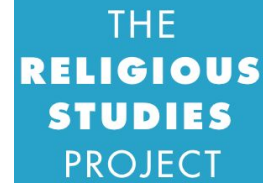


Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 21 June 2018



Representations of Religious Studies in Popular Culture

Podcast with **Brian Collins** and **Kristen Tobey**. (8 October 2018)

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/representation-of-religious-studies-in-popular-culture/>

Christopher Cotter (CC): *Many of our discussions at the Religious Studies Project focus upon the complex intersections between religion – whatever that is – and popular culture, and justifiably so. Indeed, our good friend and colleague Vivian Asimos, of Durham University, has been producing a very interesting religion and popular culture [podcasts](#) for a while now. But what about Religious Studies, and the people who do it, in popular culture? When I initially thought about this, I could certainly come up with a list of academics and bookish people who are somewhat problematically, and wildly inaccurately portrayed in popular culture – from archaeology’s [Indiana Jones](#), and palaeontology’s [Ross Geller](#), to archivist’s [Rupert Giles](#), or Linguistics’ [Louise Banks](#). But, I have to admit, I struggled to come up with many examples of the Study of Religion, as we – here at the Religious Studies Project – know it. Luckily, today’s guests have the question much more firmly in focus. Given that, as they argue, popular culture representations are more likely to shape public perceptions about what the Study of Religion is, and who does it, than either direct experience in the classroom or statistics about graduation rates and job placements, we hope that you will agree that we should try to understand what these perceptions are. So joining me today, to discuss this fascinating and important topic, are Professors [Brian Collins](#) and [Kristen Tobey](#). So first off, Brian and Kristen, welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

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Brian Collins (BC): Thanks for having us.

Kristen Tobey (KT): Thank you.

CC: *I'll just say a little bit about who you are. Brian Collins is Associate Professor and the Drs. Ram and Sushila Gawande Chair in Indian Religion and Philosophy, at Ohio University. He's the author of [The Head Beneath the Altar: Hindu Mythology and the Critique of Sacrifice](#), and various essays on Hinduism and the Study of Religion. And his second book, *The Other Rama: Matricide and Varnicide**

In the Mythology of Paraśurāma – apologies for the pronunciation – is forthcoming from SUNY press. And Kristen Tobey is Assistant Professor of Religion and Social Sciences at John Carroll University, in Cleveland, Ohio. And her research treats religious identity formation and communication in the contemporary United States. And she's the author of [Plowshares: Protest, Performance and Religious Identity in the Nuclear Age](#). So that's where you're coming from. How did you get interested, then, in this question of the representation of the Study of Religion in popular culture? It doesn't necessarily sound like it's your main research focus. So how did you get into that?

BC: Well, shall I answer this one Kristen?

KT: Yes, go first.

BC: I asked Kristen to join me, and she graciously did. And together we worked on a project. But it started out because – and I think both of us had an idea at some point – we study religion, and we have to actually tell people that we study religion and then see what they think we do. So very, very infrequently does someone have an actual idea of what the Study of Religion, in the university, entails! You know, I teach classes in Hinduism and Buddhism and if you take both classes, students – who are in the same class – typically ask you: “Why are you teaching this? I thought you were a Hindu.” Or, “Why are you teaching this, I thought you were a Buddhist?” Because I'm teaching both classes. So the idea of studying religion as an academic subject is a mystery to most people. And I say, “Well if they don't know, what do they know? And where do they get the information?” So I started watching a lot of movies on TV, and I consumed a lot of junk culture. So I saw a few people,

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here and there, who seemed to be, basically, doing what I do – but not in a way that I recognised! And so I had to cast a wide net and see what impressions were out there.

KT: (Laughs.) I face the same thing. Less from my students, because I teach in a Catholic school so they're familiar with religion teachers – although not quite the same way I tend to do it. But I face this a lot with my research subjects who are very suspicious of the idea of someone studying religion academically, because the examples that they see, as Brian says, in pop culture, are so very strange. So when Brian asked me to join this project I was really excited, for that reason – and also because my research usually deals with how religious people either present themselves, or are presented. So to think about another piece of that – as you said, Chris: “Well, how is the field presented? How are the people who do it presented?” That was very interesting to me, and thinking about questions of identity.

CC: *Wonderful. I should have said in the introduction, of course, that part of the reason that we're having this conversation is that the two of you have just published an article – I say just – June 2018 – in the [Religious Studies Review](#) (5:00) which was called, “From Middlemarch to the Da Vinci Code: Portrayals of Religious Studies in Popular Culture”. So that will give a hint, to the Listeners, of where we might be going with our in-depth examples, here. But before we get to [Middlemarch](#) and [The Da Vinci Code](#), how did you go about selecting your cases and just conducting this study in general? As I say, I struggled . . . I mean [Robert Langdon](#), from The Da Vinci Code, kind-of came to mind but, as we'll discover later on, that's not really Religious Studies, is it? Sorry! There's a siren going on outside, as well! That's typical here.*

KT: I'm just so glad that's you and not me! (Laughs).

CC: *Ah. They're not coming for me, Listeners. Yes. So, Robert Langdon certainly came to mind. But I really struggled to think. So, how did you go about even finding your case studies?*

BC: Well, for me, I did have to think about. That's a methodological question we had

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to ask at the very beginning. And I compiled a [list](#). I said, “Indiana Jones sort of reminds me of a person who does religion, but he's clearly identified as an archaeologist. So I wanted to find people that weren't clearly identified as archaeologists or classicists, or anthropologists. There's a different article, two articles, by anthropologists in literature and movies that we cite in our article. But they seem to be studying something like what we do. So I eliminated people like parapsychologists and clearly identified historians, so there was a sort-of middle ground. Robert Langdon is a “Religious Symbolist” which is a totally made-up profession, at a real university! Whereas Casaubon from *Middlemarch*, the other big example that we treat, is Well what is he identified as, Kristen? Just a scholar?

KT: He's identified as a scholar, but he's very clearly engaged in work that would be recognisable for a historian of religions. Pretty much in the mould of somebody from that era. So it was actually, in many ways, a pretty accurate depiction. But as far as garnering the case studies and garnering the examples, I remember Brian – was it years ago maybe? Or do I just have a skewed chronology on this? That you sent round an email to maybe half-a-dozen people, saying “Hey, I'm thinking about this. What examples can you think of? And one thing that was really striking to me was that, as those emails came back to you, most of them were from horror movies, right? The vast majority of these characters were in scary movies, doing scary things. You know, summoning demons, or whatever else. So, as far as characters that we might actually recognise as doing the work that we do, Casaubon is one of very few examples.

BC: Yes. That's what I did. I crowd-searched the research! It's easier to get someone else to do the research for you, I find! So I came up with a list and then I said, “. . . like these people. Anybody else you can think of,” again, “that's not identified clearly as something else?” And so I did get a long list. There were comic books on there. There were podcasts on there. There were movies, mostly horror movies on there. There were a few novels on there. And some of the ones I ended up having to eliminate . . . they were the sort-of archivists. There were a lot of archivists – like

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the Giles, from Buffy, that you talked about. And that was a limit case for me. I didn't know whether to include those or not. But I feel like they're somewhere in the mix. But, for our article, we didn't discuss them. Archivists have a family resemblance to the archetype of the Religious Studies person. But we ended up leaving them out, because they're . . . if you asked who they are, somebody can tell you that they're an archivist, and not a religionist. The case is that *nobody* is identified as an historian of religion or a religionist. Partly that's our fault. We have no easily identifiable, transferrable job title from university to university, nor even a place at university that can consistently be found. So it was just that way in the representations, too. We had to kind-of make decisions along the way, and narrow it down.

KT: Yes, with the very memorable exception – and tell me if I'm getting ahead of things here – of [Emily Dumont](#) in [Black Tapes](#), right? I think she's one of just a handful, really, of three or four, who was actually introduced as a professor of Religious Studies. But then it turns out what she does is not really like what professors of Religious Studies do at all! But she's one of the few who actually get that label attached to her.

CC: *Excellent. Well we can get to that . . . The Black Tapes is a podcast that I, unfortunately, had never heard of when I read your article – but you do a good job of discussing it (10:00). So it would be quite good for us on the Religious Studies Project Podcast to discuss that. But I'll just also mention that I put out on Twitter last week that we were doing this podcast, and we got a couple of responses. I asked, what were your personal favourites and bugbears? So Richard Newton at the University of Alabama said that he likes Professor Jamal in [Mooz-lum](#). He said that there was an emphasis on good questions over simple answers, embrocation of race and religion, and examination of the insider/ outsider problem. And then another character that you discuss is in the [Hulu](#) series, [The Path](#). And what came back? We had Tylor Tully saying that he had really enjoyed The Path on Hulu, and their inclusion of a Religious Studies scholar – particularly their treatment of an emerging religious tradition. But then Joel Bordeaux said that the religion professor on The Path is probably the worst he's ever seen: invited*

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as a guest to a class, openly deriding their tradition, conducting secret sexual relationships with research subjects, deliberately intervening in communities he's studying, and so on! So you might want to respond to some of that, and then maybe tell us about Emily Dumont.

BC: Well, I think Emily Dumont is interesting. I do want to talk about Jackson Neill from *The Path* actually. It's one of the best examples, and it came very late in this project, which was . . . I was watching the show and I said, "Now I have to go back and rewrite a large part of this!" And I did. But Emily Dumont . . . *The Black Tapes* is a podcast. It's a sort of like [The X Files](#). It's told in the style of a true crime serial-type podcast, where they're investigating supposedly true occurrences, and the characters are meant to be real people. So it blurs the line between fiction, and reality, and journalism. But they interview people and they interview a religious studies scholar. And she is specifically interested in demonology. She's described as very sort-of informally dressed. She described her as an over-grown high school freshman with a Ramones T shirt and a funky haircut. And sort of irreverent. And also speaking about [Chemtrails](#), which is strange conspiracy theory about air travel, or something - I don't really understand it! But it was bizarre *X Files*-type stuff. And it was put in the mouth of a Religious Studies professor. Elsewhere on the same podcast there's a different Religious Studies professor, who openly derides her as crank - even though she's in a university and he's not - who takes a really hard-nosed, scientific, some would say a kind-of reductivist view of religion. And his job is to disprove . . . Miracles are a pretty common theme. The job is either to disprove religion or to become a leader of religion. But in the case of Emily Dumont, she's marginalised as someone who's sort of a joke. And that's a little disconcerting. I think that a podcast like that, you're likely to have people who went to college, an audience who went to college, and somewhere along the way had a class. So I feel like this person seems to me that it was drawn from some experience of some whacky Religious Studies professor. I mean, that was my read on it. What did you think, Kristen?

KT: I think that's possible. But I also think that podcast is doing something really

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odd, in that it's conflating paranormal studies – paranormal activity – with religion in a wholesale, non-nuanced way. Because we do have this Emily Dumont character who's very childlike, who's very gullible, who represents one possibility, right: a person who's involved in Religious Studies and the paranormal because of *naïveté*, let's say. But then there's the other character, Richard Strand, who is very sceptical, very perceptive. He's not a Religious Studies professor, but he was a Religious Studies major, we are told. So we have these two extremes, both attached to the field of Religious Studies, but then . . . And I should say, I only managed to listen to the first half-dozen or so episodes before it became too scary for me (laughs). They were interesting, but it was too scary and I couldn't continue. But throughout those first few episodes we get other characters being brought in, who are also sort-of oddly attached to religion. For example, one character who is described as being – and I'm pretty much quoting here – “what theologians would call a Biblical Demonologist.” (15:00) As far as I know, there is no such thing as Biblical Demonology – though I'm not a theologian, so maybe there is and I just don't know! Maybe. But that's what I mean when I say that it's as though the paranormal and Religious Studies are just completely layered on top of one another in this show – or podcast, rather – in some ways that are kind-of interesting, and some ways that are really bizarre. And there doesn't really seem to be any explanation – at least in the first half a dozen episodes – of why that's the case, or how those particular choices are being made. So, yes, maybe there is something very specific going on, in that one of the creators had a professor that that is modelled upon. But maybe there's something else happening, which is just that it's a podcast dealing with sort of odd, supernatural, paranormal stuff and there's nowhere else that it makes sense to house that, other than in Religious Studies.

CC: Yes.

BC: I mean it's odd, because it would have been ten years ago – a parapsychologist, I mean they used to have those in movies all the time. The people that investigated hauntings and psychic phenomena and stuff. I mean the [Ghostbusters](#) are . . .

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KT: Ghostbusters! Sure!

BC: They're in parapsychology lab. They're doing (audio unclear). So what happened to that, I don't know. But why it became religion, here But nothing recognisable as religion is ever studied! Now that said, I was inspired to teach a class on religion and the paranormal and it became the most popular class that I teach, because of seeing these movies. So that's good, I guess!

CC: *Absolutely.*

BC: And some people write about it. We mention that in the article too. There a new sort of, newish, wave of books dealing with religious experience and paranormal experience, from different angles. [Ann Taves](#), Geoff (audio unclear) – both from very different points of view. So there is some of that. But I don't think anybody knew that as they're making these characters. I think that's coincidental, or a part of a larger zeitgeist.

CC: *Exactly. I'm just keen that we keep pressing on, because I do want to get Jackson Neill, but we've got to get to the Da Vinci Code and everything before. So maybe, quickly. . . . In your article, I think you were just saying that Jackson Neill, although he may not be the most morally upright of scholars in that sense, actually, what he's doing perhaps quite closely resembles what we would consider to be the Study of Religion?*

BC: Well, he's an Americanist, just like Kristen. Which is why I pointed him out to her, very early on. He's doing a kind of ethnography, which is what she does. But what he does, that she doesn't do – as far as I know – is give major talk shows advertising his book!

KT: (Laughs) No. Just this. This is my 15 minutes of fame right here!

BC: But he had a sexual relationship with his informant. He inserts himself in the life of this new religious movement, which is uniformly referred to as a “cult” throughout the TV series. All sorts of things that seemed like he had to go through

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[IRB](#) to do, but had no problem doing. He's eventually sort-of discredited, and they turn against him. But it's so realistic that it almost feels like that this is something that people would believe references the Study of Religion in the academy! And it does, in the sense that we do that kind of work – we do talk to people about their experiences – but what we *don't* do is try and undermine some tradition with an exposé.

KT: Right. And I think another thing that is important about that character is that one of the tropes we identified in a lot of these representations is a thread of hypocrisy. So, yes: maybe he's a good scholar, or maybe he's doing actual scholarly work that resembles what an Americanist ethnographer might do, but then he's got this potentially sort of shady sexual stuff going on. I am hard -pressed to think of a depiction of, say, a math professor – right? – where there is a plot that has to do with sexual behaviour. Whereas it comes up over and over again in these Religious Studies characters, as though people using these characters are doing it in order to identify a hypocrisy that's inherent to studying religion!

BC: Yes, I think so.

CC: *Which would scan with my intuition, anyway. So, just so we can absolutely get to it . . . You discuss how a lot of these characters can sometimes end up on a sort of pathetic-heroic spectrum. You've got your nerdy, weedy scholar working away, (20:00) pale-faced and not much interest in real life, and then you've got the Indiana Jones's running around: they're dashing – wonderful knowledge . . . And so you set up this comparison really well, in the article, between the Reverend Casaubon from George Elliot's Middlemarch, and then Robert Langdon from Dan Brown's books, [Angels and Demons](#), Da Vinci Code, and so on. I'm afraid it's been over a decade since I read Middlemarch, but it was nice engaging with it again through your article. Can you maybe, just for the next five minutes or so, give a brief introduction to these two characters and maybe sort of set them up against each other, the different models of the Study of Religion?*

KT: Yes, I'll start with Casaubon who appears first in, of course, George Elliot's

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Middlemarch in the 19th Century. He is sort-of the quintessential example of a dry, dusty, pedantic scholar, who only cares about his books. As I mentioned earlier, he is doing work that is very recognisable as History of Religions. He's trying to compile sort of a massive comparative mythology. We learn later on in the book that he doesn't actually have the language skills to do this, that he will never finish this fruitless project, and most of the characters – ultimately, pretty much all of the characters in the novel – think that he's ridiculous, and think that he's so intellectually obsessed that he's out of touch with real life; it compromises his virility; he doesn't deserve the love of the beautiful protagonist; and so on, and so forth. So he is pretty much a paradigmatic example of intellectual obsession that, basically, ruins everything else about him. And something interesting that we noticed, as we were thinking about his character, is that even in more recent and contemporary updates, where other characters are treated somewhat differently and more sympathetically, Casaubon never is. So, for example, there's a very recent [YouTube series](#) that is updating Middlemarch. It's you know, young, attractive students on a college campus. And many of them are socially awkward in some way, but still endearing. Whereas Casaubon – who is now, in this rendering, a graduate student working on some completely obscure dissertation topic that would probably fit in Philosophy of Religion, for example – he's still a really unpleasant character. There's still this linkage between intellectual obsession and unpleasantness. No-one likes him. He's unlikeable, because he is sort of a sham scholar, let's say. He's obsessed with this intellectual project, but he doesn't really have the skills to do it successfully. So “weak”, “pathetic”, “unlikeable”, all of these adjectives continue to attach to him, even in contemporary updates.

CC: *Yes. And on a surface level, your gut reaction is that that's going to be quite different to the character in Dan Brown's work, who we see portrayed in [film](#) by Tom Hanks who's America's – if not the world's – most loved actor, in some ways! That's quite a different character. But not so different, I believe?*

BC: Right. It's hard to find someone who doesn't like Tom Hanks. It's like the

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Jimmy Stewart of our generation. He's much beloved, and he's this. But one thing that's interesting about him that's the same- and I'll talk about what's different about him in a minute- but it's the sexual aspect. I mean I think that Casaubon is really a neutered character, right? He has no sexual drive, or sexual energy associated with him. He's seen as sort of a dried-up old husk of a person, whereas Langdon has a different kind of asceticism, in that . . . Dan Brown uses the term “good clean fun”. It's all about good clean fun, which means that . . . Indiana Jones has a different female love interest in every movie. They have a “will they, won't they?” . . . and of course they will! But in all of the movies based on *The Da Vinci Code* books, I mean the books about Robert Langdon, his female lead is not in any kind of a romantic relationship. They even have a handshake! It's the most chaste hero/heroine relationship one can possibly imagine. In the first book she's the descendent of Jesus Christ – which is a meaningless thing anyway, thinking about 2000 years of generational history – but it's someone who you can't imagine having sex with someone on a movie or on screen, right? It's a very . . . He's also a very consciously non-sexual, de-eroticised character (25:00), unlike the one's we talked about before. But what he does is really instructive. I think that nobody has done more to get the Study of Religion in the public consciousness than Dan Brown: the Catholic reaction to those books; the sort-of revival of interest in conspiracy theories about the [Illuminati](#), and what have you. It never really went away, but it certainly got more . . . And that was what became the shorthand for the Study of Religion – is studying the secret conspiracies behind all the fakeness of religion. And that's what he does. But everything he says about religion is nonsense. And we also learn that he's not even the person who teaches Religious Studies. That's somebody else at Harvard, who we never meet. But he has this particularly narrow focus on religious symbology, without any explanation of what a symbol is, and mistaking symbols, cyphers and codes for each other. It's a very . . . it's a very thinly researched book, right? There's lot of work on the conspiracies but, as far as what he's *doing*, what we see him doing in classrooms, what we see him talking about, what passes in his dialogue as *profound knowledge* – that the Feast of [Sol Invictus](#) has

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something to do with Christmas, and blows everybody's mind (laughs) – really speaks to the depth of ignorance about the Study of Religion. Which I think is an indictment really, for me, anyway. If this just goes over without a ripple, then: how have we not established – in any meaningful way – what we do in the classroom, and what we do with our books?

CC: Indeed, yes. And someone else pointed out that one of the biggest errors, perhaps, in the portrayal is the completely full lecture hall that . . . (Laughs) he's teaching to – of attentive students!

BC: And the bottomless budget that he has!

KT: That, too.

CC: So, I mean, we could go into in-depth on these characters, and obviously we direct the Listeners to your article which we'll link to from the podcast page, to get really into the analysis of them. But towards the end of the article you ask, through this comparison exercise, what kind of picture have you formed of the fictional religious studies scholar? And then, also, about what emerges about religion as an object of study. So perhaps, using the examples that we've discussed thus far, could you tell us a little bit about what we can say about the generic fictional Religious Studies scholar, in a nutshell? And maybe, how religion is conceived?

BC: Well the one thing that's interesting about the Langdon character is that he's the only one that gives us a real definition of what religion is as an object of study. Now it doesn't . . . I'll quote from the book. The book is [The Lost Symbol](#), which is a later book in the series. And he says to his class – this is in the article, too: “So, tell me. What are the three prerequisites for an ideology to be considered a religion?’ ‘ABC’, one woman offered: ‘Assure, Believe, Convert.’ ‘Correct.’ Langdon said, ‘Religions assure salvation. Religions believe in a precise theology and religions convert non-believers.’” It’s a self-evident – to him and to everyone else in the class – rote definition of religion. It’s not very useful to me. It has nothing to do

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with symbols, interestingly, which is the foundation of the Study of Religion as he does it. But it does give you a very pat definition of what religion is. Assure, believe, convert: these are all these verbs that imply control over a crowd, over a group, over minds. It's a very cynical and, of course, one dimensional – well, it's three dimensional technically – but *thin* definition of religion. And it's the only one we really get. The question of what religion is never comes up for anybody. Which, considering the amount of ink that we've spilled over the last 50 years trying to figure out what that is, that does not translate into the representations as we have them.

KT: Yes, it's pretty interesting that all we have is this very thin, superficial, reductive definition, which might well be a definition that works well for some religious scholars. I find it a bit odd, but that's just me. Because it seems to me that what Religious Studies does best is sort-of the opposite of thin and superficial. And nowhere in this examination of characters do we see anyone who's doing the *thick* work of Religious Studies. (30:00) So, what is religion? Assure, Belief and Control – or something like that?

BC: Convert.

KT: So, then, what is religious studies? As Brian says, it's this very simplistic endeavour that has to do with recognising a very simplistic dynamic at play. In other words, in these depictions we don't see Religious Studies scholarship as being about critical empathy; we don't see it as being about rigorous analysis; we don't see it as being about robust comparison – which to my mind are the things that it does best, and the things that it can help students to do best. So we get not only a wild misrepresentation of what religion is – that is it's always about coerced conversion and that sort of thing; it's always about shadowy mystery and espionage – but we also get a very unfair misrepresentation of what Religious Studies is doing and – by that same token – is *not* doing.

CC: *Well the flip side of what you're saying there, in the Casaubon character we would*

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have Religious Studies being the sort-of dry, study of texts, and very esoteric search for some sort of higher knowledge that is beyond relevance to the social world. So it's either something that's irrelevant bookish and not of interest, or something that's sort-of swashbuckling, and uncovering of conspiracies, and releasing people from coercive control – neither of which are very accurate depictions of what any of us do!

KT: Or ghost-hunting! Sometimes it's about ghost-hunting, don't forget! But, yes included in none of those things is there the important skills that Religious Studies, when done well, actually can and should inculcate.

BC: Well, what you also find is Casaubon is a textual scholar, a clear-cut textual scholar. And I would have expected that to sort-of hold through time. But increasingly they're not textual scholars, even though we think that's what we all are, and that's something to overcome. I mean, that's the critique: “too text-based”, or whatever. But, mostly, they're going into cults, or they are talking to believers – and usually believers who are radical in some way. So they seem to be out in the field looking at miraculous events and bizarre beliefs, as they sort-of characterise them, more than they are reading books or comparing. Comparing is the one thing that's almost never done, except for with Langdon in this very weird kind-of comparison. But outside of him there is almost no comparison. It's just studying the one thing that's their dissertation topic; that's their tenure portfolio; or that's, usually, their personal dark obsession – which drives them into becoming serial killers, often!

KT: Right.

CC: *So we're over time here, which is fine because we're going to get to wrapping up and I would say, Listeners, do check out the article where you can read a lot of this stuff that we're just skimming over, in a lot more detail. But my final two questions I wanted to throw out would be: what can “we” do about this portrayal? So – it's a similar thing with the media, for example. A lot of my colleagues and I are always moaning about the media never really get things right about religion, “It's terrible! It's awful!” But I never*

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really hear solution: “What can we do about the portrayal of religion in the media?” So what, potentially, could we do about the portrayal of Religious Studies in popular culture, or beyond? Any suggestions, based upon your thinking about this?

KT: I'll try this one. Public scholarship could be an important mitigation here: the extent to which actual Religious Studies scholars are doing the actual work of Religious Studies, in a way that can be seen by the public. That could be one mitigating force against these sort of wild misrepresentations that we have.

BC: I feel like that it starts with students. I mean, we come into contact with a lot of students over the course of our careers. And it's not just Religious Studies. I think they often don't figure out what any of the faculty members do most of the time, because we don't talk about it. It's sort-of opaque, for some reason. So, I think talking to students about our work, about our interests, about how we got interested in it – I think it's useful, I think it's helpful, it clarifies things (35:00). It makes our position clear. And we can do that on a small level, more. I think we could all, everybody in the academy, could better engage with our students about who they are, and what they do, and how they're compensated, etc. But I think we could especially do that. Now the interesting thing is, over the time I was writing this article, we had the affair of [Reza Aslan](#), here in the States, who had a rise . . . the first real rise to power, or rise to prominence, as the first real public intellectual in Religious Studies – only to be fired, pretty quickly, for making a comment on Twitter about President Trump, after a few episodes of his show – Believer – which was widely derided by scholars of religion. As was his book about Jesus. What was it called? [Zealot](#). So here we have a failed, missed opportunity to have a public intellectual presenting a model of this kind of work. But that doesn't mean it has to be the last time we try that. Maybe that's the place to start. You know, a plot where you save the Pope from a radical Catholic assassin is going to be more interesting than a plot where you translate a text, but it doesn't have to be about plot, it can be about . . . the old . . . the stuff they used to do on the BBC, where they had long-running, long-form shows to educate the public, in way that is also engaging.

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And I think that can be done again.

CC: *And you know, maybe, if you're burning the midnight oil, we could all be writing those novels, writing those screenplays that we all wish we were seeing. Is this it, for you, with this project then? Or do you have plans for future research, future publications? What's next for you?*

BC: I think Chris is writing the screenplay, based on the article.

KT: That's' right. Look for the screenplay. Just kidding! Not really. No, I am developing a class on religion and pop culture and a lot of this stuff is sort of feeding the mill for that. Brian, what about you?

BC: Well I think that the natural next place to go would be a panel at the AAR – bring in more people to talk about it. And that seems to me like . . . I don't know if we need another article any time soon. But, bigger conversation – a public conversation about it at our annual meeting here – would be helpful.

CC: *Excellent. And hopefully this podcast and your article will kick off a bit more of that conversation, and we can look forward to a future where the discipline, the field, is represented a bit more accurately. But, for now – thank you so much Brian and Kristen. It's been wonderful having you.*

BC: Thank you.

KT: Thanks, Chris.

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with these

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