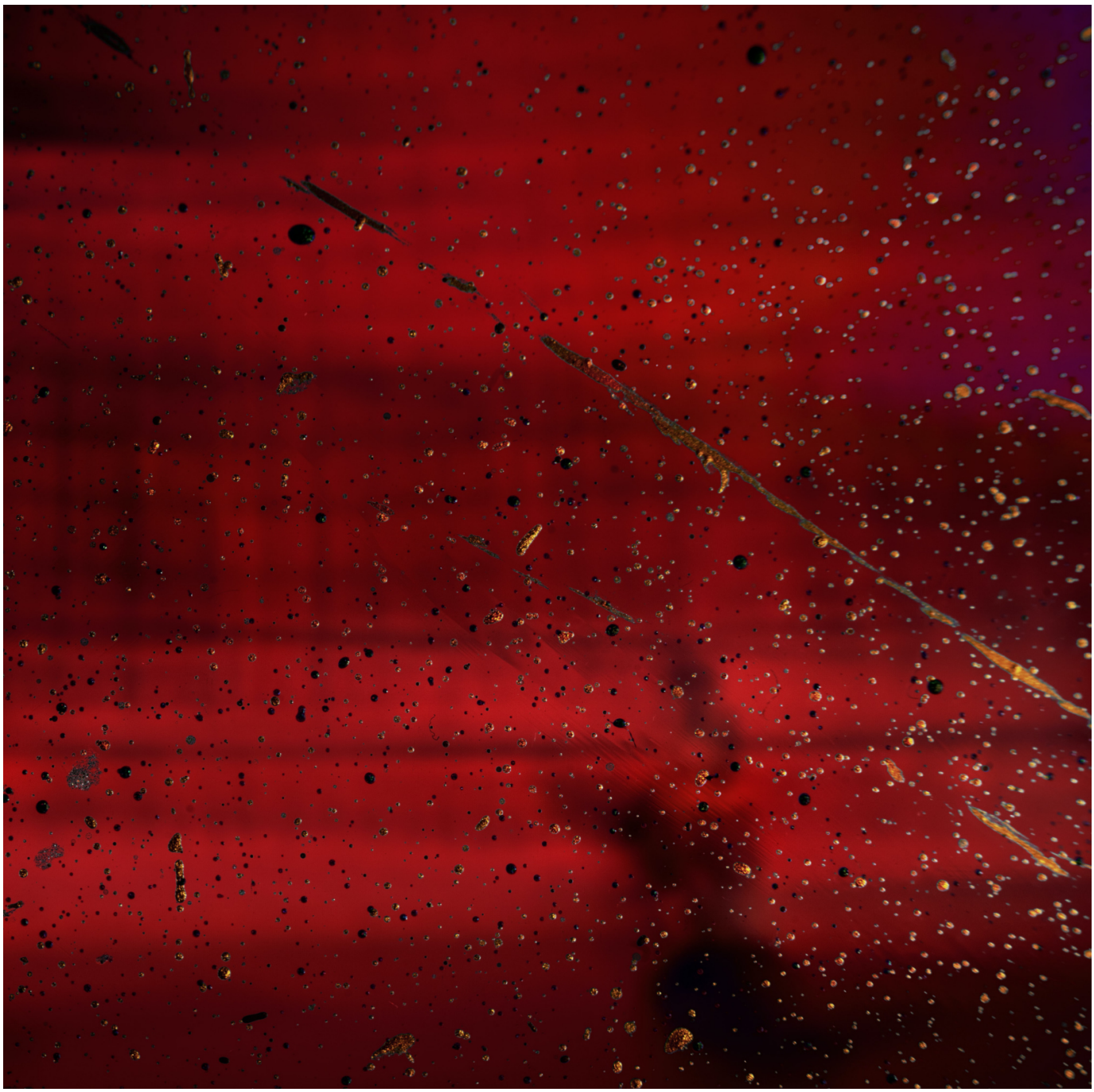
JRC | Religion & Culture

2021 Volume 29



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In Conversation

With Russell T. McCutcheon

Participants:
Russell T. McCutcheon (University of Alabama)
Lindsey Jackson (Concordia University)

Graduate students operate in a world of precarity. Future job security is not a guarantee, and graduate students sacrifice an enormous amount (financial security, time, energy, relationships) to pursue their degrees. It is not uncommon for graduate students to question their decision to enter graduate school and the graduation rate among Canadian PhD students in the social sciences hovers around 65%.[1] The world of academia can feel mystifying and difficult to navigate, and there are few practical guides on how to maneuver through this world. Dr. Russell T. McCutcheon's *"Religion" in Theory and Practice: Demystifying the Field for Burgeoning Academics* (Equinox Publishers, 2018) endeavors to fill this gap and serves to aid graduate students and early career scholars in religious studies navigate their way through the field. Touching on a wide variety of topics such as teaching, public scholarship, the job market, and the current state of the field, McCutcheon draws on his past experience as a graduate student, instructor, and now department chair at the University of Alabama to demystify the field for up-and-coming scholars.

LJ: As the title suggests, this book is geared to graduate students and early career scholars. Why did you want to write a book for this audience?

RM: First off, thanks for reading the book and inviting me to converse a little about it. It's a real treat to have this chance.

As for its audience…. As I selected the pieces to include and as I wrote the new material for the book I had early career scholars as my intended audience for a few reasons; as my discussion of the title, early on in the book, makes clear, I took the subtitle from a line in a review of a previous book, *Entanglements: Marking Place in the Field of Religion* (Equinox, 2014), written by then-doctoral student Travis Webster. (And yes, I let him know ahead of time.) There he asks why more senior people in our field are not writing things explicitly for earlier career scholars—I have hunches why that might be the case, by the way…. That earlier book was a collection of replies that I've written over the years but with new and fairly substantial introductions to each that set the scene, as it were, but always with an eye toward a reader at an early stage of their career. I discuss not just the context of the original back-and-forth—of which I've been fortunate to have had a few—but also disclose a few things about the field that I've figured out over my time in it. (I've been working full-time teaching in the field since 1993, which I started doing about a year-and-a-half before defending my dissertation at the University of Toronto.) So the intended audience there was implicit but here, in this book, it's pretty explicit. As someone who, from the start, was not interested in participating in the field as it was (i.e., work that was largely descriptive of what were then portrayed as unique manifestations of the Sacred—don't forget, I was a grad student when the first edition of Eliade's *The Encyclopedia of Religion* was published), but who had an inkling that it could be practiced rather differently, I had some role models, of course, but not all that many. So there was, instead, a fair bit of trial and error early in my career, to try to figure out how to be a scholar of religion when you thought that the category religion was a problem that needed some critical attention; remember, this was before Tim Fitzgerald's first book was out, before Malory Nye's and Tomoko Masuzawa's books were out, and so back when Wilfred Cantwell Smith was among the only voices thinking about "religion"—though Jonathan Z. Smith's now (in)famous line about religion being imagined in our studies, which opened his 1982 essay collection, was still fresh enough that many weren't really thinking too carefully about what to do with it. So, over the years, as a few more of us have come to the conclusion that what some now call a critical approach to the study of religion needs to be explored in more detail, I've concluded that if this alternative model of the field was to get any traction then it would, to whatever extent, probably be because each newer generation, (those who also shared frustrations with the field and who were also looking around for workable alternatives), could find them a little more easily in the literature. So that's what I've done—in part recognizing that I probably wasn't going to persuade many members of my own generation (budding traditionalists far outnumbered the small number of us wanting to do different sort of work in my own graduate program) or those well ahead of me (for they long ago made up their minds). Whether what I write persuades earlier career readers is up to them, of course, but I've wagered that this is the group more likely to be dissatisfied with current options and looking for different ways of doing their work; so one of my jobs is to present them with choices that they might not have realized they had while carrying out research or teaching others. Or, to say it all much simpler, I realized long ago that the intended audience for some of my work was me, thirty or thirty-five years ago—back when I was reading work that I found very frustrating and trying to cobble together a different way of doing the work myself. This most recent book is just the most explicit that I've been about something I've been doing for a while.

LJ: You have written extensively about the classification and categorization of what we call "religion" or "world religions." What kinds of classroom activities or assignments do you incorporate in your introductory religion classes to get students to think more critically about the category of religion? (I personally love the activity where the students read the 1883 Supreme Court decision that debates whether a tomato is a fruit or vegetable!). Why are these kinds of activities important?

RM: I'm a fan of starting out simply in a class—not simplistic, mind you, but working up to what might seem to be the more complicated issue by first tackling something that appears to the students to be rather familiar and thus unremarkable, something of which many of the students feel they're already an expert, if they've even reflected on it, that is. (Aside: at the end of the day the goal of many of my classes is to call that very expertise, that commonsense, into question for them, by eventually making it our object of inquiry.) The simple almost always turns out to be way more complicated than we had previously thought—which nicely paves the way toward examining what we assume to be the more complex, since we now might wonder if its more understandable than we had at first imagined. So yes, that old and misleadingly simple *Nix v. Hedden* court case in the U.S.—in which tomatoes were imported and taxed as vegetables, only to have the seemingly commonsense designation called into question by someone using the technical definition of fruit, the one that a botanist might use (the importation of which was not taxable at the time)—is pretty handy in classes, I find. It's old enough to be alien to the students but its issue is timely, with students always divided on what they think a tomato is—or better put, *ought* to be, for the decision nicely exemplifies what it means to offer a stipulative definition. Using it in class is therefore a classic example of defamiliarization, that Smithian term many of us think

of when recalling that older motto for the field: to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. So, for example, "everyone knows" that there are world religions, six or seven, or maybe eight of them. Or was it nine? Well, let's then take some time in class to look at some older world religions textbooks and see what was commonsense for our predecessors—so I've brought in a sampling of old textbooks that I've collected over the years, and we flip pages and compare tables of contents. You don't have to go back to the time period Masuzawa covered in *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago, 2005) to see how this designation has changed over the years; just look at a textbook popular in the 1950s or 1970s and suddenly it's pretty apparent that those authors thought you needed three separate chapters for Christianity yet one was sufficient for Buddhism—the position and interests of those authors become apparent to students pretty quickly. Or get students reading an excerpt or two from the first edition of Huston Smith's still widely selling intro book and the link between the discourse on world religions and global military dominance is pretty hard to overlook. But I find that starting with this sort of conclusion is pretty daunting, no matter the course or the level, for you're asking a student to rethink what has been taken for granted their entire life—and something that it took a decade or more for the instructor to come to understand, by the way. So, again, let's start with a question with far lower stakes, such as whether a whale is a fish or a mammal, and then let's consider how recent it was that anatomical studies of the natural world up-ended what was once widely known. For, recall that Ishmael, in *Moby Dick* (chapter 32) said as follows: "Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that a whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me." I have in mind D. G. Burnett's wonderful book, *Trying Leviathan* (Princeton, 2007), by the way—and, well, suddenly the fact that the student

just knows whales to be mammals becomes pretty interesting to them, their commonsense suddenly becomes a datum, and they can start to see this seemingly discrete piece of information about tomatoes or whales as a building block of a much larger way that they order their world, to move around within it in a certain sort of way. So maybe from there we can look at those current debates on whether or not Paganism should be included in the world religions textbook, or whether a crucifix is a religious symbol to be excluded from the public square or an innocent expression of "our" heritage and culture (as was recently debated in Quebec, as I recall).

LJ: You discuss how the way you create syllabi has changed since you first started teaching religion courses. It seems you were more concerned with "fitting it all in" earlier in your career. How has your focus narrowed over your career and what do you tend to prioritize in your syllabi (i.e. skills vs. content, teaching what you know vs. teaching students how to know it, etc.)?

RM: Oh, skills, by far. I'm one who (as may be pretty obvious) was influenced in a dramatic fashion by J. Z. Smith, especially with regard to teaching. If you don't know it then I'd really recommend his short essay, "Teaching the Introductory Course: Less is Better," a 1990 piece that Chris Lehrich included in his edited collection of Smith's works on pedagogy, *Teaching Religion* (Oxford, 2013). As Smith does there, you should calculate how many minutes you have face-to-face with your students in any given semester—for me that's 15 weeks or so, meeting twice a week for 75 minutes each time, minus the testing days and the snow days (yes, we do get a few of those in Alabama), and, once you do the math, it's a remarkably short period of time. Add to that the fact that, as Smith goes on, the vast majority of our students (at least here in the U.S.) take our courses to satisfy general education requirements, meaning that we'll likely never see those nurses and engineers and business or communication majors again in one of our classrooms, and you arrive at a situation where the instructor should realize that they need to exercise some careful choices in crafting a syllabus. And part of that realization is that they just can't cover it all, making coverage, as Smith concludes, not what a course is actually all about. (Which reminds me of the PowerPoint presentation on teaching that I once sat through in a Department Chairs meeting, where the person ran out of time and rushed to fit it all in, concluding with the recommendation that, when using PowerPoint in lectures, we should *not* rush to fit it all in—I kid you not.) Instead, as I took time to learn in my career, the content should always be in the service of the choices that I've made, as the instructor, with each item that we study doing work in the course to illustrate something or to provide an opportunity to do a certain sort of analysis, using a certain sort of skill that I want students to learn. So yes indeed, it's skills that I think our courses are all about, which simplifies a syllabus in some ways—I'm wanting them to learn how to *define* something, *describe* something, *compare* two things and then come up with a persuasive *explanation* for why some similarity or difference surprised us. You can't do those operations in a vacuum, of course, so, sure, along the way we're going to learn this and that about these people or those practices, this set of stories and that collection of images, making plain that content and skills can't be separated. But—again, following Smith closely here—none of that material should be presented as if they were found objects that are of natural or inevitable significance. Instead, still sticking with Smith, our job is to make the students aware of how those items got to our classroom in the first place. That brings us back to choices and the way others—to start with, ethnographers and historians, not

to mention colonial administrators and missionaries from an earlier era—crafted their worlds and satisfied their curiosities by making certain things stand out as worth talking about, all of which functions in the classroom as models for what the students themselves are up to and will continue to do long after leaving our classroom: operationalizing interests and crafting a world in which they each act and organize. While I'm not sure what that world will end up looking like, I'm hopeful that anyone who comes through one of our classes will be better equipped to tackle the inevitable challenges of crafting a world in which to live. And that's a tall order, so while a focus on skills can simplify a syllabus in some ways, in other ways it also makes them far more complicated than just a survey of this or that tradition (again, like Smith, I'm not a fan of surveys, and prefer introductions, a distinction he highlighted that I find pretty useful).

LJ: Blogs have become increasingly popular sites for scholars to publish and share short pieces much more quickly than publishing an article in an academic journal. But it is not uncommon for graduate students to be dissuaded from engaging in the digital world (through blogging, engagement on social media, etc.). What are your thoughts on graduate students and early career scholars using some of their energy to create an online presence? Would you consider this a worthwhile use of one's time?

RM: I fully recognize that people have to be mindful of their use of time—it's not an unlimited resource, regardless your career stage. But I'm an advocate of blogs—sure, they're not cool anymore, and who knows who reads them, but anything that challenges early career people to practice writing, especially writing succinctly and with a basic point to be made, illustrated, and supported, can't be a bad thing. Regardless the readership, it's important practice in thinking something through and making your case in plain language (assuming that you're trying to write so that more than just specialists in our own subfield will understand what you're saying). In fact, I've blogged about the relevance of blogging, which then turned into the basis for one of the chapters in *"Religion" in Theory and Practice*—making evident that blogs are not the end of the line; instead, that material can get revised and incorporated into larger pieces that you might write later. In fact, there's sometimes so little pay-off or feeling of accomplishment for those writing dissertations—it takes years to hold a finished product in your hand—that a quick blog post of, say, three paragraphs, that discusses a topic you're working on and illustrates a larger point at a manageable site, can play an important role in helping someone to feel like they're making progress on a project that, at times, surely feels like a mountain that just can't be climbed. I also think of a post that I wrote, on our department's blog—a place where faculty, current students, alums and solicited guest posts all regularly appear—entitled "Scholars or Colleagues?" (April 9, 2015), which reflects on a then recent visit to the University of Chicago where I repeatedly heard how doctoral students should not teach or publish anything but, instead, should solely be engaged in writing a "field-changing dissertation." That I disagree with this advice—well, really, it's an injunction not advice—might be pretty evident by now. Sure, take full advantage of having one main project on which to work while writing that dissertation, but even if you're lucky enough to write one of the few dissertations that has a lasting effect on the field once it's published, that's going to take years if not decades to happen and what are you doing to feed yourself and pay the rent in the meantime? I see the dissertation as a credentialing exercise necessary to enter this profession—that it is not a sufficient gateway is now pretty obvious, what with the

things that have been happening to the humanities job market over the past several decades, not to mention the 2008 economic collapse along with the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on higher education. So, there's also teaching experience and service experience, of course, but let's not forget the sheer luck of being in the right place at the right time. The odds are increasingly against seeing the imprimatur of a graduate school landing someone a job, making "just write a field-changing dissertation" a rather misguided directive, I think. Sadly, too few graduate programs in North America are taking this seriously, such that inventing a C.V. writing workshop isn't really sufficient anymore to help the students we train—and on who some departments rely for generating the undergraduate credit hours that help to justify the department's continued existence—to have lives after our programs. So while increasing attention to the digital world isn't some cure-all, it is one of the areas that departments can explore to help prepare their students for a variety of futures—in fact, it's exactly what our department at the University of Alabama is doing with our new M.A. degree, now entering its fourth year. (I've yet to decide if this model can be extended to a Ph.D. degree as well.) It's designed to help students prepare for doctoral work, sure (and, so far, we've had three of our seven graduates go on to full-rides in good graduate programs elsewhere in the U.S.), but it's also intended to help students who want a graduate degree in the humanities but who don't intend to pursue that sort of future; after all, why shouldn't scholars of religion, at least as we understand them, be helping to prepare people who might eventually work in archives, museums, or go into education or any number of other fields. (One of our grads in now training to be an architect.) So, among the other things that our M.A. students do, they also learn a variety of digital and public humanities skills, they learn how to make their own website and how to set

up and manage a blog, how to record and edit a podcast, how to work with video and so-called big data or online curation. For some students these will just be additional skills in their toolbox but for others, such as those who pursue one of our internships with the University of Alabama Press or a local humanities magazine, these end up being the primary skills that they highlight on their C.V. and which help them to get to where they're hoping to go after they graduate. But, again, it's all premised on rethinking what we're doing in the study of religion, let alone with graduate education. And, speaking personally, you'd be amazed the things that occupy much of my daily time, having been a department chair for 15 years so far—among them are things like getting an undergrad's writing into shape to be posted on our department blog, putting an item on our Facebook page that I think alums might like to see or giving some feedback to a faculty member who manages our Instagram page; simply put, the digital world is so basic an ingredient to department life and success that anyone who dismisses or demeans it in academia just isn't paying attention to the world that their grad students are entering.

LJ: The final section of the book consists of twenty-one responses from Ph.D. students and early career scholars to your theses on professionalization, which I found very helpful and enlightening. As I was reading each response it felt like I was getting advice from a different graduate student. What made you want to include this section in the book?

RM: Well, all along I've been involved in a variety of efforts to get other people into print as well—much earlier in my career I was the co-editor, or for a time editor, of the peer review journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* for a total of 12 years (a journal started by two other doctoral students at Toronto) and then for five years

I edited the once well-known quarterly *Bulletin for the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* (the forerunner to today's *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*). I've also edited several book series and tackled the editing for a variety of collaborative projects—but over the past decade or so I've been increasingly interested in publishing the work of early career scholars (such as two multi-authored volumes in Vaia Touna's book series, Working with Culture on the Edge). So when this particular book was coming together I knew that it needed some novel way to end, and then I thought of the responses that Matt Sheedy had solicited to each of those twenty-one thesis statements about the profession that I had written and published some years before.[2] Those replies all originally appeared—yes, you guessed it—as blog posts (on the once popular Bulletin Blog that Sheedy used to manage). So asking Matt to contact those authors, organize some revisions, and include them all as the final section of the book just made perfect sense to me and I was very pleased that everyone agreed to participate—for it was a practical illustration of much that was in the book, but accomplished by people other than myself, those whose relationship to the current job market was rather different from my own. For, as a long-serving department chair who has participated in a surprising number of searches and hires over the years, I'm certainly connected to it but in a rather different fashion than is an applicant. So having current writers with that sort of connection confirm what I said over a decade before, or even critique and correct it, was pretty rewarding, because it's all about creating something of relevance and use to that specific reader whom I had in mind. For despite how I perceive myself, when I look at a calendar and let sink in how long I've been doing this it's pretty apparent to me that these other authors are increasingly becoming the spokespeople for and thus the proper representatives of the field. Including them, taking what they're writing

seriously, is just the inevitable next step in the natural history of our field.

LJ: This may be a difficult question to answer, but what are some of the main pieces of advice you give to Ph.D. students who are hoping to stay in academia?

RM: If we can bracket our current situation for the moment—and by that I mean the uncertainties of the post-COVID-19 world into which higher ed is moving, whether it likes it or not—then, yes, there's a few things that I'd say and, in fact, have been saying, whether in person if queried or in blog posts or books.

(i) First off, thinking of an earlier answer, I'd suggest to them that, while completing the dissertation is certainly an accomplishment worth celebrating, having a completed dissertation is really just a basic entry requirement to the profession, with pretty much all applicants necessarily having one. And since it usually takes years to assess the contributions of that first piece of work—think of the time it takes to get into print, let alone the years it takes to get reviews written and published let alone for it to find readers—the people reading letters of application are likely going to be looking for other things as well.

(ii) Just what they're looking for, who knows; but speaking for myself, I'm looking for evidence on which to base that always speculative judgment that someone will join our department and succeed here while helping us to continue to succeed (i.e., attract new majors, write interesting scholarship). Being a professor, like many other careers, means juggling balls—class prep, lectures and seminars, grading, proposing new courses, working on a variety of research projects which are all at different stages, committee work in the department or for the university or even the profession itself, writing letters of

recommendation for students, etc. I'm looking for evidence that an applicant can tackle that challenge. Have they taught? Have they designed a syllabus of their own? Have they spoken at conferences and published something? Did they serve on any committees as a grad student or maybe help to host a local speaker or small conference? As I suggested above, some readers might be surprised if they actually saw how someone like me spends much of my work day; although our setting is hardly representative of the field at large, so much of what I do has little to do with what I thought I was training to do when I was a doctoral student. While I hope that this doesn't characterize large swaths of time for all of the faculty in our department, I bet they'd all be able to identify with this, since each adopts a certain part of department life and heads it up—who will plan the annual undergrad research event this year? Who is our liaison to alums? Who is helping to plan the annual guest lecturers? Who is mentoring the M.A. students who are teaching an online course this summer? Who is chairing the search committee? Who will be the undergrad director and who is the graduate director? Not all of that is placed on the back of just one person, of course, and we ensure that new colleagues get a bit of breathing space when they first arrive (such as the new faculty member we added last year, Edith Szanto—a specialist in Islam, or Jeri Wieringa, who we've hired to start this fall—she's a digital historian), but no one who I know just sits in an archive all day thinking big thoughts. Given that this is what's needed to ensure that our department continues to succeed, continues to train B.A. and M.A. students, continues to try to exert some influence on where the field might be going in the future, then judging applicants means looking for evidence that they too will contribute while carrying out their own work and, hopefully, eventually establish themselves as a force in their own subfield.

But, in saying that, (iii) I'd also caution that a little goes a long way—e.g., the learning curve is steep when you first teach your own course but I'm not sure what is gained by teaching 10 of them while a doctoral student. That is, I'm looking for evidence that one can (and increasingly will be able to) do something not that one is already fully accomplished at doing it at such an early stage of their career. Seeing on a C.V. that a book is published already is encouraging, sure, but evidence of familiarity with the publishing process, with working with editors and copyeditors, with submissions and referees and revisions and resubmissions, can be conveyed in a variety of other ways.

As well, (iv) I'd say that, all depending on where you apply (for our field exists in a variety of places, from major research universities to small joint Philosophy/Religious Studies Departments), you might be the only person who works on your topic, so your application materials and, if you get the chance, your campus visit should not assume that you're speaking with other specialists equally versed on the intricacies of this or that. Instead, write and talk as if you're speaking to other motivated and intelligent people who don't happen to know much about your topic—so make connections, ask about their work, exhibit that you're a specialist, sure, but remember that in many cases the ability to attract undergraduate students with engaging and broad courses could be the life-blood of the unit and so they're looking for someone to help in that effort. (If, on the other hand, they're a research-intensive program looking to add their fourth medieval Tibetanist, well, make some adjustments, of course.)

Also, (v) don't get recommendation letters from just your committee, for more than likely they all end up saying the same kind things about your dissertation. Since I'm needing broad evidence of your readiness to join

a thing that's already on the move, you should work hard to have letters that represent your various accomplishments and skills, using the letters to complement and even enhance the picture of yourself that you've painted in your other application materials. Can someone comment on your teaching? Maybe they sat in on one of your classes? Is someone able to give us an insight into what it's like to work with you? Has anyone heard you give a conference paper or seen you organize an event? There's so much more to say, of course, but we've got to get back to that post-COVID-19 world into which we're now moving. The rise of contingent faculty over the past decades has already been noted by many (even addressed in this book) and already been felt by a generation of doctoral students intent on moving into full-time positions in the field. While I don't have a crystal ball, it's pretty obvious that, at least for the short term, the budgetary effects of this pandemic are going to be felt by many schools and will likely compound the trends we've already seen in higher ed. So, for some graduate students hoping to stay in academia, as you phrased it, that may mean trying to stay off the job market for a year or two, in the relative safety of their own graduate program. But when funding dries up someone has no choice, so it means that tough decisions may have to be made—such as how far you're willing to move for what sort of position and pay or how long you're willing to try to find work in our profession. In my case, though I recognize it was in the mid-1990s, when my annual full-time instructor position at the University of Tennessee ended, I applied to one more position, in southwest Missouri, with the shortest application letter I ever wrote and with a stack of rejections in the file already. For whatever reason, I got that job (working there for a total of five years)—it was completely unexpected and came when I was very close to deciding that this career was not for me. I say that to make clear that many of us are

familiar with tough decisions and so I don't envy those who are now entering a far tighter, even more precarious job market.

LJ: One thing that is guaranteed in academia, at the graduate level and beyond, is rejection – rejection from jobs, grants, journals, fellowships (I can go on forever). How have you dealt with rejection throughout your career and what advice do you give early career scholars who have faced (or will inevitably face) rejection?

RM: You're right, rejection is part of the game. For me, given my own approach to the field and understanding of how it has worked and, I'd say, continues to work, the rejections I've received often fueled me and my work. It wasn't difficult to read some of those reader's reports, let alone what was said about either my work or myself in reviews and replies published in journals, as evidence of just how deep the problems were and are in the field. So I took Noam Chomsky's words to heart, which I recall him saying in the 1992 documentary on his work that I saw in Toronto a long time ago, with Stephen Heathorn, who was doing his Ph.D. in the history of British working class identity at the time and who is now a Professor at McMaster—if it were not for such criticisms "I would begin to think that I'm doing something wrong" (his remark, early on in the film, was in reply to a review of his work in *The New York Times Book Review*). So when I was once likened, at the very start of my career, in the pages of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, to a little dog that had learned a new trick, or when the method that I worked with in an earlier book was accused, in a review, of dehumanizing people by calling them data, I took both as opportunities to put an even finer edge on my critique by calling into question the vantage point from which such judgments were made, demonstrating the invested nature of claims that present

themselves as disinterested statements of obvious fact. Not all criticisms can be met in this fashion though, to be sure; some just have to be absorbed, some ignored and shaken off, while some have to be taken to heart and used to inspire revisions and rethinking. The prospectus that became my first book, and which had been my dissertation—*Manufacturing Religion*—was rejected by eleven or twelve publishers (two different people separately rejected it at just one of those presses, in fact) and *JAAR* didn't review it because, or so I was told when I later inquired, a book on the field as a whole was too broad. I never had a campus interview in Canada (I'm a Canadian, by the way—growing up in southern Ontario but with parents from the Ottawa Valley—who also became a U.S. citizen just last year, after working here since 1993). Though the job market now is obviously worse than in my day, it wasn't great then and I still have a stack of rejection letters from all those positions to which I applied at the start of my career, including a post-doc in Indonesia and a small school in Rhode Island that required a pledge of faith from its faculty. In most of those cases you just move on, happy to have been considered. Some rejections are a little more bitter, of course, or at the least ironic, such as the time, years ago, that I was not selected for a position back in Canada but ended up being contacted by the eventual hire, unaware that I had applied, looking for advice on how to teach the courses that had been included in the ad for the position. Later I learned how controversial my name was for the committee, even early in my career, confirming for me again that I must be doing something right. So, depending on the rejections you get, you need to have confidence in what you're doing and just try to keep moving forward, using it as either data or inspiration for as long as you're able. Some rejections have more consequence than others, that goes without saying, of course, and I've been lucky to be able to keep pressing

forward despite them—though, sure, if I stop and think about it, there's a few that I've not mentioned here that still sting.

LJ: To end on a broad note, what are you working on now?

RM: Now? Still making sure students, staff, and faculty are all in the loop and involved during that rapid move to working remotely—which involved figuring out how to run a department remotely, how to transition to new staff members, and how to teach remotely and assist others to tackle that challenge; I admit that this was pretty much all-consuming for a while. I was teaching a large enrollment intro course that semester, and a small grad seminar, so quickly devising ways to help those two different groups of students just to finish the semester in a positive way was also a goal. Now, planning for a fall semester full of variables is an ongoing focus of much of my time. As for my own research and writing, I'm an essayist and so I have a new collection of essays (documenting how little has changed in the field while offering a constructive alternative—with some uncollected but also some new pieces) that I'm near to sending to a press in Europe—a publisher there is currently considering the project. So, with the previous question about rejection in mind, we'll see where that goes. (In case you're wondering about someone at my career stage: sometimes a press might jump at a project that I suggest, based on the idea and a conversation, and sometimes I develop a proposal that goes out for review, awaiting comments and then making revisions to the project and trying again.) Apart from that, much of my work over the past year was mainly focused on editing other people's writings, such as a collection of Willi Braun's essays that's due out in the fall and, along with Emily Crews (who worked at Alabama for the past two

years and who is currently finishing her own dissertation at the University of Chicago), co-editing a collection of pieces assessing Jonathan Z. Smith's contributions to the field (both due out from Equinox in the fall of 2020). Aaron Hughes and I established a book series based on our *Religion in 5 Minutes* volume (Equinox, 2017), so we spent some time finding editors to tackle a variety of topics in the field "in 5 minutes" (i.e., short essays answering common questions that newcomers might ask about, say, Hinduism or Paganism). We're pretty pleased that several of those volumes are all happening right now, each edited by someone else. Aaron and I are also near done editing a new book for Oxford University Press, in which we asked about 20 senior people in the North American and European field to define religion and then to comment critically on each other's definitions, all in an effort to get people talking who don't usually—and we've identified the field pretty broadly in this book. That's taken a couple years to complete and we hope to have it off our desks pretty soon. Then Aaron and I just cooked up a new project last week and another press in Europe is now mulling it over. So, like I suggested above, there's lots of pots of different sizes all bubbling away at different rates. There's an anthology that I keep meaning to get to also and there's a few essays due out in journals or as book chapters in the coming months, so there's always something to do and to look forward to seeing in print.

Notes

1. Rosanna Tamburri, "The PhD is in Need of Revision," *University Affairs,* 6 February 2013, https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/the-phd-is-in-need-of-revision/#latest_data
2. McCutcheon's theses were originally published in Mathieu E. Courville's *The Next Step in Studying Religion: A Graduate's Guide* (Bloomsbury, 2007).