

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 11 June 2018



## What Can We Learn from Our Founding Fathers?

Podcast with **Bettina Schmidt** (18 June 2018).

Interviewed by **Jonathan Tuckett**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/what-can-we-learn-from-our-founding-fathers/>

**Jonathan Tuckett (JT):** *Hello. And welcome to an entirely new format of interview with the Religious Studies Project! You may now recognise my face as somebody even more familiar – I'm the Features Editor, [Jonathan Tuckett](#). And we are, once again, testing out the video format. So this time we actually have [Bettina Schmidt](#) with us, who is now President Elect of the [BASR](#), and also Senior Lecturer . . . ?*

**Bettina Schmidt (BS):** Professor.

**JT:** *Professor – apologies – Professor at Trinity St David's, in Wales. So, we are currently at the [OU Conference on Religion and Its Publics](#). And we're here today to talk a little bit about Bettina's [keynote speech](#), in which she was talking about some of the older figures in Religious Studies; figures that . . . one of whom, I personally feel should be buried, and never remembered! But I'm sure Bettina is going to give us a valid reason why we should be reading some of these people, even today, in the modern research university. So – just a quick summary of the keynote speech?*

**BS:** Well, Jonathan, to give a quick summary is always difficult for a long speech – but I will do my best. So, in my keynote lecture yesterday, I wanted to highlight that we can learn something from historical figures in our field. In particular, from three of what I call “founding fathers” of the wider field of the Study of Religions. I quite consciously didn't select old female scholars, which is a bit of a problem, because we also had a few “founding mothers”. But I highlight the work of three figures who are often described – and were even described in the beginning – in quite negative terms. For instance, one of the figures which probably you think we should bury is [Rudolph Otto](#), who was the professor

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for Systematic Theology at my old *alma mater*, the University of Marburg. And for the 400-year anniversary of the university, in 1925, he was able to found a new museum – the first museum which has artefacts – which is called, still today, *Religionskundliche Sammlung*. In this museum – which he founded outside any faculty, but as a university collection – he gave home to a rich (collection of) religious artefacts from all over the world, in relationship to religion. However, some of the other theologians during his time, and their students, quite dismissively called it (audio unclear) – which is a very negative term in German. The other figure was [Andrew Lang](#), who described himself as an outcast of Academia. He had held, for a couple of years, a Fellowship at Merton College in Oxford. He decided to be through with Merton, because he wanted to get married. And, in that time, a Fellow was not allowed to get married. And the third person I highlighted was [Marett](#), the successor of [Edward Tylor](#), at Oxford, as Reader in Social Anthropology. But he himself, and others, described him as an anomaly. Although he had a university position, in the wider recognition – nowadays – of the beginning of an interest in religion from an academic point of view, he is often just a footnote. The Oxford University still has the [Marett Lectures](#), but people are no longer interested in his work – apart from looking at his early work on *mana* and other things. And I think we can still learn from these figures – of course, with reservations. They were children of their time and they were firmly linked to a certain belief system at the time: evolutionism, [Social Darwinism](#), and so on. But, nonetheless, they all three had something which really made them special, from my own view.

*JT: Sure. So the obvious question then is, in a certain respect: you've mentioned Rudolph Otto – who comes from a very theological background – and you mentioned Lang and Marett who both come from EB Tylor's background. So it's two very different backgrounds here. So what is it that unites the three of them together, as a kind of collective, for you that allows you to talk of them a single group, as it were, in this context?*

BS: Yes. This is an interesting field. Why did I choose to include Otto in this mix, with two Classicists? When you look at their engagement with other religion, I find that they're highly appreciative of the emotional draw to religion, the creative one, the imaginative one. So, for them, a huge element which interests them, in religion, was imagination. Otto, it was also a personal connection to the sacred, this idea of the holy. He, as a child of his time – in particular as a Lutheran professor of theology – he of course saw Christianity as very important for his own person. But he appreciated, also, that this concept of religion – like [Schleiermacher](#) before him – was present in all regions. And he travelled around. He did not do proper fieldwork overseas, but he travelled around. Already, as a student, he visited Great Britain and attended high church services. And then he went to

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Greece, and got acquainted with the Greek Orthodox. And then he went to Egypt and encountered Coptic Christians, but then, also, the different forms of Islam. And this led him, then, to further encounters with Islam in Northern Africa. Then, in particular, his journeys to Asia inspired him. That there are so many different forms of religious practice, but they all had in common this fascinating, this *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: this concept of awe in the presence of the deity – the idea of God, or something else. And this is what still attracts people to Otto. Lang, on the other side, always argued against Tylor. Although he is always put in connection with Tylor, he was never a student of Tylor. And he disagreed with Tylor's quite intellectualist approach to religion, that religion is belief in spirits. And he really argued more on an emotional, on a “felt” position. And this was even stronger in Marett who, although he was a successor of Tylor, criticised Tylor's approach and definition of religion and argued that religion is something “danced”. I have a quote, if I may. It is in the time of Marett, so it was in the beginning of the 20th century. So he used the term “savage religion”, which we don't use today – fortunately!

**JT:** *(Laughs).*

**BS:** But he wrote: “Savage religion is something not so much thought out, as danced out” And this is something which I also feel is present when I do my fieldwork. One of my fields is spirit possession and trance. And so I've attended rituals in various different countries. And there, people don't discuss what religion is but they feel it in their body. And this is what I think is a common aspect in all three of them.

**JT:** *Interesting. Because when you say imagination, an almost “go to” kind of understanding of imagination would be Tylor and the idea of the savage philosopher who is sitting in his cage, and is imagining all these things to explain the world around him. But the way you're describing it, imagination seems to serve a very different kind of function within the thinking of Otto and Lang and Marett. So in the way that you're now talking about dance, how does this idea of imagination and dance, for instance, connect together in this kind of thinking?*

**BS:** Well, I think we have a different understanding of imagination. For me, imagination is really the creative aspect, the wonderful performance, the feeling . . . The imagination leads an artist to paint. And so this is, for me, imagination. While Tylor's minimal definition of religion is not . . . You are right: he'd argue that people sat somewhere, and imagined, and invented it. But he really thought that this is a logical answer to the question, “How did religion get started?” That it's really just a way to explain things. All three never went in this direction. It was never about, in the work that they wrote,

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religious justification, or something to explain (religion). It's something to be felt – the emotional aspect – and then to imagine what it meant, like how the deity, the sacred, might be, might enact and might feel. And so it's not something intellectually thought of, but emotionally responded to.

**JT:** *OK, yes. So we have Tylor's rationalistic kind-of response. I'm curious. I'm going to use the phrase anti-rationalist to now describe these three. Would you say that's a fair way of describing their approach?*

**BS:** Otto himself used an English translation of the term, “non-rational”. And I think this is also true – although they didn't use the term non-rational – but it's also in-between-the-lines in Lang and Marett's work. It's not a rationalistic, intellectualist definition of the beginning of religion, but an emotional, felt one. And therefore, yes, the focus is on the non-rational.

**JT:** *I'm feeling a couple of questions coming on. And I know the RSP audience is probably thinking, “Oh No! It's Jonathan. He's going to ask her all about phenomenology!” So I'll hold back on those questions for now. But on a more practical level – you're now talking about dancing. What kind of methodological challenges does that kind-of throw up if we're focussing on the non-rational side of religions? If we can no longer read a book and read a statement and understand what is going on there, what kind of challenges do you then face for studying and understanding religion?*

**BS:** I'm going to start answering your question by saying: I'm not saying it's either/ or. But my argument is that by acknowledging the non-rational as part of the study of religion, we ought to allow religious, spiritual experience and even non-religious experience to be studied within the Study of Religion. This does not mean that everything has to be, then, non-rational or experience. Of course the Study of Religion includes a wider range of aspects. But at the moment, or from the beginning, the Study of Religion focussed on the controversy with Theology, and the aim to be acknowledged as science – with academic value. And therefore people shied away from acknowledging that we are also studying counter-culture, that we are studying New Age, that we are also studying something like Spirit possession. And my argument is, by showing that at the beginning of the discipline, at the beginning of the 20th century, or the end of the 19th century, this was already covered by some scholars who were very important in creating the field of the Study of Religion, we can then have a trajectory that shows that this was a more-or-less open or visible part of our discipline from the beginning. And which . . . . My argument is that it might help us to acknowledge that today, when we study religions, we are studying all different kinds of religious practices and beliefs. We are not just looking at the dominant tradition. But we are looking at what people do, the lived experience, the lived

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practice, the vernacular traditions. And when we start focussing on this aspect we can study everything. We can still read books. We can still do the normal participant observation and interviews. It's just that we don't acknowledge the non-rational in our field.

**JT:** *Interesting. So building on that . . . because now that you've tied it into the idea of lived religion and vernacular religion, as kind-of like the vogue trends of how to study religion these days, and tying it particularly to Otto. And – you can then probably correct me – on Lang and Marett if they do something similar. But when you talk about Otto's' mysterium tremendum et fascinans, it's a very – to use one of the words from one of the earlier panels – it's a visceral experience, in the language of Otto. It's a very dramatic experience, in the same way that you've described trances and spirit possessions which are dramatic events and dramatic experiences. But how does this kind of approach, then, apply to the more humdrum, kind-of mundane understanding of lived religion and vernacular religion?*

**BS:** Otto used these Latin terms because he thought there is no equivalent, no way to express what he felt, in ordinary languages. This is why he went back to Latin. We also have to understand that at that time, Latin was seen as the language of the Church. And therefore I think we should not over-emphasise that he used Latin phrases. But you are, of course, right with my spirit possession and trance studies. In particular, my field area is Latin America. And I mainly focus on the African diaspora. And these are very powerful performances. But from the beginning I also included, for instance, Spiritism. Spiritism is not very dramatic. It is more of less sitting around a table until the medium say that the medium sees something or hears something. So it is not very dramatic. And this is also part of my own fieldwork. And we also need to acknowledge the lived experience. It's sometimes praying in your world, in your own place, or being alone on a beach. And this is also a religious or spiritual experience, and also part of what we should study. And so, it's not just the dramatic performances, but also performances which perhaps have elements which are just inside of ourselves. I want to argue that we should not just focus on aspects and practices which happen in religious buildings – like a church, or a synagogue, or a mosque – but we also need to include what happens in the street, what happens when somebody is alone. This also is part of vernacular religious practice.

**JT:** *It's interesting, because you're talking about the importance of Lang, and Otto, and of Marett. And that's very much in the way of: it's important for “us”, as scholars and academics. But one of the themes of the conference has been the public face of the university. And, particularly, the reason I asked about trance – and particularly in terms of the visceral experience – is, when it comes to things like spirit possession, that kind of thing will capture the public eye because it is kind-of a dramatic*

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*thing. And, in your own presentation, one of the photographs had a woman who was moving around with a blade, and so it's very eye-catching. But now, as you say, we need to focus on the person who's praying in their living room, or in a quiet corner somewhere. So how, on a slightly more practical level, do we present that kind of study of religion to the public in a way that is as captivating as some of the more visceral imagery that can sometimes be associated with religion?*

**BS:** Before I answer your question about how we can speak about it, just another comment. Otto and Lang are both quite popular outside university. Otto's [Idea of the Holy](#) is translated in over 20 languages, and some of them non-European. And people are still reading it. And Lang was very dominant in the (audio unclear) Society, and is still very important in the material. So both had quite an impact on the public, and still have. We have kicked them out of our history, but the public is still enchanted by them! And so, I think we ought to catch up with what the wider public reads of publications in our field. But, back to your question. This is always a problem. A while ago I wrote about animal sacrifice for a [publication on sacrifice](#). And one of the questions was whether I had an illustration for the publication. And I said, "No." Because I didn't want the public to get the wrong impression. I wanted my article to explain the normality of the practice, and not the exoticism. So I don't have illustrations, and I don't give out illustrations, and I don't show illustrations of sacrifice in any presentations, because it would give the wrong impression of the practice. Spirit possession is different, because sometimes, in [publications](#), I include some images – or in presentations like the lecture, yesterday. I find them wonderful. I find these photos that I've chosen, a wonderful expression of creativity. The costumes are exotic, wonderful, and colourful. Of course in the photo we cannot hear, but the music is wonderful, the whole performance is just wonderful. It could be on stage. It could be in the theatre. It could be in an art gallery. And you can see, in some museums, costumes presented to a museum because they are so creative and wonderful to look at. And so I've chosen them, also, as a way for the wider audience to realise spirit possession is not something negative. It's not about being possessed by the devil. It can also be a very positive experience. And this is what I want to convey with the photos I've chosen.

**JT:** *So, in a way, what we're doing is . . . we're kind-of taking the things that are visceral to the public, and showing that they're not actually visceral – they're more mundane things. And then, that will hopefully generate (interest) in other things that they already recognise as mundane, as well.*

**BS:** Also, it's in order to counter-balance a stereotype image that they have, often, when they hear the term spirit possession.

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**JT:** *Thank you very much, Bettina Schmidt, for being my test subject with the video format. I hope you enjoyed the experience!*

**BS:** Well, I hope it's come over quite well!

**JT:** *I hope so, too! All that it remains for me to say is: “thanks for watching” – this time – not just “thanks for listening”. So, thank you for watching!*

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