
The Editorial: Critical Conversations

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<https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.32723>

One of the courses I teach is a graduate seminar that serves as a writing workshop for scholarly prose. Students start the semester with a working draft of a paper, or sometimes just with an idea they wish to develop, and we spend time taking it through the writing *process* (brainstorming, researching, drafting, revising, editing, and proofing) so that they can ultimately submit what becomes an article-length essay to a peer-reviewed academic journal. Certainly we discuss the finer points and line edits that come with cultivating the craft of composition (they learn the art of peer editing, and they receive visits every now and again from the stickler of a grammarian who lives in my head), but much of the work we do is related to reframing what I find to be many students' preconceptions about what scholarship *is*. My own grad-student self had similar ideas early on. Chief among them was the notion that scholars were impossibly external to me, and I was a receptive vessel for their insights that seemed either to fall from the sky or to be drawn from a well of genius. Additionally, "scholar" was an ontological state of being—something one *is* rather than something one *does*. And so on.

What I came to learn, and what I now try to impart to students, is that the work of thinking and writing is not a series of dramatic epiphanies or spontaneous insights. What can seem like magic tricks performed by geniuses are actually methodical, practiced strategies by people willing to put their unique skills to use with the confidence that they have something to offer. That confidence and those offerings, I'm increasingly convinced, are learned behaviors more than natural talents. A professor gave me a gift at one point in my own dissertation process over fifteen years ago when she told me that "staging an intervention" was mostly about identifying one's conversation partners. "It's like being at a cocktail party," she said. "Having a presence—and having fun in the process—is really just about finding the people you want to talk to." Easier

said than done, of course, especially for this introvert. I wanted a wing person at the proverbial party who could introduce me and vouch for my fledgling and exceedingly self-conscious cool factor. But her point was well taken. She was challenging me to think of myself as having a voice at the table among scholars rather than as being merely a receptive vessel for their work. In other words, the craft of academic writing is, perhaps most importantly, a lesson in taking one's own ideas seriously. So now when I teach that graduate writing seminar, I talk with my students a lot about identifying useful discussions already happening in various fields—ones to which they'd like to contribute—rather than identifying their "original" claim external to that process and then implanting it elsewhere. In the former mode of intellectual exchange, ideas beget new ideas, and contributions are borne of the often-unpredictable direction those ideas take.

It makes sense, then, that one of the primary reasons I have long found the *Bulletin* to be an incredibly useful publication is that it stages critical conversations among thinkers—providing a venue for questions and debates currently animating academic studies of religion, while providing a welcoming space for students and early-career scholars to pull up a seat and join us. My colleague Richard Newton has been an exceptional conduit for such interactions as editor, and I'm genuinely honored to step into that role. He has my deep and unalloyed gratitude for gathering the work contained in this double issue and for helping me drive into the editorial learning curve. Unending thanks, too, to the team at Equinox who see to matters of production—especially Amanda Nichols, copyeditor extraordinaire, and Ailsa Parkin, both of whom have answered roughly a quadrillion questions from me...if estimating conservatively.

The essays here appear as two sets of conversations. The first, among nine scholars, comprises a special issue on Health Humanities, organized and curated

by Paul Bramadat. The discussion is global in scope, with case studies from reiki in the U.S. and U.K., to spiritual coaches and care providers in Quebec, to pandemic-inflected social dynamics in Australia, Tanzania, and South Africa. Framed by the context of Covid-19 and delving into topics like conspiratoriality, grief counseling, human rights, climate crisis, and health injustice, this set of papers on care as a social, religious, and institutional phenomenon could not be more timely.

The second set of papers approach the art of critical conversation more literally than topically, presenting clear prompts and responses. The Essay comes courtesy of John Cappucci's "A Minority Affair: The Baha'i Question and Iranian Canadians." It examines how Iranian Canadians in Ontario perceive the treatment of Baha'is in Iran by the government there. There emerges a rich conversational nexus as a result—between Cappucci and the respondents he interviews, between those self-identified Baha'is in Canada and their religious counterparts in Iran, between all of them and non-Baha'i Iranian Canadians. Who does and does not talk to whom (and how/where) itself becomes an interesting point of consideration.

In *The Buzz*, Oleg Kyselov and Anna Mariya Basauri Ziuzina—both Ukrainian scholars working in the US—respond to Valerio Severino's 2023 documentary, *Some Kind of Liberating Effect*. The film, which tracks the development of and challenges to the academic study of religion in Central and Eastern Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was the subject of an interview that Richard Newton conducted with Severino for a recent issue of the *Bulletin* (May 2024). While that discussion brought up issues regarding the making of the film and the history that motivated it, Kyselov and Basauri Ziuzina reflect on their personal experiences with that very history. They weigh in on matters of academic freedom by sharing their unique perspectives as scholars who studied religion in Ukraine as graduate students and who now teach at a public university in the United States.

Finally, Temitope Fatunsin, who is currently pursuing a master's degree in Religion *in* Culture at the University of Alabama, writes a review essay for *The Experiment*. In it, she responds thoughtfully to Elizabeth Perez's 2022 book *The Gut: A Black Atlantic Alimentary Tract*, which explores the role of the digestive

system in various Afro-Diasporic religious traditions. Fatunsin considers how relationships to embodiment shape epistemologies and systems of "knowing." Her own critical engagement adds its own layer of discourse to the kinds of conversations brought to bear in Perez's book (those that emerge in kitchen spaces, for example, where people "spill their guts").

If, as my professor long ago suggested and as I now maintain with my students, "scholar" is a subject position only insofar as it implies a specific and strategic set of conversational actions, the kinds of conversations we have and the moments we pick within them to offer new directions are key. To my mind, what remains most helpful in making those choices is methodological precision. After all, any concept—"religion," as only one example—is going to take a particular shape based on the perspectives and approaches of those discussing it. My investment in conversation, then, should not be confused for a discursive attempt at welcoming all comers into a universalizing big tent. While that impulse may be well-intended, it is also wrong-headed in its inevitable collapsing of analytical nuance and context (memories come flooding back of embarrassing middle-school moments that saw me pretending to like "all kinds" of music for fear of invoking an unpopular band in front of the cool kids).

The intensive time my graduate students spend with their objects of study is also time spent getting to know themselves as burgeoning scholars. That process helps develop the very perspectives they then seek to convey as clearly and effectively as possible. In turn, the evolution of those perspectives over time results from continued engagement with others who share their methodological and theoretical commitments. Such critical conversations start from a baseline that assumes the importance—indeed, the urgency—of critical thinking in its own right. And they are the kind I aim to facilitate as editor of the *Bulletin*. My hope is to host something of a curated gathering of scholarly voices in its pages moving forward, to greet new readers and writers at the metaphorical door and help show them around the interdisciplinary field of religious studies, and to introduce and connect people so that they might more easily find other people they want to talk to. Come hang and invite others! I'll even make sure there's a good playlist going.