AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION

GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING AND EVALUATING

PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP IN RELIGION

Approved by the AAR Board on January 26, 2025

OVERVIEW

A central part of the American Academy of Religion's mission is to "enhance the public understanding of religion." To pursue this goal, hiring criteria, organizational structures, fellowships and awards, promotion and tenure, merit-based pay, and other areas of evaluation need to be better calibrated to support and value public scholarship.

The following guidelines provide strategies and recommendations for creating standards that recognize, assess, and reward public scholarship *as scholarship* (not only as teaching or service) within the critical study of religion. They are intended for use by scholars, students, administrators, and leaders in institutions of higher education, as well as editors, curators, grant/award committees, and others who evaluate Religious Studies scholarship.

Public scholarship encompasses a wide range of interactions among academic and non-academic individuals and groups. There are many cognate terms: public-facing scholarship, engaged or community-engaged scholarship, community-based participatory research, and participatory action research, to name a few. These terms carry different histories and shades of meaning, but they share an emphasis on issues of broad public relevance and engagement with non-academic actors—as audience, participants, and/or co-producers of knowledge.

Seven Recommendations
1. Revise institutional/departmental policies to recognize and reward quality public scholarship *as scholarship* in the critical study of religion.
2. Develop clear evaluation standards and procedures to assess the broad range of public scholarship.
3. Communicate the standards to scholars and evaluators, along with a clear understanding of how this work advances the institutional mission.
4. Publicize the work of public scholarship in your institution to enhance its visibility, impact, and status.
5. Reimagine graduate education, especially doctoral education, to develop skills and experience in public scholarship.
6. Support public scholarship with training, grants, fellowships, and fostering community partnerships.
7. Develop protocols to support scholars if their public-facing work generates controversy. Be transparent about the risk/reward of public scholarship and institutional policy.

INTRODUCTION

The stated mission of the American Academy of Religion is "to foster excellence in the academic study of religion and enhance the public understanding of religion." These objectives are intertwined in ways that current systems of recognition do not adequately address. Although religion scholars are engaged in a broad variety of efforts that advance public understanding, the narrow boundaries of scholarship considered for professional evaluation limit the scholars' public influence, diminish opportunities for collaborative knowledge production, perpetuate institutional inequities, and undercut the relevance of religious scholarship in our world.

The absence of criteria for measuring the quality and impact of public scholarship is a major impediment to acknowledging these efforts and integrating them into broader considerations of merit. The following guidelines provide strategies and recommendations for creating standards that recognize, assess, and reward public scholarship *as scholarship* (not only as teaching or service) within the critical study of religion. They are intended for use by scholars, students, administrators, and leaders in institutions of higher education, as well as editors, curators, grant/award committees, and others who evaluate Religious Studies scholarship. While the document addresses institutional policies, it is essential to bear in mind the ways that individuals serve as gatekeepers and agents of change.

Rationale

As affirmed by numerous humanities and social science academic associations,[1] the current moment highlights the urgency of rigorous public scholarship. Religiously-based conflict and the potential for religion-related forms of social transformation reinforce the need for greater religious and cultural literacy. Scholarly inquiry that engages multiple and diverse audiences develops informed publics, which in turn shape civic responsibility, democratic values, and religious pluralism. Public scholarship in religion demonstrates the profound impact of religion in society, helping to allay current anxieties about relevance and reinforcing the value of humanities education.

Technological advances and changing avenues of communication require creative engagement to maximize learning with a growing variety of publics. Higher education and other institutions have recognized the need to strengthen community partnerships and produce scholarship that non-academics find meaningful. Consequently, scholars are often encouraged to direct their efforts in ways that enhance an institution's public stature.

Many scholars of religion rise to the challenges of changing technologies, methodologies, and priorities to educate the public about important social issues, build meaningful partnerships outside the academy, and underscore the value of their field to public actors, funders, colleagues

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[1] See, for example, recent statements by the American Historical Association, Modern Language Association, American Anthropological Association, and Imagining America. The current guidelines borrow language and substance from these excellent precedents.

in other disciplines, and administrators. They contribute substantively to the evolution of best practices in public scholarship.

Despite these developments, faculty hiring, organizational structures, fellowships and awards, promotion and tenure, merit-based pay, and other areas of evaluation rarely acknowledge or value public scholarship. This disparity disproportionately impacts early-career scholars, women, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, contingent faculty, and other historically marginalized groups in the academy who are vital contributors to publicly-engaged scholarship. Colleagues working outside the academy are similarly disadvantaged by established norms.

The AAR Guidelines for Supporting and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion are designed to enhance the quality and impact of public scholarship; to support scholars of religion in their multifaceted approaches to research, teaching, and public engagements; and to integrate with existing policies and missions in a variety of institutions.

What is public scholarship?

Public scholarship is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of interactions among academic and non-academic individuals and groups. It refers both to the activity of producing knowledge and to the products of this work.

There are many cognate terms: public-facing scholarship, engaged or community-engaged scholarship, community-based participatory research, and participatory action research, to name a few. These terms carry different histories and shades of meaning, but they share an emphasis on issues of broad public relevance and engagement with non-academic actors—as audience, participants, and/or co-producers of knowledge.

The forms and content of public scholarship in religion are dynamic and expansive in nature; they include but are not limited to:

- Traditional scholarship presented in public venues, e.g. lectures at libraries, civic groups, humanities festivals
- Scholarship written for a public audience and published in trade books, newspapers, magazines, and blogs
- Scholarship for specific contexts such as environmental reports, cultural heritage documentation, infographics, policy briefs, government consulting, and expert testimony
- Multimedia and digital scholarship, such as museum, library, and online exhibitions, websites and web apps, databases, data visualizations, films and podcasts
- Collaborative research with public, community and other non-academic partners; the products of this scholarship may involve relationship- and capacity-building, grant applications, artistic and other non-traditional presentations, institutional coordination, etc.

CRITERIA AND MODELS FOR EVALUATION[2]

Supporting public scholarship in religion requires that we reframe and/or expand the ways in which scholarly contributions are traditionally assessed. It also requires strong, reciprocal communication between the scholar and review committees. Scholars should receive clear guidelines for how their work will be evaluated and they should have the opportunity to describe the work, its goals, methods, contributions to the field, and public impact.

The criteria and models discussed in this section offer guidance for evaluating public scholarship where existing structures of peer review may not currently be adequate.[3] While the four categories represent only one possible approach, they hopefully provide a starting place to explore how to value and recognize such scholarship.

Note that the framework focuses largely on tenure and promotion review processes, but the principles and questions can also be useful for award deliberations, grantmaking, job descriptions, doctoral education, publishing criteria, and academy-adjacent or other professional appointments—as well as for scholars preparing a portfolio or considering best practices in community-engaged projects.

Criteria for Evaluation

Broadly, the suggested categories of evaluation address Content, Form and Dissemination, Impact, and Process. Given the broad range of public scholarship projects, some questions will be more or less applicable in each instance.

Content: Public scholarship in religion should maintain the rigor and quality of research standards while recognizing the needs of different publics as well as the requirements of various forms and platforms. No matter the length or complexity of the work, it can communicate discipline-related expertise and make unique contributions to the understanding of religion.
- How does discipline-related expertise inform this work? What degree of substantive scholarship is evident in the ways that it discovers or synthesizes information, interprets findings, and explores implications?
- Does it make a unique contribution to the field, either in its content or translation of knowledge for new/diverse publics?
- What is the scope of the project, and how well does its content fulfill the scholar's objectives?

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[2] Questions and criteria have been adapted from multiple sources: Rutgers University Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly-Engaged Scholarship, MLA Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs, American Anthropological Association Guidelines for Tenure and Promotion Review," Hanover Research "Publicly Engaged Scholarship Frameworks," April 2018.

[3] There are recent efforts to provide new avenues of peer review, e.g. "Reviews in Digital Humanities," and "Debates in the Digital Humanities," but they engage only a small portion of public scholarship in religion and other fields.

- Is there external evaluation of the work (e.g., public or peer reviews, awards, grants) that would be appropriate to consider?

Form and Dissemination: While the status of partners and venues is not irrelevant, prestige institutions should not be the only beneficiaries of scholarly endeavors. Thus, the primary metric for assessing the form and dissemination of public religion scholarship is how well they suit the goals of the project, taking into account factors such as language, platform, and continuity. While most North American scholarship is in English, for example, some public-facing projects would be more effective in a different language. Platforms should similarly be selected with an eye to the intended public(s). And, although we are always eager for scholarship to have a long life and enduring effect, some impactful projects are ephemeral by design (events, performances, special exhibits).
- What is the intended audience and how does the project try to reach them? What challenges exist in dissemination and promotion for this audience?
- How does the form of the project advance the objectives?
- How well-suited is the platform for dissemination to the project goals? Has the scholarship also been shared with the academic community in some fashion?
- What is the appropriate timeline for deliverables?

Impact: Measures of impact for public scholarship can include the ways in which the work reaches out to new audiences to improve the public understanding of religion, promotes cultural revitalization, creates new areas of study, deepens community partnerships for the common good, fosters more equitable policy and outcomes, and/or advances the mission of the institution(s).
- What are the goals of the project in terms of impact, and how well does it achieve them?
- What evidence is available to assess its reach and/or impact?
- Are there testimonies from partners or users/viewers of the scholarship?
- For ongoing projects: What are the milestones of the project, including the timeline for various phases, and how much progress has been made to date? If designed for long-term impact, is it sustainable?

Process: This category is most relevant to research that involves community collaboration, which presents unique challenges and opportunities. Academic and institutional needs should never take precedence over ethical norms or community well-being. The co-production of knowledge should be recognized for reputational, material, or other benefit. In evaluating community-engaged scholarship, it is important to consider not only the quality of the finished product, but also the research, outreach, communication, and consultation efforts that go into it. With many variables beyond the scholar's control, even projects that are successful at the level of research and engagement may get derailed before dissemination.
- How well did the ideals of equity, reciprocity, transparency, and empowerment guide this work? Did the project follow appropriate community protocols and IRB standards?
- What role(s) have community partners played in the design and execution of the project at each stage (research questions, methods, implementation, assessment, development of and credit for outcomes)?

- What has the scholar contributed to this collaboration? What kind of time and other resources did the scholar dedicate? Is there ongoing responsibility to maintain the content or relationships?
- How does the project benefit the community? Examples of such benefit include contributing to the community's knowledge of itself; advancing the partners' agency, capacity, and sustainability; adding to the community's experience and resources.

Models of Evaluation

Promotion and tenure policies should provide clear guidance regarding public scholarship in their institutional context, with explicit criteria for documentation and evaluation. The several approaches detailed below are often used in combination. It is also essential that those who serve within institutions make known to outside reviewers how public scholarship is "counted" and evaluated.

Formal inclusion: Some institutions offer a general but explicit statement to include public scholarship in evaluation. Consider, for example, the University of Denver's policy: "Scholarly output and creative activity includes publications, creative work, consultation, presentations in public media, public performance, exhibitions, and interdisciplinary and community-engaged research, and other activities promoting the public good."[4] Individual departments can then draft more particular expectations dependent on the field(s) and discipline(s) involved. Proactive approaches to codifying the recognition of and standards for public scholarship avoid inconsistent or invisible expectations that place an undue burden on scholars at vulnerable stages of their careers.

Rubric: Many institutions have systematized their criteria in a rubric for evaluation committees. See, for example, this rubric from Indiana University, or the one on p. 27 of Purdue University's *The Guide: Documenting, Evaluating, and Recognizing Engaged Scholarship*. The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and several other schools utilize a rubric more directly focused on community-engaged collaborative projects; it expands on eight characteristics identified by the Community Campus Partnership for Health in 2007.

Point system: Other institutions establish a point system, "counting" various forms of public scholarship dependent on the academic labor involved and a general assessment of its scholarly contribution based on form/platform. See, for example, this example from the American Anthropological Association in their guidelines (p. 13 Appendix III), representing the policy of a public R1 university, or this more elaborate point system from Appalachian State University (pp. 16-23).

Portfolio statement: Scholars should take the initiative to articulate ways in which disciplinary expertise informed the project as well as its contributions to the field and to the public good. It

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[4] University of Denver "Policies and Procedures Relating to Faculty Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure" (2015), p. 27.

is helpful to lay out the objectives, the logic of the selected form and dissemination, and the outcomes or impact (predicted and/or actual). Recognizing that both traditional and public scholarship are academic labor, what kind of effort was expended compared to the production of a peer-reviewed article or book chapter? How does this effort complement the scholar's other research and teaching efforts?

If scholarship is co-created, authors should discuss the process, roles, and contributions of each partner. Documenting engagement or attention it may have received from other scholars, funders, media, and community voices will help make the case for its value. Scholars may want to solicit letters from partners, public figures, subject matter experts, or organizational representatives impacted by the project.

Public Scholarship Review Committees: Given the broad nature of modalities and unique criteria for evaluation of public scholarship, some schools and consortia have established public scholarship review committees. They may support the scholar in designing projects as well as preparing materials for promotion and tenure. At the <u>University of Minnesota-Twin Cities</u>, the committee produces a letter for the promotion and tenure process with a detailed evaluation regarding the quality and impact of the candidate's community-engaged scholarship.

Depending on the nature of a scholar's oeuvre, it might be advisable to include individuals from outside the academic community in evaluation/review. "Community Peer Reviewers may include educators, psychologists, and librarians working in public policy and other applied settings; key community partners who are not academics by training, but who are experienced consumers of applied research and use academic scholarship for policy or organizational ends."[5]

SUPPORTING PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Updating evaluation policies to provide clear guidance about public scholarship is an important step, but insufficient to create larger ecosystems of support for public scholars and to drive changes in academic culture. Ultimately, additional investments and reward structures are needed for institutional transformation. Higher education administrators, professional associations, publishers, philanthropists, and other organizations can each support public scholarship in numerous ways.

Organizational Change

Many schools set appointment, tenure, and promotion policies on a campus-wide rather than departmental level–but the tools provided in this document are sufficiently general to serve as resources for broader institutional consideration. Departments of Religion/Religious Studies and Divinity Schools can build common cause with other departments to advocate for change and

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[5] O'Meara, Kerryann, Timothy Eatman, and Saul Petersen. "Advancing Engaged Scholarship in Promotion and Tenure: A Roadmap and Call for Reform." *Liberal Education* (Summer 2015): 52-57.

participate in the process. Deploy these guidelines and those of other academic guilds to make the case.

Beyond promotion guidelines for scholars, other institutional work needs to be done to foster quality public scholarship in religion and other fields.
- Include public scholarship in university, college, and organizational strategic plans, where it can be linked to all aspects of the institution's core mission–beyond outreach and public service.
- Make public scholarship a formal part of department, center, and program reviews and budget requests. Including public scholarship in metrics of evaluation can normalize it and integrate it more fully into institutional culture.
- Create and fund an office of community engagement that helps remove barriers and provides resources to faculty pursuing public scholarship.

Awards and Financial Support

Reputational and material incentives are crucial in recognizing the tremendous value of public scholarship in religion as well as the manifold claims on scholars' time. In addition, capacity-building support is often necessary, as production, dissemination, and promotion of public scholarship in religion without institutional support can be difficult.

Schools, academic associations, foundations, museums and other organizations can recognize an individual's overall contributions to public scholarship in religion, or invite submissions for a juried award. They can finance collaborative projects and publicize quality efforts. A few examples are listed in Appendix A.

Fellowships and Scholar Development Programs

Many scholars are trained only for discourse within the academy, so fellowships, training programs, and mentorship to develop competencies in public scholarship both expand and improve the quality of public scholarship.
- Support need not incur significant expense. Create a directory of engaged faculty. A directory can help facilitate connections and support among the community of public scholars, it can underscore the inherent diversity of this work, and it can signal the importance of public scholarship to faculty, funders, and administrators.
- Host workshops that teach scholars and students how to do public scholarship and how to present it in their dossiers, and that educate the wider community about the purpose and value of public scholarship.
- Encourage and support scholars to participate in outside development programs. Sacred Writes invites applications for a cohort-based training with a stipend. The Public Religion Research Institute Public Fellows programs provides emerging scholar-leaders with training, a stipend, and microgrants to support collaborative projects and relationships. The Institute for Diversity & Civic Life is launching a certificate in community-based

research. The American Academy of Religion offers short-term workshops to advance public scholarship abilities.

- Support a major school-based or organization-based program. The <u>University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill</u>, for example, offers a Faculty Engaged Scholars program, a two-year, competency-based curriculum with mentorship and financial support.

Graduate Education

Departments of Religious Studies are encouraged to prepare the next generation of scholars to engage in public scholarship as part of their professional endeavors. Education of the next generation is fundamental to long-term change. Many resources are available within existing Centers for Religion in Public Life and/or faculty with relevant expertise, but progress requires deliberative decisions about graduate education.

Establish doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships dedicated to public scholarship in religion. Some universities, such as the <u>University of Michigan Rackham School</u>, centralize support and training in public scholarship.

See ACLS's recent report, <u>"Preparing Publicly Engaged Scholars: A Guide to Innovation in Doctoral Education"</u> and their Mellon-supported fellowships to encourage <u>innovative dissertation research</u>.

Institutional Solidarity

Public scholarship can burnish the reputation of scholars and their institutions, but it also comes with risks. Colleagues, administrators and institutions should visibly support scholars when there is negative publicity or threats in response to their work.

Visibility within the guild

The American Academy of Religion presents the Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion as well as journalism awards on an annual basis. Other efforts to boost visibility within the guild are needed, e.g. focused panels by an increasing number of program units, supported networks for scholars, publicizing of existing work in public scholarship, formalization of training opportunities, and ongoing efforts to collect award, competency-building, and fellowship information.

APPENDIX A: GRANTS & AWARDS[6]

American Academy of Religion Martin E. Marty Award for The Public Understanding of Religion: This major guild award goes to individuals whose work has a relevance and eloquence that speaks, not just to scholars, but more broadly to the public as well. The Marty Award is not a "lifetime achievement award" but instead a recognition of exceptional work that fits the criteria above, at any stage in that person's career. It offers only a modest subsidy for attending the November AAR conference, but includes a dedicated award program designed in consort with the awardee.

C. Peter Magrath Community Engagement Scholarship Award: Presented during the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) Annual Meeting, this award includes a sculpture and a $20,000 prize. The award annually signifies the single best engagement program in a public university.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Community Engagement Scholarship Awards: Given to the winner of each of four regional competitions, these awards provide $2,500 to support the production of a two-minute video "story" about the partnership and to defray expenses for travel to the ESC Annual Conference. Certificates of award are also provided to community partners.

Engagement Scholarship Consortium Excellence Awards: Open to all institutions of higher education, awards for engaged scholarship recognize exemplary institutional programs in four categories: Student, Faculty, Community Partner and Institutional Leadership.

National Campus Compact Award: The Thomas Ehrlich Civically Engaged Faculty Award recognizes one faculty member each year for exemplary engaged scholarship, including leadership in advancing students' civic learning, conducting community-based research, fostering reciprocal community partnerships, building institutional commitments to service-learning and civic engagement, and other means of enhancing higher education's contributions to the public good.

The Richards Award for Public Scholarship: This $1000 award considers how nominees have contributed to and shaped public discourse, broadly defined. This may include writings (including op-ed pieces and blogs), websites attracting the public, public speaking (including media appearances and public lectures), teaching and mentoring, or other means through which the nominee has served the public. Applications highlighting recent work as well as those highlighting a legacy of public engagement are accepted.

National Endowment for the Humanities: The Public Scholars program offers grants (up to $5000/month) to individual authors for research, writing, travel, and other activities leading to

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[6] This list is not exhaustive; it is hoped that the new AAR website (once launched) will maintain a more comprehensive list of grants and awards.

the creation and publication of well-researched nonfiction books in the humanities written for the broad public.

Luce-AAR Advancing Public Scholarship Grant Program: With funding from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Luce-AAR Advancing Public Scholarship Grant program offers grants to support scholars of religion who are working to engage publics in innovative ways, through projects designed for presentation in public spaces and outreach through publicly accessible sites.
See also: **Luce Religion and Public Scholarship Pipeline Project**

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

AHA Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian. 8 April 2010. Last revised 4 June 2017.

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Magness, Jodi and Margaret M. Mitchell, "Religious Studies and the Imagined Boundaries of the Humanities," *Daedalus* 151:3 (2022): 166–179.

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Sdvizhov, Helen, et al, "A Framework to Understand and Address Barriers to Community-Engaged Scholarship and Public Engagement in Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure Across Higher Education." *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 26 (2022) 3: 129-147.

University of New Hampshire, "Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Languages and Literature Programs." November 2022.

Wendling, Lauren A. "Evaluating Engaged Research in Promotion and Tenure: Not Everything that Counts Can Be Counted," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 27:1 (2023): 221-33.

APPENDIX C: TASK FORCE PRECEDENTS AND PROCESS

The Task Force for Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion began by reviewing existing statements from several academic guilds and previous guidelines from the American Academy of Religion, notably AAR's Guidelines on Evaluating Digital Scholarship (2018) and a general statement on evaluating scholarship in religious studies (2019).

We also discussed collaborative efforts among religion scholars as they focus attention on public scholarship, e.g. the AAR Committee for the Public Understanding of Religion, AAR's Publicly Engaged Scholarship in the Study of Religion Seminar, and the Community Engaged Research Collective.

Members of the Task Force conducted twenty interviews with department chairs, deans, funders, and public scholars, seeking input about current policies and experiences as well as recommendations for the substance and rollout of the guidelines.

AAR staff distributed a survey to the Program Unit Heads, inquiring about the value placed on public scholarship in their cohort and seeking examples. Of the forty-one Units (25%) that responded, thirty-three identified public scholarship as 5 or higher on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). Eighteen ranked it as 8/10 and five found it to be of the utmost importance, ranking it as 10/10. It is noteworthy that *all* of the respondents identified public scholarship as playing a role in their work.

The Task Force distributed a draft of the document before and during the 2024 annual conference, inviting feedback, before submitting it to the AAR Board of Directors.

Members of the Task Force:
Rachel S. Mikva, chair
Evan Berry
Victoria Machado
Teresa Smallwood
Jeremy Sorgen