

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 6 March 2019



### Religion, Multiculturalism and the Quest for Belonging in Canada and Beyond

Podcast with **Wendy Fletcher** (11 March 2019).

Interviewed by **Carmen Celestini**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/religion-multiculturalism-and-the-quest-for-belonging-in-canada-and-beyond/>

**Carmen Celestini** (CC): *Today I'm speaking with Dr [Wendy Fletcher](#), the President and Vice-Chancellor of Renison University College, affiliated with the University of Waterloo. Dr Fletcher is a co-author of [A Space for Race: Decoding Racism, Multiculturalism in the Quest for Belonging in Canada and Beyond](#), which we'll be discussing today. Dr Fletcher, thank you for sitting down and talking to us. I'm just going to ask a couple of questions about the book. The book contains personal stories of the authors and others. And it opens up with the merits of belonging. Could we expand on these merits and the personal experiences of the book?*

**Wendy Fletcher** (WF): Sure. Thank you. Thank you very much for the question. It's an important question to start with as a historian. I think narrative is all. And personal narrative and how it links to a broader narrative, in terms of telling the story of where people have come from and where we go, is really key. So I identify as a historian, as I believe there is no genuine objectivity. We can struggle for it, but of course we all live within our subjective contexts and experience. So for both of us – [Kathy](#) and I – writing the book, to locate ourselves in the context of the question of ethnicity – because the book is, of course, really struggling with that question of racial and ethnic identity against the backdrop of Canada's vision of multiculturalism – was very important. So Kathy, of course, came to the book as a Jamaican immigrant and as a Canadian scholar. And I was raised as an Anglo-speaking Euro-descent settler who, over the context of a complicated story, found that I had some indigenous, ethnic, racial background myself. And in the context of my journey was adopted into other indigenous contexts as well. The point of it all being that in the backdrop of identity politics today, having the one who is speaking feel free to say something about who they are and be the one to define who they are,

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is very, very important. In the world of the university right now, especially, identity politics is all: who has the right to say what about who. So our first premise – of sharing these stories of how we understood ourselves, and then inviting others to do the same about themselves as the story of their research unfolded – was pretty key. Because we're staking the ground for an individual's right to say who they are, regardless of what anybody else wants to say about that. The identity of the self is first formulated through one's own construction of narrative and belonging.

*CC: Well that really comes though, very clearly, in the book. Definitely. So, these merits that you want to expand on: what are the merits of the belonging? Is this the individual voice, or are there other merits as well that you think are important, in our expression of who we are?*

**WF:** So I go back to . . . I'm also an Anglican priest and so if I step back outside the world of the academy for a moment and I think about the spiritual dilemma of the human being, I think that the spiritual dilemma for the human being in every generation – but perhaps never more acutely than in this one – is a question of belonging. We all need to belong. We need be valued. We need our story to have meaning and place. And in the context that we often find ourselves today, “dislocation” and “belonging” seem to very dominant motifs. So for me, then, setting this story in the context of the question of belonging and not belonging – perhaps the truest measure of whether Canada's multiculturalism has actually worked the way the frameworks of that vision intended – has been very important.

*CC: Definitely. How do you think we should move towards belonging, and how would you define that sense of belonging?*

**WF:** So I have this understanding about who the human being is where I start micro and go macro, usually, for me. I start with the trees and go to the forest. And my fundamental philosophy of the human being is that every human being matters infinitely. And that there is nobody like you. There is nobody like me. Every one of us is incredibly unique. We're all on a path and a journey, and we all have a contribution to make to this world and its best becoming, that is uniquely our own. And it's sometimes a contribution of harm depending on how the story goes for all of us on any given day. So the world I imagine, the Canadian society I imagine, is a place where that is how we understand respect. We talk about respect a lot, but if you go the dictionary and you look up what the word respect means, it's actually in my view – and in particular from an indigenous perspective – not a very helpful definition. The word respect says to esteem or value someone because of their gifts, skills, abilities or contribution. Well in an indigenous context that's not what respect means. Respect means to esteem, to value, to offer, to recognise the dignity of the other simply because they *are* (5:00). And for me that is

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the basis of a truly inclusive society that is capable of supporting the parameters of what the original framers of multiculturalism imagined. So that just because we *are* means we have a right to be here, we have place, we have values and should be accorded dignity. So genuine multiculturalism – multiculturalism that worked – would do that.

*CC: Yes. Definitely. And I think that's where – and this is my own personal opinion – but sort-of having the “politics of becoming”, and these things are happening. And I think this is really fundamental to those ideas, sort-of moving forward politically. What can a Religious Studies perspective bring to the table in this conversation?*

**WF:** A good scholar, in my view of Religious Studies, understands that there is no one right voice. No one right path. That you take a hermeneutic of questioning to the journey of a Religious Studies discourse. So, insofar as the Religious Studies imagination understands that the story is framed by multiple voices, multiple experiences, multiple philosophies and multiple truths – like, competing truths – as a necessary way of telling any discourse, it contributes that. There is no genuine multiculturalism; there is no healthy pluralism in the society which doesn't understand that what you believe and what I believe may not be the same thing but they're both true, because they're true for us and we're holding that discourse and that voice as a piece of the whole.

*CC: I like that concept, I really do. How might scholars working in Religious Studies navigate the current political landscape, using insights from this book?*

**WF:** So, what the book does in part . . . I'm a historian so a lot of the book is actually historical. One of the things I learned as a teacher – in religious studies and history – I thought when I first started teaching that people would change their minds based on an idea or a philosophy. But they don't. My experience of human beings around their prejudices, the narrowness or wideness of their worldview, actually is more influenced by – in this age that's still living hanging on the edges of a modern discourse – that empiricism actually matters. I'd like to say it doesn't, because we've all embraced the postmodern thing. But honestly, when you look at the fact that indigenous persons in this country received the vote in this country after persons of colour did in the United States – many years after – you go, “Woah! I didn't know that about Canada!” Did we know, in Canada, that we had a very tightly negotiated space? We have a policy of multiculturalism and at the same time we are tightly controlling immigration and racialising immigration according to preferred racial and ethnic groups. So we know that in Victoria children of the Chinese, for decades, were not allowed to swim in the swimming pools; were not allowed to shop in the stores; that persons of Asian descent in Vancouver were not allowed to work for certain people. So a white woman, for example, could never work for an Asian male. And an

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Asian child was not allowed to go to school in Victoria with a white child. Chinese schools were segregated. All these things are shocking to Canadians. But they are empirically the case. So while I, with Pilot, on any given day will say, “Well, what is truth?” There are some things that we just know to be true. Somethings that are actually measurable in the story. And so as I worked with students over many decades I understood that their worldviews were actually more significantly expanded through shocking empiricism than they were through any great rhetoric of a particular philosophical worldview. So the only way to get at the falsity of the illusion of multiculturalism in the Canadians story was to go after the bedrock of what the story actually was, through historical detail. So there's tons, and tons, and tons of historical detail in the book as a way of helping to unmask our own self-delusion about multiculturalism.

*CC: And I think it's really successful at doing that. As I was walking in here I said, “This book made me rethink so many things.” Like, there was so much that I didn't know about Canada. Now this concept of multiculturalism - I see it in a completely different way. The veil, it's gone now. It's a very powerful book and the stories really do tell that. The history changed my perspective a lot. So now, after I've said that, I'm going to ask this question: why does this matter in Religious Studies and in Canada's understanding of multiculturalism – as we label ourselves?*

**WF:** Right. So just to link, in the first instance then, Religious Studies and multiculturalism (10:00): we're not as aware in Canada as elsewhere in the world of the extent to which religion continues to be a huge dividing factor. So as we talk about laying a table, in Canada, where everyone is welcome – the historically theoretical multicultural table – to not be aware of the ways in which religious difference and deep religious commitment actually lays a table of dissention, animosity and hatred, potentially – rather than respect for diversity – is going to be really key. So we think religion doesn't matter in our society any more. But as the world comes to us, where religion does actually matter in the broader world in the way that it doesn't in a fairly secularised Canada today, we are bumping up against not only the assumptions of newcomers and other cultures but our own prejudices. Because if we think religion doesn't matter, but we're living in a country where the newly-elected government of Quebec is talking about using the “[notwithstanding clause](#)“ to violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and [disallow people to express their religion in their dress](#). So we are on the cusp of writing an article, right now. I'm writing an article that looks at the tension between the Charter of Human Rights and religious freedoms, and contemporary politics – where the political discourse of the day is going right now. And the two case studies I'm looking at in the book: one is the [Trinity Western University law school issue](#), where it was agreed by the Supreme Court that particular rights and freedoms took precedence over religious rights and freedoms. But now the Quebec notwithstanding clause, where we see that our

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political machinery has the capacity to override anybody's rights and freedoms including religious rights and freedoms, if a majority government decides that it wants to do that. . . over anything! That is actually . . . . Our constitution actually allows that. That is a disconcerting shock note into the middle of this story of a Canada where “we all feel safe and everybody's rights are protected, and everybody has a place, and there's dignity for all”. But this book freeze-frames that story and says: in what was the past that was simply not true; in what *is*, that unfortunately simply is not what is true. And with the way the constitutional framework has been set in our country, the possibility of it being unmade – as racism and xenophobia go wild, as immigration increases and the diversity of ways – has the possibility of just opening a Pandora's box of a kind of Canada that bears no resemblance to this whole notion of respect and dignity for all, that we say we prize so much.

*CC: It's definitely shocking, what's happening in Quebec, and even what's happening here, as we see American politics in some ways affecting us. Look at [Andrew Scheer](#) and what's happening, and [Rebel Media](#), you know. It's definitely a frightening idea of what could happen here when we think of who we are and the safety that we have here, in that sense.*

**WF:** It's so true. And I honestly believe that the most pressing political question of this generation for our world, let alone Canada, is: how will we live with the other? How will we live with the other? How are we going to live with difference? The old model of multiculturalism that we deconstruct in the book talks really about tolerance: “We’re going to tolerate the difference of the other.” The future, or a genuine multicultural vision, or a post-multicultural vision would actually *not* tolerate the one who is different, but embrace and celebrate the one who is different. And, in fact, may accommodate the difference. In other words, may oneself be changed because of value and esteem for the difference of the other. That’s different than the original multicultural vision. But here’s my critique. Can I just tell you, for the Listener, my big critique of the multicultural vision?

*CC: Of course!*

**WF:** Ok, so we have a whiteboard, right? And we have the image of a mosaic – you know, the Canadian mosaic – all the different tiles. We put all the different tiles up and put it there. There's Canada, all the different faces. People keep the integrity of their difference, but it's on a white board. And that's the fundamental problem. That we're going to tolerate all this difference on top of what is foundational. What is underneath is the whiteboard that we are attached to: the fundamental assumptions of a Euro-descent, Anglo-speaking, Western value system – which has been laid on top of a red soil, which was here prior to the arrival of European colonisers – and which is going to determine, then, how this mosaic actually is able to be lived out. So until we deconstruct that, the

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assumption of the normativity of Anglo-white culture . . . It's scary. Because what does the new Canada look like? Because what I'm basically arguing is the only way to take account of genuine multiculturalism is to move beyond tolerance and to adapt (15:00). So that I don't know what the new Canada will look like because I haven't been yet modified, adapted, and shaped by my original people and newcomer neighbours in the way that this course will demand if we are actually engaging each other out of respect for genuine difference.

*CC: I really do like the sound of your Canada, I really do. I want to thank you so much for participating in this. Do you have any final thoughts or anything you'd like to add?*

**WF:** Yes, maybe just a last one. So I'm a true believer in the notion that the world is a more liveable place when the unique diversities of every ethnic, racial, philosophical, gendered, sexual identity individual is respected in the story. And I do believe that it is actually possible to imagine a social fabric which makes space for that difference to co-exist. It's only possible, I think, in a couple of ways. So my new book that I'm working on is actually how we actually can live into this world that we hope for. Which is what I think our framers on some level inclined towards – but they didn't want to give up the whiteboard, right? So if we give up the whiteboard and start from where we are, we have several things going for us. We have a good constitution, and we have a constitution which is not only one that protects the basic notion of the rights of individuals to be different from each other, but it also is adaptive. So the constitution that we have can adapt, it can change. So newcomer voices and original peoples that want to renegotiate the fabric . . . it's possible to adapt and evolve through our judicial system, in particular. And we can adapt this good constitution that we have. My fear of that, of course, is going to be whether the political will is there. Because if we have the dominance of . . . a majority that actually are willing to over-ride the rights protected in the constitution – because political will gives it the right to do that – will we ever get to the other table? So I'm a believer. I believe it's possible. But only if the principles of democracy are held in balance with the rights of individual and ethnic and racial groups and religious groups and others to be heard on their own terms.

*CC: It makes complete sense. I hope so. I mean, it's a frightening time for sure. But I'm kind-of hoping, on a personal level, that what we see happening around us, south of the border, will actually bring out the good in us, and make us want to be better, and do the right thing, and include everyone for sure.*

**WF:** It's so true that in every action there's an equal and opposite reaction. And I think we have to trust that. We're a couple of hundred years into a really strong tradition of liberal democracy in the West. And that is a gift of the West. We critique ourselves for our marginalisation of other worldviews, but

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held accountable to our own best principles we know that the discourse of diversity is the only way forward to a truly strong culture. So if we hold ourselves accountable to those virtues which are philosophically strong, I think that will mean that we have to change. I think we will find a way forward.

**CC:** *I think we will. Thanks you so much, Dr Fletcher.*

**WF:** My pleasure. Thank you.

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