

# eREACH

5.1

January 2015



Reflecting on our Chicago meeting  
Standing room only at AAR session  
Theme for November 2015 announced

## From our President, Mai-Anh Le Tran

If I had been more connected to the mind of Northwestern University's bioethicist Laurie Zoloth, then I might have been remembered for being the Program Chair who attempted to propose the cancellation of the 2014 Annual Meeting of REA:APPRRE.

Dr. Zoloth, in her presidential address to the American Academy of Religion (AAR) this past November in San Diego, California, challenged the guild of learned scholars to consider taking a year off of conference attendance. The premise was provocative: Imagine the economic and carbon footprints and their chafing effects on the planet each time nearly 10,000 religion scholars descend upon some city for a five-day spectacle of academic discourse and networking. What if we were to observe the Jewish concept of *shmita* and take a year of Sabbatical "release" from conference globetrotting, and instead turn to our local neighbors for conversations—"the poor, in local high schools, community colleges, or the prison, the hospital, the military base, the church, mosque, synagogue or temple"?

An "REA Sabbatical Year"—a relished thought in the aftermath of a tensely organized and administered Annual Meeting for our modest-sized yet ever-robust organization. To be sure, REA 2015 will occur in Atlanta under the diligent leadership of Harold (Bud) Horell, professor of Religious Education at Fordham University. The next *shmita* year is not until 2021, and it would be as thorny to get 350 scholars to cancel their annual

conferencing ritual, as it would be for 10,000 to walk out on the world's largest religion marketplace.

Zoloth's moral challenge is a serious one, however, especially for those of us who return from academic conferences to communities writhing in collective pain. Protest movements across major U.S. cities in recent months speak loudly: the notion of shutting down establishments (#SHUTITDOWN) that no longer serve equitable public good is much more than a tongue-in-cheek thought experiment about bureaucratic down-sizing. The notion of canceling an academic conference is much more than flippant attitude about the cost-benefits or personal inconveniences of annual professional meetings. Why do we gather, and what are the "material consequences" of our gathering?

In retrospect, the 180 of us who met in Oak Brook/Chicago for the 2014 REA:APPRRE Meeting did wrestle with Zoloth's challenge in various ways. The Thursday pre-conference workshop led by Eileen Daily, Mary Hess and Daniella Zsupan-Jerome engaged issues of digital presence in social media, instructional technology, and environmental activism. There were virtual and actual footprints to this exploration, as some scoured the web and others trekked out to Illinois's Deer Creek, located just behind the conference hotel.

On Saturday morning, over 60 of us filed into two yellow school buses to learn from local neighbors about their work in the streets, schools, courts, and prisons of Chicago. For some, that experience was the highlight of the conference, for Religious Education scholars understand the importance of connecting macro issues to micro realities. Those field trips were unconventional to our conference schedules, and inordinately time-consuming to coordinate, but we know as educators that insights from the field enliven our academic questions. Imagine engaging with organizers of the John Marshall Law School's Restorative Justice Program, with the incisive questions posed by speaker Willie James Jennings in the back of our minds:

- How might we educate against the specific seductive powers of the weapon and especially the gun?
- How might we detect and begin to address the pedagogical imperialism at work in our institution and in the formation processes we engage students in?
- How might we challenge the sanctioned ubiquity and normalization of black death and how that normalization is coordinated through the distribution of bodies in the geographic spaces of neighborhoods and communities?

Equally "outside-the-box" for this year's conference was the [experimental video](#) produced by plenary speaker Andrea Bieler of Wuppertal, Germany. The motivation behind it would make Zoloth proud: we were looking for ways for Bieler to participate in the conference without having to fly half way around the world. Energetic brainstorming and painstaking work months in advance resulted in a compelling video presentation on "[Remembering Violence: Risky Pedagogies and Contested Aesthetics](#)"—an original, transnational, intercultural, interdisciplinary collaboration between a practical theologian, a filmmaker, a jazz musician, and an author-speaker-dancer (Angel F. Méndez-Montoya of Mexico).

On the flipside, after viewing the video, some of us wished that Andrea Bieler had been present at the conference for interaction. There lies the dilemma to Zoloth's evocative proposal, which she also acknowledges. Beyond valuing the kinesthetic power of "embodied pedagogy," we believe that intimate gatherings like REA's offer added value to presence.

Over the course of four days, we constituted a body of collective inquiry, engaged with one another in our full senses.

The conference was formally opened with a video performance by artist Anida Yoeu Ali. Her piece, entitled "[Palimpsest](#)," along with drumming offered by the [Tsukasa Taiko Drummers](#), and compelling visuals provided by the newly formed Art and Ritual Team (Courtney Goto, Yolanda Smith, Tamar Wasoian, Barbara Javore, and Virginia Lee), underlined the power of aesthetics to awaken the senses, a power which flowed throughout the weekend. Saturday evening culminated with a stunning live performance of the one-woman play "[Unveiled](#)," by Rohina Malik, which shook us viscerally as well as provoking laughter and tears.

We met colleagues from so many parts of the world, from vastly different contexts and communities of practice, and were reminded that the REA has been and must continue to become even more international, intercultural, interreligious, and institutional. This year alone, there were first-time attendees from Germany, Indonesia, Korea, Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Overall we had 183 attendees, of whom 68 were students. 32 of our participants came from nine countries outside of the US, and 54 participants identified themselves as practitioners. 85 presenters (of whom 35 were students), were chosen in a blind peer review process, and gave 75 presentations through 37 breakout sessions. The lively conversations around magnificent posters, the free-associations over meals, the dialogues after excellent breakout sessions, the poignant memorial rituals and milestone celebrations...they were not just stimulating for the weekend. They reflect generative connections that extend far beyond the scope of a three-day conference.

The challenge remains for academics to reckon with the long-term consequences of our work—including its effects on the earth. To borrow Theodor Adorno's expression (which was printed on your conference folders), if the principal demand upon all education is that the violation of human flourishing and planetary life does not happen again and again, then what must occupy the imagination of Religious Educators in the days ahead?

The 2014 Annual Meeting in Oak Brook/Chicago, Illinois, unfolded thanks to countless hours of planning, physical labor, and generous donations on the part of many members. I imagine similar energies for REA 2015 in Atlanta, and am grateful for the work of this association. You can return to the website for videos, photos and other reminders of the weekend. We hope you'll share them with colleagues and alert them to the work of our field.

## New board and committee members elected

In addition to our annual election of members to our Board of Directors, this year the Board also went through a complicated process of [revising the terms of several offices](#), so that members now will rotate off in a more gradual process. Please help us to welcome these new members:

- Bert Roebben, Dortmund University in Germany, VP & program chair for 2016
- Kevin Sandberg, Notre Dame University, Treasurer
- Mary Elizabeth Moore, Boston University, Harper Committee
- Barbara Senacal-Davis, Fordham University, Student Representative
- Kathy Winings, Unification Theological Seminary, Chair, Religious Education in Faith Communities Forum
- Ina Ter Avest, VU University Amsterdam, Nominations Committee

You can read biographies of these new board members at the [business meeting site](#). Please join us in thanking them for their commitment to our shared endeavors.

## New membership procedures and donations

We have moved our membership management from Taylor & Francis to a system managed by REA staff. You will still receive the journal *Religious Education* with your membership — in fact, with our new system, you will be able to access the journal immediately! — and in general we plan to provide more effective membership management and communication. We have added links at the bottom of every page of our website that will take you directly to your member profile, the membership directory, and your immediate access to the journal.

It's important to note that REA really appreciated the extra donations many of you made in the course of renewing. Since our new system does not allow for that kind of donation, we urge you to consider [donating via PayPal](#) or by clicking on the "donate" button at the bottom of any page on our website.

## 2015 Annual Meeting Theme introduced

Harold (Bud) Horell was pleased to share the theme of the 2015 meeting, to be held in Atlanta, GA from November 6th to the 8th: *The Power of Imagining: Imagination at the Heart of Religious Education*. Details of the call for papers [are already available](#).



## Willie James Jennings receives Grawemeyer Award



Just two weeks after being a keynote plenary speaker at our annual meeting, Willie James Jennings, Associate Professor of Theology and Black Studies at Duke Divinity School, received the 2015 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion. The “Nobel prize” for religion, the award is given to individuals who have shared innovative and powerful ideas with the world. Jennings’ book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, has profoundly shaped contemporary theological imagination at a point in time in which racial oppression is gaining renewed attention due to massive inequality and distorted and dysfunctional systems of criminal justice. You can access [a video introduction to his ideas](#).

## Our session at AAR draws a standing room only crowd

Our second year of being an official part of the American Academy of Religion meeting was a huge success. The first book in the Horizons series – Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook’s *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities* – was the subject of discussion by a panel of distinguished scholars: Marianne Moyaert (VU University Amsterdam), Najeeba Syeed-Miller (Claremont School of Theology), and Mary Elizabeth Moore (Boston University).

These panelists — international, inter-professional, inter-disciplinary — are border-crossers and bridge-builders who have contributed significantly to scholarship on religious plurality, interreligious dialogue, teaching religious diversity, conflict resolution, justice and reconciliation. Their presence on the program was a compelling draw, with the room so full that we had to turn away last minute attendees.

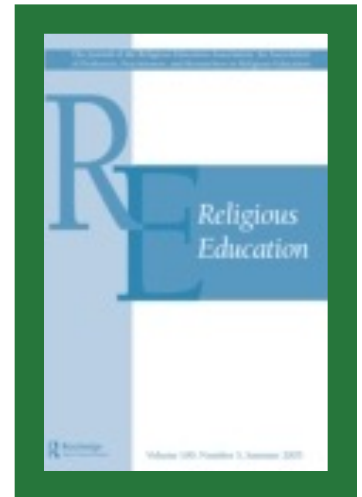
We hope that this session at AAR each year not only brings together old friends who cannot always attend our annual meetings, but also invites people to learn of our work, and raises the visibility of our field.

## Journal Editorial Board offers updates

The Editorial Board of our journal, *Religious Education*, met during the annual meeting and shared much good news about the state of journal. Papers were submitted from 22 countries, with papers from 12 countries eventually published. Articles were received

this year exploring five different religious traditions, with articles concerning three (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) published.

At this point in time the journal is accepting only 30% of the papers submitted, and this year had 96 submissions (our second highest number ever). This low acceptance rate means that the quality of our journal is consistently very high. In addition, although we have such a high rate of turn-downs, our editorial board continues to work hard to help scholars refine and revise papers. Unlike many journals, when you submit a piece to RE and it gets returned to you, it will always have significant comments attached for improvement, or perhaps ideas for more appropriate journals to which to submit it. This year the journal celebrates its seventh year of publishing five issues a year, which amounts to roughly 600 pages of text.



The process of submitting articles has just been streamlined, through the implementation of a new electronic system put in place by Taylor&Francis, our publisher. This system, dubbed “editorial manager,” ensures that all submissions are tracked carefully throughout the process, allowing for rapid submission of original and revised manuscripts, and facilitating the review process and internal communication between authors, editors, and reviewers via a web-based platform.

Finally, as noted in earlier issues of this newsletter, Editor Jack Seymour will be stepping down in a year. Joyce Mercer has been selected as editor-elect, and will be working collaboratively with Jack this year as the transition takes place, taking up roles of overseeing review of new manuscript submissions, soliciting book reviews, and beginning to plan issues for 2016.

## Help us raise the visibility of REA

One of the more striking paradoxes of our annual meeting was the contrast between the crucial and compelling way in which the meeting addressed widespread public concerns, and the continuing sense, on the part of many of our members, that much of our field’s scholarship remains invisible to other parts of the academy.

We intend to work directly on engaging this conundrum in the year to come. We need your help in doing so! If you would be willing to bring REA brochures with you to another scholarly or association meeting that you attend, just let us know a couple of weeks in advance and we’ll ship them to you. If you know of a group of scholars who might be interested in the theme of our next meeting, and would like us to send a direct invitation to them, [please contact Mary Hess](#), our networking coordinator. Link to our blog, comment on our Facebook page, share news of our association with other organizations — if you need help with any of this, or have ideas of your own on how we should be raising our profile, [please contact Mary Hess](#).

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eREACH is a newsletter of the Religious Education Association, an Association of Professors, Practitioners, and Researchers in Religious Education.

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