



## **NSRN Events Report**

*Religion in Public Life:*  
Report on the Annual Meeting of the  
American Academy of Religion, Western Region

Report by Kristy L. Slominski, University of California, Santa Barbara

Event Details:

March 9-11, 2013

Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ

Sponsored by the American Academy of Religion and Arizona State University

## **PARTICIPANTS<sup>1</sup>**

Dr. Amina Wadud (Plenary Address), Professor Emerita of Islamic Studies and Visiting Scholar at the Starr King School for the Ministry, Graduate Theological Union  
*Muslim Women in the New Millennium: Many Roads to Justice*

Jodie Baird, Arizona State University  
*A Feast of the Senses: Helping Students become More Conscientious Consumers of Religion in American Popular Culture*

Stephanie Bilinsky, Arizona State University  
*“Two Distinct Forms of Civilization”: Voodoo and Negotiating National Identity and the Exotic in New Orleans City Guides*

Michael Broyles, Arizona State University  
*Sound Recording as Text and Expanding Hermeneutics: Learning from the Discourse on Religion and American Blues Music*

Dr. Anna Hennessey, California State University, East Bay  
*Secularizing Goddess Imagery, and Birth as a Nonreligious Rite of Passage*

Dr. Christina Littlefield, Pepperdine University  
*Chosenness and Civic Patriotism in Late Nineteenth Century England and the United States*

Dr. Bret Lewis, Loyola University Chicago and Crystal Lopez, Arizona State University  
*Politics and Perceptions of Religious Studies: The Arizona Legislature and the Bible Class Initiative*

Takashi Miura, Princeton University  
*Upholding a Catfish as a Public Religious Symbol: Interpretations of the 1855 Ansei Great Earthquake in Edo and Representations of the “Earthquake Catfish”*

Dr. Keith Pacholl, University of West Georgia  
*“A Very Advantageous Vehicle”: Marketing Religion in Eighteenth-Century American Periodicals*

Sean Sagan, University of California, Riverside  
*The Impact of Popular Secularism in Religious Studies Classrooms*

Kristy L. Slominski, University of California, Santa Barbara  
*Alliances of Ministers, Physicians, and Educators in the History of American Sex Education*

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Conference Program for a full list of participants.

Dr. Konden Smith, Arizona State University  
*Approaching the Secular in a Post Secular America: Correlating Critical Thought and (Non) Faith in the Classroom*

Allison Solso, University of California, Riverside  
*Roadside Shrines in 19th Century America: The Contest of Space*

Dr. Evelyn Sterne, University of Rhode Island  
*"It is Not the Ballot Box You Need?": New Hampshire's First Fruit Harvesters and the Evangelical Debate over Progressive Era Public Life*

## **NSRN Report**

*Religion in Public Life:*

Report on the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Western Region

Kristy L. Slominski<sup>2</sup>

Several scholarly trends have contributed to a renewed interest in studying religion in public life. The push to study religion on the ground—referred to variously as “lived religion,” “everyday religion,” and “vernacular religion”—has led scholars to look for religion beyond traditional religious institutions, from people’s homes to the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> A parallel and somewhat overlapping trend that has expanded our understanding of religion outside of traditional religious institutions is the shift from a focus on beliefs to a focus on practices, which has highlighted religious experiences, embodiment, rituals, and a wide range of religiously meaningful actions.<sup>4</sup> The study of religious difference, including the diversity within religions and religious pluralism, has also brought attention to the ways in which religious people interact in public life and to the conditions of public life that foster specific forms of religious interaction. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, studies of secularity and nonreligion have contributed to understanding religion in relation to secular spaces and trends “for which religion is not the primary reference point” and in relation to nonreligious things that are “primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kristy L. Slominski is a doctoral candidate in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, researching the twentieth-century translation of religious concepts into the secular spaces and discourses of American sex education.

<sup>3</sup> See work by Leonard Norman Primiano, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 37–56; David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America* (1997); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Everyday Religion* (2007); Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, eds., *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life* (2012).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Lois Lee, “Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Nonreligion Studies,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 1 (2012): 135-6.

The 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Western Region (AAR-WR), synthesized a number of these trends in its conference theme, “Religion in Public Life.” Held from March 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, the conference brought together approximately one hundred and fifty scholars of religion representing over fifty institutions. With the conference theme calling for scholars to contemplate the various ways in which religion interacts with the public sphere, and for example, whether we have the tendency to grant some status to certain public expressions of religion and not to others, many of the thirty-two panels hosted brought original research to the topic. Some of these panel units included: History of Christianity, Queer Studies in Religion, Ethics, Religions of Asia, Asian American Religious Studies, Catholic Studies, Religion and the Arts, Goddess Studies, and Religion and Social Sciences. Individual papers on religion and public life were also integrated into other panels, such as those organized by the units of Islamic Studies, Religion in America, Education and Workshops, and Psychology, Culture and Religion. This report will highlight some of the contributions shared at this conference on the theme of religion in public life, with particular attention to contributions on secularity.

### ***MEDIA FOR PUBLIC TRANSMISSION***

Understanding religion in public life requires some comprehension of the channels through which religion operates within public life. This includes media that transmit religion to wider audiences, including secular forms of mass communication. Keith Pacholl’s paper on religious marketing demonstrated that eighteenth-century American secular periodicals acted in an extremely advantageous manner as a vehicle for the distribution of sermons, the advertising of Bibles, and the marketing of a variety of religious events. In addition to spreading religious information, the growth of American periodicals, Pacholl argued, also spread a consumer mentality that influenced the ways in which people thought about religious choices. Pacholl’s research contribution serves as an important reminder that secular media do more than just transmit religious messages; they also act upon these messages, transforming them in new and often unexpected ways. Stephanie Bilinsky’s paper on racial and religious images of voodoo within historical city guidebooks for New Orleans similarly showed that printed materials have the capacity to reflect cultural debates and serve as an important arena for shaping these debates. She discussed how the creators of guidebooks attempted to rewrite both New Orleans’ history and its present in order to make it seem “more American” after the Louisiana Purchase. They did this by downplaying the images of voodoo and slavery associated with the city and by employing dominant discourses of race, religion, and nationality. Both papers indicated that secular print media contribute to religion in public life as both products and producers of culture, with the potential to communicate and reshape religious messages, religious mentalities, and narratives of religious histories.

Religion is also expressed to the public through a variety of non-print media, which challenge scholars to adapt interpretative tools in order to understand the non-textual aspects of religion being conveyed. It was in this vein that Michael Broyles’ presented a hermeneutical approach to religion using sound recordings of American Blues music,

building upon previous scholarship from theomusicology. In addition to analyzing the elements within the recordings, Broyles recommended studying the religious intentionality of musicians and others involved in the music's production by examining the conditions under which the recording was made and situating the recording within its larger religio-cultural context. This example suggests that the secular media of music and music recordings can serve as important *contexts* for religious productions and places where religious and secular influences can intermingle. This same type of intermingling became apparent in the research of Allison Solso's paper on nineteenth-century roadside shrines. Solso showed that these public memorials acted as sites through which religious participants expressed and negotiated sacred and profane meanings surrounding death. Her case studies of roadside shrines, such as the shrine to Mormon pioneer Rebecca Winters, also suggest that the location of these expressions on public land and the replacement of local versions of shrines with government-issued memorials can complicate the borders between church and state. These studies of non-print media for religious expression lead to more nuanced understandings of religious practices and the material objects that express, absorb, or mediate religion in public life.

While the narrative of the religious transforming secular media is familiar to religious studies scholars, what is less familiar is the narrative of the secular transforming religious media. Anna Hennessey's paper explored secular uses of goddess imagery for the visualization of, and preparation for, labor and birth. Hennessey's discussion of the secular in relation to individual, embodied experiences is an important addition to scholarship that tends to focus on the societal and ideological dimensions of the secular. Her research indicated a trend among pregnant women, and the childbirth educators, midwives, and doulas who guide them, of utilizing images of goddesses on the one hand for practical meanings related to childbirth—especially for their depiction of labor positions—rather than divine meanings related to their original religious contexts. However, even as these images are stripped of their original religious significance, their ritualistic use in the birthing process actually helps to sacralize birth as a rite of passage, ultimately leading to the re-sacralization of the images. Her paper pointed to the complexity of the dialectic between the religious and the secular, as well as to the power that interpretations and practices have in shaping the dynamic processes that secularize or sacralize objects and events. Another paper that highlighted the secularization of a religious symbol was Takashi Miura's historical study of the "earthquake catfish." His paper discussed how the Japanese religious figure of the catfish, originally considered a spirit existing beneath the earth's surface, was secularized through its widespread association with the 1855 earthquake in Edo (present-day Tokyo). Although at first blamed for the city's destruction, the earthquake catfish became a secular public symbol for the economic reinvigoration that followed during the rebuilding of the city. It also became associated with the redistribution of wealth that was required by law after the natural disaster. These secular significations of the catfish appeared in popular block prints, representing the transformation of religious symbols to encompass social changes beyond the religious sphere.

## ***RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLITICS***

Several talks concerned the significant way in which religion engages with public life through involvement in politics. Evelyn Sterne's paper on the First Fruit Harvesters, a restorationist Christian group started in late-nineteenth century New Hampshire, illustrated the common Christian tension between separating from the rest of society and engaging society with their religious vision. This group balanced separatist discourses with a religiously motivated charge to engage in public life through the ballot box. The case of this conservative evangelical group, which was particularly active in progressive campaigns for child welfare legislation in the early twentieth century, also serves as a reminder of the diversity among evangelicals. Sterne suggested that the Harvesters engaged more liberally in their politics when compared to other conservative evangelicals of the time, in part due to their location within the politically liberal Northeast. In a paper comparing late-nineteenth century Social Gospel proponents in England and the United States, Christina Littlefield offered further insight into some of the religious justifications for progressive political engagement. Christian Social Gospelers in both locations combined a belief that God had chosen them to carry out divine plans with an understanding that this chosenness came with civic responsibilities. Their calls for Christian political engagement ranged from encouraging people to vote, to pressuring qualified Christians to run for office. This combination of chosenness and civic responsibilities, according to Littlefield, supported new forms of civic patriotism. For both the Harvesters and the Social Gospelers, engagement with secular politics became religiously meaningful, extending their repertoire of religious practices and their understandings of themselves as religious actors.

In addition to government politics, the conference also included discussions of cultural and religious politics. Amina Wadud's plenary address, entitled "Muslim Women in the New Millennium: Many Roads to Justice," shed light on the diversity of feminist approaches to gender reform within Islam. She discussed the tension that has existed between secular Muslim feminists and Islamist feminists. The former, explained Wadud, frame their mission as one related to human rights and turn to international organizations like the United Nations as sources of authority, whereas the latter define their mission as Islamic, turning to religious tradition as sources of authority. Proponents of a third feminist approach have also emerged to critique this polarization between religious and human rights frameworks; this insistence that human rights approaches can coexist with religious approaches within Muslim feminism has resulted in the shunning of this third approach by both secular Muslim feminists and Islamist feminists alike. Wadud then discussed efforts to determine Islam's intentions for women and social justice. Some Muslim feminists have attempted to separate divine meanings from secular meanings within Islamic tradition, especially as pertains to secular constructions of gender associated with patriarchal cultures. In addition to distinguishing the core of Islam from its cultural packaging, another feminist approach has been to mine Islam's core concepts for their implications for gender equality. For example, Wadud argued that the Islamic concept of *tawhid*, which refers to monotheism, contains three dimensions that are significant for understanding God's intentions for women. These include the understanding that God is above gender, and therefore not limited by gender; that God is

united, without distinction or contradiction; and that God unites all people, and therefore no one person has greater humanity than any other. Overall, her plenary address pointed to lively and complex interaction between religious and secular feminist visions, identities, and approaches to public social change.

### ***RELIGION AND PUBLIC EDUCATION***

One of the most prominent aspects of the conference theme related to a discussion of religion and public education in America. Paper topics ranged from discussions on religious influences on public education to examinations of the study and teaching of religion within public institutions of higher education, the latter of which concerns most religious studies scholars at some level. Since the relationships between religion and public school education are defined by religious disestablishment in America, these scholarly conversations help to illuminate what church-state separation looks like in practice, as well as the various ways in which religion enters the secular sphere of public education. Crystal Lopez and Bret Lewis's co-authored paper explored recent efforts to make religion more visible within public education. They discussed the Arizona legislature's approval of a bill to develop a course on the Bible and its influence on Western culture. The course will be allowed as an elective in public high schools. After pointing out the symbolic territory that public schools represent in relation to religious expression and "Christian Americanism," Lopez and Lewis examined the range of influences that congressmen attributed to their votes, which included religious reasons, democratic reasons, interpretations of church-state separation, and understandings of religious liberty. They also acknowledged problems that this course poses, including the privileging of Christianity and the lack of training that high school teachers receive in the secular teaching of religion. Ultimately, Lopez and Lewis pointed to the important role that religious studies scholars have to play in these cultural developments, suggesting that scholars should continue to develop guidelines for teachers and curriculum designers, thereby aiding the public in its understanding of the academic study of religion. Kristy Slominski's paper on the alliances of ministers, physicians, and educators within early-twentieth-century campaigns for sex education pointed to the many cultural frameworks that shaped early sex education, including religious, medical, educational, racial, and national discourses around sexuality. In practice, this meant that the Christian sex educators within the early campaigns—who were religiously motivated to stop the "sexual sins" associated with venereal diseases—often translated their goals into the secular, scientific language of public health in order to gain authority both among secular allies and within public education. This suggests that religious people can be quite flexible in their strategies for influencing the public sphere with their beliefs and practices, even though some strategies result in the decrease of surface-level religious visibility.

The papers that addressed the teaching of religion within public institutions of higher education remind religious studies scholars that they are primary instruments for bringing the topic of religion into public education, and that their students may go on to impact religion in public life. For these reasons, pedagogical approaches of the religious studies scholar require careful reflection. Konden Smith's paper encourages thought about how

students' prior knowledge from religious contexts inevitably shapes their learning within the religious studies classroom. In line with theories of learning and pedagogical developments from other disciplines, Smith proposes a student-centered classroom that acknowledges students' cognitive and affective responses to religious studies material, utilizing these responses to further their learning experience. Given the history of religious studies, which has typically encouraged a more objectified view of religion within research and has struggled with the role of faith and affect in the classroom, Smith's approach seems particularly appropriate. His discussions suggest that, as much as religious studies instructors at public institutions have attempted to separate the teaching *of* religion from their secular teaching *about* religion, religions are alive within classrooms, and perhaps especially within the affective responses and interpretative frameworks that many students draw upon to understand new material about religion. Dismissing these as religious intrusions, rather than as teaching tools, might lead to missing an important opportunity of engaging students' learning processes and improving their understandings of religion.

Other papers addressing pedagogical issues discussed how popular discourses about religion can create problems and opportunities. Sean Sagan's paper discussed the tensions caused by popular secularism, and particularly the writings of Richard Dawkins and other atheist writers, within religious studies classrooms. Sagan argued that these popular discourses of atheism can become "corrosive discourses," a term from Bruce Lincoln, because they spread reductive views of religion and lead students to hold religion in disregard. To prevent students from conflating Dawkins' arguments on religion and his approach to secularity with the secular, academic study of religion, Sagan recommends that instructors address and contextualize this popular secularism within their courses. To counteract reductive views of religion, he suggests teaching the dimensions of religion outlined by Ninian Smart. Jodie Baird also presented a paper that addressed ways to prepare students for critically engaging with popular representations of religion in their everyday lives. Her pedagogical approach focused on shaping students to be "conscientious consumers" of religion in popular culture, with an emphasis on building students' skill sets so that they can analyze examples of religion encountered outside of the classroom. She suggested several benefits of teaching examples of popular culture in religious studies courses, including increased interest by students who are not religious studies majors. Popular culture examples are also instructive, explained Baird, because they often bring together clashing sacred and profane elements for humor or shock, such as the "Jesus is my homeboy" t-shirts and the many irreverent scenarios with religious characters on *South Park*. Both Sagan and Baird suggested both that the study of the secular is significant in learning more about religion, and that the religious studies classroom is an important space through which people become prepared to encounter and understand religion in public life. The abundance of pedagogical papers at this conference also served as a reminder that religious studies scholars offer important academic contributions to the public understanding of religion, both as teachers and as researchers.