



Austin Steelman Receives 2023-24 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott Award

The LGBTQ Religious Archives Network (LGBTQ-RAN) honors Austin Steelman with the [2023-24 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott Award](#). The Mollenkott Award honors outstanding research and scholarship in LGBTQ religious history. The review jury selected Steelman’s “Not an ‘Ordinary Man:’ J. Gresham Machen and the Un-Queering of Evangelical Theology” from among eight papers submitted for the award this year. Steelman will be given this award at a public event on Wednesday, March 6th, 2024 at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Austin Steelman is a Ph.D. candidate in the History Department at Stanford University. Prior to coming to Stanford, he earned a J.D. from Harvard Law School and worked as a litigator in the field of intellectual property law. While in law school, he began his research on the connections between interpretations of legal and religious texts in American history. His dissertation, “Paper Gods: The Bible, the Constitution, and the Evangelical Revolt Against Modernity, 1923-1986,” looks specifically at the interconnected ideologies of biblical inerrancy and constitutional originalism and their role in the formation and rise of the Evangelical Right. His work identifies the old theological and epistemological roots of constitutional originalism—the creed that continued to bind and animate the fractious conservative legal movement to the present day.

Steelman was examining the papers of conservative Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen, arguably the most influential evangelical theologian of the twentieth century, for the first chapter of his dissertation when he recognized a pattern of coded language around sexuality and romance in Machen’s correspondence. Relying on the work of scholars of queerness in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (including the work of past Mollenkott Award winners), Steelman argues that Machen’s circumspect descriptions revealed his same-sex sexual orientation. Significantly, Machen’s reckoning with his sexuality occurred during his graduate studies in Germany, a nation with a more robust understanding of “homosexuality” than the United States, and at the same time that he became enamored with the liberal theology of his professor Wilhelm Herrmann. Ultimately, Machen’s encounter with his sexuality—which he described to his family as his “moral fault” that no “ordinary man” could understand drove him to repudiate the theological liberalism and return to the conservative Calvinist theology of his upbringing and Princeton Theological Seminary training. Machen, who became a Princeton Theological Seminary professor and America’s leading conservative theologian during the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, taught some of the most influential fundamentalist and evangelical leaders of the 20th century. In recovering a crucial turning point in Machen’s life that echoed through American religious history, Steelman theorizes a historical process of “un-queering,” rejecting intellectual diversity due to a backlash against queer sexuality that complements existing historical inquiries into “queered” theology.

Steelman is the fifteenth recipient of [LGBTQ-RAN’s award for papers](#) since its inception in 2005, but the second honoree since the award was named in memory of Virginia Ramey

Mollenkott in the summer of 2022. This is the only award given for outstanding scholarship in this field of study. Jury members Joanne Carlson Brown, Ph.D., and Gillian Frank, Ph.D. found that Steelman's work best captured the attributes of this award: "centering queer subjects, offering compelling archival and textual evidence, showing change over time, analyzing religious and sexual historical contexts, and making innovative interventions in the field." Furthermore, they observed that Steelman "uses close readings to draw attention to both presence and absence in the archives and utilizes queer historical methods, queer theory and religious studies to re-think the history of Evangelical thought as a process of "un-queering." By looking at Machen's archives (and their absences), exploring his personal life, scholarly writings, and legacies, Steelman allows us to see the ways in which queerness was both present and evacuated. While we might have some question about some LGBTQ historical contexts, we found the arguments to be innovative and convincing."

Submissions for next year's Virginia Ramey Mollenkott Award must be postmarked or received electronically by December 1, 2024. Complete information on submission guidelines for the award can be found at: <https://www.lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/vrm-award-guidelines>

The [LGBTQ Religious Archives Network](https://www.lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/) is a ground-breaking venture to preserve the history of LGBTQ religious movements around the world. It has three primary purposes: a) to assist LGBTQ religious leaders and groups in determining how best to preserve their records and papers; b) to provide an electronic information clearinghouse about LGBTQ religious history for the use of historians, researchers and other interested persons; and c) to encourage scholarship in LGBTQ religious history. Learn more about LGBTQ-RAN at its website: <https://www.lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/>

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