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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 23 April 2019

Demystifying the Study of Religion

Podcast with **Russell T. McCutcheon, Matt Sheedy and Tara Baldrick-Morrone** (29 April 2019).

Interviewed by **Tenzan Eaghll.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/demystifying-the-study-of-relgion/

Tenzan Eaghll: *Hello. We are gathered here today, over the mighty inter-webs to discuss Russell McCutcheon's latest book,* "Religion" in Theory and Practice: Demystifying the Field for Burgeoning Academics. *Joining me is not only the author himself, Russell McCutcheon, but a couple of young scholars who contributed small pieces to the volume – Matt Sheedy and Tara Baldrick-Morrone. Russell McCutcheon probably needs no introduction to most of our Listeners but just for some of those who may be new, he is Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. Matt Sheedy is visiting Professor of North American Studies at the University of Bonn. And Tara Baldrick-Morrone is a PhD candidate and instructor at the Department of Religion at Florida State University. Now part of what makes this book special, and why I wanted to include Matt and Tara in this podcast, is that it isn't just another theory book about Religious Studies, but actively engages with questions about what it takes to make it as a scholar in today's world. And there are about twenty other young scholars, including myself, who wrote short pieces for this book reflecting on some of the concerns and issues that young Religious Studies scholars face in the workplace today, as well as in their scholarship. So what I want to do is start with Russell and get a sense of what this book is all about, and then bring in Matt and Tara to the conversation and talk about their respective contributions and about some of the issues that burgeoning scholars face in the world today. Now, Russell – one of the first things that jumped out at me when I originally initially read the blurb for the book, on the back jacket, is that it is a bit of a follow-up to your previous book,* Entanglements. *So I was hoping you might start by summarising the general aim of the book for our Listeners, and saying something about how it relates to your previous work and how it differs.*

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Russell McCutcheon (**RM**): Sure. Thanks for wanting to talk about this. *Entanglements* was a collection – also with Equinox – of replies and rejoinders that I've been lucky enough to have – interactions with a variety of people – over the years in print. And those things all just sit somewhere and have a life of their own. And nobody knows they happen, if they don't stumble across it. So I thought I'd pull all this together. But in pulling that together I wrote a fair bit of new material to open every one of the pieces and situate it, contextualise it – when was this given, why was it given. But in writing those, I explicitly tried to think of an earlier career reader who might not yet have had the luxury of doing these sorts of things, of talking to these sorts of people. Because latterly I've paid a fair bit of attention to job market issues, things that have been issues for decades in the Humanities, but have certainly hit a peak in the last five, ten years in North America at least – also in Europe now. So it occurred to me that that would be a good audience to write to, whatever anybody else did with it. So that was *Entanglements*, it certainly wasn't a "how to" volume or anything. But then a review of *Entanglements* – and there have been many reviews – but a review of *Entanglements* written by Travis Cooper – who recently finished his PhD at Indiana, mainly I think in anthropology but also Religious Studies – he wrote a review of it and had some qualms with the book here and there. He said some nice things, he said some critical things. But I open the introduction to this set of pieces quoting his review, where he basically says, "Where's the other senior career people in the file, writing things? Where are they? Why aren't they writing things like this?" And that stuck in my head after the press sent me a copy of that review. And for a variety of reasons I've become an essayist. I didn't set out to be an essayist, but I've turned into an essayist in my career. And so, periodically, I've collected together things that have been published, things that haven't been published. And that was in my head. And his review line prompted me to think, "Well I have a number of things I've written – on the field, on teaching, on the intro course – that have not been pulled together, and a few that have not been published yet. And so that's how his book came about. Thinking specifically to – in an even more explicit way – address a variety of career and professional issues with the earlier career person in mind. Whether they agree or not with how I study religion they'll probably at least come across certain departmental or professional issues. So that was the logic of this book.

TE: *OK, great. And maybe just to add to that, that the organisation of this book is also quite interesting. It's divided into three sections: theory, in practice and then in praxis. Is there a particular rational for that division?*

RM: Well I finished this book quite a long time ago, to be honest. Well over a year, a year-and-a-half ago. And presses all have their own publishing schedules. And the book originally had two sections.

That's the title: in theory and in practice (**5:00**). And my logic was, you're looking for some . . . you know, it's myth-making, right? You're looking for some hindsight organisational principle to the pieces you're pulling together. You think, in your head, that they're related somehow. And I thought, "Well, a group of these are mainly about my interest in the category of religion, classification interests. But a number of these are a lot more practically concerned. They're about . . . *The Bulletin* blog series, I repurposed a piece that I wrote there, and Matt was involved in commissioning that, right? But: "What do you tell people you do, when they ask you, as a scholar of religion?"; a piece that I originally did up at Chicago on practical choices you have to make in designing a curriculum syllabus . . . so there's your practice. But because the piece was done so long ago and it had not moved to copy editing, that's when it occurred to me that a whole bunch of these additional pieces where people had replied to something I wrote ten years ago on professionalisation issues, that what a perfect opportunity to get all these people – if they were interested – to get their pieces into print. I liked my theory/practice division and that's when it occurred to me, "Well, yes: praxis! Why not? There's the third section." It's certainly not praxis in the technical Marxist sense, but giving early career people – ABD people, or at least they were when they wrote this, not all of them still are – reflecting on their own situation in the light of some theses about the profession from a decade ago, seemed to have this very nice integration of theory and practice. This very nice sense of practically applied theory. And thus the structure of the book came about.

TE: *One thing that I liked about the book, on reading it, is that it didn't just say a lot of the familiar stuff that those of us who have read your other books, say, have come to know and expect from your work, such as your critique of the world religion paradigm and, say, tropes like the spiritual-but-not-religious notion. But it also had this really kind-of cool practice section where you almost were thinking through, in some of the essays, your own development as a teacher and scholar, and how you kind-of came to arrive at certain more critical positions, and give a nice reflection on the development of you and academics and Religious Studies in the field today. . . .*

RM: Oh that's very kind. You found some of those useful, then?

TE: *Yes, I thought these was an interesting juxtaposition – because we didn't' just get the critique but how those critiques formed, and how they formed – particularly in the classroom in some of your reflections on teaching introduction classes. But I have a question on that, so I'll get to that in a moment.*

RM: Well one thing I could say, jumping off that, is that – I've written about this – I've long been

frustrated by the classic division of labour between teaching and research. And, "My teaching gets in the way of my research", which all kinds of people talk about that. Or on the other side, people will call themselves "teaching specialists". I've never been sure exactly what that means to be honest. In other words, I've never met a teaching specialist who teaches more than I do, that teaches more different courses than I would. We all, generally, do about the same. That division of labour, wherever you side yourself, has always been frustrating. Because, at least in my experience, the things that I've taught in classes have been deeply consequential to my writing. I don't know anyone who teaches something in a class that didn't come from someone's research, right? We read books, we use books in classes, and we do field work and talk about it in our class. So anything that draws attention to intimate cross-pollination between these, strikes me as an important thing.

RM*: That's one of the similarities between some of your essays and the works of, say, Jonathan Z. Smith, is that he often did the same thing: used essays as an occasion to reflect on the intersection between the two, teaching and theory.*

RM: For me it was profoundly evident in my very first job. I was a full-time instructor at the University of Tennessee. I've written about this, when they asked me . . . . In a different book that's come out, I reflect on this quite explicitly, to use Huston Smith's world religions – *The Religions of Man* is originally the title – in one of my courses. And I didn't know much about Huston Smith's book. I kind-of knew a little bit about it – I'm writing my dissertation and I'm not paying attention to that particular Smith – and I used it. I had to use it. And the kind-of world religions critique someone like me would offer wasn't present in the field. Then, not many people were thinking much about it. And at least for me, that particular experience – using the book I was told to use in classroom – played a crucial role in helping to cement a real dissatisfaction in the particular model that probably, prior to that, I hadn't thought too much about (**10:00**). And thus *Manufacturing Religion* takes on a new character. There's new examples used in that – specific things from Smith, used as instances of problems in the field. So it was a frustrating experience for me using the book, but it was only a frustrating experience for me *as I used* the book. And as I became familiar with that very popular model that a lot of other people were using. So again, that was fortuitous that they asked me to use that.

TE: *This might work as a partial springboard to the next question, then. It's one of the points you make in your introduction that I found interesting: many of the concerns about the current state of the field are not new, but have been of concern to young scholars for a number of years – including*

yourself, when you were a young scholar. I found this interesting, because it's something that I hadn't thought about when I was a grad student and heard everybody complaining about the lack of jobs and the current state of the Humanities. I would always kind-of wonder to what extent these struggles are all new, how new they were? And so I guess I wanted to throw that question out here, and ask you to expand a bit on what you think is new for young scholars in today's climate and what is similar. Do we face new challenges or is it all the same-old . . .?

RM: I say, I think, a little bit in the introduction and then a little bit in the intro to the third part. Before Matt's piece, in the third part of the book, I repeat this. I always find it frustrating the manner in which groups – who might otherwise have shared interest – consume each other in their critique. That I often now see conflicts between scholars more senior than myself – and I write about this a little bit in the book – and scholars much more junior to myself. And the two of them are quite critical of each other. On the one side I see almost a view of: "Suck it up! It's all hard work." And on the other side I see this view of: "You're a privileged older person and you don't really get how hard it is right now." While I certainly understand that situation – at least from where I sit, being well between those generations. I'm fifty-seven, so I'm not a seventy year-old scholar. I got my PhD in '95. I started doing my PhD in about '88-'89. I kind-of forget. So the generation that taught me, as opposed to the generation that are now getting PhDs, so I feel a little between those groups. And they strike me as having dramatically shared interests. They strike me as facing very similar problems, that there's all kinds of people in their sixties and seventies and eighties – depending on how far back we go – who certainly just walked into jobs. Yes – at times, that happened. But if you ask scholars of those generations more about their own background you easily start to hear stories that are very identifiable with today. Today however, especially, you know, post 2008 budget collapse etc., it's ramped up dramatically. It's not just the 2008 budget collapse. At least here, in the United States, state budgets where education is largely funded, have been declining for decades, steadily, right? The proportion of state funds going to higher education. So, none of this just happened overnight. This has been a steady process. But when you add the post-2008 budget collapse it does seem to heighten it pretty dramatically. So I think they're incredibly similar situations. But the magnitude of the situation now, it's not difficult to see someone in a situation now thinking, perhaps rightly so, that it's a change *in kind*. It is so heightened. So I guess again, the attempt was to try to get a number of people currently in that situation – the pieces in the last section of the book were written a few years ago, so some of those people's situation has changed – to really get, to have a voice. And I don't know that we're here to convince people more senior than myself about anything. They'll read this, they're retired perhaps. But

as least back to Travis Cooper, to really start thinking of those other senior people in the field. It's not that like department chairs control universities. They're largely the victims of funding decisions that happen elsewhere, too! But to think a little more constructively about contingent labour, about PhD programmes across the country: what should they be doing? How do we train students? What are we training them for? Let alone MA programmes? So if that starts a little bit more of a conversation that would be wonderful. It's a long-overdue conversation, there's tremendous interest probably against ever really having the conversation. That's just the standard way. But I'm hopeful.

TE: *Alright, that might be a good spot to turn to Matt and Tara. Their contributions were reflecting upon Russell's "Theses on Professionalization", which he originally wrote in 2007. So perhaps, Matt, you could start by saying something about your role as editor of* The Bulletin (**15:00**)*, and how these responses to the "Theses on Professionalization" came together, and your specific response in the volume?*

Matt Sheedy (MS): Yes. Well, thanks very much for this invite and the opportunity to talk about this sort-of interesting collaborative project. I was – past tense – editor for *The Bulletin for the Study of Religion* blog – that's the blog portal of *The Bulletin for the Study of Religion* – from approximately 2012 to this past summer, 2018, as *The Bulletin* has had some transitions in terms of editor. And I don't remember exactly how the idea for this came about, but Russ's piece on professionalisation had circulated for quite some time since it was originally written. And it was something that was widely read and engaged with, and talked about. And so it became this opportunity – possibly seven, eight, nine years after the fact – to revisit some of the questions in the theses that he proposed, with early-career scholars who are trying to sort-of navigate the job market and deal with questions of professionalisation more generally. So, with a few suggestions from Russ and from people that I knew as editor at *The Bulletin*, I was able to bring together twenty-one early career scholars at various stages in their careers – some who were ABD (all but dissertation), some who had just finished their PhDs, some who were taking on visiting professorships and post-docs, and so forth, to reflect on the different questions from their own experience. So what's really interesting about these responses is that it reflects a fairly broad range of scholars, dealing with similar sets of questions, in around the same time, with widely different experiences. You know, for me, when I was asked to bring all these together and it became this interesting project, the idea of turning this into a book came about through a variety of conversations. And that never fully took place for a variety of reasons. And the idea of turning these blog responses into a book was temporarily shelved. And then Russ came to me and said that he thought, if I was interested, that a portion of this book would be a good place to include these

responses. Not only because they're obviously theses responding to something that he had written, but because it reflects very much this idea of religion in theory and practice, and engaging the process of professionalisation; engaging young scholars. And it really worked out that way. Everyone was able to rethink their pieces, upwards of two years on from originally writing them, to get that published in this volume. For me, I talk about how – as Russ touched upon earlier – the 2008 economic crisis was really a crucial hinge in how a lot of us, at least, early career scholars had been thinking about this process of professionalisation. And whether or not, and to what extent, these problems were around and persisted in earlier generations. Certainly conversations, narratives about the crisis – not only in the broader economy but also in academia – really started to come to the fore, by my estimation. In the aftermath of things like the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, shortly after that in 2012-2013, one started to see regular articles appear in higher education (publications) and a variety of other forms, talking about younger academics having problems getting jobs, having problems making that transition. And, more generally, this idea that the economic crisis was finally coming to the academy. And the assumption here is that there was a bit of a lag, a bit of a delay, in terms of the impact and the effects on less and less people getting jobs. And for me, one of the things that I mention is the experiences of two scholars in particular, one of whom, Kelly J Baker, has a piece in the 21 pieces on professionalisation. She very publicly made the decision to walk away from academia and yet, at the same time, pursued her writing career that was related to her training in the study of religion, related to a lot of problems of being an academic, getting a job, the current job market, questions of gender and so forth. And she's a really interesting example of someone who has made lemonade out of the lemons that she was given, so to speak. Another scholar that I mention is Kate Daley-Bailey, who was engaged with academic circles, certainly was working with Russ and Tara and a number of others as well. And she made an announcement as well, I think around 2014 – 2015 that she was leaving academia because there weren't enough jobs for her as adjunct (**20:00**). And this sort-of struck me as a somewhat personal, or at least emblematic, instance of someone I knew who seemed to have all the sharps, all the skills, all the motivation to do this job and do it well, but had to walk away because of her own experience with those structural issues. And so those were a few of the things that I gesture to in the introduction. And I also bring together just sort-of an overview of the different themes that are talked about and covered in the 21 theses. As well as the changes that have taken place over the course of about 2 years: seeing certain people succeed, get tenure track positions. In other cases people remaining adjuncts, still working through their PhDs and in some cases scholars having left academia either temporarily or altogether. So it really struck me as microcosm bringing these 21 scholars together, of all of the different sort of experiences that one may encounter in this current academic

market specifically related to the study of religion.

TE: *That's definitely one of the most interesting parts, having read them all when they were first initially published on The Bulletin and then reading them now, is kind-of the development of some of the responses over the couple of years. Initially I think, when everybody wrote, there was a lot more morbid tone in some of them – at least mine! Mine was very . . . when I first wrote it, it was very like "Everything's hopeless!" But now my reflection, a couple of years on, is a little bit more nuanced. Throwing it to Tara, perhaps you could say something about your thesis and your response?*

Tara Baldrick Morrone (TB-M): Sure. And thank you for asking about this. I responded to Thesis Number 6. And the general point of this thesis that Russ wrote is that simply getting a doctoral degree is no longer enough to obtain a full-time position in academia. And in my response I discussed how this has related to the hyper-professionalisation that has been occurring in the Humanities. That people like Frank Donoghue have written about *The Last Professors*. And the idea is that younger scholars, those still in graduate school, are expected to publish, to gain a lot of teaching experience while they are still students and as they are still working on their own coursework, in order to professionalise them so to speak, in order to obtain that tenure track job. And as Matt was talking about, that's not always the case. You can sort-of fulfil all of these requirements and still not obtain a secure full-time position in academia – as the examples that he mentioned, Kate Daley Bailey and Kelly J Baker. And so I wanted to draw attention to this because this is one of the things that we're all told. That if we do all of these extra things we can attain that position. And looking at the job numbers from the reports released by the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, the number of tenure track jobs have actually been decreasing. And that just is further evidence, I think, of those positions not being available.

TE: *Yes, and the amount of grad students doubling in the process, which is those two colliding: the faculty tenure track positions decreasing and then the PhD applicants doubling and tripling. That creates a quandary. Yeah, definite strategies are needed and it's so tricky once you get out in the workplace and you're actually then responsible for even recruiting new MA students, like I am now in my current position. And you kind-of feel this burden. The department is asking you for more students and to promote the department, because they want the revenue from the students. But at the same time you know, like – what's the end here? It's just more PhD students on the job market. Now in my response to Russell's "Theses on Professionalization", I address the gap between what we study as grad students and what we're expected to teach once we are working in the field (**25:00**). And I would*

like to extend that topic to both of you, Matt and Tara, for consideration. Since both of you are now teaching at the moment, I wonder if you'd be able to offer some reflection on the gap you have experienced between your, say, early dissertation and research topics and the actual content that you have been expected to teach. Have you found any conflict between these areas? And if so, how have you dealt with that? Maybe we could start with Matt?

MS: Well, for me I would say it's very much a mixed bag. My training is in critical social theory, broadly speaking. I look at religion in the public sphere, focussed on the Frankfurt School and Habermas in particular. Its theories of post-secularism offer what I consider a very strong critique of that position. I have, for example, had to teach fairly generic on-the-books courses like ethics and world religions, among other classes, which – with only one exception, in the case of an online course – required me to follow a standard introductory text book. I've been very fortunate, apart from that, to have the opportunity to basically reimagine or redesign those courses when teaching them in person, in any way that I see fit. That's been, I guess, gratuitous in my case, in my recent position in my second year as a visiting professor in a North American Studies department at the University of Bonn. It might be worth mentioning something briefly about that particular transaction. But getting hired on as a visiting professor there, again, now in my second year I have an opportunity to do a third year next year. I was given a complete autonomy to design whatever courses that I wanted. So I don't have any a particular complaints in that regard. When I have continued to teach some of these course on-line, that's when the constraints come in. I on one occasion had to teach text books that reflected the world religions paradigm. And on a personal level it might have some utility in getting you to constantly re-engage those ideas from my own work, moving forward. But pedagogically, it's very limiting. So I have some issues with that. And the other broader point that I just wanted to mention was that in my current position in a department of North American Studies, I hadn't really anticipated making that kind-of shift from Religious Studies. A friend sent me an application to this visiting professorship opportunity at the University of Bonn. And I gave it a casual glance and thought to myself, “Well, I'm a scholar of religion, a scholar of critical social theory, cultural studies, and these sort of things. I'm not really sure if that fits.” And my friend replied back, “Well, why not? You focus on North America, for the most part.” West, more generally. And I said, “OK, yeah. That’s a good point,” I sent in an application. And they were thrilled to get someone who focusses on North America and comes at it from the study of religion. So maybe to make a slight shift away from the doom and gloom and the negative stories often associated with these current academic market, for me at least, in this instance, I was able to transfer my skills to a slightly different department. And I came to realise very quickly that

their own particular data set in this department of North American Studies may not be "religion" quote-unquote, but we share very similar theoretical backgrounds. So there are, certainly in my experience, and I know in the experience of others, opportunities like that to continue to professionalise, to get a post-doc, to get a visiting professorship and hopefully use that as a springboard to move forward. So I just wanted to put a shiny spin on that, in mentioning my experience.

TE: *Shiny spins are always welcome! Tara, what is the gap that you have experienced between your dissertation and research topic, and your teaching experience?*

TB-M: I am in the Religions of Western Antiquity track in my department and I have been trained as a historian of early Christianity, translating Greek and Latin and focussing mainly on second to sixth century CE. But there aren't many courses, besides the intro to the New Testament course, that specifically focus on related issues. And so I've been teaching courses that my department needs me to teach. Some of those courses include introduction to world religions, a multicultural film course and gender in religion (**30:00**). And so I have attempted to make that teaching work for me, in a sense. So some of my earlier work has been on the world religions paradigm, presenting papers for example at NASR meetings about that along with Mike Graziano and Brad Stoddard. And also thinking about how I might teach other courses in similar manners – such as gender and religion which is what I'm doing right now. And so I can't just focus on those areas that I have been trained in. I have to broaden my own research interest in order to teach my students about something other than the ancient world. So there is a gap there, but I think that I've made it work for me by pairing some of my research interests with other topics that I'm either nominally interested in, or that I think my students will be interested in.

TE: *Great. Well, thank you very much Russell, and Matt, and Tara for joining us today. It was a great conversation.*

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