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**“Better Get to Know *Practicum*: Critical Theory, Religion, and Pedagogy”**  
**An interview with Craig Martin and Brad Stoddard of *Practicum* Blog**

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*Editor’s Note: The following interview first appeared on the Bulletin’s blog site as part of a series launched earlier this year, “Better Get To Know . . .,” profiling groups that analyze religion. The participants wish to express their appreciation to Matt Sheedy, our associate editor who manages the blog, for his invaluable assistance in facilitating such interviews as this one. And I add my own thanks to theirs. As editor of the Bulletin, I am delighted to include this interview here in our pages. Since the launch of Practicum, we have had a close working relationship with this new pedagogical blog and we look forward to continuing our collaboration in the future on highlighting the importance of theory and pedagogy in the academic study of religion.*

**Ipsita Chatterjea:** Brad, Craig, thank you for taking the time to talk to the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* about your group and its work! *Practicum* observed its one year anniversary on April 26, 2014. What is *Practicum*’s origin tale?

**Brad Stoddard:** The idea for *Practicum* grew out of my experience at Florida State University, where I recently completed my doctorate. Most graduate students at FSU have to teach, and some of us swapped strategies for introducing critical theory into our intro courses. I noticed that similar conversations took place at various conferences, so I thought it might be a good idea to create a space for scholars to discuss various strategies, techniques, and ideas. I floated the idea by Craig, who asked several people if they were interested in contributing to the project. There seemed to be sufficient interest, so Craig and I launched the blog as co-editors.

**IC:** Who are you people?!

**BS:** I’m Brad Stoddard; I’m an assistant professor of religious studies at McDaniel College in Maryland, where I teach American religious history and history of Christianity. I study religion and public policy, religion and law, and theory and method. I’m currently revising my dissertation, which is an ethnohistory of

Florida’s faith-based correctional facilities.

**Craig Martin:** Hahaha, Brad’s initials are BS! I never noticed that. I’m Craig Martin; I’m an assistant professor of religious studies at St. Thomas Aquinas College, which is in New York (not far from Manhattan). Since I am one of only two professors in religious studies here, I teach a lot of courses, from introductory courses on “Religion and Society,” “Religions of the West,” and “Religions of the East,” to more upper level courses on religion and gender, religion and capitalism, religion and politics, etc.

In addition, I currently serve as the executive secretary / treasurer of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), and I once edited the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*. I think I’m probably most known though for my latest two books: *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Routledge 2012) and *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (Bloomsbury 2014).

Our editorial board includes the following four scholars:

- William Arnal (University of Regina): Bill is a scholar of Christian origins and the author of several books, including *The Symbolic Jesus* and (with Russell T. McCutcheon) *The Sacred Is the Profane*.
- Sean McCloud (University of North Carolina, Charlotte): Sean is an Americanist; his most recent works include *Divine Hierarchies* and he recently published *American Possessions: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States*.
- Monica Miller (Lehigh University): Monica works on race; her first book was *Religion and Hip Hop*, and she’s edited (with Anthony Pinn) both *The Religion and Hip Hop Reader* and *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*.
- Merinda Simmons (University of Alabama): Merinda also writes on race; her first book was *Changing the Subject* and she’s edited (with Houston Baker) *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*.

**IC:** So, what does *Practicum* do and how does *Practicum* do it?

**BS:** Our goal is simple: we want to create a space where scholars at all stages in their careers can explore and suggest practical strategies to help introduce their students to critical theory. The underlying assumption is that critical theory should play an important role in the undergraduate classroom, including the introductory course, which for the vast majority of students is the only Religious Studies course they'll take. We'll literally have one semester to influence the students' understanding of "religion," so we should approach the classroom as a tradesperson approaches a trade. Specifically, we should look for new and innovative tools to help us "reach" our students.

To facilitate this, the editors at *Practicum* solicit original content and we look for relevant material on other blogs. We also have two ongoing "series." The first is the syllabus project. Since every course makes a larger argument, we ask a scholar to share her syllabus and to discuss her main argument and course objectives, paying particular attention to the theoretical framework that underlies the entire course. Our second ongoing series is our interview with the author series, where we identify interesting and important books and then ask the author to answer a few questions that will explore the book's theoretical framework and its pedagogical value.

**IC:** "Practicum," "Critical Theory," "Religion," and "Pedagogy"—how do you see these words (and three of them are highly contested words within the field) and the range of issues they evoke for the bloggers and readers of *Practicum*?

**CM:** What we hope these terms signal likely centers on two of the terms: "critical theory" and "pedagogy." First, I think critical theory, at bottom, is about critique in the Kantian sense (with a little bit of Marx thrown in): what are the conditions that make something possible? Under what conditions is "Jesus" constructed and then taken for granted as an authority figure in particular communities? What material conditions make it possible for "spirituality" to be more popular than so-called "organized religion," and—perhaps more importantly—in what discursive context do those terms even signify in the first place? How do the conditions of imperialism and colonialism make discourses on "world religions" both possible and appealing? In this way, critical theory is about exposing or unmasking the typically

invisible discursive and power laden conditions that make our social worlds possible. In addition, this form of critique has to be applied to the term "religion" as well—so its place in our title is not a marker of the substance of our blog but merely a discursive site at which we apply criticism.

Second, since it's not easy to show students what is usually invisible to them, it requires us to be pedagogically sophisticated and reflexive—particularly so we don't end up dismantling one essentialism only to replace it by another. We have to be continually vigilant as teachers. We hope this blog encourages reflection that lends itself to this constant vigilance.

**IC:** What changes or shifts would *Practicum* like to see enacted in classrooms where the analysis of religious phenomenon is the focus of the room?

**BS:** I have two main goals. First, as scholars interested in the academic study of religion, we would like to see more instructors treat religion as a thoroughly human phenomenon. Second, and related to this, we should provide our students with theoretical tools to help them identify the various interests (material, ideological, political, economic, etc.) that underlie our approaches to the supernatural. Regarding this latter point, I often recall Russell McCutcheon's important question: "Most simply put, are we studying nouns or verbs?" The answer to this seemingly simple question frames and informs our studies.

**IC:** *Practicum* was involved with NAASR's Pedagogy Workshop in San Diego? How did that develop? How did it all turn out?

**BS:** Tara Baldrick-Morrone and Matt Sheedy deserve 100 percent of the credit for the NAASR section on religion and pedagogy. They organized the panel, circulated the common readings, and administered the entire session. A month or so before the session, I approached Matt and asked him if we could parlay it into some blog posts for both *Practicum* and the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion's* blog. Both he and Tara supported the plan, so we discussed it at the session. Then after the session, we created a Facebook group for session participants to discuss the session and to float ideas for the blogs. Here again, Matt deserves most of the credit, as he did the vast majority of the work.

Overall, though, I was very happy with the conversation that followed! The session started a longer conversation that continued in multiple venues over the next several months. The ideas we explored in the session segued into erudite blogs that hopefully benefitted scholars throughout the country and beyond.

**IC:** *Practicum* and the *Bulletin* (in particular the *Bulletin's* blog) have worked together since *Practicum* has kicked off. Craig, you founded the *Bulletin's* blog; could you comment on that relationship and how it has shaped both endeavors?

**BS:** *Practicum* and the *Bulletin's* blog have a great relationship. As you mention, Craig either had or has a role in both blogs, and both blogs address similar questions, issues, and approaches to the academic study of religion. If anything distinguishes the two, it's that *Practicum* is specifically concerned with pedagogical issues.

Given our mutual interests, we regularly repost each other's blogs and work together on the occasional project. As a case in point, *Practicum* recently published a series of posts by Nathan Rein on teaching the Bhagavad Gita to first-year students. The *Bulletin* and Nathan are working to expand the post and to publish it in the *Bulletin*.

**IC:** Are there journals that display a more mindful consciousness about teaching religion or critical theory as an aspect of reporting research findings?

**CM:** The only journal I know of that addresses teaching is *Teaching Theology and Religion*. There is sometimes some excellent stuff in there, but unfortunately—at least from my perspective—the material in that journal is often articulated in an uncritical and under-theorized theoretical apparatus. Sometimes it's a view of ethics or social justice that naturalizes particular moral discourses, and sometimes it's a liberal ecumenism that reinforces a Protestant ideology or a world religions discourse—which go unanalyzed and therefore uncontested.

**IC:** Could you tell us about the webinar held in early 2015 and whether another is on plan any time soon?

**BS:** We created the webinar to serve several goals. First, given the scarcity of critical theory in the aca-

ademic study of religion, we wanted to create a forum where we can introduce students to the types of issues we're interested in. Second, some students were already familiar with critical theory, so we wanted to provide them a place where they can continue to explore critical theory. Third, every participant is working on a senior or honors thesis, so we wanted to provide additional theoretical tools to help the students in their studies. Finally, since most of these students will soon become graduate students, we wanted to give them an opportunity to meet, interact with, and network with other like-minded young scholars.

To this end, ten undergraduates participated in the program, which consisted of roughly four hours of instruction and discussion spread over two Fridays. We don't currently have plans for another webinar, but that could change. We're still kicking around a few ideas.

**IC:** To revisit an aspect of an earlier question, in recent years there has been a significant growth in online academic blogging in tandem with the digital humanities formalizing; what considerations surfaced in the decision to proceed as a blog as opposed to a journal in the design of *Practicum*? Or, given that *Practicum* is an online forum, how do you see the blog as *Practicum's* format as different (better, worse, different) from more traditional venues for discussing pedagogy such as the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion*, or conferences run by the Wabash Center?

**BS:** We chose to go with the blog format for very practical reasons. First, it's easier to solicit short and pithy blog posts than to solicit long essays. Second, it's less of a time commitment on our end. I was a graduate student when we started *Practicum*, but now both Craig and I teach at small colleges where we have heavy teaching loads and administrative responsibilities, so the blog seemed like the best forum.

**IC:** What journals do you think instructors should point to to help undergraduates or entry level graduate students make the transition into scholarship or study design, inasmuch as these journals are consistently good in their deployments of theory and research on religion?

**BS:** *Teaching Theology and Religion* occasionally has

good articles, but *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* and the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* are the best journals in the academic study of religion. At the risk of sounding self-indulgent, I think my conversation with Bruce Lincoln (for the Religious Studies Project) has more pedagogical value than any single article I can think of. In forty or so minutes, Lincoln introduces the student to critical theory, and he provides practical examples of applied theory. I know of several instructors who are assigning that podcast as a course assignment.

**CM:** I think *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* is the best journal in our field. Some of it might be inaccessible to students, but much of it would be highly instructive regarding ongoing debates or methodological issues. Case in point: Bruce Lincoln's "Theses on Method" was published in *MTSR*; that would be a fantastic conversation starter in a religious studies classroom, even if the instructor didn't agree with Lincoln.

**IC:** Are there scholars you find yourselves turning to who have particular books that embody critical theory based research and represent either really good introductions to such work, or are good models for students who need to transition into developing writing projects and research papers? Is any of that work forthcoming?

**CM:** Haha, well, since you asked: I think my *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* does a good job of introducing students to a critical approach to the subject matter.

I've had some success using Aaron Hughes' *Abrahamic Religions* in one of my courses; in that book Hughes brilliantly interrogates the idea of "Abrahamic religions" (a successor to "Judeo-Christian religions" and "religions of the book"), revealing its history and showing that the phrase is grossly

normative. I use this in my "Religions of the West" course in order to help dismantle the course's very title.

In my "Religions of the East" course I've similarly had success using Veronique Altglas' new book, *From Yoga to Kabbalah*. Altglas looks closely at how contemporary practitioners of "Eastern religions" typically employ romantic, orientalist notions of the "Mystic East" at the same time that they transform the traditions they appropriate by articulating them onto modern discourses on "individuality." In addition, she looks at how some contemporary scholars do precisely the same thing. Thus it provides me with a platform for encouraging students who signed up for the course out of a romantic interest in the "Mystic East" to reflect on their own uncritical assumptions, as well as how even scholars might be directed by naive stereotypes of "individuality" and "religion."

Although I haven't used it yet, I'm anxious to try out Leslie Dorrough Smith's *Righteous Rhetoric* in class; it's a fantastically clear and accessible critique of how rhetoricians appeal to people's fears of chaos in order to elicit support for their social agendas. What's especially great about this book is that Smith applies her critique not just to the evangelical Christians she studies but also the scholars who write on evangelicals, who use precisely the same rhetorical device. Thus the book is a model for the type of analytical reflexivity to which we think critical theory should aspire.

**IC:** On behalf of the *Bulletin*, thank you for letting us get to know *Practicum*. Is there anything else we should know?

**BS:** We're always looking for content, so don't hesitate to submit something if you think it's relevant. Our website is <http://practicumreligionblog.blogspot.com>.