

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 19 February 2020



## Founding *American Religion*, the Journal

Podcast with **Sarah Imhoff** and **M. Cooper Harriss** (24 February 2020).

Interviewed by **David McConeghy**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/founding-american-religion-the-journal/>

**David McConeghy (DMcC):** *Hi. This is [David McConeghy](#). And today I'm at the 2019 [American Academy of Religion](#) meeting in beautiful, warm Santiago. For those of us that are maybe coming to this conference from many thousands of miles away, where it is cold and snowy and causing airplane delays, it is such a relief to walk off the airplane, and it's sixty-five and sunny and beautiful! And the beach is right off of the convention centre. How anybody comes to anything at this, I don't know! But today, I'm joined by two wonderful people who have a wonderful new thing to share with you. I'm joined today by [Sarah Imhoff](#) and [Cooper Harriss](#). Sarah, would you introduce yourself for all of our Listeners?*

**Sarah Imhoff (SI):** Yes. I'm Sarah Imhoff, I'm an Associate Professor at Indiana University, Bloomington, where I'm in the Religious Studies department and Director of the Borns Jewish Studies programme. And I'm a co-editor of [American Religion](#), our new journal.

**DMcC:** *I'm so excited. And, Cooper, would you introduce yourself?*

**Cooper Harriss (CH):** Yes, I am Cooper Harriss. I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, in Bloomington. And I also am a co-editor of *American Religion*.

**DMcC:** *I am so excited about this new journal. As an Americanist myself, it is quite the thing to be around for the birth of a new journal. Can you talk about why – when, in the field of American religion, or American religious history, or religion and American culture, we have all these journals – what inspired you to start a new journal?*

**SI:** Yes. It's been a project that's quite a few years in the making. One of the things that Cooper and I

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both noticed was that there was a lot of really exciting work that was happening that we thought of as belonging in the field of American Religion, but wasn't being published in journals that are traditionally associated with American religious history, or religion in American culture. And sometimes, even the scholars who were doing it didn't envision themselves as Religious Studies scholars. But we saw ourselves as being able to learn so much from this, and we also saw connections among that scholarship. So we wanted to bring those voices together.

**CH:** Yes. Really to create a place for people who work in what's a fascinating place, to create a new vision of what this field might be, and to cultivate and curate that in the process.

**DMcC:** *So can you give me an example of a work that was connected in this new kind-of identity that you're expressing, that wouldn't have had a home before – perhaps maybe even from the brand new newly-released issue? What's a great example to think of when we think, “There wasn't really a great place for that, it didn't have a home before – and now it does! We gave it a home!”*

**CH:** The one that sticks immediately to mind, I think – many, or all, of these would qualify on certain levels. But I'm pulling open the table of contents, here, to make sure I get this correctly. But it's [Spencer Dew's article](#) on intellectual property law in a Puerto Rican Taíno indigenous movement. One of the things that this does is it . . . so it's historical, but it's historical in a different way. It relies critically on legal thought, legal theory and there are some social theoretical dimensions that are there. It also pushes and expands on what we mean by the word America. And this is one of the things that we really deliberately want to make happen with the journal, is to push on . . . . You very nicely summarised, in the beginning, sort-of religion in America, American religious history, American religion. And that's one of the things that we've been toying with, and thinking about, as we've sought to bring new scholars and scholarship together: what counts within this formulation? What counts within these words? What does it mean to study religion? What does it mean to study America? What is that? Or the Americas? Never mind the prepositions.

**DMcC:** *Right. And one of the things that I noticed is the journal title, American Religion. But what I heard in your response there was maybe a little pushback that there's a secret s on the end of that? That it's plural from the outset? Am I hearing that correctly, or is that . . . ?*

**SI:** So I would say, yes, and no. In some ways, we want to be capacious and not think of American religious history as just sort-of Church History 2:0. We really do want to see spaces for non-Christian religions. And, as a scholar of Judaism, I very much see the ways that the field can sometimes default back to a Christian model (5:00). So, in that sense, yes: religions, plural. But also, the idea of religion

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as a category. And there we do see it as singular, even if it's not well-defined. It's nebulous. But we see it as not necessarily a singular object of study, but it gets talked about in a way that is singular. And we thought there was something to hold onto about that, too.

**DMcC:** *So, if I can, I'll put on the critical theorist hat. Have you gotten pushback about that potential line of essentialism? And if so, what kind-of form does it take?*

**CH:** Well, the very first article in our journal *American Religion* is by [Melissa Wilcox](#), and her title is “[Words Kill: Sex and the Definition of US Religion](#)“. And she has, almost immediately . . . yes, her very first footnote! Her very first footnote, in the very first article, of the very first issue of the journal says “From here on, I use the term “US Religions” both to clarify etc., etc. . . .” And so one of the things that we really like and appreciate about this is that we have this vision and understanding of the nomenclature, but we also want that to be an invitation for people to push back at it. It becomes a formulation that's very much under conversation, very much in process, very much . . . yes, in process, I would say, is the way that we want to set this up.

**SI:** Yes. And in some ways *American Religion* sounds like it's another journal about US religion. And in some ways it is, because we're interested in the discursive formation of “America” – which is the banner under which the US appears so many times. But also we do think about this as a chance to challenge, and critique, and think in new ways about the *Americas*. So South America, Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America – what do those things mean? And what do we see about them when we consider religion?

**CH:** And also trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific. So thinking about sort-of trans-ness as well, within this category of . . . Well, we have the category of religion, and then we have the category of America . . . is one way to think about it. It's not this singular thing, but a set of discourses.

**DMcC:** *I had a piece of writing recently and I forget exactly what context this was. But the clear memory of it was that I was chastised for using America to stand in for the United States of America, when, “who knows whether . . .” I had meant North America, or Latin America or perhaps colonial American holdings abroad. You suggested – when I asked for an example from the work that's really pushing that broader picture – you pointed to an article about Puerto Rico. And I'm guessing that there is a geographical diffusion that the items . . . the pieces that come to your journal are going offer, that really kind-of connect the dots. So many people, when they think about the US, see the continental US as the end of the story. And then Alaska wonders where it got left off the map! But even if you include Alaska, and even if you include Hawaii, we still, as the United States have, what, thirty*

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*or more international territories including military bases, including islands in the Pacific, islands in the Caribbean? And are you hoping, in the future, that you will really be able to explore that diffusion?*

**SI:** Yes. I think one of the things that we think about is: what does it mean that the US has been an empire, and continues to be imperial in many ways? And what does it mean that the contemporary boundaries of the US are not the boundaries that we see throughout its history? Colonial America looks, geographically, so very different from the contemporary US. So attending to the fact that there isn't one stable entity, even if we just take the US, it changes over time – and that matters.

**DMcC:** *What would you say to people that already have a large body of journals that they're looking at, if you had to pitch to them? I'm hearing so many different versions of the pitch: that this is a space for discursive reflections about the major terms in the particular area of the field; that this is an expression of critique about how some of those formulations have been done. But I also saw your teaser on [Twitter](#) that included a very wonderful poem. Can you talk about some of the other work, and maybe what role that plays in how you're defining scholarship for your journal? (10:00).*

**CH:** Sure. That's one of the things . . . . We're probably excited about the research article, which we see as creating new knowledge, new bodies of knowledge, but the other components of the journal. . . . The other journals that specialise in religion in the Americas, religion in American culture, do not publish book reviews. So we will have an active, vibrant book review section. We are interested in publishing creative work – so [Elizabeth Pérez' poem](#) in our first issue. And we have some other things in the hopper, and would encourage submissions from anyone who has any kind of artistic or creative interest: fiction, non-fiction, but also material art, photography, visual art – we will figure out a way to make it work! We have an ongoing . . . I think every issue will have at least one review essay that is not about books – although it could be about books, but it could be about something else. So our first issue has [Kathryn Lofton](#) writing on [Bob Dylan's Bootleg series](#) from the Gospel period. We have one, I think, coming up on the word “surreal” – a review essay on the word surreal, written by a scholar of religion who's also an artist working through that. And again, we want some . . . maybe cuisine, fashion, these kinds of things. Giving scholars . . . . It doesn't have to be about religious dimensions of these things. The people we have, our readers and our writers, bring the – quote-unquote – “religion” to it. It's about sort-of cultural assessment, seen through the lens of people who are trained or working in the field of Religious Studies.

**SI:** Yes. So one of the things that we love about this is that already in the classroom we use creative

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things. We have our students look at poems; we have our students read literature; we have our students look at visual things. And we think about them in our own scholarship. So seeing a journal as a space for creative material felt right and natural for us, even if that wasn't standard for others. Another thing that we have that we're super-excited about is the website, which has materials that are often shorter than you would find in a traditional journal. They're scholarly and yet they're accessible. And the journal becomes . . . it really comes to life in a certain way. We can host things on the website that can't really appear very well in the journal. We can have things like photo essays. We can have interactive spaces. We can have teaching resources so that even if your library doesn't subscribe to the journal you can see that as a space for you. And so we've got three sections right now. I encourage you . . . It's [american-religion.org](http://american-religion.org). I encourage you to go and check it out. We've got new material that shows up there several times a month.

**DMcC:** *How easy was it to decide that you wanted to be a trans-media publication? Was that an easy decision? Was that, “How do we do this? How do we sustain it in the long run?” Can you speak to that?*

**CH:** I mean, that decision itself was a no-brainer. The question then became how to make this happen. And we're fortunate to have some very talented friends in that regard, I think, who not only helped us make it happen, but helped us to imagine, helped us to curate, to think up these categories. It all has been collaborative in one way or another, but the website is one of the places where we really see just a lot of people getting on the shovel, and thinking, and making this happen.

**SI:** Yes. So [Meghan Goodwin](#) designed the website. And right now we have three people who are each curating a space on the website. And so, [Seth Perry](#) is currently curating a group of things that he's calling “[empty spaces](#)“. And that's thinking about the emptiness that you can find in a field site. [Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada](#) is curating something that is looking at visuals. And she has a wonderful [essay](#) there about tattoos . . .

**CH:** The sacramental dimensions of tattoos.

**SI:** Yes, it's wonderful. And [Brandon Bayne](#) has a section there that is dedicated to pedagogy. So a space to think . . . and the [project](#) that's in that pedagogy space right now is rethinking the Americas: how should we design courses? How should we design exam lists for graduate students if we are taking seriously the idea of religion in the Americas? (15:00).

**DMcC:** *Right. That kind-of classic thing where the old horse of: “Here are the puritans, maybe here*

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*are the Catholics and, eventually, maybe you get to the Spanish colonial context”. Then destroying that narrative. Just abandoning it entirely. You have so many collaborators on this project. I was looking through the [list](#) of at-large editors, and your advisory board. What was the process for recruitment like for you? How did you decide who would make an excellent editor for you? And this begins a transition, perhaps, in the podcast. For everybody listening: I'm going to ask some questions about how this item came into being, and about some of the more practical elements of giving birth to a journal in this age, right? So first, maybe, how did you recruit all the best people to join you in your project?*

**SI:** Well, this connects back to part of our earlier conversation, when we talked about a need we saw. One of the first things we did after we had identified those was to scrounge around for some funding and have a workshop. And so many of the scholars you see on the editorial board were on our desired list, for this workshop, to get these people together and have them talk to one another. And in many cases they hadn't known about one another's work. And so that was part of what really convinced us . . . . In fact the idea for a journal came out of that first workshop, from the people in the room. They said, “You know, we want to continue this conversation. We know all these other people who belong in it. Let's have a new journal!”

**DMcC:** *Was there a thought that it might have been something else at that point? You're shaking your head! Yes, and then . . . .*

**SI:** Yes. Yes and no. It could have been anything. It was, “Should we have a journal? Should we have a website? Should we try to make an annual meeting? Should we . . . ?” Anything was possible. We needed the funding and the human power to do it. But I think we're really happy the way this has turned out.

**CH:** Yes. The daunting . . . . It's daunting, but the power of the journal is that it is something that continues, that isn't sort-of a one-time document, but it's something that will continue on, and change, and tack in different directions, and this kind of thing. So it's the beginning of a kind-of free-ranging conversation that will continue.

**SI:** Yes. A free-ranging conversation. And some of the other things that we felt came out of that workshop were ideas about the subfield and the profession and how we could do it better. What would peer review look like if we could try to be more constructive? So one of the things that we're trying out is singly anonymous peer review: so that the reviewer knows the identity of the author. And this came out of the experience of many of us who have published books, who've found that the singly

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anonymous review process generated reviews that tended to be more generous in their reading and more generous in their critique. Not just saying, “This doesn't work”, but saying, “What about this thing?” So, so far that's been a good experience. But that's one example. Another example is really encouraging and making space on our editorial board, and other places, for contingent scholars, adjuncts – encouraging the work of graduate students – which is another way that we hope that singly anonymous peer review process can really help our graduate students move their work forward to the next level.

**DMcC:** *I think that's a really interesting . . . . I had not known that about your peer review process. For many of us that are so used to double-blind review . . . . Always Reviewer Number Two – the nasty one, who's willing to say anything! You just kick the can, like, “Goodbye, Reviewer Number Two. We never have to see or hear from you again!” Was that a freeing decision? It sounds like it was a liberating decision for you?*

**CH:** I think so. I mean there's the experience of the book, like Sarah described, single reviewers for a book. There's another journal or two out there that do this. And having performed those kinds of reviews . . . .

**SI:** [Public Culture](#), I think

**CH:** *Public Culture*, yes. And having done a review for them, it was sort-of . . . yes it was freeing, as a reviewer. And it just seems like, in a way, it builds a kind of connection, or camaraderie, that's there – in its best iteration.

**DMcC:** *It's easier to be kind, right, when you know that there's human . . . ? Like the anonymisation of the process . . . it doesn't turn us into trolls. (20:00) I don't know that I'd go that far! But it opens that space to be critical, and unthinkingly critical, right? And when you have a name attached to it you can really understand to whom you are speaking, and why you want to help them make a product that you want to share. That's a collaboration at that point.*

**SI:** Yes, I do think it makes reviewers think of the process as a helpful one: “There's a human on the other side who authored this. They're trying to write a good article. How can I help them write a good article?” Rather than, “My main audience here is the journal, and it's my job to say, ‘thumbs up’ or ‘thumbs down’.”

**DMcC:** *So you recruited all the best people – and, substantially, friends. Many of these people . . . and*

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*the field of American Religion is not that big, and we know, personally, many of the people that are collaborating on it. But I don't know that many of us experience the birth of a new journal, the founding of a new journal. Can you talk about some of what you had not expected to have happened when you decide to publish the thing? Because I think you both have published books before, right? And that process is potentially just as unclear as it is to everyone! But journals are totally different, right? Normally, you think about a journal and it's got a twenty or fifty-year or eighty-year history. And so its birth is so long in the past that we can't really compare it today. So what surprised you about that process?*

**CH:** I mean, I think one of the things that I really enjoyed about it was feeling that there was an opportunity to create this thing the way that we wanted it to go. I had some background. I've been a managing editor for a journal in the past. So I had a sense of how these flows go. And Sarah certainly knows . . . is as well-published as anyone. So she knows the process quite well as well. So one of the things . . . . And we also have other people advising us, who know about this. And so, I think, one of the things that was pleasantly surprising was feeling . . . was enjoying, or appreciating the fact of trying to mould this: to take things that we knew existed, and also trying new things, and having this kind-of experimental sensibility at the core of what we're doing. Knowing that we want a website, knowing that doing this gave us some latitude to try some different things as well. And then also, the attempt to kind-of grow the field as well. It's relatively small, but we want it to be bigger in some ways.

**SI:** Yes. I would say we have a very capacious understanding of who counts as in the field of American Religion. We want everyone who helps inform our work, and we want people to feel welcome. We want it to be a welcoming field. We think those are the most intellectually productive fields. I would say, for me, the thing that has been the most surprising is how much, in the process of shaping a journal, we could make the calls. There is not a clear pattern that says, "You must do this. Your journal must have these kinds of things, but must not have these kinds of things" Down to choosing a font, we made most of the intellectual decisions – maybe all of the intellectual decisions – and many of the aesthetic ones, too. So even more, I would say, than the process of creating a book, we got to decide the structure in addition to some of the content.

**DMcC:** *And that went from: what kinds of things can be submitted; what the appearance of them is when they're in print; what the appearance of them is, if they're going to be on the website; how we can have kind-of a dual-curation model, almost, between the print side and then the website side. And your new cover . . . and we will make sure to prominently display a picture of it. But it just is this*

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*lovely, highly suggestive figure with flowing hair, and it goes onto the back cover. And there's constellations, and this deep blue colour against a very starkly white background. It's so striking, you can spot it from across the room so easily! The freedom to make those decisions sounds so powerful! I can see in both of your faces that it just makes you happy to think about how you can shape that. What do you think that you would like this to be, five years down the road, ten years down the road? (25:00) When the time comes – as it must maybe for all projects – for you to pass the reigns onto the next people, what do you hope that you will give them at that time?*

**SI:** That's a great question. And some of it I want to demur and say, “I don't quite know yet.” Because I want the journal to be responsive to the field, and responsive to the lessons we learn early on. So I think that I would have different answers if you ask me in a few years. But at this point I would say that, thinking of the journal as a space that is recognisable to people who come from many different disciplines – anthropologists, literary scholars, artists, historians – it's a space that all of those people recognise and feel that they can have a conversation, and have ownership even. I also think, starting with our next issue, we will have the abstracts appear both in English and Spanish. And so I also really hope for the journal that it becomes a place that pushes the rest of the field of American Religion to think better about places that aren't just the continental US. So, Latin America in particular. And I hope that's a legacy that we leave as editors.

**CH:** You said it well, I think. And maybe I will not demur and I will say in 5 or 10 years, having the feeling of passing on something that did make a real difference in the field, that did whatever that shape is that we had a hand in. And be it through the languages we're also open to, insofar as we have the resources, publishing not in English. That's part of our . . . I think it's part of our submission policy now. But it's just one example. But, down the line, to say this is something that has really driven the subfield in new directions, and yes. So I will not demur!

**SI:** (Laughs).

**DMcC:** *I'm so glad, those are both such powerful ways of thinking about starting a journal, and a trans-media journal, as interventionist, right? That we can . . . “Here's a deliberate thing we can do, and we're open to the possibilities of what it might become in the future.” But we need that intervention. Because if we don't make it, if we don't open the languages of scholarship up to Spanish and English –when there are more Spanish speakers than English speakers in the Americas, if you count them that way, right? – then we have really closed off those avenues of understanding things in a much more open, and broad, and contextualised way. It's really so great to hear that. Let me end by*

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*thanking you both for joining me here, today. And since we're at the conference – and I know everyone hates the question when you meet someone at the conference, you're like . . . if it's a graduate student you don't ask, "How's the dissertation going?" Right? That's absolutely forbidden! You also, perhaps, don't ask, "Well, what are you working on?" Because after doing that five or six times, right, (laughs) it becomes this formulaic little nugget that you really don't want to do! So let me ask, instead, what I heard: what's one thing you've learned while you've been here at the conference – maybe on a panel or maybe in a discussion – that has you excited, that you heard this weekend? We're only on Day two of five, if you count Tuesday morning's final session.*

**CH:** . . . . I can tell you what I'm working on!

**All:** (Laughter).

**DMcC:** *That's the ultimate demur!*

**All:** (Laughter).

**CH:** Well, I heard an excellent conversation yesterday centring around [Charles Long](#). I was here, and speaking, and the sort-of fascinating round-robin of people who were thinking about religion and science in what-I-take-to-be new and exciting ways. It's not something that I know a great deal about, but I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation and feel expanded by it. So . . .

**SI:** Last night I was part of a conversation about what has been called a "Manthology"

**DMcC:** *A whole panel, right?*

**SI:** Yes. I've done some work on bibliometric . . . so citations, and thinking about how we can have more ethical and more representative practices in our scholarship including publishing (30:00). And that conversation was both supportive, in the sense that the conversation spent some time identifying problems, but spent a lot of time thinking about ways to go forward, given those problems. So, in that sense, it was really supportive. And it was also really lovely to see people, across sub-disciplines, thinking together about how we can have better practices of scholarship. So it was a kind-of meta-conversation about what we could do as a guild, and then also beyond the guild. What do we do with activists, and other modes of knowing? And how do we properly acknowledge them, or bring them into the practice of knowledge-making and scholarship?

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**DMcC:** *That sounds very exciting. I was sad to have missed the Manthology panel. I was otherwise engaged at that moment. I'm so thankful for you both, and your time here today. Can you remind everyone where they can go to find the journal and to take part in submissions, if they care to do that?*

**CH:** Yes, so probably the quickest way to find the journal, or to find links to everything that people would need, is through our website, which is [www.american-religion.org](http://www.american-religion.org). We have a link to the journal information there. You also can find us through the [Indiana University Press](http://Indiana University Press) website.

**SI:** Which is: [www.iupress.indiana.edu/journals/](http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/journals/)

**DMcC:** *And then, for all of the social media friends, you are on Instagram and on Twitter as well. And so when we post this we will be broadcasting it everywhere. So join us on Twitter for that.*

**SI:** Fabulous.

**DMcC:** *Thank you so much.*

**CH:** Thank you very much, David

**SI:** Thank you, David.

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