

50 Years Later: Recollections and Reflections from Previous *RSR* Executive Editors

RSR and the Demise of THE CSSR: A Historical Note

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As a former chair of *Religious Studies Review's* editorial board and executive director of its former parent organization, the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR), I was kindly asked by Mark MacWilliams if I would like to contribute to this *RSR* special issue, perhaps talking about my “understanding of the value and importance of *RSR* as a journal for our field.”

I spent my career as a professor of religion at Texas Christian University deeply engaged with Religious Studies—past, present, and future—and was honored to be part of a journal named *Religious Studies Review*. The extensive response to the request to participate in this special issue is itself strong evidence of *RSR's* ongoing importance in the field. But instead of a more theoretical piece on “Religious Studies Whither and Why,” and prompted by Harold Remus’s 2009 essay on the original goals and subsequent history of the CSSR and of *RSR*, I thought readers might find my experience with the Council and the journal revealing and thus of interest.

I began reading *RSR* long ago as a graduate student, appreciating both the booknotes and review essays relevant to my specific field, South Asian religions, as well as those considering topics or authors writing on method and theory in Religious Studies broadly. I thought, then and now, that few journals cover as much of the field as *RSR* does, and the wide-ranging short booknotes were, in particular, useful to me and many others to help decide what I might look into in more depth.

During my scholarly career, I was surprised and pleased about how involved I became with *RSR* and its parent organization, the CSSR, though I never expected to oversee the latter’s dissolution—and thereby hangs quite a tale. My first involvement with *RSR* was as a Hinduism booknote, then South Asia area, editor from 1997 to 2004. That role helped me to read broadly and get to know a wide array of scholars in my field. A few years later, my friend Jeffrey Kripal, a professor at Rice University, to which *RSR* eventually moved, asked me to

become the Executive Director of the CSSR. I held that position from 2007 to 2009 when I, along with Board President Russell McCutcheon of the University of Alabama, dissolved the organization. I concurrently was the Chair of *RSR's* editorial board from 2007 to 2010.

The first few months of my CSSR directorship were marked by a series of sobering shocks about the organization’s actual financial condition (including major debts). Given my unfamiliarity with the CSSR and inexperience in budgeting when I began, Board President McCutcheon did heroic work in helping me respond to the financial shortfall. We redid the budget and had a reliable cash flow chart for the first time. I also want to give great credit to my predecessors, Nadine Pence and Rick DeMaris, for saving both the CSSR and *RSR* over the prior years, but the survival of the CSSR was in question from the beginning of my involvement.

RSR got a new look, inside and out 2007, which generated mostly favorable comments. Despite various difficulties, we were able to put out a complete set of issues, though we were short on review essays and had a thin “pipeline.” We were helped by the fact that the excellent outgoing editor Rick DeMaris made an “editor’s choice” of best essays in his valedictory issue, and we changed the timing of our first issue each year from January to March. We replaced Rick with two new co-equal editors, one for review essays, David Gray of Santa Clara University, and one for booknotes, Deepak Sarma of Case Western Reserve. Both did superb jobs during my tenure. Jeff Kripal, then Rice Religion Department chair, was a stalwart supporter of me, *RSR*, and the CSSR all that time as well. I also tried to begin what I believe have been repeated discussions throughout the history of *RSR* about taxonomic categories for editor areas and booknotes, and setting up procedures or benchmarks for activity for area essay and booknote editors and subeditors. Building a true accountability structure eluded me during this period.

We began 2008 with greater financial and personnel stability, but that August CSSR’s largest constituent society, the Catholic Biblical Association, had its own financial crisis, so it withdrew from the CSSR and stopped subscribing to *RSR*. That, and the long-term shrinkage of CSSR constituents, forced Russell and me to begin the dissolution of the Council and discussions with parties interested in taking on *RSR*, which itself

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earned a healthy profit with publisher Wiley-Blackwell. In 2008, *RSR* continued to receive and publish an increased number of essays and booknotes; we published four complete issues of new material on schedule for the first time in five years.

In 2009, after extensive negotiations, *RSR* happily found a safe harbor with Wiley-Blackwell under the editorial leadership of the Rice Religion Dept. As I planned to depart, I was pleased that the journal published four complete issues on schedule, had a stable cash flow, a solid editorial team, and an excellent support team at Rice. Regarding the CSSR's dissolution, I spent considerable time dealing with lawyers. Through research, we discovered that since the organization was chartered in Pennsylvania, it would need to be dissolved

there. We employed the Harrisburg PA firm Saul Ewing to represent us, and it will likely surprise no one that it turned out to be far more expensive than expected (over \$20,000), but they worked hard through the year to bring the transfer of our journals and organizational dissolution to a smooth conclusion. The final line in my annual director's report was, "the CSSR has lived a good life, but I am satisfied to assist it to a good death."

Given this history, I am very happy to see that *RSR* has continued to thrive under Mark MacWilliams and the Rice team. No other journal offers quite the same twofold benefit of stimulating review essays with such extensive short reviews of books. May the journal's next 50 years be as auspicious!