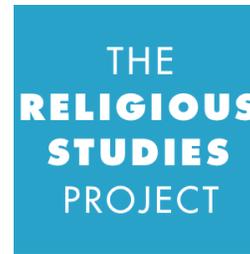# Podcast Transcript

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Stereotyping Religion: Critical Approaches to Pervasive Clichés

Podcast with **Brad Stoddard** and **Craig Martin** (30 April 2018).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

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Chris Cotter (**CC**): *"Religions are belief systems." "Religions are intrinsically violent." "Religion is bullshit." These are just some of the pervasive clichés that we might hear from time to time, in the English-speaking world, about our central topic of discussion on the RSP: religion. Joining me today to talk about a new book that's coming out called* Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés, *are the book's editors,* Brad Stoddard *and* Craig Martin, *neither of whom should be strangers to the Religious Studies Project. But, just to introduce them, Brad is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. He completed his dissertation at Florida State University and is currently revising his manuscript on Florida's faith-based correctional institutions. He teaches American Religious History and the History of Christianity. And he's primarily interested in religion and the law, religion in American prisons, and theory and method in the Study of Religion. And he's currently serving as the president of our beneficent sponsors, the North American Association for the Study of Religion. And Craig Martin is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at St Thomas Aquinas College. And his research and teaching focuses on theoretical questions in the academic Study of Religion, typically related to discourse, ideology and power. And some of his books include,* Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere; Capitalising Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie; and A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion. *And he is currently the editor of a book series with Bloomsbury, titled* Critiquing Religion: Discourse, Culture and Power, *in which this book,* Stereotyping Religion, *appears. So, Brad and Craig – welcome back to the Religious Studies Project!*

Brad Stoddard (**BS**): Thank you.

Craig Martin (**CM**): Thanks so much.

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CC: *And I should say that we are conversing via the wonders of Skype. So maybe – just to set the scene here for me – if you want to tell me, how did this book come to be? Why did it come to be? What's the point here?*

CM: Brad, can I field that one to begin with?

BS: I think you should!

CM: (Laughs.) So, the initial idea for this book project came to me when I was working on my dissertation at Syracuse University. I was thinking about all the stereotypes about religion that my students came into the class with, and that I found frustrating to know how to deal with – and not just students, but also friends and family members who would repeat these clichés. And it was like, I couldn't think of an obvious scholarly source to point them to, to say, "OK. In a nutshell, here's why scholars try to avoid this cliché." So, through conversations with my friends Donovan Schaefer and Jeremy Vecchi . . . Schaefer's now at – I'm going to get this wrong. He's either at Penn State, or the University of Pennsylvania – I can't remember which.

CC: (Laughs).

CM: But, I reached out to [Donovan Schaefer](#) and [Jeremy Vecchi](#) and I said, "You know, I think we could write this book really quickly and easily, because we already know what we want to say about each of these stereotypes." And we produced three chapters, and I graduated and moved away, and the thing just kind-of languished and was never picked up and continued. So a couple of years ago I was like, "You know, that really was a good idea for a book. There should be something on clichés and stereotypes." So I reached out to Brad and said, "Hey, are you interested in helping me edit this?" And he jumped on board, and then we ran with it.

CC: *Wonderful. And it's really great when that sort of thing happens, when you get to revisit an idea that you had – and no one else has stolen it! Yes.*

CM: (Laughs). Yes. Well in ten years of it sitting, nobody else stole the idea. And I think that the stereotypes we chose are so pervasive that we didn't have any difficulty getting people to sign up for the project. People were immediately, "Oh yes! That's a great idea. Can I address this one?" Or, "Can I address that one?" So, yes we were pleased with how quickly it came together, and how great our submitting authors were.

CC: *On that note . . . . So, you say you found it quite easy to come up with the list of clichés: did you present a ready-made list and then try and find contributors? Or did contributors come to you with clichés they particularly wanted to write about? And were there ones that you had wanted to include, that you couldn't?*

BS: As I recall, Craig and I . . . when Craig approached me with the project we sat down, you know, over the phone or email and went back and forth to create a list of about ten clichés that we agreed on. And then we started looking for people to write about the individual clichés. And in conversations with the individual authors at least one or maybe two of the clichés changed, because the author would say, "Well that's good – can I approach it from this angle" And of course, when it made sense, we gave the individual authors the freedom to run with the cliché. But the bulk of it, I think, came from a few conversations where Craig and I just identified: these are the main clichés we see in society and politics. These are the main clichés we encounter in class. And so we had this list of clichés – and it just changed a little bit, but for the most part we ran with our list.

CC: *Fantastic. I'll ask you in a moment to take me through a few of them. But, in the introduction you set out the context for the book, but also the context in which the clichés are operating. So you talk about liberal political theory, idealised Protestantism, secularisation theory and so on. Maybe you could – just for the listeners – lay out the context that we're talking about, in which these stereotypes are operating?*

CM: I think a lot of that stuff in the intro was from me. Because when we were finishing edits to the various chapters, and I was reading through them and thinking about, you know – would my students be able to follow these or not? Because we wanted this to be accessible at an undergraduate level. I realised a common theme that went throughout a majority of the chapters were those three things that you mentioned: liberal political discourse that says religion is a private matter, the discourses on secularism and the discourses on New Atheism. These didn't pop up in every single chapter, but in a majority of ones. So I was like, you know: we should give some background to the consistent themes that were going to pop up as the reader moves through the book.

CC: *Yes.*

CM: So that's why I used those in particular: because I thought that they would help the readers understand the chapters.

BS: The only thing that I would add to that – I think you also mention in that section anti-Catholic propaganda, or anti-Catholic Protestant propaganda, about religion being a private matter. Or some of the other clichés: that they have a Protestant bias built into them. And, of course, the colonial context. Those are two other factors that we saw as common themes in the history of the general clichés.

CM: Yes, for sure. Exactly.

CC: *Fantastic. So, I'm wary of asking you pull out favourites or anything, because we'll not have time to get through every cliché. But perhaps you could take us through one or two of them, and just show us some of the analysis in action?*

BS: Do you have any ones you want to pull out, Craig?

CM: I'll wait till after you go.

CC: (*Laughs*). *I like that*.

BS: I have a soft spot for [Steven Ramey's](#) piece. Steven Ramey writes about religions being mutually exclusive. And I think Steven's was the first . . . . The reason I have a soft spot for it: I think it was the first one that came back to us; he was the first to submit it, that is. And I read it and I thought, "This is exactly how I want this book to look." So, Steven Ramey addresses the cliché that religions are mutually exclusive. And so he introduces the chapter with I think the opening sentence, "What is your religion? Check one box." And this is something that all undergraduates have seen in some version, right? What is your religion? They get it here. They have the option to check that box when they apply for admission. So I know they've at least seen it once, but probably many times before. So he introduces the cliché. In the introduction he talks about how this is not . . . this cliché that religions are mutually exclusive is not just academic navel-gazing, but that there are real political and legal implications. And he addressed some of the legal and political implications. And he continues . . . . In the chapter he talks about places where you encounter this cliché. Where do we see it? We see it in popular culture. We see it in politics. We see it in Law. Of course, he doesn't mention this, but for example in the work I do in prisons: when you're an inmate in America you check "Which religion are you?" You have to check one. And in Florida, where I did the bulk of my research, you can only change your religion once every six months. And it dictates where you can move about in the prison, which groups you can attend, which study groups, which religious services. Steven doesn't address that part, but these are some of the examples. Steven mentions different types of examples like this.

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You know, this idea that religions are mutually exclusive: it does have political and legal implications. So then he moves in, and he talks about the development, the historical development of the cliché. Talking about, of course, the European context in which the cliché emerged. He talks about the colonial context. I believe he mentions the Protestant Reformation. He talks about places like India, where the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism is not as rigid as we would imply. Or some other Asian countries where Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism or even Shinto - these alleged, so-called separate religions - the boundaries are just so much more malleable. So, long-story-short, by the time you read Steven's chapter you get the history of the cliché, you get the political work that it does, and you realise the areas of the world where that cliché becomes quite problematic.

CC: *Exactly. And it's worth noting, here, that the book isn't attempting to sort-of put something in the place of these clichés. Because the opposite example of religions being mutually exclusive, would be that, I guess, religions are all one and the same – which is another one that is dealt with in the book. You're not so much asking these authors to say, "This is wrong, and this is right." You're rather pointing out that clichés, in and of themselves, never tell the full picture and are always doing ideological work.*

BS: That's true. We highlight that in the introduction, where we make a point of saying that we want to make it clear the work is not to replace these old clichés with new generalisations about religion, or better generalisations about religion. Instead, we're suggesting to the students, or to the readers, that any cliché about religion or any generalising statement can similarly be interrogated, historicised, etc.

CC*: Fantastic. So, Craig, you've had a long time to think, there, about which you're going to pick out!*

CM: Well, I decided I can't pick one. I think – there are so many great chapters in here, in my opinion.

CC: *You'll never hear the end of it if you pick . . . you know, whoever you pick!*

CM: Yes. (Laughs). Well, ok

BS: Delete my answer, then!

CM: I really enjoyed [Tenzan](#)'s chapter on learning about how religion leads to tolerance – in part because he did a bunch of research into [Ninian Smart's](#) work that I didn't have a lot of prior familiarity with. So I actually learned a lot about Ninian Smart by reading his chapter. You know, Ninian Smart reproduces a stereotype that if you learn about religion, or if we teach about religion in public schools

or in colleges, then people will be more tolerant and accepting and forgiving of one another. And one of the things that I felt was really important about the book was that I felt that we needed to address how theses stereotypes appear not only in popular culture, but also in scholarly literature. And Tenzan just did a fantastic job of showing, you know, how even a sophisticated scholar like Ninian Smart reproduces some pretty blatant stereotypes. But I really thought he nailed Ninian Smart – that's probably why I liked it so much.

CC: *Yes. When I was reading it I did highlight three or four pages to come back to, the next time I have to teach about Ninian Smart.*

CM: I had a chance to teach him in my Intro to Religious Studies class. I taught this book last semester. And literally, the day . . . . So, this was a 9 o'clock in the morning class, and we'd addressed Tenzan's chapter that education about religion leads to tolerance. And then, literally a couple of hours later, one of my students who was in that class went to one of her other classes where they had a guest lecturer – who showed up to talk about how education about different religions leads to tolerance! So the student came back to me in office hours the next day and said, "You know, Professor, I was arguing with this presenter in my head, and I was pretty sure I won the argument, based on what we had learned in class earlier that day."

CC*: (Laughs).*

CM: So it was fun to see . . . . You know, we addressed this cliché and then two hours later, literally, she encounters the cliché in the classroom. It's fun!

CC: *Fantastic. And we'll talk, hopefully, before we finish about that experiment of using it in the classroom. But you've touched on, there, learning about religions leads to tolerance. That sounds like a quite a positive cliché. In one of the chapters, I think it was [Matt Sheedy](#)'s on religion being violent, he brought up [Karen Armstrong](#), and others, insisting that proper religion is peaceful, and religion is a peaceful, nice thing. Is there a danger that by critiquing positive clichés we're doing society a disservice? Or is there such a thing as a positive cliché?*

CM: I want to answer this question pointing to what I think is an excellent book on phenomenology of religion, [Tim Murphy](#)'s *[The Politics of Spirit](#)*. And in that book Murphy looks at the history of phenomenology, a lot of which puts a positive spin on religion: that religion is getting in touch with the transcendent; religion is a sort of happiness, etc. Phenomenology of religion tends to think

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positively about religion. But what Tim Murphy does is show that each one of those phenomenologists uses their rhetorical framework to rank religions and to denigrate some in relationship to others. So that someone like Rudolph Otto says, you know, religion is getting in touch with the transcendent, and that Christianity most beautifully gets us in touch with the transcendent. But, of course, Islam doesn't do so well, and primitive religion is terrible at it. So I think that even the positive clichés . . . like Karen Armstrong – she also has a ranking system built into her framework. So that the things that she likes she can call *authentic* religion, and the things that she doesn't like she can dismiss as *inauthentic* religion or political religion – or maybe, for her, political religion isn't even religion. So perhaps it's ok to bomb the ship in the Middle East, because they're not *good* religious people, they're *bad* religious people? So I think that even the positive clichés have the potential to be used in that kind of ranking system, where people can favour one and dismiss others. And that can often-times lead to what I consider to be negative effects.

CC: Absolutely. And, indeed, Leslie Dorrough Smith writes in the book about the idea of religion being about transcendence. And I pulled out this quote where she says that cliché can "simultaneously normalise the existence of the supernatural, identify an enemy, justify a political cause, amplify the seriousness of one's position and unite a group of people under the banner of their own moral worth." And that's not even a complete list! So in that . . . . You hear, "Oh religion is just about the transcendent, the supernatural, the ineffable," and it doesn't sound harmful. But when you look at how it is deployed, it's doing real ideological work. So let's talk about the classroom setting, then. So, as I was saying earlier to you: this is certainly going to be a very useful resource when I'm coming to teaching – not only about Ninian Smart, but any time you casually mention these clichés – it's going to be fantastic to just pick up the book and find a few examples. So I can see it being a really useful teaching resource, in that respect. But, Brad – you used it in the classroom, then. So how did that go down?

BS: Yes, I used this book in my Intro to Religious Studies class, where we start by reviewing the so-called canon of important or influential Religious Studies scholars, and then we supplement that with people who are omitted from the so-called canon. And then the benefit of that is that the students got a wide survey of theories about religions, approaches to religion, methods, methodologies, etc. And then we ended the semester by reading and discussing *Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés.* And since it was the first time I taught from the book, I organised it as this: we'd meet three days a week, and I asked groups of students to present for a half hour. And so, you had two or three students each presenting a chapter. And they presented for about twenty minutes, and then we'd open up for Q and A

for about ten minutes or so. And then I had some closing comments at the end of the class. And what I like about it is that it allowed me to see what the students took from the book, and what I thought they omitted. And it led to some really good discussions, because the students thought...or the students said, "Yes. Some of the clichés that we've identified, I embrace them." Pretty much the entire class! And so to have someone call them out, and point out the history, and point out the problems with it – it did a lot of work in the class. It helped the students, because it overturned some things that they had just taken for granted. And actually, on the last day of class, we discussed the entire book. And the students tended to agree – obviously they knew that I was one of the editors, so they weren't going to say too many harsh criticisms; they weren't going to criticise it too much! But they thought that it was nice to end the semester by addressing these clichés, for the simple fact that it changed the way they were thinking, or that they had thought about religion, you know, for their young adult life.

CC: *Fantastic.*

BS: Not to over-romanticise it, right?!

CC: *Oh, no.*

BS: But they did find value in it.

CC: *Excellent. I can totally see myself, the next time I'm marking a pile of essays . . . . And you see these clichés coming up all the time. One that's not in the book is, you know: "Religion has been around since the beginning of time . . ." They'll sort-of begin with that. But plenty of other ones come up. And I can imagine, immediately, just copying in a URL to the chapter on the library website, for any of these – rather than having to spend my own time deconstructing it! Just say, "Read that chapter, and then come back and write it again."*

BS: That's a good one! Craig, take note: we should include that in the next edition, if there is one!

CC: *Yes! (Laughs). Well, if there's another one: "Religion is a choice" – you always hear that. People choose to believe, or choose to have a certain religion. So, yes, I'm already filling up the next volume! I guess an obvious question that would come up on the RSP quite often, is: why religion, here? Obviously this is our area of interest. We teach courses on this. But could you do a similar book for say stereotyping sport, or stereotyping gender, or, you know – is religion particularly problematic?*

BS: Yes, you could. And I hope other people do!

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CC: *(Laughs).*

BS: So, I have a little more of a substantive response to that question.

All: (Laugh).

BS: I think that, yes, obviously you could write such a book about any subject matter: stereotyping politics, stereotyping gender, stereotyping race. What I think sets Religious Studies apart is the fact that post-structuralism reached Religious Studies twenty years later than it hit all those other fields. And the popularisation of post-structuralist approaches is lagging. I don't know, apart from Malory Nye's intro book, in Russell McCutcheon's new book, I don't know of any introductory material in Religious Studies that actually comes from a critical, poststructuralist perspective. And I'm pretty sure that people have been teaching poststructuralism to undergrads since the 80s. So it's time that we went ahead, and picked up our slack, and tried to catch up by having some undergraduate literature to present. I mean it's not like post-structuralism is brand new. It's 50 years old, now! Our introductory textbooks still tend to ignore those types of critical approaches.

CC: *Yes. So there are disciplinary reasons why such a book may not be written, necessarily, in other fields. And then also, like it or not, "religion" – this constructed political category – is something that has a lot of power in the modern Western world. To write a book called, I don't know, "Stereotyping Golf", or "Stereotyping Stamp Collecting", whilst it might be interesting . . . . Unfortunately, stereotypes about stamp collecting probably aren't quite as pervasive, or potentially harmful, as these clichés about "religion". Every time I say "religion" it's in scare quotes. But we all know that. We are coming up on about 25 minutes, here. So I'll be wanting to wrap up, fairly soon. And I'm going to close the interview with Rebekka King's close to the book. But I just wondered if there's anything more on this topic of prevalent stereotypes about religion that you would like to say, or that you'd hoped you were going to say?*

CM: I think I would just want to say thanks to Donovan Schaefer and Jeremy Vecchi for working with me on this project in the ancient past, and thanks to Brad for joining the project when I decided to resurrect it. And also thanks to Lalle Pursglove at Bloomsbury publishing, for showing some interest in the idea and taking me up on the offer.

CC: *Absolutely. And it's brilliant to see the sort of critical religion approach applied in this sense, sort-of applied systematically to a variety of clichés that . . . . When I was reading it myself I was*

doing a lot of, "Well, yes. Yes, that makes sense." But there were a lot of things that were thoughts that I'd had, but were never actually put down on paper. And lots of interesting examples, and plenty that I'd never thought of before. And I can see it being really useful, both for students and to point students to – and potentially to do the sort of thing that Brad did, sort-of structuring some teaching around it. So do check out the book, Listeners. It's called Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés, *edited by Brad Stoddard and Craig Martin. It came out in paperback immediately, so it's nice and . . . It's not a typical academic book price, so you can get your hands on it quite easily, hopefully. And you can find the full list of all the stereotypes and clichés . . . we'll put them on the page with this podcast. I just wanted to end with Rebekka King's chapter on "Religion is bullshit". And she begins by talking about how even the desire to correct the statement "religion is bullshit" is, in itself, bullshit. And she closes the book with the following words, which I thought would be a nice way to end the episode: "At the end of the day, it doesn't matter whether or not religion is bullshit. The term is an empty signifier. What matters is your ability to weigh evidence, locate sources and pay critical attention to both your scholarly process and product. You may find yourself mired in shit, but at least you'll be in good company." And I hope you've been in good company today. Thanks so much Craig and Brad.*

CM: Thank you.

BS: Thanks so much for having us. We appreciate it.