

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 27 November 2019



Straight White American Jesus, the Podcast

Podcast with **Bradley Onishi** (25 November 2019).Interviewed by **David McConeghy**Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/straight-white-american-jesus-the-podcast/>

David McConeghy (DMcC): *Welcome. My name is [David McConeghy](#). And today I'm joined by Dr [Bradley Onishi](#), Associate Professor of Religion at Skidmore College in New York. He's the co-author of [Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches](#); the author of [The Sacrality of the Secular](#), a major work about the philosophy of religion. Today he's here as the co-host, with [Dan Miller](#), of the really excellent podcast, [Straight White American Jesus](#). Brad, thanks so much for joining us today.*

Bradley Onishi (BO): Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

DMcC: *So I've been listening to your podcast for a while now, and I know you share it with everyone. But for those that haven't come across this yet, where did you get the idea for this podcast?*

BO: So in the kind-of aftermath of Trump's election Dan and I got together and talked about wanting to share our stories, and also wanting to share kind-of our scholarship on evangelicalism and American religion. For those who haven't listened, my [story](#) is basically that I converted to evangelicalism when I was fourteen. And by the time I was twenty I was a full-time minister, I was married, and I was really on my way toward a kind-of life in ministry and in the evangelical world. All of that changed, of course. And I'm still in the religion game – as I like to say – but just from a much different perspective. And so, for Dan and I, we wanted to help folks have an insider perspective and understanding of white evangelicalism in this country. We also wanted to provide a kind-of historical and social scientific lens on white evangelicalism. Our major goal is basically this: we want to explain, basically, why Donald Trump appears more like Jesus than any other politician white evangelicals have ever encountered. And so we do that through both the telling of our stories and a kind-of tracing the history of evangelicalism in this country.

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DMcC: *I found that mix of personal experience blending in to academic rigour, blending into full-on interviews with really important scholar like [R. Marie Griffith](#) and [Randall Balmer](#). It's really compelling. Did you know from the beginning that you had that kind-of really effective dialogue between those two halves? That you and Dan both share, right, share a background?*

BO: Yes, you know it all comes so naturally. Because evangelicalism was my world. I mean I was. . . . It's hard to explain how zealous I was, when I converted. I was that sixteen year-old kid who went from sneaking around the back of movie theatres to do teenage stuff, to standing out in front of the movie theatre, trying to convert people. And so when evangelicalism is that much a part of your life reflecting on it is sometimes painful, but it comes very naturally. So Dan and I knew we could do that. We also knew we had a passion for enabling . . . or creating a platform for scholars to help a wider audience understand, like: how is that more white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump than for George W Bush, or Mitt Romney? How does that happen? Well, we knew there were people out there who could help us understand that. And so we wanted to just provide space for those analytical, historical, critical, sociological perspectives.

DMcC: *What I take from the moment that we're in right now, is that we really have a great opportunity, right, as scholars, as outsiders, to kind-of present some of the research that's been done, especially into those theoretical perspectives that the public often doesn't see. Because they're framed in language or framed in books that are hard to market to public audiences. But the insider approach really gives you that colloquial, fundamental access to an authenticity, when you speak about it, that makes it – when you switch, then, to the academic narrative – so much more alive. When you say it's hard to convince audiences of how zealous you were, there was the moment when you were describing in the podcast, how you would go, in the high school lunch room, up to students that were your high school peers and evangelise to them at lunch. Because you were convinced that their mortal souls were at risk, and if you did not do everything you could do at that moment that you were going to leave them behind.*

BO: Yes. And you know one of the goals is not to soften, or make more palatable the politics and culture of evangelicals in the Trump era. We are not here to sort-of “make nice” in any case. But what I do want to do, by telling stories like the one you just mentioned, I want people to be able to think themselves into the places of the evangelicals, not so that they can agree, not so that they can accept it, but so they can see the human element in it. It's so easy to reduce those we disagree with – especially those who seem to be harming our public sphere – to just reduce them to something demented, something that's not right. And just sort-of push them away as hopeless and helpless and whatever. My

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hope is by sharing my story, and Dan's too, that we can show folks that this is a very human culture. It's a very human set of events. It's a very human community. And if you can get a window into that, maybe it can help you when you're at a school board meeting, or you're at your election for the city council, or when you're dealing with parents on your kids' soccer team, or having a Thanksgiving dinner. Maybe it can give you a better approach to how to discuss these things with your neighbours, with your fellow citizens, with your colleagues – whoever that may be. And so all that is to say, for me, that the personal element is really, really important. It adds something, I think, that makes it easier for a general audience to identify with. And it also makes it easier for those who are ex-evangelicals, like I am, to feel that they have a way in to understand more of the sort-of academic discourse surrounding the culture that they're arguing from.

DMcC: *Right. And for those perhaps outside of the US, it's been a very kind-of English language discussion and very much on Twitter with folks like [Chris Stroop](#), and others who #Exevangelical, are talking about their de-conversion experiences. There really is that kind-of two sides to what's going on, in the sense that there are some folks that worry that perhaps the level of honesty that you're approaching this topic with is unfair to evangelicals. And I think, all of the folks that I've heard from have been really forceful advocates for: "We're not going to dismiss what's wrong here, and we're going to call out things that we see are wrong, and we feel like we have a space to do that." But on the other hand it is about explaining experience and opening dialogue and trying to find the allies that are there for you. On the other hand, though, do you think . . . ? (Laughs) I'm guessing that maybe there's been some push-back as well? Can you talk about the kinds of different responses that you've received from those that have been very supportive, as ex-evangelical community members, to those that are remaining evangelical, and may have some less than kind words for the work that you're doing.*

BO: Yes, I mean just to go to the beginning of your question there: my goal is not to. . . . I'm a scholar. And even when I'm talking about my own experiences, I want to be able to have an analytical lens. And so on our podcasts and with the work we're doing, the goal is never reduction; the goal is never demonisation. The goal is always to say: "We want to examine these issues as best as we can." And that includes returning to sources. That includes returning to documents and facts and histories that have been covered over that people don't know about. We did this in one of our very first episodes with the abortion myth. Randall Balmer came on and Let me outline the history for you regarding the formation of the religious right. It was not about abortion. And the idea that it was is revisionist history in service of an evangelical propaganda or mission. In fact it was race. And my response to those who would have a pop at that, I would say "We're doing historical work here. If you feel like our historical analysis is off in some way, we can talk about that. But just to say that somehow pointing

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these things out is unfair or not warranted, I just don't buy that.”

DMcC: *That's such a good response. Because, you know, it allows you the space to say let's take [Darren Dochuk](#) who would place oil, and empire, and commercialism, maybe even above race, at the start of the kind-of consolidation of the religious right. And it gives you that space to say, “Even scholars have disagreements about this. But we can all narrate the problems that we're seeing at the same time.”*

BO: I think that's exactly right. And it leads to who has kind-of responded to the podcast. I can say that we've had two groups respond very positively. One are ex-evangelicals who've said “ You're able to speak my language. You speak the language of evangelicalism that I came out of. And yet what you're doing is giving me a road into understanding the history and all of the cultural and political factors that shaped that religious community that I'm now emerging from. What it's doing is helping me kind-of put my world back together, after sort-of coming out of a very strict religious community that most of the time made no sense to me.” We've also had many people say, “I'm a secular person in Portland” or “I'm a Reformed Jew in New York City. I have no idea how to understand why white evangelicals are so in love with Donald Trump and why they vote, and act, and think the way they do, so you're helping me gain a window into a culture that for me is completely alien. It seems so far from my understanding of the world that I just didn't know where to start in order to understand all of this.” And so those two communities have really reached out over Twitter, and everything else, to say that they've really appreciated what we're doing. There's been a little bit of pushback, but not much. One of the things that I like to tell students and tell folks I discuss things with is, I am totally open as a scholar to argument, and debate, and dialogue. Those are the things I love. But you're not going to out evangelical me! I'm like “level expert” at evangelical. So when it comes to theology, and language, and jargon, and colloquialisms, and clichés – I'm fluent in that. And so when you want to discuss those things with me, just know that I'm going to be speaking your language better than you. And so you're not going to get the upper hand on me! And the last thing is, I'm not going to assume – and I think this is part of the ex-evangelical community online, the work they're doing is – we need to stop assuming that if you call yourself a Christian that that means you are a good person. Now don't get me wrong – I'm not calling Christians bad people! Do not come at me on Twitter for that! What I'm saying is there is a privilege in this country that if you're a straight, white Christian – especially a straight, white Christian male – you're given a kind-of cover as “Oh, you must be a true, good, old-fashioned patriot.” We just sort-of have this assumption. And part of the work we're doing – along with many other people – is just saying we need to stop giving that benefit of the doubt, just because someone claims those identities. And we need to just be willing to look very critically, and with an unflinching gaze,

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on what's actually happening in those communities. That could be everything from church, too, and sexual misconduct and abuse. That can be authoritarian structures that can be supporting candidates who are authoritarian and abusive – whatever it may be. And so anyway, all of that is part of the work I feel like we're doing, and will continue to do, and are very proud to do.

DMcC: *I'm tempted to ask whether you think you would ever run out of topics. But . . .*

BO: (Laughs)

DMcC: *since you describe your access to evangelicals as both fluency in a language, but also access to a world that is very closed off, and inaccessible to those that are not fully immersed in it, it feels like you can just take any aspect of an evangelicals life: how they think about the economy, how they think about death, how they think about marriage, how they think about the value of life. And every issue, right, has to be encapsulated in some way by that worldview. It has to be addressed with fluency by that language. Do you feel that way? That there's really never . . . this is an eternal wellspring for you?*

BO: Well I don't know about eternal, but what I will say is when you're in something long enough you have the muscle memory to either know how to do it, or to find the person who does. And so I don't want to make out that the evangelical community in this country, including the white evangelical community in this country is homogeneous. There's a lot of difference between small house churches in West Texas and Liberty Baptists with the [Falwell Family](#), there's a lot of difference between the Vineyards in South California and what's happening in rural Georgia. With all that said – at least in the Trump era – there is no shortage of need to discuss things related to evangelical culture. And so at least for the moment, it's not hard to find things that are not only relevant but seem very pressing for our public sphere.

DMcC: *It reminds me of the way that people have spoken about Trump's election as a net gain for the media, even amid its attacks that the constant stream of scandals – or things that sound like scandals to some people – generates that kind-of a gravity of its own. And that we're lucky, as religion scholars who happen to work on things that are so central to understanding what's going on in American politics right now. It makes me feel very fortunate. But also it seems to carry a lot of responsibility. Do you feel that weight, as well?*

BO: I do. And I know there'll be people out there in the religious studies world who will say, “You know, Dan and Brad, you are blurring the lines between insider and outsider. You're blurring the lines

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between scholar and data.” And I understand that perspective. I don't necessarily agree with it. So when Dan and I go into any episode we do, we want to make sure that as we tell anecdotes from our past, as we recount what it was like to come home and have your family not be there, and have your first thought be “Maybe the rapture happened?” Where everyone got taken away and I didn't. As we tell those stories we always want to balance that with very rigorous scholarship. And we want to do our homework. We want to go to the primary sources, we want to go to the data, we want to make sure we have that right, so that we can make sure, as scholars and as people that have a platform, that we are owning up and responding to that responsibility.

DMcC: *Right. It also strikes me that it's kind-of like you have an ethnographic project that you were living. And then you decided that the project was over. And then you realised that you could actually . . . that you had collected all this data that was really valuable. So, from one perspective, you know, is it blurring the line between insider and outsider? Well, it might be. But on the other hand, you were living in the same way that an ethnographer might live, as if they were doing full-immersion field work. And now you've pulled back from being within that perspective. And now that you're not in that perspective you can clearly demarcate your outsider-ness – right? – in relation to your previous insider-ness*

BO: And I think that's right in ways that I think ethnographers experience. You begin . . . if you're an ethnographer you form relationships within the community. And even when you might find the politics or practices of that community detestable, at that turning point, the relationships you form affect you. And believe me, I still have friends and many family members who are still part of the evangelical world. They are people for whom I have great affection. I love them. And so for me to do this project, again, means I want to avoid reduction and demonisation. But I also want to have the courage and the audacity to point as critical and as unflinching an eye as we can on what's happening.

DMcC: *Right. So, do you think – and feel free to share specific episodes that you'd like to direct people to if they come to mind – are there things that really resonate best with the community where the clarity of that kind-of-like worldview switch that you've had, that you're revealing to everyone, really appears best? Your gold star podcast episodes?*

BO: Well the thing we've been focussing on this season has been [Beyond Belief](#). And what we want to do is explain not only what evangelicals believe, but what their culture and beliefs do for them. And so let me give you an example. We've spoken several times on our podcast about [abortion](#) and “cultures of life” – quote unquote – And one of the things we've tried really hard to explain is that, yes, there is a

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focus on abortion. Because many rank and file evangelicals go to bed at night believing that any form of abortion is equivalent to murder. Ok. However there's whole nother package of goods that come with that belief. I know personally, from my own experience, that every time that I explained to my church elders that I wanted to vote for a Democrat because their emphasis on equality, or social justice, seemed more in line with the gospel of Jesus Christ, they would sort-of say to me "Look, you can do that if you want. But what you're condoning is the murder of millions of children." Why do I bring that up? Because that one belief in abortion meant that I could turn off my brain completely when it came to all other issues. So when I went into a voting booth I did not have to consider whether or not all the things related to healthcare reform, education initiatives, tax hikes, immigration, what all of those things meant for who I should vote for. What I was going to vote for was who was "pro-life", quote unquote: who was against abortion. And so I got to turn off a whole set of moral and ethical decisions. I got to disengage politically, and go to bed at night knowing that I had done the right thing: that I was a good person, because I stood against murder. And that happens all over the place in evangelical culture. I could give you similar examples when it comes to apocalypticism. I could give you similar examples when it comes to God and guns, or gender. And so, what our audience has been really reacting to is unpacking what beliefs do for you more than just simply explaining theological frameworks or evangelical doctrines.

DMcC: *And I'm so thrilled to hear you present it in that way. We've been having kind-of a religious literacy discussion on Twitter, some of us going around, and that really strikes me as one of the operational moves that religious studies really can take advantage of: that it's not simply the content that we can present – it's the critical appraisal of the work that religion does, in particular instances, for particular people. So on abortion, the work that it does is potentially make hard political decisions a lot easier, right? It clarifies what the expectations are for them. And, as an element of religious literacy, presenting religion in that way to the public is a really powerful way to think about it. It's very different than thinking about religion as simply a collection of beliefs that we hold and then not really much beyond that, right?*

BO: It is. And you know that in every Intro to Religion class, most scholars and teachers are not going to ask, you know, "Let's ask their students to make a list of what Hindus and Muslims and Christians and everyone else believes." They're going to ask, "Let's try to define religion." and then they're going to say, "What does religion *do* for people?" Well I know the question I ask my students on the first day, is "Why do people *do* religion?" and when I say why do people *do* religion, they immediately get away from belief and they start raising their hands. And it's like "Community" "tradition", "family", "belonging", "identity". And as soon as we start talking about why people do religion instead of what

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do religious people believe, all of the dimensions of religious studies opens up. And what you see is that when we study religion we're also studying race, we're also studying embodiment, we're also studying gender, and we're also studying group formation. I always tell kids who want to major in religion, I'm like: "Look, when you sign up with us, you get to study it all. You don't have to compartmentalise what you're doing into one domain. Studying religion means studying the human condition writ large." One of the things I like to say is that, when you study religion you get a window into human conditions. That means communities and worlds that at one time probably seemed indecipherable. And you also get a window into the human condition in a way that I think is really unique. In the humanities, yes, but in religious studies even more so.

DMcC: *I'm so pleased to hear you say that. It's really been quite a pleasure to speak with you today about this. Thank you so much for joining us. And where can people find your podcast online?*

BO: Yes, so you can find Straight White American Jesus on [Apple Podcast](#), on [Stitcher](#), on Google, on most places that people find podcasts. You can find me on Twitter [@BradleyOnishi](#). And we still do have a [Straight White American Jesus Facebook](#) page as well.

DMcC: *Perfect. Thank you so much for joining us.*

BO: Thanks for having me.

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcription, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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