The Interview connects Bulletin readers with scholars who have been shaping key aspects of our work in the field. Chris Jones of Washburn University in Topeka, KS takes some time to chat with us. Many of you will know his work on Twitter and other social media platforms where he shares what he’s learning and teaching in the classroom. Jones is no stranger to the shifting currents facing the education of scholars and students in the academic study of religion, so we are most pleased he could join us to discuss these and other matters.

Richard Newton: I know that a number of Bulletin readers know of you from your presence on Twitter and the exchanges you’ve been a part of in regard to pedagogy. However, we met in a related yet quite different capacity. And that is that we were active participants and steering committee members in the Academic Teaching and Biblical Studies program unit for the Society of Biblical Literature. One thing that stood out to me there was that the group seemed to give space to the existential reality (... threat, crisis—choose your own word) that doctoral specialization is rather different than pedagogical and professional practicalities. Can you tell us about your own academic training?

Chris Jones: My graduate training was in hardcore ancient Hebrew philology. We studied almost nothing apart from ancient Hebrew and Northwest Semitic texts: there was very little archaeology, history of interpretation, or “situated” reading. One of our catch-phrases was “too relevant!” if somebody’s reading strayed too far from these concerns. There was also nothing structured into our training that dealt with teaching, job searches, and professional development. I was, however, able to find mentors in these areas, particularly my advisor, Jeremy Hutton, and Jordan Rosenblum. I also had to seek out professional development in teaching, both through my institution’s teaching center and through my connections on Twitter.

Newton: What is your current role and what do you teach?

Jones: I am a tenured professor of religious studies and the de facto program director for a religious studies program. Right now, I teach four courses every semester, usually three general education courses and one upper division course. My gen eds are Introduction to Religion, World Religions, and Introduction to Bible. My upper division rotation is Jews, Christians, and Sex, Ritual, Race and Religion, Prophecy in Jewish Tradition, and a theory/method course for majors. I also do all curriculum planning and program assessment since I am the only faculty member in religious studies.

Newton: I know you teach at Washburn University. Can you tell us about your current institutional setting—perhaps the school itself, where it is located, and the kind of department you are in?

Jones: Washburn University is a service-oriented public university in Topeka, Kansas. We are the only municipally operated bachelor’s granting institution outside of the CUNY system, and we have our own board of regents, distinct from that of the other public universities in Kansas. We serve mostly students who grew up within an hour of Topeka. We are a historically white institution, though we have a rapidly growing community of Latine students. My department is Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Newton: So, you’re teaching in a comprehensive school as the lone religious studies faculty member, and to boot, your doctoral training is in biblical studies. It seems broadening your focus is the name of the game at many levels. How do you go from hyper-specialized training into a setting where you’re broadening your scope and arguing for your relevance?
Jones: Make friends. When I started here at Washburn, I reached out to Rebekka King to ask about running a small public university religious studies program, and she offered tremendous insight. Beyond that: I think it’s important to adjust your research agenda to match the needs of your teaching. I rarely teach upper division biblical studies courses, and I never teach languages, so it doesn’t make a lot of sense for me to continue limiting my research to the kind of narrow philological stuff that I was trained to do. All of my conference presentations and publications in the past three years have either been about the modern influence of the Bible or about the scholarship of teaching and learning. Those pursuits contribute directly to my work in the classroom, even if they do not directly use my training in biblical philology.

It also helps that I have experience outside of academia. I recently rebuilt all of my courses so that the content and assessments focus on real-world and job-ready skills. I emphasize to students the ways that what they’re learning are directly relevant to the workforce and to their potential careers: we emphasize collaborative learning, clear and persuasive writing, analytical thinking, and the application of theory to data. These are all skills that employers say they want. I’ve moved to a portfolio model that encourages students to collect work that demonstrates their proficiency in these skills.

At a service public, any program that can’t plausibly make a case for its workforce relevance is gone.

Newton: I know from social media that you take your role as de facto program director of religious studies quite seriously? Can you give us a sense of Washburn and your program from the students’ view? How do they find you and what do they see in your program?

Jones: It’s an uphill battle. Programs here live and die on enrollment. That starts with gen ed. I used social media strategically to make myself visible to students so that they’d want to give my feeder courses a try. I tried to present both the distinctive aspects of my pedagogy (commitment to UDL and ungrading, for example) and the goofy, self-effacing part of my personality. I also wanted students to see how much I like students and identify with their struggles. At a place like Washburn, where most students work 30+ hours per week and face significant challenges outside of school, that is essential—they are far more likely to talk about their struggles with somebody if they have reason to expect they’ll be heard and believed. And they are more likely to enroll in classes where they think that the professor cares about them as humans, even if they aren’t particularly interested in the subject matter (at least at first).

Newton: Kansas has become a battleground state—once again—on a number of political fronts, especially higher education. What is going on there as it pertains to state legislature and curricular reforms?

Jones: Starting in 2024, all public Kansas universities will have to have the same general education requirements, and it is significantly less than it has been. My program relies on gen eds to get students into feeder courses, so less gen eds means fewer uncommitted students to recruit as majors and minors. My approach is to focus on marketing religious studies courses to target demographics. I have a good reputation with our Student Success advisors as somebody who will help at-risk students, so they track a lot of students into my courses. My courses are also popular within Greek Life and among student athletes because I’m known for my flexible policies and my willingness to support students’ mental health. Finally, my courses have a reputation for being fun, engaging, and welcoming. I’m hoping that after gen ed is reduced I’ll still be able to get enough elective enrollment to continue filling courses and attracting majors and minors. I also hope that reorienting SLOs [Student Learning Outcomes] around workforce skill sets will help to keep numbers steady.

Newton: You mentioned before the importance of professional development for you. What kinds of tips, tricks, or tactics are you keying in on as you navigate your context?

Jones: Have lunch. Have coffee. Get to know your colleagues and find the people who share your core priorities and values. This is honestly more important than attending “official” professional development events (as valuable as those can be). Most of my best practices I’ve learned either from my colleagues at Washburn or from connections I’ve made on Twitter and Discord. It is also crucial for coalition-building. Find people who share your core values and who are committed to working toward the same goals. Then work outward: identify others who can become part of the coalition, and also identify those who will oppose your work.
Don’t burn bridges unless you have to, though–try to maintain as much goodwill as possible. Remember: as a humanist in 2023, you are vulnerable (whether or not you are tenured) – you want to make it easy for your colleagues to back you up if you find your program on the chopping block.

Newton: Earlier you mentioned that you worked outside of academia a bit. Can you tell us a bit about what you did and what specifically you brought from that experience into your present work?

Jones: I have worked in alumni relations and state government. I also got offered a job as a corporate trainer with a tech firm after my first (disastrous) year on the academic job market, but I turned it down to take the postdoc that ultimately saved my career. I learned a bunch of things that help me as an academic. I learned about office politics and the value of knowing what not to put in writing. I also know how to make a resume and cover letter and how to help my advisees think about how their academic achievements translate into job skills.

Newton: Throughout our conversation you’ve mentioned outcomes – Student Learning Outcomes, workforce preparation, program recruitment, and even credit hour production as it relates to gen ed. All of these things translate well to spreadsheets and bulleted lists. At the same time, you’ve narrated your initiatives in a manner that reveals passion and relationships too. Is that something that you cultivated on the job? I ask because I know that many of our colleagues fear assessment and administration as, for lack of a better term, soul-sucking.

Jones: Assessment and administration are absolutely soul-sucking. Spreadsheets are where passion for learning goes to die. But there is not a single job out there in which you don’t have to do soul-sucking things, or compromise your ideals, or build relationships with people you’d otherwise want nothing to do with. That’s the price of doing anything meaningful in the world. I spend as much time simply continuing to justify the existence of my program as I do actually teaching and researching in my discipline. What’s the other option? Letting the only regional public religious studies BA in a 200-mile radius disappear? And I do love what we do in the classroom.

The nature of my job has had a profound effect on my research. I haven’t published anything that draws on my knowledge of ancient Hebrew in several years. My current and forthcoming publications and presentations all focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning. I sometimes say that anymore the only research question that matters is “how do we keep the lights on.” I like this work, but it definitely isn’t what I was trained to do.

Newton: I know you’re well-versed in the literature and discourse around religious literacy and the scholarship of teaching-learning. What “best practices” have worked well at Washburn and what has not? So often the conversation about program development ends with, “Well, that won’t work in my context.” Part of what I appreciate from your work is that you know your context well and use that knowledge to process what is going on in the field.

Jones: Every place I’ve taught, I’ve started doing something and I’ve said to myself, “I will always do that!” And then I go someplace new and POOF it doesn’t work. All “best practices” are contextual—not just regarding the institution, but regarding you as teacher as well. The best way to identify your best practices is to start by reflecting on your blue-chip ideals as an educator and then work backward. What do you most want to accomplish as a teacher? What are you unwilling to compromise on? For me, my blue-chip ideas are that education involves the whole person and that students won’t learn unless they feel that their whole self belongs in your class. That has manifested in a variety of practices: I use introductory surveys and metacognitive learning reflections to invite students to bring their whole selves into their learning; I use an all-feedback-no-grading model in assessment to promote openness and intrinsic motivation; I emphasize student-to-student interaction; I hold my drop-in hours in the library so that students feel more comfortable coming to talk to me; I begin and end every class by thanking students for coming and telling them something really positive about themselves (it’s amazing how often students assume that their professors don’t like them!); I talk openly about my struggles with anxiety and ADHD so that students know it’s OK for them to struggle, too.

A lot of best practices also depend on your personal style. I tend to run a rather frenetic classroom: lectures are quick and punchy, punctuated by frequent
ad hoc paired discussions, and no class activity lasts more than ten minutes at a stretch. My affect in the classroom is energetic and theatrical. It works for me because it matches the way that my brain and body work: I have ADHD and I’m a flaming extrovert who channels social anxiety into energetic exhibitionism. If you’re an introvert, that won’t likely work for you, but you may find that you are marvelous at creating space for students to express themselves. Ultimately, you have to find practices that channel the best things about your authentic self.

Newton: How long have you been teaching in higher ed and what do you think has changed about the industry?

Jones: I did my first TA gig in 2005, and I’ve been teaching full-time for nine years. It’s honestly hard to say what I’ve seen change, though, since I’ve done it at three very different institutions: an elite SLAC, a regional SLAC, and a regional public. Each context has been radically different. But in my six years at Washburn, I have seen students grow less resilient. That’s not a comment on them – I firmly believe that resilience is a function of support structures, not of intrinsic qualities. Students are spread thinner: since the pandemic, they’re working more, and they are more likely to feel like they have to prioritize their jobs over their classes. They also put more pressure on themselves, and they are more likely than ever to give up after facing setbacks.

Newton: Similarly, discussion of generational shifts abound in higher-ed especially as it pertains to workforce readiness and pedagogy. Are students different now than at other points in your career? What’s the same? What’s different?

Jones: In terms of the industry itself, I don’t see anything new, just the continuation of trends that were set in motion by the 2008 collapse: the lack of tenure-track jobs, the erosion of tenure itself, the strain to attract and retain students, the need to market our disciplines and our classes to student “customers,” the increased surveillance and restriction of college curriculum by right-wing politicians and activists, the increased willingness of administrators to bow to right-wing pressure and turn against their own faculty.

This is before I started teaching full-time, but while I was a TA at Wisconsin I got to see the first real attempt by right-wing politicians to break public higher education in 2011 when Scott Walker attacked public unions (including the TAA, my union), shut down liberal arts programs at regional public universities, cut tenure protections, and attempted to re-write the Wisconsin Idea (i.e., that public universities should benefit the whole state through their research) strictly in terms of “workforce development.” I chose to take the job at Washburn precisely because it was a public institution in a red state, someplace where I felt like I could continue the fight that started in Wisconsin. I’m here to take a stand for public higher education. I don’t believe that liberal democracy is sustainable without it. If I have to reframe that conversation around workforce development and return-on-investment, so be it.

Newton: Those who have followed your work and advocacy will likely be familiar with your passion for teaching. Can you talk to us about a “class in the life” of Dr. Chris Jones? What does a normal class session look like? What are you and your students doing?

Jones: I rarely lecture or develop a tightly scripted lesson plan. My style is to plan out learning outcomes for the day’s curriculum, develop a set of exercises that will help students meet those outcomes, and then we move in a pretty non-linear fashion through those exercises, mixing up short lectures, ad hoc paired discussions, and formative assessment strategies like one-minute essays. This method of teaching suits my own neurodivergent brain, and it also seems to be really popular with neurodivergent students, in particular because there are frequent shifts to help them reset their attention. I also focus on conceptual-level processing rather than data-dumping, so class generally involves using several different approaches to teaching the same concept. And we rely heavily on student input and involvement; for me, a good class is one in which student discussion has a significant impact on our progress toward our general outcomes.

Newton: What have you been reading that has shaped your thinking on the field? What’s it doing for you?

Jones: I have recently been doing a lot of reading on religious trauma, an emergent field within trauma studies that explores the ways that religious world-views can cause long-term harm to people who leave religious communities. It has led me to heighten my awareness of the ways in which religious studies
classes can be fraught spaces for students, even when we are not necessarily talking about more typical triggering content (e.g., sexual assault, self-harm, warfare). Theory (even at its best) can have a tendency to represent religious practice as merely “interesting” (in the sense that J. Z. Smith would mean), when in fact it is often simultaneously terrifying and inescapable for some of our students.

Other books I’ve recently read in conjunction with my revamped Intro course are Maria del Socorro Castañeda’s Our Lady of Everyday Life, Craig Martin’s Capitalizing Religion, Tisa Wegner’s We Have a Religion, Brett Hendrickson’s Border Medicine, and Francis Stewart’s Punk Rock is My Religion. This is mostly just about filling in all of the gaps in my training so that I can be in some sense competent and credible as the sole religious studies professor at my school. I will say that studying practices of the Borderlands (like Curanderismo, Vodou, Conjure, and the Native American Church) helped me to confront my own deeply embedded assumptions about the reification of religion. I have known for a long time in theory that religion is a category imposed by outsiders that does violence to Indigenous and non-Christian traditions; spending time in La Frontera (Anzaldúa 1987) has helped me recognize how little I’ve really understood that idea in practice.

Newton: What word of advice would you share with those graduate students coming into the profession?

Jones: Two things. 1) Your peers aren’t your competition. Yes, you’re probably applying for a lot of the same jobs. But there is no realistic sense in which you are competing with each other because the odds are stacked so thoroughly against all of you. Make friends with people. Share materials wherever you can. Support each other. Celebrate each other’s victories. Understand that luck is at least as important as talent, competence, hard work, and production. And 2) ask for help. Anybody with a tenure-track or tenured position owes you their time. Ask people who’ve gotten jobs to read your job materials and Zoom with you about your applications (especially if you get campus interviews). You have a limited window to find long-term employment in a system that is stacked against you. Don’t hesitate to ask the people who have found some security in that system to help you. We owe it to you. None of us would be here if other people hadn’t helped us.

Newton: What is something that you used to do in your teaching that you probably wouldn’t do any more and why?

Jones: Grade. Because reducing a student’s educational journey to a number or a letter is an act of violence. Yes, I know, we are required to submit grades by our institutions. Insofar as I am able, I minimize the actual importance of grades in my classes. I want students to focus on learning, not on performing.

Newton: What are you looking forward to trying out or working on in the future?

Jones: Service learning and internships. I want to build up a more robust employment pipeline for religious studies majors and minors by connecting them to community networks where they might find jobs after graduation. I know I won’t be able to recruit new majors if I can’t plausibly tell them how their major will lead them to employment. Yes, I know, that’s not what a liberal arts degree is about. But we’ve long since lost that battle.

Newton: I’ve thoroughly enjoyed conversing with you here. What one conversation do you think the field should have or revisit?

Jones: Teach theory. Teach it to freshmen. Teach it at community colleges and regional publics. We do our students such a grave disservice when we go to conferences and talk about theory with our colleagues, then return to our classrooms and teach out of textbooks that take the categories that constitute “religion” (beliefs, practices, sacred texts, faith, salvation) for granted. We need to be talking in our scholarship about how we can continue to theorize religion in our intro courses. Our discipline is doomed if all we can offer to freshmen at non-elite institutions is survey courses.

Newton: Tell us about a memorable teacher you’ve had as either a student or colleague? What makes them so memorable?

Jones: My undergrad advisor and mentor, Dr. Carolyn Cole. I majored in English, and she was a medievalist. She showed me to the joy of learning old languages (I can still recite the first 20 lines of The Canterbury Tales in Middle English). She also showed me that it is possible for a teacher to be both compassionate
and demanding, to use kindness and support to empower people to fulfill their potential. I have endured so many toxic teaching styles, and through it all Dr. Cole’s model has been my guide.

**Newton:** Where can people find you if they want to connect with you and what do you hope people connect with you about?

**Jones:** I’m most active on Twitter at @ProfChrisMJones. I use the same handle on TikTok. My official email is chris.jones1@washburn.edu. I love to talk about how we teach religion and how we strategize to be able to keep teaching religion.

**References**


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### The Conversation: What is the GCPR?

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_The Conversation puts an ear to current discussion in the field. With scholars reevaluating the legacy of every facet of Religious Studies, the team at the Bulletin thought to check in with what is happening in the world of philosophy. In so doing, we learned about an exciting endeavor known as Global Critical Philosophy of Religion. Philosophers Nathan Loewen (University of Alabama), Tim Knepper (Drake University), and Gereon Kopf (Luther College) were kind enough to answer our questions about GCPR._

**Richard Newton:** Where does the Global Critical Philosophy of Religion conversation come from?

**Nathan Loewen:** I think the Global Critical Philosophy of Religion (GCPR) can be traced to a five-year seminar hosted during the American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual meetings from 2017–2021. Conversations among dozens of scholars led to a guiding question, “Can philosophy of religion enter the globalized, 21st-century world? If so, how?” (https://globalcritical.as.ua.edu/) The question prompts a set of affiliated constructive projects aimed at changing the field’s scope of data and scholarly representation.

**Tim Knepper:** The seminar attracted scholars wanting both to globalize and diversify the content of philosophy of religion and to critically interrogate and expand the categories, methods, and perspectives used in the practice of philosophy of religion.

**Gereon Kopf:** We should also note that there were several mini-conferences and workshops, and we have