Editorial

Acknowledging peer review

To begin by stating the obvious, the peer-review process remains the gold standard for assessing academic excellence, not least in the Humanities, and the process itself could not exist without the dedication and generosity of those among our peers, in all fields, who actually do the reviewing. Nevertheless, as a recent critical discussion notes, “reviewers seldom receive the professional credit they deserve” (Schwartz and Zamboanga, 2009, p. 54).

First, then, we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and to thank the many referees who have donated their time and expertise to reading and commenting on articles submitted for potential publication in RELIGION. Over the course of 2008 and 2009, 154 scholars from 23 countries have made this generous and essential contribution to this journal, to their colleagues, and to the field, some more than once. Each of these people stole precious hours from research, family, and other areas of their lives to engage in this act of collegial criticism, in the best senses of both those words. The following list includes those among that number who explicitly agreed to be acknowledged in this way. Reviewing for peer-reviewed journals (not only publishing in them) should be (and is in some cases) an accepted measure of scholarly production and/or service. We hope that our public recognition of RELIGION’s referees will contribute to documenting this important scholarly activity.1

One of the great privileges of serving as the editor of an academic journal is the opportunity to witness, over and over again, the professionalism with which many of our colleagues share their astute, learned, and frank assessments of the work of peers, and the generosity with which they highlight strengths, note points requiring further evidence or elaboration, rehearse alternative lines of argument, and suggest further relevant sources. For younger scholars, the peer-review process can and should be an important element of their apprenticeship in the field. In our own personal experience as authors, feedback from the peer-review process contributed substantively to our research and writing. It not only fine-tuned individual pieces; it helped us to improve as scholars. Our recognition of the value and the importance of peer-review continues to grow as we see many of our colleagues in action.

Given the importance of peer review to the scholarly enterprise, and given that its place has recently been coming under greater critical scrutiny, we thought it worth addressing the issue from the perspective of this journal, and from that of the field of Religious Studies more generally.

Peer review is not a perfect process. A recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education has been garnering attention for its claim that “The Peer-Review System Is Broken” (Myers, 2009). The author, Daniel J. Myers (Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean for Research, Graduate Studies, and Centers in the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame) notes that “Editors complain about frequent refusals from potential referees, low quality and brevity of reviews, lack of engagement with the papers’ arguments and evidence, and the ever-increasing time it takes referees to produce their reports.” That there is more than a grain of truth here only increases our respect for and gratitude to those among our colleagues who commit themselves to regularly, conscientiously and effectively making this essential contribution to the scholarly community. At the same time, Myers gives several reasons for his view that the system is broken: potential referees are facing increasing numbers of requests; editors ask for too many reviews of each paper (“three, four, or five reviews”); “the reviewer pool has become too constricted”: clearly inadequate papers are sent out for review when they should be rejected outright; and too many authors are given “revise and resubmit” decisions.2

Rather than directly address these important critical points, we thought it more productive to briefly review RELIGION’s peer-review procedures and policies. (We are not the only journal editors, even in the Humanities and Social Sciences, to seize on the momentum generated by Myers’ critique in order to discuss this important issue [Boelstorff, 2010]). RELIGION stands out from most journals in its field by virtue of its having an explicit Peer Review Policy (posted on the journal website <http://j.mp/a3ULfA>). The editors reject some manuscripts

1 RELIGION is, to our knowledge, the only major Religious Studies journal that regularly publishes a list of its referees. The first such list was published by the previous editors, Robert A. Segal and Thomas Ryba, in 2007 and included all those who reviewed articles from 2004 to 2005 (37/2, pp. 184–185). That list covered a period before the introduction of the current on-line submission and review system, and it included 66 scholars from four countries. Since we took over the reins as editors, we have instituted an informal policy of publishing such a list on an bi-annual basis, in the journal and on its website <http://j.mp/a3ULfA>. We published an initial list on the site after our first year as editors. This and last year’s lists were compiled by RELIGION’s editorial assistant, Alexander Rödel, who also offered helpful comments on drafts of this editorial.

2 There is a further issue that Myers does not note: on rare occasions, certain comments by referees are unhelpful because they are trivial, specious, off-track, off-the-wall, caustic or downright acrimonious. A recent tongue-in-cheek “study” squarely addresses this quirky aspect of the peer-review process: “Using two interconnected scales of silliness and belligerence, and tempered by mood, the framework clearly outlines how to best deal with the entire spectrum of daft peer-review feedback, from the innocuous to the inexcusable” (Rosenfeld and Hoffman, 2009, E304).
without sending them for review: these include “submissions that fall outside the aims and scope of the journal or have serious scientific flaws.” We employ double-blind review, match submissions with areas of expertise, and typically review submissions within three months. We offer general guidelines and a clear set of questions to guide referees in the editors’-eyes portion of the review. We use an on-line process for all submission and reviews (with flexibility for exceptional circumstances). All reviewers receive a month’s free access to SCOPUS, the publisher’s abstracting and indexing database. Editorial decisions are based solely on issues of scholarly quality and, desk rejects aside, the evidence for this generally consists of at least two referees’ reports (occasionally more, especially in cases of highly interdisciplinary work, as is more common in Religious Studies than in many other fields). In line with our mandate of publishing top-quality work, our rejection rate is (to the extent we can obtain data) as high or higher than that of other leading Religious Studies journals, but we do not reject papers solely in order to increase our rejection rate. Some authors have chosen to submit elsewhere rather than undergo a potential second review process after a revise-and-resubmit decision from RELIGION.

The editors and the publisher of RELIGION remain convinced of the value, the effectiveness, and the continuing health of the peer-review system. However, we recognize that each of these points faces serious and sobering challenges.

Most fundamentally, basic conceptions of what constitutes academic expertise are changing. New communication technologies are the major driving force in this development, leading to a greater presence of on-line publishing and greater ease of peer-to-peer communication. According to some optimistic voices, new modes of expertise are emerging to reflect the changing landscape of scholarly publishing:

The key to such new modes of authorization is a shift from traditionally understood peer review to peer-to-peer review. In conventional peer review, the “value” of texts is determined through a process of gatekeeping designed for an economics of scarcity, in which a limited number of pages, or journal issues, or monograph volumes can be published. … Peer-to-peer review acknowledges that the Internet exists instead within an economics of abundance, in which there is no upper limit on the number or size of texts that may be published. What has become scarce, instead, is time and attention, and what is thus needed is not gatekeeping, but filtering. … (Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 128)

In light of these changes, proposed new metrics of scholarly authority draw upon a wide-range of non-traditional criteria, to be quantified by computer algorithms and evidenced largely by elements of web-presence. The markers of expertise under such models of “Authority 3.0” include but extend far beyond peer-review: prestige of publisher and/or referees; percentage of a document quoted by others; number of links to a document; number and nature of comments and discussion in post and blogs; quality of institutional affiliation(s); value or impact of works cited by the author; inclusion in syllabi or other lists; tags attached to the document as a function of the authority of the taggers/tagging system; etc. (Jensen, 2007, pp. 40–41).

It is not just that the face of peer-review may well be changing, but that the weight attached to it is potentially in decline. For scholars in the Humanities (and to a lesser extent the Social Sciences) who are just beginning to grasp the extent to which their value to their employers is increasingly measured in terms of “citation indices” and “impact factors,” the emergence of these more radically innovative measures of scholarship promises a sharp and painful learning curve. Insofar as appeals to such broader metrics find purchase as part of academic appointment, tenure and ranking systems, the place of peer-reviewed academic publications will necessarily become more marginal: “faculty members will have to take the time to learn about – and give credit for – the new authority metrics, instead of relying on scholarly publishers to establish the importance of material for them” (Jensen, 2007, p. 42).

A harbinger of these developments is the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the UK’s proposed metric-based system for assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/>. This system is being put in place even as the UK government announced, in late 2009, its plans to cut funding to universities. On the one hand, the proposed weighting of 25% for metric-based measures of “impact” has been criticized on the basis of “the novelty of this element, the well-recognised difficulty of its evaluation and the unproven nature of the proposed methodology” (Bellingan, 2010, p. 4). On the other hand, peer-review has been retained as a key performance indicator, though less prominently than in the UK’s previous, and highly controversial, Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). As an article defending peer review in the face of these developments notes, “The REF has already realised one remarkable achievement; it has made some scholars nostalgic for the old RAE” (Russell, 2009, p. 63). The latest news, as we finalize this text, is that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) has pushed back the implementation date of the REF and is “edging out” of plans to use citation analysis, in favour of an enlarged set of peer-review panels (Corbyn, 2010).

Even within the more traditional avenues of academic publication, alternative models of the editorial process are emerging, including post-publication review, fast-track publication, continuous content updates, and the on-line publication of non-reviewed articles. There has been much discussion of the virtues of open, as opposed to blinded, review. An open review process would have pros (referees might be more accountable and polite; signed reviews would give credit where credit is due) and cons (making it harder to find referees; reducing the amount of valuable, because sharply-worded, criticism; and replicating systems of hierarchy, with junior referees fearing reprisal and with ‘old scholars’ networks reciprocally rewarding their own); all in all, the weight of argument supports our continuing to accept double-blind peer review as the gold standard of academic quality (Shatz, 2004, pp. 71–72). As Michèle Lamont argues, in How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment (Lamont, 2009), peer-review remains the best system for evaluating scholarly excellence, in large part because it respects disciplinary difference. This is especially so in the case of the Humanities, where connoisseurship, erudition and scholarly opinion are seen as central to the assessment process. Empirical studies of the peer-review process confirm its continuing value, despite certain weaknesses (Ware, 2008; Shattell et al., 2010). The increasing centrality of citation analysis itself demands a form of peer-review, reflecting the fact that “any research assessment will need a group of people to decide how to balance the evidence that comes from distinct and not always consistent sources, like those of citation and reputational analyses” (Weale, 2009, p. 49).

As faculty members, most of us labour in the shadow of administrative vigilance, with its slogans of “quantifiable objectives,” “research and service outcomes,” and “end product deliverables.” This growing darkness is especially uncongenial to the Humanities. Some university administrations in the U.S. have explicitly discouraged faculty from spending their time writing peer-reviews rather than grant applications. Proposals are afoot to allow market forces to drive the system, with potential reviewers bidding to review manuscripts for a fee. (Currently, though relatively rare, payment for reviews appears, surprisingly, to be most common in the Humanities and Social Sciences [Ware, 2008, p. 91].) Much is lost in the market-driven weighing of output against input. On an inseparably related note, the veneer of scholarly reciprocity cannot obscure the substantial profits that academic publishers extract from a system that takes for granted the unpaid labour of referees,
not to mention that of authors. Yet, there is a very positive side to this business. As scholars of religion, we are more sensitive than many to the social dimensions of exchange relations, to the inherent tensions between mercenary considerations and the basic ideology of the gift. We recall, perhaps, that beyond calculation lies informal reciprocity, beyond this the pure gift given with no expectation of return, and beyond these the gift of wisdom that shapes tradition. The peer-review process embodies all of these.

For the time being, and in our view all for the best, peer review is here to stay. As a recent editorial in Nature Neuroscience observes, “Instead of perpetually arguing about the reliability and fairness of peer review, authors, editors and referees should seek to optimize this time-tested system” (“Striving,” 2009, p. 1). All complications aside, two basic points remain: reports of peer-review’s demise are greatly exaggerated; and the peers who review are the bedrock of the process. So, to our referees – on behalf of the many authors and potential authors whose work you have reviewed, and on behalf of the ultimate beneficiaries of your gifts of time and expertise, RELIGION’s readers and the scholarly community in the study of religion – thank you.

Steven Engler
Michael Stausberg

References


Referees for RELIGION (2008–2009)

Mario Aguilar, University of St. Andrews, United Kingdom
Ilkka Arminen, University of Tampere, Finland
Greg Bankoff, University of Hull, United Kingdom
Philip Barnes, King’s College London/University of London, United Kingdom
Justin L. Barrett, University of Oxford, United Kingdom
Timothy K. Beal, Case Western Reserve University, United States
John Beck, Gonzaga University, United States
Gwilym Beckerlegge, Open University, United Kingdom
Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, University of Haifa, Israel
Jesse Bering, Queen’s University, Belfast, United Kingdom
Stephen Berkowitz, Missouri State University, United States
Ulrich Berner, University of Bayreuth, Germany
Marion Bowman, Open University, United Kingdom
Willi Braun, University of Alberta, Canada
John Brewer, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom
Joseph Bulbulia, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Kimmy Caplan, Bar-Ilan University, Israel
David Chester, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom
Adam B. Cohen, Arizona State University, United States
John Cort, Denison University, United States
Istvan Czachesz, University of Helsinki, Finland
Douglas Davies, Durham University, United Kingdom
Scott Davis, University of Richmond, United States
Lorne Dawson, University of Waterloo, Canada
Renee De La Torre, University of Guadalajara, Mexico
Elizabeth De Michelis, University of Oxford, United Kingdom
Michael Despland, Concordia University, Canada
Merlin Donald, Queen’s University, United States
William G. Doty, University of Alabama, United States
Michael Dove, Yale University, United States
Ronald Numbers, University of Wisconsin, United States
Paul Numrich, Methodist Theological School, United States
Peter Oakes, University of Manchester, United Kingdom
Okuyama Michiaki, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Japan
Raymond Paloutzian, Westminster College, United States
Douglas Paton, University of Tasmania, Australia
Robert Pennock, Michigan State University, United States
Anssi Peräkylä, University of Helsinki, Finland
Ilkka Pyysiainen, University of Helsinki, Finland
Pakinam Rächad El Sharkawy, Cairo University, Egypt
Lewis R. Rambo, San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, United States
Ian Reader, University of Manchester, United Kingdom
Bryan Rennie, Westminster College, United States
William Richards, Johns Hopkins University, United States
Minna Rikkinen, Launeen seurakunta Lahti, Finland
Anne-Sofie Roald, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway
Joel Robbins, University of California, San Diego, United States
Richard Roberts, University of Stirling, United Kingdom
Ira Robinson, Concordia University, Canada
Cristina Rocha, University of Western Sydney, Australia
Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Wesleyan University, United States
Tuula Sakaranaho, University of Helsinki, Finland
Benson Saler, Brandeis University, United States
Kevin Schilbrack, Western Carolina University, United States
Michèle M. Schlehofer, Salisbury University, United States
Jens Schlieter, University of Berne, Switzerland
Randi Schroeder, Mount Royal University, Canada
Richard Seager, Hamilton College, United States
Mark Sedgwick, Aarhus University, Denmark
Robert Segal, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom
Seyed Hossein Serajzadeh, Tarbiat Moallem University, Iran
Darren Sherkat, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, United States
Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, University of Oslo, Norway
David Smilde, University of Georgia, United States
Daniel Jordan Smith, Brown University, United States
Jan Snoek, University of Heidelberg, Germany
Pawel Socha, Jagiellonian University, Poland
Nurit Stadler, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
Olof Sundqvist, University of Gävle, Sweden
William H. Swatos Jr., Baylor University, United States
Bron Taylor, University of Florida, United States
Einar Thomassen, University of Bergen, Norway
Thomas A. Tweed, University of Texas at Austin, United States
Abel Ugba, University of East London, United Kingdom
Asenageh Ukah, University of Bayreuth, Germany
Seda Unsar, University of Southern California, United States
Frank Usarski, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil
Michael Wessels, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Harvey Whitehouse, University of Oxford, United Kingdom
Melissa Wilcox, Whitman College, United States
John Wilkins, Bond University, Australia
Ina Wunn, Bielefeld University, Germany
Brian Zimm, Cincinnati VA Medical Center, United States
Phil Zuckerman, Pitzer College, United States