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## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 12 December 2019



### Applied Religious Studies at Georgia State University

Podcast with **Molly Bassett** (16 December 2019).

Interviewed by **David McConeghy**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/applied-religious-studies-at-georgia-state-university>

**David McConeghy (DMcC):** *Welcome. My name is [David McConeghy](#). And today it's my pleasure to be joined by [Dr Molly Bassett](#), Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. She's an expert on [Mesoamerican Religions](#) and the author of [The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies](#) – as well as a recent participant in an [Imminent Frame](#) forum about applied religious studies. Today we welcome her to speak about her department and some of the changes they're making – and the innovation that they are developing for new degree tracks for their graduate students, as well as setting up undergraduates receiving degrees in Religious Studies for success in a variety of jobs outside of the academic or PhD track. Dr Bassett, thank you so much for joining us here today!*

**Molly Bassett (MB):** Thanks so much for having me, David.

**DMcC:** *So, for those Listeners that may not be familiar with Georgia State, can you describe your university to us and a little bit about the context of your department? Who are your majors, and what's the department like?*

**MB:** Sure. So Georgia State is located in the heart of Atlanta. If you've been to an [AAR](#) conference here, the conference happens just a block away from Georgia State. We are the tenth most diverse student body in the country. So our majors come from everywhere. They come from rural Georgia, they come from refugee communities in Clarkston, and so they bring the world's religions into the classroom in a way that I haven't seen in many other places. So that makes the department a really vibrant place to think about world religions, and lived religion, and religion on site in Atlanta. Our unit

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grew out of a combined Philosophy/ Religious Studies department back in 2004, when we established an MA programme too. And so we work closely with lots of other departments on campus. And at this time we're really focussing on applied religious studies and religious literacy.

**DMcC:** *That's great. Can you say about how many faculty members, and about how many majors, versus how many students in total, kind-of enrol in your courses? Can you give us a sense of the numbers?*

**MB:** Sure. So we have – depending on how you count us – between five and seven continuing faculty members. Two of my colleagues are in administration and teach sometimes. We're hiring this year, so we're a growing department. We have about between forty-five and fifty majors, typically. And then the number of students we serve, though, is much larger. Because we teach, of course, in the core curriculum or general education. So we reach thousands of students through a course that's called “Introduction to World Religions”, but it's really a thematic survey. So in that class, for example, just this semester we've introduced a new module on Religion and Health. So the topics in that class are changing all the time. And it's a class that faculty teach, and also our MA students teach.

**DMcC:** *That's an approach that I hear a lot more departments talking about – a kind-of thematic rather than tradition-based approach to world religion – so that you can “plug and play” new timely modules, and really adjust it for the skills and expertise of the teacher. I heard that you were doing your academic programme review this year – the dreaded . . . (Laughs) chance to review your curriculum. Is that the kind of thing you're talking about? When your department is thinking about the changes you're going to make?*

**MB:** Yes, exactly. So we finished APR in the last year. And over the course of that year – so really, beginning about this time last year – we did an intensive review of every aspect of the department. And the focus of the APR was the curriculum. So I'll talk in a little bit about our graduate programme. Part of what we talked about in APR was how to bring some of the success we're seeing with some of the applied courses and applied concentrations at the graduate level back into the major and undergraduate curriculum. So that's part of why we incorporated this new module at 2001 (5:00). We're hoping that students in our core course, who might not think about religious studies as a potential minor or major or double major – say they're like pre-nursing major right now – if we can hook them with this religion and health topic, then we offer a 3000 level online course in religion and health, and then an upper level undergraduate course on medical ethics. So part of what we're trying to

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do is build pathways through the undergraduate curriculum, so that we can entice more majors into the programme and help them see how religious studies can complement other fields of study, or it may become their passion.

**DMcC:** *Right. So when you as a department think, “We’d like to make a new partnership with another area within the university.” How do you come to the decision that a new partnership is warranted? How you know that . . . say, for instance, I teach at Salem State and we have a huge nursing programme. And so the nursing programme is a major feeder for a general education curriculum course. So how does it work in your department, when you look for those kinds of partnerships?*

**MB:** That's a great question. So the first time we partnered with another unit in like an ongoing fashion. Catherine, my colleague was chair of the department at that time. And she and I, as grad director, were seeing our graduate students finish and go on to work in non-profits. And that anecdotal evidence on our part, or observations and connections with alumni, was supported by data from a 2015 study the AAR did of religious studies majors. And a good percentage of undergraduate majors go onto careers in non-profit. And so Catherine knew that our School of Policy Studies offered a graduate certificate in non-profit management. And so we worked with our colleagues there to integrate their certificate into our MA programme, so that students can earn an MA in Religious Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences, while also earning a certificate in non-profit management through our concentration. So it's not . . . Prior to that, students were sort-of choose-your-own-adventure-style doing these things. But this way, the programmes are integrated so that some of the non-profit classes count toward our degree. And students have a seamless programme, and they graduate with two credentials that are recognisable. So that decision was driven by watching our students go and do things, and us saying, “Oh, wait! We can help them do that.” We can help them really get the skills they need to go onto those careers. And then taking advantage of resources at the university to embed an existing credential in our programme. So we weren't recreating the wheel.

**DMcC:** *Right. It takes advantages of the strengths of your university. But it also really signals to employers and companies that are looking to hire future Georgia State students, that there's a credential process for this, that there is a pathway for students, that you have designed a curriculum, you've been really intentional about it, it's not ad hoc, that has learning outcomes. Has the business community of the non-profits kind-of management segment, have they really responded to the presence of a new credential like that? It's brand new, right? I don't know that there's any or perhaps very few other universities that have a credential like that. Are you seeing good traction with that programme?*

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**MB:** Yes. I think we are. I mean we've had several years of . . . well a few years of graduates now. And part of the programme is . . . toward the end of their second year, toward the end of the programme, they do an internship and then write a paper that integrates their knowledge from both non-profit and religious studies in some fashion. Or the paper can be a project. So our first graduate Emir Mohammed, his paper was “Non-profit Paperwork”. And he established his own non-profit. So that's like entrepreneurial success rate, off the bat!

**DMcC:** *Right! (10:00).*

**MB:** But since then, several students have found that the internship has either given them opportunities toward a next step, or that the internship has become sort-of a try-before-you-buy for the students, and also for the employer. So recently an alum talked to me about an opportunity she has . . . she's continued to work with the organisations since she graduated, and she's done some other work too, including some teaching. And the director of the non-profit is leaving and the director approached her to step into that position. And I think that stories like that . . . It's not just that she had the training she needed, or the credentialing that she needed, but that she had the opportunity to see, “Is this a good fit for me?” And for the other people at the non-profit to get to know her. So, yes. I think it's working out and it's working well. And students have a lot of flexibility in the programme, either to do their own thing, or to find a place in the non-profit world here in the Atlanta area, to continue the work that they started with us.

**DMcC:** *That kind of applied religious studies approach, seems to me to be so obvious now. But we haven't really done, or thought about thing, really, in that direction in American Religious Studies for a long time. In the business world you would never complete a four year business degree without doing a variety of internships, right? But we so often in Religious Studies have not taken advantage of helping our students with the business networking that they really need, in order to be employed once they have the degree. And this fills such a need to justify – especially to administrators, who always want to say to parents and potential students and graduating students, “Here is the job that our university, and this major, got this student” Like, they want to take that and draw a direct line between their university and the great job that the student has got. And now, within your non-profit I think I can really see that connection. You have the stories to back up the perception that that networking really does matter a lot.*

**MB:** Yes. I think so. And I feel like the programme's also attracting students who have had careers or

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have been working for a while, and they see . . . they've identified a real world problem. So I feel like this is the golden opportunity of applied religious studies to identify a real world problem and then take the skills that they learn in our programme and non-profit management . . . . Or we have another concentration, a new one, in Religion and Aging. So they take the skills that they learn from our colleagues in the gerontology institute and apply those to the problem with the subject area expertise of Religious Studies. So recently, another student in our non-profit management concentration, Lavalla Wilson, had a PhD, she had a career in resident services at universities, and she moved to Atlanta do our programme because she had recognised a need. And the need was: homeless youth have trouble getting into colleges or community colleges, or even getting high school credentials because they don't have a physical address, they don't have a residence.

**DMcC:** *Right.*

**MB:** So starting from that observation, Lavalla went through our programme and her internship was developing a website, and an app, that connects homeless youth in the Atlanta area with existing resources that can help them get into school. So to see that . . . to see someone, you know, who's been working for a long time, identify a problem and then identify our programme as the place that she can build the solution to the problem, I think it shows how a religious studies department is vital in more than one way.

**DMcC:** *Absolutely. Can you . . . . You raised your Religion and Aging programme. Can you speak a little bit more about that new programme?*

**MB:** Sure. So the Religion and Aging programme is modelled on the non-profit programmes. So it's another concentration that's available to our MA students. And we developed it, in part, in response to and in connection with a community partnership we have with [Wellstar Health Systems](#). So Wellstar Health Systems is a big hospital group in Atlanta. They employ twenty-four thousand people. They have a bunch of hospitals, assisted living centres, hospices – you name it. And one of our alumni, [Jason Lesandrini](#), is their chief ethicist. So Jason has been working with us for a long time, and we've established a [graduate fellowship](#). So each year we award one fellowship to an incoming Masters student who's interested in religion and health professions, or religion and ethics and medicine. **(15:00)** And as I watched those students go through the programme, many of them were doing the non-profit concentration but it didn't seem like the best fit for the research they were conducting or the careers they wanted to pursue. So we started talking with people in the college and with people in gerontology

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and felt that opening a concentration in Religion and Aging would be a great opportunity for our Wellstar Fellows. But it also is a great opportunity because of the growing number of aging people in our city and our country. And in Atlanta it's such a diverse and global city that for students to understand cultural diversity, and to be literate with respect to religions, and then also understand the aging process and have a sense of what gerontologists can do professionally – it seemed like a good and strong partnership moving forward.

**DMcC:** *Yes. I was looking at the certificate requirements and I was seeing all of the courses that come from the gerontological side of things. You have “aging policy” and the “sociology of aging”, and “communication in aging”. But then on the religious studies side you have “death and the afterlife”, or “psychology and religion”, or “religious dimensions of the human experience”. And you're really providing them a second language to speak about aging and to really frame that diversity. What kinds of things have you heard back from the students that are in the programme, whose only kind-of connection, prior to that moment, was “I'm in the same school within Georgia State that houses both departments, but I'm not in both departments until I was in the programme” That kind of . . . new students to your department, let's say?*

**MB:** Yes. So we have two students in the programme. It opened, officially, just in August. So the feedback is preliminary.

**DMcC:** *Brand new and shiny!* (Laughs).

**MB:** But it's good! (Laughs.) Very shiny. But I can say, I taught a grad seminar last fall and students in that seminar partnered with another of our community partners, [Compassion House for Living and Dying](#). It's a non-medicalised hospice. One of the co-founders is an alumnus of our programme, [Justin Howell](#). And we work with them to build an online orientation for their volunteers – the [death doulas](#) that work at the hospice – so that they have a better sense of how to approach guests from a variety of religious backgrounds. And so I feel like that gave the students in the course and me a lot of insight into end-of-life care, and what people of different faiths might expect in terms of end-of-life care . . . or resist. And also, how we can again sort-of solve a real world problem by bringing our subject expertise around death in Islam, say, to an organisation that wants to serve Muslim guests.

**DMcC:** *Right.*

**MB:** So end-of-life care is just a tiny piece of what students in the concentration can study. But that's

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one example of the work. And then our colleagues from gerontology came and presented in the department, a few weeks ago. And so we got to hear about some of the NIH funded work they're doing and long-term care facilities, around what are meaningful encounters for people with different forms of dementia (20:00). And, you know, it was really fascinating to talk with them about what . . . like, how do you define “meaningful engagement” or a “meaningful encounter” and what goes into meaning making? And I feel like that is something that a lot of students drawn to the study of religions can . . . . There's a lot of traction there for us, too. So it's just getting started, and I'm really excited to see where this partnership goes to. I mean for us as faculty, as well as for the students.

**DMcC:** *I'm really intrigued by the idea that part of the goal of including students within these programmes for non-profit and for aging is that the critical approaches that religious studies has, are applied approaches. That there is a way to translate and move, rather immediately, from the kind-of critical tools of studying discourse, and using comparison, and being religiously literate about the diversity that exists in a community, and understanding all of those elements. But then turning that around the corner and saying “And then now what do we do with that?” I think often, when we have discussions about religious studies there's a dividing line that some have put between a kind-of critical perspective, and maybe a softer, older literacy approach that simply talks about content. And this is a different kind of conversation, to me. And I think that your programmes are identifying that there's a new . . . a third way that we can think about it.*

**MB:** Yes. And I feel like I just have so much to learn still, about what it means to negotiate the two conversations that you identify: the critical approach – you know, we need to cover the content, and understand diversity, and be literate – and then how to bring both of those to bear on applied projects. Yes. I have a lot of questions. They come up all the time! (Laughs).

**DMcC:** *Well, great! We love questions! (Laughs). When you have a student that's . . . let's say, they are in a programme like the non-profit certificate programme and they have a personal faith, right, that is potentially motivating them towards a particular line of non-profit work. And then you, as a religious studies . . . an academic-oriented view of religious studies, you're providing them critical tools. That dialogue, right there, is an intersectional space where you're providing critical tools but they may have their own critical approaches, right? And I can imagine how many questions arise – both on the curricular side, but also just simply negotiating a classroom where you have someone that has a really clear sense of their own personal employment goals, and their own personal religious goals. If you take the charitable compassionate work as part of your core religious values, how do we*

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*translate those into the critical terms of religious studies? Is that where those questions really arise from?*

**MB:** Yes. That's definitely one space the questions arise in. I mean, you know, we do some of the typical things. We talk about [bracketing](#), and we talk about identifying bias, and being self-aware. And we also, then, talk about whether those approaches are really working out in the classroom or outside the classroom. But then the questions also arise in terms of like, understanding the audience for the applied project, and thinking about what's appropriate given that audience. So one of the things we're trying to do now is bring the applied approach back into the major. And this semester I'm teaching one of the required courses in our major. It used to be called the Survey Class. And now it's Traditions of World Religions. So in addition to doing the . . . like, we started in my version of the class with Native American traditions (25:00). And then we turned through the big five. I am bookending that course in conversations about religion and public education. Because, while we're doing the work of learning the content, students are working in small groups to create some instructional support materials for teachers at a local public school.

**DMcC:** *That's a fascinating project!*

**MB:** Yes. It's in process. It is fascinating. And it's also sometimes anxiety-producing!

**DMcC:** *Is this the first time that you've been doing that kind of project?*

**MB:** Yes.

**DMcC:** *The terror and joy of a new big group project, right?*

**MB:** For sure! So the school is my daughter's elementary school. So, yeah. And I told the students at the beginning of the semester, my daughter came home at the winter break in kindergarten singing “[Dreidel Dreidel](#)” which is just fine, until you've heard it 800 million times! And I thought, you know, it's interesting to me that she learned this in kindergarten at our neighbourhood school. And “I wonder what else she's learned?” I started talking to the teachers and they're adopting a new [IB](#) curriculum for the school – so, International Baccalaureate. And that's an inquiry-based learning system which is fantastic. So I'm working with the IB co-ordinator and, at the end of this semester, will hand over a bunch of support materials that my students have created to help the kindergarten teachers be more literate with respect to religions. I mean they themselves identify this as a growing edge for them, and

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welcome our partnership. So I'm excited to see what comes of it. But we're all going there in December, during our final exam period. We're meeting at the school to meet the kindergarteners and read books to them. So I keep focussing on that while we're ironing out the problems of the actual assignment, and figuring out how to get the work done.

**DMcC:** *Right. But holding the feet to the fire to the fire like that, right? There are actual kindergarteners out there and your students are going to go to them. That level of incentive is the level of incentive all teachers hope for, right? To push, to be compelled to do the work for really valuable reason: there are children that have things that they could learn about religion. I can do that work in this class. That's a win-win from my perspective.*

**MB:** Man, I hope so! (Laughs).

**DMcC:** (Laughs).

**MB:** Yes. I mean that's the picture I had, right? And the kids in the public school system are in our neighbourhood. You know, so when we talk about community partnerships, they are our community. And it's a really diverse . . . . Both Georgia State and that elementary school are majority minority schools. So the big kids are going to see the little kids and the little kids are going to see the big kids. And of course many of my students are not kids but . . . . And I feel like the kindergarteners might see too that like, "Oh, one day I could be a [Georgia State Panther](#)" I don't know. Maybe that's pushing it? But yeah. I think there's a lot of good reasons to be giving this a go, and seeing how it works out. And we worked through the [AAR's guidelines](#) for teaching religion in public schools. And we had a forum on that in the department yesterday. So, at the same time, we're churning through the questions of, like, "Well what about teachers who . . ." you know, like you were just saying, "who have religious perspectives. How can we help them negotiate teaching religion when it's not appropriate to indoctrinate or you know call on their own personal faith system to explain what's happening?"

**DMcC:** *Right.*

**MB:** In a book about [John Lewis's](#) upbringing, or whatever it is. Yeah. So, as I said, there are lots of questions!

**DMcC:** *So as we wrap up, I think the one thing that I'd like to offer to all the Listeners of the podcast is, if there are people that are really interested in this kind-of new model of applied religious studies –*

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*where you're making greater partnerships with some of the other departments in the university – to lend a bit of professionalisation to things: what would you recommend that they start with? Should they kind-of take a peek at the students that are in the class?(30:00) Is this “I got to walk down the hall and talk with the other department, first”? What's a first step that you might recommend, to get someone rolling down this path?*

**MB:** Well that's a good question. I feel like we lucked-out, because we had some alumni who are really invested in our programme, and then I have just some remarkable colleagues who have a lot of energy around ideas like this. And then it also happened that what we're doing aligns with our College's and University's strategic plans. And some of that is intentional, and some of it is a bit of a luck of the draw. So I feel like it probably depends on what your institutional context is, and who the potential partners could be – either within the university or within the community. But I think the AAR is also a resource. There are going to be a bunch of sessions about applied religious studies at [this year's meeting](#). And I think that would be a place to meet more people who are doing similar things. I think UCSB is now partnering with the art museum in Santa Barbara; folks at Missouri State, I think it is, just started a Certificate in Medical Humanities in the undergraduate programme; and I know that you have plans to talk to other folks who are doing things like this.

**DMcC:** *Absolutely.*

**MB:** Yeah, I think there are lots of models out there. There's probably not a bad way to go about it.

**DMcC:** *Right. But the central point, as far as what I'm hearing, is: every university has a context. And so if you're in the religious studies department and you want to make those kind of connections to your universities network, we really have to take a step back and think about who the students are that are coming to the university, and where they go when they leave the university, and the relationship between the university and the community that exists, to really identify all of those networks that already exist, right? We're just not tapping into them as well as we could. Would you . . . ?*

**MB:** Yeah. I think that's a great way to put it. I think, you know, just sort-of being open to opportunities as they come along, too. I mean, I wouldn't have thought to make this connection with an elementary school until my kid brought home something that, for me, was like . . . “Huh? Mmm.” So yeah. I think I feel like once you get started thinking about, “How can we take our subject area expertise, and the skills that we develop in the study of religions, and use those to improve things for

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folks outside the academy?” Once you start thinking in that way, then you see all kinds of ways to work with people in other professions and other academic departments, too.

**DMcC:** *Wonderful. Well thank you so much for joining me here today. We really appreciate your time.*

**MB:** Thank you.

**DMcC:** *Have a great day!*

**MB:** You too.

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