

## AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION SOUTHWEST REGION

### REPORT TO MEMBERSHIP

Greetings!

School is finally done and I have a few days in my study at home before heading out for the summer. Road trip: Jersey shore, here I come! My daughter has graduated from high school and will begin at University of Texas in the fall. I have retired from classroom teaching at The Hockaday School. Life is good! I'm writing to report to you what transpired at SWCRS this year and hopefully get you a little excited about what we've been doing and about next year's meeting.

The Southwest Region held its annual meeting March 13-15, 2015 at the Marriott DFW in Irving, Texas in conjunction with the three other organizations (SBL-SW, ASSR, and ASOR) that jointly compose the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies (SWCRS). The program comprised 24 sessions, including three special events for graduate students and one special session on Religion & Class, Joerg Rieger presiding. Attendance was down, off 8% (27 registrants) overall and 28% (25 registrants) for AAR. This decline represents a trend, as last year's attendance was down 4% (4 registrants). SBL attendance was the same this year as last. The plenary speaker was AAR Past President Laurie Zoloth, who spoke about sustainability. Because she was at the bedside of her ailing father in LA, she was unable to travel to Dallas. The plenary, then, was recorded and broadcast at the SWCRS meeting, the speech demonstrating one of her ideas about environmental sustainability and academic conferences: virtual meetings reduce the carbon footprint. She also emphasized regional meetings as not only intellectually vibrant but also as environmentally responsible. Laurie's speech can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7svMJnEoVFg&sns=em>

The meeting this year exhibited unprecedented support of graduate students.

- Last year AAR-SW agreed to support its Student Director's travel expenses for the national and regional meetings. This resulted in over \$800 of support.
- During the year AAR-SW officers Allen Redmon and Marc DiPaolo drafted the SWCRS "Guidelines for Presenters & Presiders," a document chiefly designed to inform new conference attendees.
- Because last year the SWCRS Directors agreed to invite the student director from each member society to observe the Directors Meeting, AAR-SW Student Director BJ Parker attended.
- Led and largely funded by AAR-SW, coordinated and financially supported by SWCRS, with additional financial support from SBL-SW and ASOR, a graduate luncheon on Saturday was provide for students who registered early. It entailed a much-discounted meal (\$8 cost to students, \$27 balance support by the societies) and brief remarks by the SWCRS Executive and each society's Regional Coordinator on optimizing the scholarly conference experience. From this very successful experiment, SWCRS decided to make this a permanent event and to take on most of the cost, asking each society to contribute nominally (~\$100).
- Saturday evening there was a special graduate student session over which BJ Parker presided on how to turn a seminar paper into a publication. This was followed by a graduate student reception hosted by SWCRS.

AAR-SW enjoyed great visibility throughout the SWCRS conference. It is AAR that is leading SWCRS initiatives and innovations. The AAR-SW Student Director was the first to attend a SWCRS Directors meeting as a pilot of this plan that will be fully implemented in 2016. AAR-SW was the force behind the graduate student luncheon and the several graduate student events, with both concept development and program funding. AAR-SW President-Elect Marc DiPaolo received the SWCRS Junior Scholar Grant to support his research this year. And AAR member Joerg Rieger, who inaugurated the AAR working group on Religion & Class and organized a special session of it for the regional meeting, was honored by SWCRS with the John Gammie Distinguished Scholar Award. AAR's influence on SWCRS far exceeds its registration numbers.

At the conclusion of SWCRS, representatives of the constituent societies met briefly to plan the 2016 meeting. There it was agreed to pilot a conference theme, one that each society will include in its CFP and its program planning. The hope is that the theme will unify the Commission, fostering inter-society dialogue and enhancing the overall program. The theme for 2016 will be Engaging Diversity. Another innovation for the 2016 meeting will be an exhibit of 3 paintings and a 15-piece graphic sequence, art created by AAR-SW Student Director BJ Parker. His works will be displayed in the main hallway and registration areas. This will bring some scholarly dialogue out of the session room and into the main concourse, as well as adding a visual component to the conference. The Commission will also look into publishing abstracts of papers and presentations online.

#### **Business meeting:**

The 2015 AAR-SW Business Meeting was held at the Marriott DFW at 7:00p on Friday, March 13. This was the second time the meeting was held the Friday evening before SWCRS rather than Sunday morning. Though attendance was better this year, it was decided to return to the brief Sunday morning Business Meeting format and to use the Friday evening time for specialized discussions.

- **Treasurer's Report:** AV & Tech expense remained low because the needs were provided by the Regional Coordinator's DFW-area school. AAR-SW contributed \$1000 to the graduate student luncheon and a special session coffee. The region support the Student Director expenses for travel to both the national and regional meetings. Plenary expenses were projected at \$650 but actually zero.
- **Policies & Procedures:** The committee made a brief report of the work to date, which was largely archival research. The Regional Coordinator agreed to take over the task and to present a draft of the document at the 2016 meeting.
- **New Business:** The Region discussed several significant questions and made three major decisions.
  - The first was that AAR-SW will provide financial support for the Regional Coordinator's expenses to travel to the national meeting if none is available from the affiliated institution. (The Region already supported regional meeting expenses.)
  - The second was that AAR-SW will apply for a Regional Development Grant to support a pre-SWCRS workshop for AAR-SW members to explore how the annual meeting might become more meaningful and membership in the society more useful. Subsumed under this decision were questions about differentiating and expanding the duties of the region's presidential line and program leadership, rationalizing the AAR programs and

working groups represented in the region, and creating an AAR-SW website to foster improved communication and year-round scholarly collaboration.

- The third decision was that AAR-SW will create a student paper prize and session around it. A CFP will go out with the region's call, students will submit papers in December, and the paper selected by the committee of readers will be featured in a special session at the meeting.

### **Meet Your Officers:**

As **Regional Coordinator: Katherine Downey, The Hockaday School**, Kathy serves as chief executive officer for the region, secretary and treasurer, and as liaison between the region the AAR. She participates in the annual Regions Committee meeting at the national conference in November, arranges for the AAR Plenary speaker, and attends the annual AAR-SW Business Meeting, the SWCRS Executive and Directors meetings, and participates in the SWCRS Graduate Student Luncheon as a speaker representing AAR. She is now serving the third year of a 3-year renewable-once term aligned with the fiscal year, July 1-June 30.

Kathy served previously on the presidential line and as program chair for the Arts, Literature, and Religion Section. She has written for *Religious Studies Review* and recently assumed responsibility as its Arts, Literature, Culture, and Religion editor. She collaborated with President-Elect Marc DiPaolo on *Godly Heretics: Essays on Alternative Christianity in Literature & Popular Culture*. Her book *Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama* reflects her interests in religion and literature religion and drama, biblical literature, cultural history, and axiology. She holds a PhD in Humanities and a MS in Management, and retired from classroom teaching at the end of this school year.

As **Past President: Allen Redmon, Texas A&M University, Central Texas**, Allen presides over the regions Policies & Procedures, reviewing, updating, and distributing them to the Executive committee, and serves as parliamentarian at the annual AAR-SW Business Meeting, also attending the SWCRS Directors meeting.

Allen affiliates with the Arts, Literature, and Religion Section. He is an associate professor of English and the Coordinator for the Interdisciplinary Film Studies Minor. Allen's recent research reflects his interest in cinematic representations of religion and the relationship film fosters with its audience. He has published in *The Journal of Religion and Film*, *Jura Gentium Cinema*, *Studies in French Cinema*, and *Contagion*. His new book *Constructing the Coens: From "Blood Simple: to "Inside Llewyn Davis,"* is garnering a lot of attention in various circles and is a fascinating read.

As **President: Jens Kreinath, Wichita State University**, Jens presides over the AAR-SW annual meeting Program and Business Meeting, attends the SWCRS Program Planning meeting, coordinates the AAR-SW Calls for Papers and program of sessions and papers, chairs the annual Business Meeting, and presides over the AAR Plenary, introducing its speaker.

Jens is Co-Chair of the Ritual Studies Group and serves on the steering committee of the Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion Group, both of the AAR. He is an associate professor of anthropology who teaches anthropology of religion with a thematic and regional focus on Islam and the Middle East. Jens's

most recent project is a collaboration among scholars working on ritual as a cultural resource for democratization, studying the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize nominee Choir of Civilization in Hatay, Turkey.

As **President-Elect: Marc DiPaolo, Oklahoma City University**, Marc presides over the AAR-SW Business Meeting Agenda and Minutes, calling for agenda items 30 days in advance of the meeting, publishing the agenda a week in advance of it, and taking minutes during the meeting to distribute them subsequently to the Executive Committee. He also attends the SWCRS Directors meeting.

Marc affiliates with the Arts, Literature, and Religion Section. He is an assistant professor of English and Film and Assistant Director of OCU's Honor Program. Marc's scholarship is inherently interdisciplinary, engaging traditional and popular religious expression. He has conceived and edited anthologies of essays by other AAR-SW scholars, Darren Middleton and Katherine Downey. His current project on comic book heroes received support from the SWCRS Junior Scholar Grant at the 2015 meeting.

As **Vice President: Paul Martens, Baylor University**, Paul attends the AAR-SW Business and the SWCRS Directors meetings.

Paul affiliates with the Ethics, Society, and Culture Section. He is an associate professor of Christian ethics and his research focuses on the thought of Soren Kierkegaard and issues surrounding Christian articulations of pacifism and just war, manifesting in four forthcoming books. Paul wrote the entry "Kierkegaard and the Bible" for the *Oxford handbook to Kierkegaard* and has recently published several articles. A prolific scholar, Paul is also the AAR-SW leadership's only ultramarathon runner.

As **Student Director: BJ Parker, Baylor University**, BJ serves as regional graduate student representative to both the regional and the national organizations. He attends the Graduate Students Committee and Regions Committee meetings at the national conference in November, and the annual AAR-SW Business Meeting as a voting member and the SWCRS Directors meeting as an observer. He programs the SWCRS Special Sessions for Graduate Students and participates in the SWCRS Student Luncheon. BJ is serving the second of his two-year non-renewable term.

BJ affiliates with the Arts, Literature, and Religion Section. He recently passed his comprehensive exams and is moving into the final dissertation phase of his PhD in Religion at Baylor University. BJ's research interests include the experience of suffering as articulated in the poetry of the Psalter as well as the convergence of visual art and biblical studies. He has published essay in *Review & Expositor, Digital Humanities Quarterly*, and the edited collection, *God and Popular Culture: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Entertainment Industry's Most Influential Figure*.

### **Challenges & Opportunities:**

- **Regional Leadership:** From a request for nominations disseminated before the business meeting, a very good candidate for the presidential line was nominated and then approved. This procedure will be added to the P&P documentation. In addition, the duties of each of the four offices on the presidential line will be expanded and differentiated so that they have meaning and heft. This will also have the effect of spreading the work of the region across more people and lighten the burden of the Regional Coordinator. The current Student Director recommends that the region nominate the successor at the beginning of Year 2 of the Director's term of service in order to allow the successor a year to shadow the current Director.

- Financial Management:** While the region’s commitment to support financially the travel expenses of both the Student Director and the Regional Coordinator, plus the SWCRS graduate student luncheon, reflects enthusiasm for this work and appreciation for those who do it, it also has the effect of consuming most of the \$2500 annual AAR subvention. An annual AAR-SW budget with these commitments might comprise the following, and actual expenses might easily exceed these estimates:

AAR-SW Meeting Expenses:

Student Director Travel & Hotel	\$ 400
Regional Coordinator Travel & Hotel	400
Graduate Student Luncheon	100
Plenary Speaker Travel & Hotel	600

AAR Meeting Expenses:

Student Director Travel & Hotel	500
Regional Coordinator Travel & Hotel	500
Total Budgeted Expenses	<u>\$2,500</u>

The region has a current balance of \$8300, enough to fund unusual expenses that arise or special program opportunities. But this is a balance that grew over the years from managing expenses to total less each year than the annual subvention.

- Regional Meeting Attendance:** The downward trend in AAR-SW participation in SWCRS despite Atlanta’s encouragement of regional meeting participation and the strong programming in recent years suggests the meeting and the regional society might need to confer more value and utility to members of the region.

The Southwest’s leadership team is active, enthusiastic, and innovative. The Report to Membership and several subsequent letters to the members from the Regional Coordinator created a few new SWCRS registrations and a couple new relationships. Our Past-President and Student Director will participate in the Regions Forum in Atlanta this November, and the Student Director will design the template for the Regions Posters that will display in the national meeting exhibits area what each region is doing. The P&P documentation mandate has fostered a revisiting of how we do things in the region, raising questions and prompting new and good approaches to what we do and how we do it. The region’s lively discussions have led us to propose a pre-SWCRS workshop to explore how the meeting and the society might serve our members more meaningfully and to seek a Regional Development Grant to support the workshop. Next year’s conference theme of Engaging with Diversity will challenge the region to think about equity, inclusion, and representation along a number of differentiations.

Serving in the role of Regional Coordinator was a profound pleasure for me again this year. I thoroughly enjoyed the Regions Committee meeting in San Diego and I am honored to have been nominated as a candidate to serve as its Director. My enthusiasm is always refreshed when I am in the company of the other Coordinators and our current Director, Susan Hill, as I am also and particularly when I spend the

weekend with the Southwest regional leadership team. Retired now from classroom teaching, I look forward to having more leisure to do more here.

Warmly,

Katherine Downey, Southwest Regional Coordinator