Comment: *AAR/SBL*

The American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature held their annual meetings, in late November as usual, this year in Toronto, with residents occupying the main downtown hotels, facing out over Lake Ontario, and many of the sessions being held in the vast spaces of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre (Centre, not Center, this being Canada).

With some 6000 participants, this is by far the largest gathering in the English-speaking world of specialists in the many disparate fields of religious studies. There were, obviously, far more papers than one could ever listen to, even in one's own area of interest or expertise. Many participants came not to attend lectures but to meet old friends, to catch up on the gossip, and to interview or be interviewed for vacant posts. There were numerous working breakfasts (7 am start); and crowded late evening receptions. Many scholarly organizations seize the opportunity to hold their annual meetings: the Hermetic Academy ('scholarly research into esoteric traditions'); the International Institute for Field-Being (interested in 'the non-Substantialistic Turn'); as well as, more conventionally, the societies interested in Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and so on (none devoted to Thomas Aquinas or any modern Catholic theologian).

The incomparable exhibition of books was staffed by publishers ranging from heavyweights like Brill Academic and the many university presses to wackier houses like Lost Coast Press (featuring *Priscilla's Letter*, by Ruth Hoppin, a formidably documented and unbelievably plausible argument that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written by St Paul's friend and co-worker Prisca).

Founded in 1880, the SBL supports the critical investigation of the Bible, in the context of the history, literature, and culture of the ancient near eastern world. The presidential address this year — 'The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence' — was delivered by John J. Collins, now at Yale Divinity School, a scholar whose work has focused on Second Temple Judaism, past president of the Catholic Biblical Association, an alumnus of University College, Dublin. At a time when the western world is supposedly, as he said, engaged in a 'war on terrorism', he reflected on the ways in which the Bible appears to endorse and indeed bless recourse to violence. Focussing on the commands to slaughter the Canaanites in the Deuteronomic literature and on the deferred violence of apocalyptic literature, he considered the use of this biblical material for violent action in Jewish and Christian tradition.

The AAR's range is, obviously, much wider. In this year's presidential address — 'Embodied Cosmologies' — Vasudha Narayanan, past president of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies, developed her work

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01839.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

on religion and ecology. Yet, if Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, African, Afro-American and North American indigenous religions, and so on, drew many participants, Christianity remained central. There were, for example, debates about embryo, stem-cell and cloning research; and equally serious discussion of the crisis in the American Catholic Church over the child molestation scandals and mishandling of them by some bishops: topics of passionate concern among US Catholics.

Many sessions had a specifically Canadian focus: one honouring Gregory Baum, in a retrospective of his work, with himself as respondent; others on religious diversity and particularly the varieties of Judaism in Toronto, and on the guilt and remorse both of the churches and the state in Canada about the mistreatment for many years of the 'First Nations Peoples' (one Anglican diocese has been bankrupted, compensating people abused as children).

Jacques Derrida was there, in person; many contributions circled round or delved into his recent reflections on religion. Hans Küng was there, indomitable and indefatigable as ever, representing the Global Ethic Foundation, and offering 'Reflections after September 11, 2001': 'A new mind-set is needed: national, ethical, and religious differences must no longer be understood as a threat but rather as possible sources of enrichment'. Arun Gandhi, the Mahatma's fifth grandson, scholar-in-residence at the Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee, asked, in another plenary address, whether we have distorted the essence of religion (it would be tricky to say who 'we' are, in this context).

The most enjoyable sessions focussed on marginal subjects, as for instance the retrieval of Aimee Semple McPherson, the early twentieth century evangelist (Canadian by birth), and her International Church of the Foursquare. The paper on the Harry Potter phenomenon gave rise to lively debate. Nothing could have surpassed the witty and worrying presentation of the 'Lord's Gym', a club in Florida for Christians who want to 'work out', with Christ the body builder supporting his cross as its logo.

This would take too much room to document; but the recurrent themes throughout the entire AAR/SBL event seemed to be sexuality (including feminist theory and 'gay men's issues'); anxiety about the extinction of so many indigenous peoples, cultures and languages (reflected also in discussions of 'native American theology'); and the effects of '9/11', as Americans call the al-Quaeda attacks on the United States (including the threat of pre-emptive or retaliatory invasion of Iraq). In these respects, if the AAR/SBL meetings are any guide, the kaleidoscope of topics under discussion, in religious and biblical studies today, far from being 'merely academic', homes in, often circuitously and subversively, on the most traumatic and sensitive issues in North America today.

F.K.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01839.x Published online by Cambridge University Press