

Religion professors repairing their rift over annual meetings: Plans difficult to change

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

Separate fall meetings for the nation's two largest organizations of religion professors—a showcase of religious studies research and expertise—may last only three years if negotiations under way bear fruit.

The American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, whose concurrent annual meetings in recent years have assembled some 10,000 academics, graduate students and publishers, held their meetings separately this November after decades of collaboration.

The AAR, whose members teach a broad range of religious subjects, including biblical and theological topics, in 2003 decided without consulting the SBL to sever ties with its longtime academic associate. Among the reasons for the split, AAR leaders said, was the fact that the growing size of the annual meeting was inhibiting its expansion into new topics.

The unilateral break led to a drawn-out controversy. But bowing to a solid majority of AAR members who objected, the AAR board of directors now hopes to adjust hotel contracts so the two organizations can convene in the same city at the same time.

The two groups will meet separately in 2009 and 2010 but are trying to arrange a common book exhibit and a central job interview center in San Francisco in 2011 when they both meet for their customary pre-Thanksgiving sessions.

Beyond that, the AAR is seeking to get out of its 2012 contractual agreement for early November in Atlanta and join the SBL in Chicago later in the month, according to John Fitzmier, who became AAR's executive director two years ago.

"That's going to take some doing," said Fitzmier in an interview November 2 during the AAR meeting in Chicago. The penalties for backing out of the Atlanta contract

are considerable, he said.

The AAR has no contract obligations for 2013, so Fitzmier has talked with Kent Richards, the SBL executive director, about meeting jointly with the biblical scholars, who have hotel reservations in Baltimore.

“There are many, many logistics” to work out, Richards said in an e-mail interview. He emphasized that the SBL “has always said we would like to work it out.”

Both Fitzmier, a specialist in U.S. religious history, and Richards, whose field is Old Testament studies, stressed that whatever compromises are reached the two groups will formalize an increased degree of independence because of their expanding programs.

About 5,700 people registered for the three-day AAR meeting that ended November 3 in Chicago—a “pleasant surprise,” Fitzmier said. As of November 4, the SBL had 5,200 preregistered for its November 21-25 meeting in Boston, Richards said.

“If we can work out the details of the San Francisco meeting, then we can begin to apply those principles to future years,” Richards added.

Religious publishers have said they cannot afford to show their wares at two meetings each year. “I suspect some will look at their sales this time and decide whether to go to both meetings next year,” Fitzmier said.

Graduate students, who constitute at least a fourth of the registrants, have not been happy with the AAR move either. “I can’t afford to go to both meetings, but I need the tools of both,” said Laurel W. Koepf, a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Fitzmier said that religion courses are still popular in higher education. “Will positions be cut in difficult economic times?” he asked. “Yes, some marginal departments of religion might suffer, but I think we have won the argument for the value of critical study of religion, especially on state campuses,” he said. “One of the questions we ask is whether there are enough jobs to go around.”