

FUTURE/S

This is not a time for “business as usual.” The future of religious scholarship within and without the academy is more uncertain than ever for our members – perhaps especially our contingent faculty, our graduate students, our department chairs striving to maintain a place for the study of religion, and all who are crafting para-academic careers. From an organizational perspective, our gatherings are powerful opportunities for collective re-imagining and action. From a scholarly perspective, our diverse traditions and approaches make us particularly skilled in thinking about future possibilities.

“The future” is a contested idea that looms large in human traditions and functions diversely in the collective stories of many cultures. To whom something called “the future” belongs, or for whom it functions is a matter of extensive theoretical, literary, and cinematic interest but visions of possible futures (hoped-for or feared) are also an ancient and enduring concern of many religions. Some would say that we bring into being what we can first imagine. Are we able critically to assess and help to build futures for which we hope? The muscle of dystopic imagination is well honed these days, and for good reason. But what about other possible futures, past and present? Where is the sensory richness that might enflesh imagination otherwise?

Scholars of religion are uniquely positioned to reflect critically on the modes and capacities of religious and spiritual stories and practices, ancient and new, local and global, to imagine futures beyond despair on the one hand, or superficial hope on the other. We know how to take seriously the narratives, traditions, and practices that have opened up or delimited our horizons of possibility. We know how to illuminate their materialization over time, and to lift up counter-memory possibilities therein. Given the present intensity of uncertainty facing scholars of religion and academic pursuits in the humanities more generally – not to mention the uncertainties of democracy, peace, and the well-being of the earth and its creatures – this is a time to attend to the question: what is the importance of future thinking (futuring, as some would have it) in the work of religious scholarship in this time?