

EDITOR'S REPORT 2005-2006
SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: A QUARTERLY REVIEW

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I. Editorial Transition

I accepted the position of editor at the end of 2004, just prior to my arrival at Wake Forest University, and I began receiving manuscripts on September 1, 2005. The first issue for which I am responsible is the Spring 2007 issue (volume 68, number 1), which is due to the printer on September 15, 2006. Therefore, I had nine months to prepare to process manuscripts and 21 months before I had to worry about submitting an issue to the printer.

I commend my predecessor Nancy Nason-Clark for suggesting this long transition period because it has made moving the editorial office from the University of New Brunswick to Wake Forest University much easier. For example, I was able to use the transition time revising the "Notice to Contributors," designing a new web page for the journal, and consulting with many experienced individuals about how to best run the journal.

The Association for the Sociology of Religion council should consider maintaining this time line for editorial transitions in the future.

II. Changes to Policy and Practice

In the period leading up to receiving manuscripts, I made a number of changes to the editorial policy and practice of the journal. Prior to implementing these changes, I met with Fred Kniss and David Smilde of the ASR publication committee at the annual meeting in Philadelphia to receive their input on my proposed changes. It was not clear that any of these changes required the formal approval of the publication committee or ASR council, but neither Kniss nor Smilde objected to any of the proposed changes so I proceeded to implement them.

Notice to Contributors

It appears that the "Notice to Contributors" had not undergone any major revisions for at least 20 years. So, after reviewing the submission requirements of a dozen sociology journals, I drafted a new Notice. An abbreviated version of the Notice ran in the Spring 2006 issue and the full version can be viewed on the journal's website. I intend to run a full version of the Notice in the first issue of each volume of the journal. The vast majority of contributors since September 1, 2005 have already seen the new Notice, so its dissemination is proceeding quite nicely.

Most of the changes I made to the Notice are designed to make the review and copy-editing process go as quickly and easily as possible. Getting good quality and timely reviews is the biggest challenge I expect to face, and I want to be able to send reviewers manuscripts that will make their work as easy as

possible. Having consistent and meticulous formatting is important for this. Also, the minimal editorial assistance I have (likely only 8-10 hours per week) means that I will have to spend much of my time editing and copy-editing manuscripts. The less time I have to spend on dealing with formatting and stylistic problems, the better. In general, the changes in the Notice require authors to send in papers that articulate closely with what we will eventually send to the printer. The changes also bring the format of articles in *Sociology of Religion* more in line with that of official American Sociological Association publications and the ASA Style Guide.

With their manuscripts, authors are now required to submit a *checklist* on which they indicate that their submission corresponds to our requirements. Both the Notice and the checklist make clear that the editor reserves the right to return manuscripts that do not follow the journal's guidelines for manuscript preparation and submission (though I have yet to return any manuscripts for this reason).

Electronic Submission

Previously, the journal required four hard copies of manuscripts but no electronic copy in the initial submission stage. We now require submission of *three* hard copies and *require* electronic submission by email or on disc. The main reason for electronic submission is to facilitate the electronic transmission of manuscripts to reviewers. This is a more convenient way for many reviewers to receive manuscripts and will surely save the journal a considerable sum of money on postage. To wit: of the first 65 manuscripts we sent out, only 15 manuscripts (23 percent) were sent to reviewers in hard copy. The other 50 reviewers (77 percent) requested electronic copies. (We email each potential reviewer in advance asking them if they are able to do the review and, if so, how they would like to receive the manuscript.)

Because we are processing so many manuscripts electronically, I may at some point (out of environmental concern) change the submission criteria again to require that authors submit only *two* hard copies of their manuscripts. I do not know that it is realistic for us in the short term to go entirely paperless, but I can see that eventuality looming on the horizon.

Submission Fee

After reviewing the submission fees at a number of other sociology journals, I reduced our submission fee from \$25 to \$15 for nonmembers of the ASR. This change brings the fee in line with other journals, including the *Review of Religious Research*, though it would still be higher than *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. It keys the submission fee to the ASR's student/low income membership rate, so if that were to rise, we could increase the submission fee accordingly.

One concern with this change was that a lower submission fee might screen out fewer marginal submissions. Thus far, I can see no clear relationship between paying the \$15 submission fee and submitting less adequate manuscripts. Of the manuscripts that I editorially "deflected" – those that had such serious problems that I did not send them out for peer review – nine were by ASR members and eight were by individuals who paid the submission fee. So, free submission for ASR members may generate more problematic manuscripts than the lowered submission fee for nonmembers.

One question the publication committee and/or council should consider is whether to allow credit card payment of the submission fee, perhaps only for scholars outside the United States. My sense from some, particularly those in Eastern Europe, is that sending in a payment in U.S. funds is difficult.

Editorial Board

As I was trying to determine how many new associate editor appointments I would need to make, I

noted considerable variation in the number of associate editors and their length of service over the past few editorial regimes. From volume 42 to volume 67, there have been as few as eight associate editors and as many as 16. Recent associate editors have served for as few as three and as many as eight years and counting. Although I appreciate having flexibility in running the journal, this variation in the size of the editorial board and terms of service of the associate editors creates some uncertainty and may limit the participation of ASR members in the editorial operation of the journal.

It seems to me that associate editors not only serve the editor, but they also represent the membership's interests with the editor. Consistent size and fixed terms maximize that representation. So, for my term at least, I have expanded the editorial board to 18 members. I have also asked every associate editor I appointed to provide around six high quality and timely manuscript reviews for the journal per year, including manuscripts that fall outside their particular areas of specialization if necessary. Thus, it should be possible for an associate editor to act as one of the reviewers for every submission to *Sociology of Religion* (18 editors x 6 reviews per year = 108 reviews; the journal currently receives 60-80 manuscripts per year).

I have also established a three-year term of office for associate editors (with discretion to re-appoint individuals for a second three-year term). The terms of office will be staggered or "laddered" so that one third of the board will rotate off each year and the entire board will be entirely refreshed every fourth year. (This is standard practice for the editorial boards of the two American Sociological Association journals on which I have served.)

In order to put this system in place, I had to hold over six members of the previous editorial board for a one-year term, appoint six new associate editors for two-year terms, and appoint six associate editors for three-year terms. The associate editors who will comprise the editorial board beginning in September 2006 are listed in Appendix 1. If this practice goes well, I hope the next editor of the journal will continue it. Thereafter, the ASR council may want to formalize the practice.

III. Design Changes

As sociologists, we know that self-presentation matters; therefore, I want *Sociology of Religion* to have a consistent, attractive, and professional self-presentation. To that end, I pursued the design of a new masthead ("logo") for the journal. The journal has had the same basic cover design for almost 20 years, since the Spring 1989 issue (when the journal was still called *Sociological Analysis*). Although there is nothing particular wrong with it, there is also nothing particularly compelling about it (in my view).

Through a departmental colleague, I found a freelance graphic designer, Marcia Underwood, who was willing to undertake the project and charged about half of what my university's design department would have charged for the work. We met to discuss the journal's history, content, and audience, and I showed her samples of a number of sociology journals, including *JSSR*, *RRR*, *ASR*, *AJS*, and *Social Forces*. She came up with four designs, which I circulated to the publication committee and the ASR council. I used their responses and my own judgement to narrow the selections to two possibilities, which I re-circulated. Finally, one design received more support, and it will be in use with the first issue of 2007. The new design is also being used for the journal's stationery and on the journal's web page.

The final total cost of the journal redesign was \$465, which includes the cost of communicating with Indiana University Printing to ensure safe conveyance of the design to them and preparing graphics for use on the journal's web page.

IV. Journal Web Page

Having an attractive, dynamic presence on the World Wide Web is becoming increasingly important. Previously, the journal's web presence was limited to a page on the ASR's web site (www.sociologyofreligion.com). I wanted the journal to have its own web site that would act both as a marketing tool and a central vehicle for disseminating important information about the journal. I imagined a site that would include a description of the journal, submission information, information for reviewers, the table of contents for the current and recent past issues, a list of past editors and current editorial board members, and information about the ASR. The web site for the *American Sociological Review* was a model for me (www.asanet.org/journals/asr).

In the summer of 2005, I designed such a site, paid \$8.88 to namebargain.com to register the domain name (www.sorjournal.org), and arranged for Wake Forest University to host the site. Thus, there was no start-up cost to the ASR for the web site, although *I hope the ASR will agree to pay the annual domain registration fee from now on.*

After asking members of the publication committee and editorial board to review the site, it went on-line in October 2005. Almost everyone who has submitted a manuscript for consideration since then has downloaded the required "submission checklist" from the site, and I refer as many inquiries about the journal as possible to the site. Thus far, I have not received word of any problems accessing the site or its contents.

In the spring of 2006, a major redesign of the web page was undertaken by Benjamin Sinclair, an undergraduate at Wake Forest University who served as an editorial intern. The redesign brought the font and color scheme in line with the journal's new design and improved the functionality throughout. I hope to launch that redesigned website in late July or early August of this year. *I hope ASR council members and others will explore the site (www.sorjournal.org) and give me their feedback on its aesthetics and functionality as it is very much a work in progress.*

V. Staff Support

Book Review Editor

I am happy to report that Jerome Baggett of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley is serving as book review editor. He reports that in December 2005 he received 30 books from the office of Lori Beaman, his predecessor as book review editor. Since that time, he has received an additional 76 books from publishers (often, especially at the outset, though direct request). Of this total, he has sent 40 books to various scholars located mostly throughout the United States and, as of this writing, has received 14 completed reviews. For the presidential issue to be published next year, he has assembled a thematic book review section.

According to Baggett, "Everything seems to be moving ahead smoothly. I try to err on the side of having more reviews available to me rather than less insofar as I am not yet entirely sure of how responsive colleagues are to writing deadlines of this sort. Also, I suspect that, in coordination with the editor, I will be attentive to possibilities for acquiring reviews of books focused on a particular thematic or topical area, and publish these within a single (perhaps 'special') issue of the journal. Lastly, and most obviously, my goal is to continue the journal's tradition of reviewing high quality books on a wide range of topics and reviewed by thoughtful and purposefully selected colleagues."

Editorial Assistance

Margaret Polzer is acting as a managing editor of sorts. She began working as a paid assistant in May 2006, and her commitment will increase each month as the share of the assistant funds flowing from

the executive office to New Brunswick diminishes over the course of this year. When her position is fully-funded at the end of 2006, I expect her to work 8-10 hours a week (on average) for the journal.

My department is allowing me to give independent study credit to undergraduate students who work as editorial interns for the journal. In the spring, I was greatly assisted by four undergraduates, Benjamin Sinclair, Molly Averitt, Lauren Peterson, and Greg Seltzer. This summer, Lauren Henderson is our sole intern. And in the fall, Henderson and Adam Abelkop will serve as interns. Each intern works about 4.5 hours per week.

VI. Editorial Activity

Because we began receiving manuscripts on September 1, 2005 and this report is due July 15, 2006, the information in this section covers the 10 month period from September 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006. In future years, this report will cover a full 12 months from July 1 of one year through June 30 of the next. The information in this section is summarized in Table 1 (below).

Manuscript Flow

As Table 1 documents, we received 66 new manuscripts over the past 10 months. 60 of these were “regular” submissions, five came in as part of a special issue on “Muslim Integration in Cross-National Perspective” (for which Jen’nan Ghazal Read of UC-Irvine is acting as guest editor), and one manuscript was submitted at my request. Because manuscripts do not come to us evenly throughout the year, it is difficult to annualize this number, but assuming no extreme seasonal variation in the regular submissions, we expect to receive about 72 unsolicited manuscripts in our first year.

By comparison, Nancy Nason-Clark reported receiving 68 total manuscripts (62 regular submissions and six solicited as part of a special issue) in 2003-2004, and 59 total manuscripts (47 regular submissions and 12 solicited for special issues) in 2004-2005.

Acceptance Rates

There are many ways of calculating acceptance rates, but the most conventional is the number of papers accepted for publication divided by the number of decisions rendered. Using this measure, our official acceptance rate for our first 10 months of operation is 18 percent (nine acceptances out of 50 decisions, including conditional acceptances).

This, however, inflates somewhat an individual’s chances of having an article accepted for publication because it includes manuscripts submitted as part of a special issue and a manuscript commissioned by the editor. Counting only regular submissions, the acceptance rate falls to just 6.8 percent (three acceptances out of 44 decisions).

As editor, I have attempted to be very pro-active in rejecting sub-par manuscripts prior to peer review (I call these in-house rejections “deflections”). Nothing frustrated me more as a reviewer (including for top-tier journals like *American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology*) than receiving a manuscript that I thought should have been deflected by the editor. Because peer reviewers are our most valuable asset, I want to use them as carefully as possible. Therefore, I have made it a policy to read very closely every manuscript that is submitted prior to sending it out for peer review. If I find fundamental flaws in the manuscript, I reject it myself and offer the author extensive comments (which are tantamount to a peer review).

What, then, does our acceptance rate look like if we factor out these deflections? It is much higher. Including special issues and papers, we have accepted nine out of 33 non-deflect papers, a 27.2 percent acceptance rate. Excluding special issues and papers, our acceptance rate for articles that make it to

the peer review stage is 11.1 percent.

Whether acceptance rates this low are sustainable over the long run given the number of manuscripts we receive annually is not clear. When I served on the editorial board of the *American Sociological Review*, the acceptance rate there had dropped below 10 percent for a time and the editors warned that the rate was too low. I am insulated from this problem somewhat in the short run because two of the issues in 2007 will have come to me pre-packaged as special issues (the presidential issue carried over from Nancy Nason-Clark and the special issue on Muslim integration on which I am currently working with Jen'nan Read).

Editorial Lag

In my incoming message as editor (available on the journal website), I write, "It is my goal for *Sociology of Religion* that an editorial decision be made within 16 weeks (four months) of receiving a manuscript." This is not as fast as journals like the *American Sociological Review* (average editorial lag = 9.7 weeks for 2005) or the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (10.3 weeks), but it is nonetheless a reasonable – and I hope attractive – lag time for potential contributors.

I am happy to report that in over our first 10 months, our editorial lag time was just 9.6 weeks for all manuscripts we received that met our submission requirements. Considering only those manuscripts that received peer review (i.e., excluding "deflections"), the lag time was still only 12.8 weeks. The average editorial lag for deflected papers was 2.65 weeks.

We work very hard in-house to achieve this, but we are also aided immeasurably by the efforts of our reviewers. When we request reviews, we ask that they be returned within six weeks. Thus far, reviewers have been very good in submitting their reviews within this time frame. The average lag between us sending a paper out for review and receiving that review is just 4.6 weeks (for about 75 reviews that have come in thus far).

Although I wonder whether I am experiencing a "honeymoon" period as editor, I do believe that our practice of asking reviewers ahead of time whether they can complete a review within six weeks helps. Of course, asking ahead of time allows a person to say "no" when they might do a review if they simply received the manuscript in the mail. But since September 1, 2005, about 90 percent of reviewers we have contacted have agreed to provide reviews. Although not every review comes in within six weeks, only one person has failed to complete a review after having committed to doing so.

I have also consciously sought out advanced graduate students to do reviews. This is not only a good form of professional socialization for them, but it also takes advantage of their cutting-edge knowledge of theory, methods, and subject matter, as well as their enthusiasm for the work. In general, I have found their reviews to be at least as good as those by faculty members.

Table 1. Summary of Editorial Activity, September 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006

A. Manuscripts Considered		72
1. Submitted to Yamane	66	
a. New Manuscripts	59	
b. Revised Manuscripts	7	
2. Carried Over from Nason-Clark	6 [*]	
B. Review Process		
1. Screened by Editor/Accepted for Review (Regular Submissions)		43
a. Rejected outright	6	
b. Rejected - revise and resubmit	18	
c. Conditional acceptance	3	
d. Outright acceptance	0	
e. Withdrawn	0	
f. Pending	16	
2. Special Issue Papers Accepted for Publication		11
3. Papers Commissioned by Editor Accepted for Publication		1
4. Screened by Editor/Rejected (Regular Submissions)		17
C. Acceptance Rates/Regular Submissions		
1. Papers Accepted/All Decisions ^{**}		6.8%
2. Papers Accepted/Non-deflect Decisions ^{**}		11.1%
D. Acceptance Rates/All Submissions (incl. special issues & papers)		
1. Paper Accepted/All Decisions ^{**}		18.0%
2. Papers Accepted/Non-deflect Decisions ^{**}		27.2%
E. Editorial Lag		
1. All Manuscripts		9.6 weeks
2. Peer-Reviewed Manuscripts		12.8 weeks
F. Reviewer Lag		
N = 75 reviews		4.6 weeks

^{*} Presidential Issue from 2005 annual meeting, N.J. Demerath, guest editor.

^{**} Includes conditional acceptances, but excludes Presidential Issue carried over from previous editor.

Appendix 1: **Associate Editors**

Carried over from previous board, serving through August 2007:

John Bartkowski (Mississippi State University)
Peter Beyer (University of Ottawa)
James Cavendish (University of South Florida)
Lorne Dawson (University of Waterloo)
Harriet Hartman (Rowan University)
Lutz Kaelber (University of Vermont)

Serving two year terms running from September 2006 through August 2008:

Antony Alumkal (Ilf School of Theology)
Graeme Lang (City University of Hong Kong)
Lina Molokotos-Liederman (Exeter University)
David Smilde (University of Georgia)
Melissa Wilcox (Whitman College)
Melissa Wilde (University of Pennsylvania)

Serving three year terms running from September 2006 through August 2009:

Anthony Blasi (Tennessee State University)
Omar McRoberts (University of Chicago)
Bill Mirola (Marian College)
Margarita Mooney (Princeton University)
Jen'nan Ghazal Read (University of California-Irvine)
Phil Zuckerman (Pitzer College)