



AUSTRALIAN RELIGION STUDIES  
**REVIEW**

**Volume 17, No. 1, Autumn 2004**

Australian Religion Studies REVIEW

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Concerning manuscripts for ARS REVIEW: The Editor, ARS REVIEW, Dr Adam Possamai, School of Applied Human and Social Sciences, UWS, Bankstown Campus, Penrith South DC NSW 1797. Email: a.possamai@uws.edu.au

Concerning book reviews: The Book Review Editor, Jay Johnston. University of New South Wales. Email: j.johnston@unsw.edu.au

Concerning REVIEW advertising and enclosures, and back issues ARS REVIEW: Dr Kathleen McPhillips, School of Humanities, UWS, Blacktown Campus, Penrith South DC NSW 1797. Email: k.mcphillips@uws.edu.au

Concerning purchase of AASR books: Rainbow Book Agency, 303 Arthur St, Fairfield VIC 3078.

Concerning manuscripts for AASR publication: Dr Kathleen McPhillips, School of Humanities, UWS, Blacktown Campus, Penrith South DC NSW 1797. Email: k.mcphillips@uws.edu.au

Concerning membership, subscriptions: Carole Cusack, Secretary AASR, Department of Religious Studies, Sydney University, NSW, 2006. Email: ccusack@mail.usyd.edu.au

*The Australian Religion Studies REVIEW* is published twice a year (Autumn and Spring) by the Australian Association for the Study of Religions. The REVIEW is sent free to all financial members of the AASR. Additional copies are available to members at \$12, and to non-members at \$15

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# Letter to the AASR Membership from the Editors of

*Australian Religion Studies Review*

Dear AASR Members,

We are writing to you to gauge your support for proposed changes to the *Australian Religion Studies Review* journal that were first raised at the 2003 Conference in Brisbane. As you know the Review has been the journal of the AASR Association since it began publication in the 1970s. It has been produced by the voluntary labour of some very dedicated individuals and has made a significant contribution to the discipline of religious studies and in particular to religious studies in Australian contexts. It has been a journal that has promoted the work of both established and new scholars in Australia and addressed a wide audience from teachers to faith practioners to public servants.

For some time now subscriptions have been falling steadily and the format of the journal has begun to look a little scruffy compared with other like journals that are making the jump to international audiences and providing electronic access to subscribers. We are keen to address the problems that the journal is facing and to attempt to re-invent the journal rather than see it slowly fade. We have thus been in contact with a number of publishing houses about moving the journal into professionally managed territory. The best deal by far to date is with the relatively new publisher Equinox.

Equinox is a UK based publisher that specializes in Journal publishing as well as in books on religious and biblical studies. They already have a number of excellent religion journals on their books including *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*; *Black Theology*; *Implicit Religion*; *Comparative Islamic Studies*; *Ecotheology*. A full list can be seen on the equinox web site at [www.equinoxpub.com](http://www.equinoxpub.com)

Our discussions with Equinox have been very productive but they do involve some significant changes. While the Review Editors would have complete editorial control of the journal, and maintain responsibility for collecting membership fees, Equinox would manage the production of the journal, including desktop publishing, printing and postage. They would also manage the promotion of the journal using their significant international network lists, as well as set up and manage a web site for the journal which would include information about the ASSR and content pages of previous journals and eventually issues of the journal. They would also offer a 10% discount on any Equinox book or journal to AASR individual subscribers.

The benefits of moving to an international publisher are numerous. We would be looking to expand our readership and subscriber base to a larger international audience. This does not involve a name change for the journal or a change in the

orientation of the journal to Australia and its surrounds. It does mean that there would be a wider audience reading the material, and to acknowledge this an international editorial board would be set up with the role of encouraging submissions and subscriptions from a wider audience. We would hope that the Review would become better known and link into important debates in religious studies around the globe.

While the benefits are clear, it would involve a hike in membership fees. Equinox is suggesting that individual membership would increase to \$75 per year, \$85 for overseas subscribers, \$40 for concession subscribers and \$195 for institutions. Any profits would be shared. However, given that there has not been an increase in membership for a long time, we feel that this is a reasonable ask. And while we propose to start with 2 issues a year, it would be possible to increase this to 3 issues a year if there is sufficient material. This would allow us to include the Presidential Address, Penny Magee Lecture, the undergraduate essay prize, standard essays, conference reports and book reviews, as well as special issues. The Review would also be given a bright new cover and format, which it has needed for some time, and which will give the journal a professional look.

We feel that this would be an excellent time to shift the journal into new territory while maintaining the integrity of its mandate. We believe that the Journal can be at the forefront of discussions on religion and a flagship for this region in particular. Given that religion is on the rise in global and local contexts, the journal could be well placed to provide intelligent, resourceful responses to world issues.

Proposed changes to the Review will be discussed at the AGM of the 2004 AASR Conference at the University of Western Sydney. If the Association is in agreement with the proposal, then we would begin publication with Equinox for Issue 18(1) in 2005. If you have a particular point of view you would like to express but cannot make it to the Conference, you can email your response to Adam Possamai ([a.possamai@uws.edu.au](mailto:a.possamai@uws.edu.au)) and it will be read during the meeting.

We welcome your responses to this proposal.

Yours sincerely

Kathleen McPhillips and Adam Possamai  
Editors, *Australian Religion Studies Review*

# **Australian Religion Studies Review**

**Inaugural**

**UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY PRIZE  
\$200 plus publication in the ARS Review**

**For the best essay on Religion  
from any discipline by an undergraduate student  
at an Australian University**

**The essay must have been submitted for grading in 2002-04 at  
2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year level.**

**Word length 3-5,000 words.**

**Submission date Friday 10 December 2004**

**PLEASE NOTE NEW SUBMISSION DATE**

**Manuscripts can be submitted to the Prize Convener  
Dr Kathleen McPhillips, School of Humanities, Blacktown  
Campus, University of Western Sydney, Penrith South DC 1979  
NSW. Manuscripts will be judged by the ARS Review Editorial  
Team.**

## **AASR PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2003**

# **Old Masters and New Allies: the way forward for Studies in Religion**

**Majella Franzmann**

*University of New England*

Last year in my Presidential Address I briefly plotted the waxing and waning fortunes of Studies in Religion in its history in the university, concluding with a suggestion for key alliances that would help Studies in Religion keep a place within the Australian university sector (Franzmann, 2002). In this final address of my presidency, I want to take up again a number of points from that earlier address, draw upon my own experience in teaching and research within Studies in Religion over nearly twenty years, and propose a possible way forward for Studies in Religion in Australia in its formal academic setting within the university and the secondary school sectors in particular.<sup>1</sup> I shall plot a relatively simple way forward for Studies in Religion, supported by a claim that may seem touched with *hubris*—that Studies in Religion is unique within the disciplines which study religion within the context of human behaviours. From this position of uniqueness, I want to outline the alliances that will be positive for Studies in Religion into the future, and the processes by which such alliances might be strengthened.

Studies in Religion is inherently multi-disciplinary. Although students and scholars involved in this area may concentrate on some disciplines more than others, a comprehensive program of study inevitably draws upon a number of key discipline areas, such as sociology, history, literary criticism, language studies, psychology, political criticism, and philosophy. Indeed, Studies in Religion cannot be understood except as constituting the totality of methods available within the Humanities and Social Sciences. In this way it is very different from the disciplines it uses in their individual fields of endeavour. Thus, for example, Studies in Religion students who use the methods of history to study a religious phenomenon will approach the study differently and from a broader basis than history students, because they are aware of a greater context for their study. They know that historical examination is but one lens through which to try to understand or describe religious phenomenon.

Whilst Theology is generally understood to be multidisciplinary, in much the same way as Studies in Religion,<sup>2</sup> it has much more affinity with areas such as Women's Studies, since it is driven by a mindset and approach to phenomena based on a specific agenda or ideology. Theology aims towards education in faith as its primary objective, and is mostly concerned with the study of Christianity

rather than the full range of religions and religious phenomena.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the approach taken by theology is partly too limiting of, or even at odds with, the approach of Studies in Religion.

The breadth and multidisciplinary nature of the approach of Studies in Religion to religious phenomena can be found in a number of self-descriptions from these areas in Australian Universities. The Department of Studies in Religion at Sydney University 'aims to provide an open, serious, scholarly and critical study of religion', with units in world religions and indigenous religions, using various methods drawn from history, philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, sociology, theology and biblical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland provides a program of study, including the major world religions, indigenous belief systems and new religious movements, 'devoted to the scholarly discussion and analysis of the role of religion in human life, in both the past and present' by applying the methods of historians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and linguists.<sup>5</sup> At the University of New England, Studies in Religion is characterised as the study of the origins and development of religions (especially the five great world religions: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) and their important aspects (foundation, scriptures, community structures) as well as the analysis of the part that religions play within social and political life.<sup>6</sup> There is a focus and breadth to these programs in Studies in Religion which provide a global perspective on religion—geographically, in their treatment of the full gamut of eastern and western traditions; sociologically, in the study of groups from indigenous spiritualities, to established religious organizations, to the very latest new religious movements; socially and politically, in the appreciation of religion as a key factor in all aspects of public and private life, and as indissolubly linked with political and social systems.<sup>7</sup>

Studies in Religion finds itself combined or associated with various other discipline areas in Australian universities. At Sydney University, the Department of Studies in Religion is situated within the School of English, Art History, Film and Media administered by the Faculty of Arts. Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland is located in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics. At the University of New England, Studies in Religion is included within the School of Classics, History and Religion. At the most basic level, therefore, alliances are generally made with other disciplines in these combined schools, with history, sociology, philosophy and so on, sharing teaching or in research clusters. Where, in the past, jealousies about students and discipline areas might have prevailed, in the present climate, these alliances are seen to build up rather than divide and bring high enrolments as well as enhancing teaching and research in both areas.

Last year, I mentioned briefly the change we have seen recently in the type of member who now joins our association, especially secondary school teachers of Studies in Religion. The teachers represent the largest and potentially the most fruitful group for alliances. Those teaching Studies in Religion in secondary schools are already experienced in consolidating their expertise in this area with

their teaching in other discipline areas—in fact their very training forces them towards such consolidation of at least two discipline areas. In this way, the secondary school environment offers a much better context and model for these alliances than the university sector does at present, and it is from the secondary teachers that we might gain a better understanding of how to recognize the potential for new alliances within the university context in which Studies in Religion now operates. This is one of the most crucial reasons that the AASR needs to continue to attract, invite, and maintain a membership from secondary school teachers.

However, the most obvious alliances across the universities are between departments of Studies in Religion. Whilst each individual department may be surviving in the present climate, Studies in Religion in Australia has not flourished in the recent past, and alliances between departments will bear fruit when a concerted front needs to be presented if departments come under threat. Added to that, postgraduates in particular need the kind of support gained by association across the universities. Alliances can provide the context for mentoring postgraduates, helping with employment, as well as making contacts and networking. Postgraduates are the smallest but one of the most fruitful groups to encourage in terms of the future of Studies in Religion and the AASR.

While I propose multidisciplinary as a positive feature, it also presents its own peculiar difficulties for postgraduates. Students who proceed through Studies in Religion as their major area of study with an expertise in some individual discipline area may not always imbibe fully the ideological or methodological position of an individual discipline area as strongly as those students who have majored exclusively in that particular discipline. This sometimes means that postgraduate students are disadvantaged, particularly when it comes to publications, because individual disciplines often jealously guard their methodological boundaries, making it hard for perceived outsiders to break through and be recognized. As well as the refereed journal of the AASR, which has always sought to support postgraduate publications, the new postgraduate journal launched by Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland provides an invaluable publishing arena for the best of our postgraduates.

In the broader tertiary scene, obviously alliances are possible between theological colleges and universities. In the closing stages of last year's address I outlined the kinds of alliances that have begun to form in Australia between Studies in Religion in the university sector and the descendants of our "old masters", the theological colleges, since Studies in Religion arose during the 20<sup>th</sup> century mostly out of or within previous Departments of Divinity. Some alliances are already in place, although for the most part the process aims to introduce theology into the universities rather than Studies in Religion into theological colleges. I mentioned last year that alliances in research were the realistic basic starting point for associations between Studies in Religion and theology and how this process was already beginning with applications for grants, especially from the Australian Research Council. However, such applications remain focused on theology for the most part, and Studies in Religion must remain cautious that its

own approach and agenda does not become lost in the process of building such alliances.

I have been a member of the AASR since the early 1980s. I remember how overwhelmed I felt as an Honours student by the large number of people who attended the annual conferences. The situation has changed enormously in the twenty years since then. In particular, we have seen the effects in the last five years or so of a change in the association from a mostly tertiary-driven organisation. Perhaps this is only to be expected given the trends in our tertiary institutions previously and currently, where there seems little appreciation of Studies in Religion as a core discipline of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Australian education.

Now it is clearly time to read the signs, understand the shift that has already begun in our membership and what that offers, and find constructive, creative, and potentially long-lasting ways to reinvent and reinvigorate our association. Obviously our postgraduates are one major element of our future. But clearly that future is also strongly linked with the secondary school sector. Last year I reflected on what the association could do for secondary schools. Now I have begun to see that we need to look to the schools for some guidance in revitalising both the association and the subject of Studies in Religion nationally. There can be no new masters, no divide between tertiary and secondary educators—but real and vigorous alliances that provide the impetus for growth into the new century.

## Endnotes

1. There are other, less formal, academic settings for Studies in Religion including the University of the Third Age.
2. Most theological colleges would recognize the similarity in approach using a variety of disciplines (see, for example, the outline provided by Murdoch University <http://wwwsoc.murdoch.edu.au/theology/info/whatistheology.htm>; accessed 28/6/03), though there are some who would suggest that theology itself is a kind of discipline to be studied in conjunction with other disciplines.
3. <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/theology/courses/undergrad.php> (accessed 28/6/03).
4. <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/religion/about.shtml/details.shtml> (accessed 28/6/03).
5. <http://www.uq.edu.au/hpre/religion.html> (accessed 28/6/03).
6. <http://www.une.edu.au/arts/scch.htm/aboutreligions.html> (accessed 28/6/03).
7. The inclusion of Studies in Religion in the program title of the Monash Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology seems inappropriate. Whilst the website suggests that introductory studies will be in Judaism and Christianity, the list of educational objectives focuses on the major religions [http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion\\_theology/about.html](http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion_theology/about.html) (accessed 28/6/03). However, when one views the offerings for first through to third year, the subjects for study are heavily focused on Christian Theology (both implicitly and explicitly) and Jewish history:  
[http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion\\_theology/undergraduate/1styear.html](http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion_theology/undergraduate/1styear.html) (accessed 28/6/03),

[http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion\\_theology/undergraduate/2ndyear.html](http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion_theology/undergraduate/2ndyear.html)  
(accessed 28/6/03), and  
[http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion\\_theology/undergraduate/3rdyear.html](http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/religion_theology/undergraduate/3rdyear.html)  
(accessed 28/6/03).

Programs like those at Monash provide an unhelpful model for those seeking to understand the nature of Studies in Religion. If a program does not really deal with the breadth of at least the world religions, then it should be called something other than Studies in Religion.

## **References**

Franzmann, M. 2002. AASR Presidential Address 2002. From Queen of the Sciences to the Rebel Alliance: Religion in the University. *Australian Religion Studies Review* 15 (2): 5-12.