Voice over:

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Daniel Seed:

Hello and welcome to Big Ideas. A podcast from Texas State University. I'm your host Dan Seed from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. We're joined for this month's episode by Dr. Joseph Laycock, an assistant professor of Religious Studies at Texas State University. Dr. Laycock has written several books on new religious movements and American religious history. He's also the co-editor of the journal Nova Religio.

Daniel Seed:

Dr. Laycock, thanks so much for joining us.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Daniel Seed:

So right off the bat. Looking at your bio, looking at what you study, what drew you to this area of study and expertise in religion and specifically the areas that you look at?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Honestly, I think I ended up in religious studies simply because of the relationships that I made when I was an undergraduate. If I had really bonded with an engineering professor, I could be in a totally different career and my mother would probably be a lot happier than going into the humanities. And then, within religious studies, I'm really drawn to things that have been marginalized and branded as a deviant or frightening for a couple reasons.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

One, it's much easier for me to produce original research on something that nobody knows about than something where there's been centuries of scholarship in which we've said all that we have to say about it. But also, I think some of these groups are really alarming to people. They look to law enforcement to allay those fears or to deal with these groups. And so, if something is actually something of public concern, then I think that we need good people researching it. I think that's one argument why those groups labeled as new religious movements are important to study.

Daniel Seed:

I want to get into those areas of study. You're prolific in terms of writing books, articles, media, but I wanted to start with the idea that you brought up of, "Had I been with an engineering professor, I might be an engineer."

Daniel Seed:

Here you are, teaching. Right? Working with students. In an article that you wrote in March of 2020, you stated that part of your job is getting students to think critically about the definition of religion. Let's start there. Walk us through that point. And then, I want to get a little deeper into how you work with students on that. But walk us through that, what is the definition of religion?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

The constitution of the United States, the First Amendment has two clauses about religion. One, the so-called establishment clause - meaning the government cannot endorse a particular religion or attack a particular religion. The government has to be neutral. And then, the free exercise clause - meaning that in America, you can actually in some cases break the law if this is part of your religion. So there is tremendous political and legal importance built on this term, but the Supreme Court has never defined what a religion actually is. Because of this, there is a great deal at stake on this question.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

What we know as historians is the word 'religion' is unique to European culture and the European point of view. It didn't really come into existence until about the 16th century, as a result of the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. And then, also colonial exploration and expansion. And so, it came to mean things in other cultures that remind us of Christianity. So under American law, the more closely what you're doing resembles Christianity, the more likely you are to be taken seriously as a religion.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

This is probably not the best way to go about defining this term. One thing I try to get my students to understand is there are many different ways of defining religion. You need an operational definition that fits well for what you're trying to do. Secondly, that when someone claims something is a religion or they claim it's not a religion - it's something else, it's a hoax, it's [a] mental illness, it's a cult. That there is almost always a political interest at stake in these claims. I teach them to look for what the angle is when people are making these definitional claims.

Daniel Seed:

And so, how do you get students to think critically about that? Walk us through some of the things that you work with students on, the ways that you get them to get a little deeper on this definition - on religion, thinking about it, the historical aspect, all of that.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

In world religion, the way that I teach it and the way that some other faculty teach it as well, we can't cover every religion in the world so we have to be selective. We cover eight. One of the things that we push the students to do is come up with a theory of what religion is that accounts for these eight religions. And so, one of the only two religions that they've looked at is Christianity and Islam. It's pretty easy, right? This is about God. This is about what happens to you in the afterlife. This is about moral conduct.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

And then, we add Confucianism. Confucianism doesn't really have any interest in supernatural beings. It doesn't deny their existence, but that's not the focus. It doesn't really have any interest in the afterlife. A very common reaction from students is to dodge and say, "Well, that's not a religion then." It's a philosophy. On the other hand, there are temples in China where people have sacrificed animals to the spirit of Confucius. Legally, if it's not a religion, then in theory, Texas State could have a mandatory Confucian sacrifice in Bobcat Stadium and require students to attend and that would not violate the First Amendment. I think that we do need to think of a way in which Confucianism could be religious. And then, we look at religions like Hinduism that don't even have a founder.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

And so, the goal for the students is we keep giving them more data and they keep having to expand their notion of what this could possibly be. I don't really care what their definition of religion is. They just have to show how it fits all of these eight traditions. Really, all I'm trying to get them to do is be consistent in having an idea and then applying that idea fairly.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

I'm really impressed with what the students are often able to do, because it is a very difficult task and they get frustrated. Say, "Listen. Guys, all I'm asking [you] to do is solve a problem that the Supreme Court has not been able to fix in 200 years. It's not that hard."

Daniel Seed:

Yes. Easy, right? Yes, sure. That sounds fascinating. To put them in that situation to really make them think that's obviously what we want to do here. Now I want to talk and just get back to... You answered this. What you study is offbeat, off the normal path, when we think about religion and spirituality. You said, it's an area that a lot of people haven't looked at, there's a lot of opportunity for scholarship, but there must have been something that drew you to this. What drew you to that though as an interest subject?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

I think that we know that these things are very big in the religious landscape, but because religious studies is really rooted in history... Traditionally, how religious studies has been done is you read documents written by important religious leaders. Things like bishops and rabbis and people like Billy Graham. Those tend to talk about very specific things. They tend to leave out a lot of things that we know are important to lots of Americans.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Through the Baylor Religion Survey, for example, we now know that two-thirds of Americans believe in at least one topic that is deemed paranormal. That would be things like UFOs or haunted houses or psychic abilities and things like that. There's really not a lot of research being done on this. At least not in the field of religious studies, even though we know it's an important part of the landscape.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

On one level, I'm simply trying to give us a more complete picture of what religious culture really looks like in America by attending to these things that have fallen through the cracks. I also personally find these ideas very interesting. I think that it's too bad that they've been left out of our academic conversation because they're considered to be almost too interesting to be taken seriously.

Daniel Seed:

Yes. That's what I find fascinating about what you do and what you study. [It] is that when you look at it, some of these stuff on its face, it may come across as silly or out there or whatever. But people are attracted to this, people believe in this. I'm curious from your experiences, what have you seen? What draws people to these beliefs away from maybe what we consider traditional mainstream religious faith?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Well, the groups I study are not all one thing. They're pretty different. But for a lot of the groups, one of the themes that we're seeing here has been called by some sociologists, "re‑enchantments". There was a narrative for a long time that basically science has figured everything out. There's no mysterious forces left in the world and that therefore religion is going to die.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

In the 1970s, everybody was certain of this. In the 1970s, everybody was saying, "Well, I'm still religious, but my kids won't know what religion is." This is gone. It's very hard to maintain that statement in 2021, when religion is probably stronger in our politics than ever. But also, we are just inundated in bizarre ideas. We just watch people gather in Dallas to watch the resurrection of JFK. We have people debating whether the earth is round or flat. And so, one thing that sociologists have noticed is that part of what was keeping this narrative that the world is disenchanted, that people no longer believe in mysterious forces was actually the churches themselves. It was the churches who said, "Don't read horoscopes", "Don't listen to this nonsense about UFOs", "There's no such thing as ghosts. Ghost aren't in the Bible".

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Ironically, as the authority of institutionalized churches declined, that opened the floodgates to returning to these supernatural and mythic ideas, which I think are probably always going to be part of human culture because I think we are naturally drawn to these kinds of ideas or at least a large percentage of the population always will be. This is why I'm interested in things like UFOs and marian apparitions and exorcism. Because these are things that we said wouldn't exist in 2021 and they all still exist.

Daniel Seed:

One of the areas that you have studied, you've published a book... I believe, you recently wrote an article regarding The Satanic Temple. You mentioned a tie-in at the beginning with this idea of the First Amendment. I know that right now or recently, The Satanic Temple was pushing back on the controversial anti-abortion law in Texas.

Daniel Seed:

What's at the heart of their argument? How is this case crucial to the future of religious freedom, but also the mandate of law, in a sense?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

The Satanic Temple was inspired by the Hobby Lobby decision in 2015. In that decision, Hobby Lobby said, "It goes against our personal religious beliefs to pay for an insurance policy that includes certain types of birth control for our employees because we consider those to be causing abortions." The Supreme Court said, "You're right. This violates the so-called Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. We're going to find some other way to get Hobby Lobby employees the products that they need." They said it doesn't even matter whether these forms of contraception actually cause abortions, all that matters is that the Green family, who owns Hobby Lobby, believes that they do. We are protecting their belief.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

This inspired The Satanic Temple to see how else can we use their Religious Freedom Restoration Act for other side of the abortion debate. The Satanic Temple is a non-theistic religion, meaning that they don't believe in anything supernatural. They are somewhat like the Confucians who I mentioned earlier. They're defining themselves a religion in the terms of, "We have ideas that we hold as very important or perhaps you can even say sacred. We have rituals." They even have a form of Sunday school. They have all these other things.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

The IRS at least has acknowledged them as a religion, which is the closest thing we have in the American government to determining if something's a religion or not. They have a list of seven tenants in their religion. One of them is, one's own body is inviolable. Nobody else can make claims or control your body. And so, they filed a series of lawsuits. First in Missouri and now, in Texas. Basically saying the state cannot make these restrictions on access to abortion, or if they have such restrictions, Satanists need to be exempt from them because this is burdening the practice of our religion, just as Obamacare was burdening the practice of the Green's religion.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

They even made an abortion ritual - which sounds terrible. It is not actually about sacrificing babies to Satan. Although, I could certainly see how people might think of it that way. But actually, we have a ritual in which a woman who desires an abortion, sort of looks in the mirror and affirms to herself, "This is my body. This is my choice. I am an autonomous being." And then, goes and receives the abortion. They did this for legal reasons so that they could argue, "If you then make that woman wait for weeks or do all these other requirements, you were actually directly interfering with our religious ritual." It's the same as if you went into a baptism or a marriage or something and you said, "You can't do this ritual until you've met all of these government requirements."

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

It's an interesting case. To this date, no court has ever really answered the essential question here which is, does the Religious Freedom Restoration Act mean that Satanists can basically get abortion on demand as part of their religion? So far, judges have tried to duck the question. They've tried to find some legal loophole to dismiss the case or to say that the plaintiff doesn't have standing. In Missouri, a judge said, "Well, you're not pregnant now, so case dismissed."

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Eventually, they will probably be able to corner a judge into answering that question. Either they will say, "Yes, Satanists are exempt from state restrictions on abortion" which would be a big change to our law. Or they will say, "The Religious Freedom Restoration Act or these laws don't actually do as much as we thought that they did." So religious freedom as a whole would be somewhat diminished if they ruled against The Satanic Temple.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

I don't really have a dog in the fights. I'm not rooting for the Satanists and I'm not rooting against them. But my job as I see it, has mostly been to just explain to people what is happening because it is very, very complicated. You really do need someone who understands constitutional law and understands the theory of what religion is to walk you through it. This can make any kind of sense to someone reading about this on the paper.

Daniel Seed:

It seems to me that just looking around it and mentioning this case, mentioning even the JFK Jr. QAnon thing happening in Dallas, religion or belief systems are becoming more weaponized. It feels like that.

Daniel Seed:

Are you seeing that? If so, is it part of the natural ebb and flow that we've had in this country where we have these points of religious fervor or whatnot, and then it peters out and then comes back? I'm just curious about that.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

There's two things going on here. One is just raw religiosity. That can be tracked somewhat with things like church attendance. We know that after 9/11, church attendance went way up. During World War II, church attendance went way up. At other times in American history, it's gone down. But the other thing is, making legal arguments based about one's religion.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

We are seeing a surge of that right now, especially around things like people who do not want to receive the COVID-19 vaccine and are trying to frame this as religious. Some constitutional lawyers are actually pretty dubious of this. [They] would say, "I believe that you sincerely don't want to get the vaccine. What I don't believe is that your religious tradition has anything to say about whether or not you can receive the vaccine."

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

So I do think that there is more of an interest in trying to circumvent American law using religious liberty to do so. That's a direct consequence of actually having religious literacy. The law incentivizes those types of things. One thing I truly try to make my students to understand is religious liberty doesn't mean the same thing in other countries that it means the United States. On the European model, religious freedom just means we can't put you in jail because of what religion you are. But it doesn't mean you actually ever get to act on your religion, it just means you're free to believe it.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

America is pretty unique in that we've said, "Well, no. You actually get to do whatever your religion says that you need to do unless the government has a compelling interest to stop you." So that's what RFRA laws actually do. They say the government, to interfere with your religion, has to offer a compelling interest for the law. If you were say an Aztec and you said, "I believe I have to sacrifice someone so the sun will rise." RFRA would say, "Well, the government has a compelling interest to not let you kill other people, so we're not going to allow that."

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

With The Satanic Temple though, it's a little bit more of a gray area. I could imagine the government saying we have a compelling interest to have these restrictions on abortion access because of whatever - informing people about a medical procedure. I could also imagine a judge saying, "It sounds like you don't have a compelling reason. You just don't want people to get abortion so you're making it harder for them." Our laws, which I think are good, do as a sort of natural consequence encourage people to make certain kinds of arguments that wouldn't make any sense outside of the United States.

Daniel Seed:

Again, we're joined by Dr. Joseph Laycock, an assistant professor of Religious Studies. Fascinating topic, fascinating line of study here - intersection of religion, faith, law, First Amendment, constitution. Just really very interesting approach that you have to looking at this.

Daniel Seed:

I also know that you had another new book coming out about exorcism. Could you talk about that?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

Sure. For various reasons, I've been involved in research on possession and exorcism. I edited an encyclopedia called Spirit Possession Around the World. When I was hired at Texas State, they were working on creating a new major in Religious Studies. They said, "Make a course in the honors' college that will get butts and seats." So I made a course called Demonology, Posssession, and Exorcism.

Daniel Seed:

That'll do it.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

It got butts and seats. It actually got me my 15 minutes of fame. I was on the radio show, Coast to Coast AM, which I'm sure undergraduates don't know what that is, but it's sort of the big paranormal show that airs from like midnight to six in the morning or something like that.

Daniel Seed:

Yes, from the desert in Nevada. Art Bell was the host at one point. Yes.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

That's right. Yes. Art Bell has since passed, but I've been on this show twice to talk to his successors.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

I was approached by Penguin Books, Penguin Classics, and they have done a brisk trade in making readers of classic literature around sort of spooky theme. They have The Penguin Book of Witches, The Penguin Book of the Undead. They asked me to do The Penguin Book of Exorcisms. In some ways, this was a very fun book to write because most of it, I didn't have to write. I just picked a text that I would like to share with other people and I wrote forwards to them.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

But I tried to find things that you couldn't get anywhere else. For example, we have a diary at the University of Connecticut describing an exorcism that occurred in the 1700's. That's never been produced as a transcript before. We have a leaked document from an exorcism that happened in Indiana. Because Catholic priests need the permission of a bishop to perform an exorcism, this was basically a letter to a bishop saying, "I really think these people need our help. The risk of embarrassment is outweighed by the need to help these people." I was actually able to get permission to produce that. There are traditions of exorcism in Islam. I was able to get original translations made from the Arabic of a certain Islamic text describing exorcism. There's some classics in there, but I didn't want people to pay good money and get something that they could just Google, so there's some unique stuff in there.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

I also tried to show a range of traditions. A lot of these are from the Western tradition, going from Ancient Assyria, through Greece and Rome, through Christianity into the present day. But I also wanted to give a lot of examples from Asia, from traditions of exorcism in India and China and Japan. There's even an account of a voodoo exorcism performed in Haiti and even of a Native American ritual, which may or may not be accurately described as an exorcism, but was described by a psychiatrist assigned to a reservation.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

He was brought a teenage girl who was experiencing hallucinations. He just asked the family, "What do you think is wrong with your daughter?" They said, "Well, we think the spirits want her to become a shaman." He said, "Do you want her to be a shaman?" They said, "No, no, no. We want her to go to college." He said, "Okay. Well, what do you normally do when somebody is asked to be a shaman and you don't want them to be a shaman?" They said, "Well, there is a ritual we could do to get rid of these spirits." And he said, "As your psychiatrist, I think you should do this ritual." It got better.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

One of the things I try to show is that this is something that kind of happens across all cultures. There are differences in how exorcism is imagined and the actual procedures, but this seems to be a very kind of universally human experience. The idea that sometimes you are not yourself, you are something else.

Daniel Seed:

I feel like that quite a bit sometimes, I'm not going to lie.

Daniel Seed:

We're running low on time here, but I did want to get back to one thing that you just mentioned where you were talking about creating a class to get people in seats for a new Religious Studies major. Discuss the major a little bit.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

When we were pitching the major, we had to persuade Texas State that this was going to be something good for the students, that would contribute to the workforce of the state of Texas. When they did a survey of skills that employers are looking for, the first one was ethics. We want to hire people who are a good person. Religious Studies is not reducible to ethics, but throughout history, ethics has been informed by religious traditions.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

The second one was cultural literacy. If you want to do business on the global marketplace, you need to know something about other religions. It's very easy to make kind of embarrassing faux pas. An example that I cite a lot is when George W. Bush was running for governor of Texas. He held a fundraiser at the Dell Jewish Community Center and someone from his campaign showed up with a bunch of pork barbecue, which would've been great at any other stop on the campaign, but it was a case where a little bit of religious literacy would've really helped with the job.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

So I think that there are lots of jobs that would want someone with this kind of training. The other thing I wanted to show students is Religious Studies is interesting and exciting and relevant and dangerous. It's not sort of Sunday school, or it's not training to be a pastor or something, which is I think how some people imagine it. Finally, because we are a government institution, the establishment clause applies to us as well. So it is actually illegal for me to teach Religious Studies in a way that promotes one religion or condemns another. I think whether you're an atheist or you're a Christian, we can all believe we don't need the government telling us what religion we ought to be. I think we can all decide that's a good way to proceed with those courses.

Daniel Seed:

Well, Dr. Joseph Laycock, thank you so much for joining us. Very interesting. If people want, what are some of the titles of your books if they want to check them out?

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

My most recent book is The Penguin Book of Exorcisms. And then, Speak of the Devil: How The Satanic Temple is Changing the Way We Talk about Religion. I have a forthcoming book, coming from Rutledge called New Religious Movements: The Basics, which is a very short introduction to the study of new religious movements.

Daniel Seed:

Well, Dr. Joseph Laycock, thank you so much.

Dr. Joseph Laycock:

It's been a pleasure.

Daniel Seed:

Thank you for listening and downloading Big Ideas. We'll be back next month with another topic and guest. Until then, stay well and stay informed.

Voice over:

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