not only committed to research but also to pedagogy. Pedagogy occurs in classrooms and also through engaging with the work of younger scholars who are new in the field. Such pedagogy demonstrates that our work in Religious Studies is relevant beyond particular subfields – and also beyond the academic field.