

The international focus for the Annual Meeting this November will be on Australia/Oceania. To help us learn more about and from the studies of religion in Australia/Oceania, the AAR is sponsoring nine scholars from that region of the world to participate in the Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. One of these scholars will be Douglas Ezzy.



Douglas Ezzy is a sociologist and head of the school of sociology and social work at the University of Tasmania in Australia.

RSN: How would you describe the current state of religious studies in Australia? Do you notice, for instance, any particular trends or emphases?

Ezzy: Religious studies in Australia is small. There are less than twenty-five religious studies academics in Australia who have full-time jobs in the dominant state-funded universities. There are approximately another twenty academics who publish and research on religious studies related topics and teach in cognate fields such as sociology, philosophy, or education. There are a number of theological colleges typically linked to particular denominations, but theological teaching is quite separate from the state-funded universities.

Religious studies in Australia has two main foci. First there are programs in religion studies at the University of Sydney and the University of Queensland that provide undergraduate and PhD courses in a broad range of religious traditions. There is also a Centre for the Study of Religion and Theology at Monash University that is similarly broad in its focus but only has a graduate program. Second, there are two programs that are focused on Catholic education (Australian Catholic University and University of South Australia) that mainly train teachers for the Catholic education system in Australia.

The growth areas in religious studies are mainly in the study of new religious movements — such as contemporary Paganism — and in the study of non-Christian religious traditions, particularly the religions of Asia that are the close neighbors of Australia. There have also been some recent government-funded initiatives in Islamic studies.

My sense is that religious studies is under pressure and that job opportunities are becoming more scarce.

RSN: Yes, I noticed that you yourself are working in the school of sociology and social work, and many of our sponsored scholars from Australia who will attend the upcoming AAR Annual Meeting are also not located, institutionally speaking, in departments of religion. Has this always been the case? If so, why?

Ezzy: In general, Australia has a more relaxed and skeptical approach to religion than that of the United States. This stems in part from our convict history, where religion was forced upon the convicts and used as a justification of authoritarian rules and measures. While it varies considerably by state, most people in Tasmania (one of Australia's eight major states or territories) have convict ancestry. As such, religion has historically been regarded with some suspicion in Australia. This also means that there are not many large private donors that might support religious studies programs financially.

The existing religious studies departments are located in the older "sandstone" universities in Australia, and even there it is typically small or absent. The University of Tasmania, for example, had a small interdisciplinary religious studies program in the 1970s that was discontinued in the late 1980s, dissolving into the cognate disciplines. The University system in Australia expanded considerably in the 1960s and 1970s, and these "new" universities tended to focus on applied disciplines to the exclusion of disciplines like religious studies. As a consequence, those of us interested in religion have often developed our careers in departments outside of religious studies.

RSN: Can you tell us a little bit about your own research at the moment?

Ezzy: My current research focuses on the transformative power of ritual. I am particularly interested in how religion operates through the embodied performance of ecstatic ritual and how this in turn shapes moral behavior. Theoretically, I am drawing together ritual studies (Victor Turner), sociology (Émile Durkheim), and some psychoanalytic thinking (Jessica Benjamin). I have two main projects at the moment.

First, I'm writing up an ethnography of a Pagan festival. This festival took place over five days in a rural part of Australia with about eighty participants performing heavily theatrical and ecstatic rituals that lasted through the night. One rite, for example, involved a recreation of the Greek myth of Persephone's descent into the underworld in which participants also journeyed into the underworld, passing through various ordeals along the way. People leave this festival feeling

profoundly transformed. An article describing this rite is forthcoming in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*

. I have recently published an article in *Qualitative Inquiry* on the methodology of this research.

Second, I am examining the influence of ritual and performance on Nazi Germany. I want to extend some of the ideas about political religion through a review of the practices of the Nazis. I think that much of the literature on the Nazis has overemphasized the cognitive values of anti-Semitism and underestimated the Nazi's ritual manipulation of emotions.

RSN: What are your personal hopes or goals as you come to participate in AAR's Annual Meeting?

Ezzy: I am hoping for some good conversations with scholars in Pagan studies, ritual studies, and indigenous studies. In the past, these conversations have been important catalysts for developing publications and research projects. I'm also looking forward to engaging with the rich variety of academic work presented at the AAR sessions.

RSN: What and how do you think scholars of religion in Australia and in the United States can learn from each other?

Ezzy: The wonderful thing for Australians coming to the United States is the experience of being part of a much larger group. It is very valuable to be able to talk to a wide range of people that understand in detail the literature and issues of my speciality. It is also very important for Australians to develop networks and contacts with researchers in the United States and the rest of the world.

For religious studies scholars in the United States, Australia presents a unique opportunity to see how religion has changed and developed in a culture that is similar to, but significantly different from, the United States. Collaborations with religion studies scholars in Australia provide the opportunity to examine how global trends (such as fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, or New Age practices) have developed in other so-called English-speaking nations. Australian academic culture also sits midway between American and European influences. Collaborations with Australians may enable scholars from the United States to engage with a broader range of theoretical traditions, including European theoretical traditions, but from a context that is also, typically, strongly aware of American academic practice.

