

Religion & Podcasts as Public Engagement Show Notes

January 2026

Major Question from Dr. Andrea Jain: One of the places that religion lives or religious studies scholarship and thinking lives outside of the classroom is in the podcast world with people like you doing the outstanding work you're doing. But I want to kind of challenge the assumption that that might only be a good thing and ask where are the downsides or can there be downsides, especially if we aren't or if we're framing relocating the study of religion and scholarship on religion in terms of a replacement of the kind of traditional methods of distributing scholarship on religion, like books. **Where are we in the podcast world addressing this problem rather than simply replacing religion in these traditional contexts? Where are we engaging in critical conversation about the problems to the cuts to regarding the cuts to the study of religion in universities?**

Megan Goodwin: I think this is a great question, maybe just not for us. I left the academy, so did Brad. A lot, if not most of the folks I know who are doing this labor are doing it in untraditional positions and not traditional relationships to the Academy. I absolutely think religious studies should be part of whatever public education we're offering to the people.

Brad Onishi: My focus is on public scholarship and audiences, a variety of people that are trying to find reliable and relevant sources of information, storytelling, etc., in a world where that is increasingly difficult to locate. At Axis Mundi Media we try to do two things at once to help that. which is create podcasts that fit on a higher Ed syllabus well and contribute to the study of religion in the classroom. But also fit the non-profit leader, the 8th grade teacher, the interested layperson, people that just want to learn and understand their world in a, in a more expansive way. I think of the work as a compliment to the academy not a replacement.

Chris Stevenson: I don't see what I'm doing is replacing those religious studies, traditional religious studies programs or fixing the problem. I'm trying to make this fantastic and super important scholarship about religion available to more people. About the downsides, as we put out scholars on our podcast and try to get what they're saying and what they've written about into the hands of the layperson, there are some downsides because, people will sometimes think, well, I don't have to read this or read that or put in a little bit more hard work to understand this part about religion and the American experience about religion's role, I will just listen to the podcast.

Megan Goodwin: Every episode of Keeping It 101 came with homework, the point of the show was to introduce the topic, rather than say "here is all you need to know" on a topic. The mission has been to bring more people into these conversations that we were having in classrooms. I saw getting into this in a focus more on democratizing not just access to knowledge, but who gets to claim the field and how it is being shaped.

Brad Onishi: What we've experienced on our show is that there's a lot of people who will hear an author, they'll hear a religion scholar, they'll hear about a book on our show that they would have never heard about before and they go out and buy it. The ones who are happy to hear that 45 minute discussion and not by the book, I hate to break it to everyone listening, they weren't going to buy your book anyway. I think we kind of need to admit that to ourselves as scholars, that if we are serious about helping people, then we have to face up to the fact that the audience for the 300 page \$42.00 book in hardcover is different than the folks that will give you an hour on their way to work on a Thursday morning. So when you get people to tune in and listen that is a win.

Megan Goodwin: This is also a question around portability and accessibility. Something we learned in quarantine was that there's a desperate need both for inside and outside the Academy for media that can be taken places and consumed while you're doing other things. The number of folks I have talked to that say I have a new baby, I'm responsible for care, I'm commuting, I can't sit down for three hours and pick this up and put this down. But a podcast you can. So it's fleshing out and expanding our offerings rather than replacing a traditional scholarship. It is one more wave in the battle against illiteracy, ignorance, and, you know, outright white Christian nationalism.

20 Minutes Into Webinar

Andrea Jain: What I am hearing is that a lot of the work you're doing is making responsible and reliable scholarship and writing on religion accessible to broader audiences. Making these different manuscripts and long papers accessible to people who do not have the privilege to sit down and read a 300-word manuscript. The flip is, **what do we do when that reliable and responsible scholarship is no longer available? If the departments and programs are gone, and we're no longer having the research time to write the books. What happens then when that that reliable scholarship is no longer available to begin with?**

Megan Goodwin: People have been doing the work outside the academy for a while now, because they have had to. It becomes a generational problem when we're not training most scholars anymore, but the pursuit of knowledge is a human instinct. I think we will just find a different way for it to be "germinated".

Chris Stevenson: Are we really looking at a projection that says we won't have this scholarship in the future? Not to a 0 but a significant decrease?

Andrea Jain: Yeah, that is what it is looking like. I don't think that is your job as podcasters to solve. I just think it's an interesting kind of problem for podcasting on the topic of religion, given that what you are doing that the important work that podcasts do is making accessible, reliable information on religion to broader audiences.

Chris Stevenson: I base most of my podcasts on reading a book from a scholar that, that's a majority of it. And if those books are and, and, and recent books, I try to keep up with, you

know, the most recent scholarship. And if that then dries up, that will definitely impact how we do our podcast.

Brad Onishi: I think that the ingenuity and the, the human pursuit of knowledge is something I believe in. But beyond that, I think we're in a time of systems, orders and institutions breaking down, coming to an end, being destroyed, being leveled. Things are not normal anywhere. We have the tragic opportunity to ask the question of what do we rebuild, how are we going to rebuild institutions and systems that will provide people the privilege, the freedom, the room, the safety to pursue the kinds of knowledge that have been pursued in the study of religion graduates, departments and centers all over this country and many others across the world. And I think only creative and revolutionary thinking is, is going to help us.

Andrea Jain: I wonder if you all as podcasters might be facing similar problems for the same reason, for example, just the increasing commodification of knowledge. And if you all are facing challenges around, you know, for example, the price of podcasts or access to podcasts or the issues around censorship if these are challenges that you were facing.

Megan Goodwin: Our podcast ended when it did because of funding and our avenues in higher education were no longer available. We expanded the show when we had more help and when we couldn't afford the help anymore. Part of that is our absolute emphasis on accessibility not being up for debate.

Chris Stevenson: we have challenges, it seems like money for when it comes to religion and society things including our podcast, for example, or the museum itself. The money is on the extremes, on the edges, on the margins. That's where people want to put their money because they want their religious story told and to be dominant. Our museum and podcast live in the middle. One of the challenges is finding people who want to fund what we are doing in the middle.

Brad Onishi: I think we've kind of reached this place in this podcast industry where the money has gone all the way to the top. The reality is in a for profit model; there's it's never going to work. it's hard to like fund a show and much less make money off of a show. I want to encourage people to, to not overlook is that if you have a podcast and you have people who are listening to you and you can do that show in a way that fits into your other commitments in your life. **Just don't lose sight of what that means and that that is an educational service.**

Chris Stevenson: I think it's also important to note that podcasts that have 100, you know, millions of followers and they can be doing really bad things like providing really bad information and really toxic and dangerous. we live in a world full of lies from the most powerful people on the earth. And they, they're everywhere and they drown every and, and you know, we're not in that. We're about accuracy and truth.

30 Minutes into Webinar

Megan Goodwin: Bringing up social media. Podcasting is kind of its own medium, right? And the thing that sets it apart from other content production is the assumption that it's dialogic, that you're in conversation with the folks that are listening to you. That was possible on different social media platforms. Twitter did a lot of the work that I think podcasting does to democratize not just knowledge but the hierarchy of the Academy. So we were talking to folks at all levels that we would never have access to otherwise. There's just zero way that our show would have taken off the way that it did if Twitter didn't exist in the way that it did. **I'm curious about what the future of podcasting, and particularly academic podcasting that relies so happily on this dialogic component is without something like Twitter.**

Brad Onishi: Social media used to be a place to find a lot of different people and really converse. Now, the number of conversions there is really, really low for what it takes to do a really good job on Instagram without looking incompetent and not like you don't know what you're doing.

Chris Stevenson: I'm doing this because I feel like we need to. We're getting information out there. However many people listen, that's good, but just information like information intake for our US population, it's, it's, I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how to get people to listen to the things they need to listen to, to be productive citizens in, in regards to religion's role in the American project. But we're doing it, you know, We're doing the podcast, we're doing the stuff.

40 Minutes into Webinar

Andrea Jain: I want to pick up on Chris's comment that part of what you all do, what you all are doing in your podcast is working with audiences on being productive citizens. I think that's like such a key point there. And it's also something that we think a lot about in academic teaching. **We think about teaching our students to be productive citizens and that being a part of a university education. What's the relationship between podcasting and teaching? How are they related? For those of you who have been in the classroom or have been students in the classroom, either, you know, as students, professors, or both, what do you see as the relationship between teaching and podcasting?**

Megan Goodwin: For me podcasting has always been teaching. It was a pedagogy podcast. It was not just here is some information about religion. It was here's how we get at these questions. Here's why these questions matter.

Brad Onishi: When you teach, you can take the attitude that you're better than your students. If you do that, my guess is you're a really bad teacher and your students hate you. And so if you don't do that, if you actually teach in a way that is filled with compassion and interest and curiosity about what your students need and what they want. The questions that lie at the heart of what they've brought into the classroom as human beings. You're going to end up

with an environment where people are like, hey, these are big questions they're addressing about white supremacy, about xenophobia, about racism, about misogyny, about etc.