

# Religion & Webinar Teaching Resources

## Religion & Grief- Released April 2021

[YouTube Link](#)

### Overview

Given the year we have been through—the multiple types of losses and “sadnesses” people have struggled with—it is fitting that we consider the roles of religion in all of this. “Religion & Grief,” however, extends beyond the pandemic, and this discussion will explore the ways scholars of religion and American Studies are theorizing grief, death, suffering, and the rituals that attend to these moments. Have our understandings of grief changed or expanded in this current moment? Do new religious movements or the deeper engagement of groups (like the nones, women of color, victims of racialized or sexual violence) complicate our analysis and narration of grief? Is grief an adequately compelling and capacious term to address the loss and sadness that we theorize in our work? Join humanities and social science scholars as they explore these questions and the larger relationships between religion, ritual, and various types of grief and loss.

### Panelists:

**Candi Cann**, Baylor University Her research focuses on death and dying, and the impact of remembering (and forgetting) in shaping how lives are recalled, remembered, and celebrated. She examined this theme through martyrdom in her early scholarship. Dr. Cann’s first book, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-first Century* with the University Press of Kentucky (2014), centered on grief and memorialization in the contemporary world. She has also written various chapters and articles on digital death and grief. Her second book *Dying to Eat: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife* (also with University Press of Kentucky, 2017) is an edited collection on the intersection of food in death and grief. Her third book, *The Routledge Handbook of Death and Afterlife* (Routledge, 2018), is an edited collection containing thirty chapters examining death and afterlife from around the world. Dr. Cann’s current projects are researching diversity in death, and the intersection of death and technology around the world.

**Michael Brandon McCormack**, University of Louisville Dr. McCormack is Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Louisville. His research interests include intersections of Black Religion and Cultural Studies; contested relationships between the prophetic tradition in Black religion, Black moral panic, and the cultural productions of the hip-hop generation; African American Religion and Religions of the African Diaspora.

### Cohosts:

**Laura Levitt**, Temple University Levitt is Professor of Religion, Jewish Studies, and Gender at Temple University where she has chaired the Religion Department and directed both the Jewish Studies and the Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies Programs.

Levitt is the author of *The Objects that Remain* (Penn State University Press, November 2020); *American Jewish Loss after the Holocaust* (2007); and *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (1997). With Laurence Silberstein and Shelley Hornstein, she edited *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art After the Holocaust* (2003), and with Miriam Peskowitz she edited *Judaism Since Gender* (1997). Laura Levitt edits NYU Press's North American Religions Series with Tracy Fessenden (Arizona State University) and David Harrington Watt (Haverford College). She currently chairs the Committee on Sexual Misconduct for the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) and lead the task force that created and implemented the Society's sexual misconduct policies and procedures.

**Brian Steensland**, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Steensland is Professor and Chair of Sociology and Director of Social Science Research at the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at IUPUI. His research interests include religion, culture, politics, and civic life in contemporary America. His books include *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (Oxford, 2014), co-edited with Philip Goff, and *The Failed Welfare Revolution* (Princeton, 2008), which won both the Mary Douglas Prize and the award for Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship in Political Sociology. He has published on topics including religious classification, American evangelicals and contemporary politics, mainline Protestantism and welfare reform, and Christianity and free-market economics. His co-authored article "The Measure of American Religion" (*Social Forces*, 2000) won the Best Article Award in the Sociology of Religion. His article "Cultural Categories and the American Welfare State" (*American Journal of Sociology*, 2006) won the Best Article Award in the Sociology of Culture.

## Sources Mentioned in Webinar

Claudia Rankine article, '[The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning](#)'

- "We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained, or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against."

## Show Notes

1. What is in your mind, the relationship between religion and grief? Two ways of thinking about this are what can we learn about religion through the lenses of grief, what do we learn about grief through the lenses of religion?

Candi: We are still uncomfortable talking about death. One thing about religion is that for some reason religion allows you to think, talk about and reflect on death. I love religion because the conversation [on

death] has always happened in the field of religion, it's a place where discussion on grief, death, lamentation and more can be embraced and safe.

Michael: How we as human beings make sense of life, life after loss, or life amid loss. We do not often have an adequate framework for dealing with that. We look to explanatory systems to help us make sense of them and religion is a place we go to make meaning of death or loss and grief or suffering. Religion gives us a meaning making system but also provides ritual practices with community and care that can help sustain us and comfort us. ... But that is the positive, we can also think about how religion can cause the grief, death, the sadness, and mourning. It can be used to justify or downplay the lives that are being lost, and or the ways religion plays a function in loss outside of that.

Laura: Looking at explanatory systems can show us something about grief, grieving, mourning, and death. Funerals and acts of mourning bring people into the sphere of religion. It is a site in American culture where that is allowed, where people can do that kind of work and rituals. It allows us to talk about what we do not have control over.

2. Thinking about the year 2020, which had so much grief and loss (loss of loved ones, the pain and grief of racial injustice and police brutality, the loss of daily, normal lives and routines, work life balance and imbalance and the loss of jobs). What are your reflections on the grief associated with this past year?

Candi: It helps to amplify and highlight the structural problems and inequalities we have been ignoring but maybe now we will now have to have those conversations.

Michael: Looking at the denial of death but the impact death has been having on the country. Thinking about Black American communities who have always already been in extremely close proximity to death. Death is not something out of the norm for the Black community.

#### *Communities of Care*

3. How are groups continuing or navigating their communities? With death and the pandemic how are people finding ways to bridge these problems?

Michael: It is difficult during this time because we are trying to social distance and keep space so we cannot care in the ways we want to or have been accustomed to. We cannot just hug and cry on each other. We must find alternative ways of caring. The protests are an outpour of emotions, an act of communal grief, "the gathering of the grieving."

*Something about the possibility of healing that could be at stake in how people choose to show up and experience these grieving moments.*

*There are protests but it is not only protests, but it is also publicly allowable grieving and public understanding of death.*

*What is our capacity to grieve collectively?*

## **Teaching Resources**

### **Discussion Prompts: Whole Video**

1. Connecting with students and helping them connect with each other: How did the pandemic change life for you? What did it show us about community?
2. What can grief practices, death rituals and ideas on death or grieving show us about a community? How can understanding these practices

### **Assignment Ideas: Whole Video**

1. Explore a religious communities grieving rituals or death practices. How do they function in the given community? What do they do for the people involved?
2. As Michael mentioned, “religion can cause the grief, death, the sadness, and mourning. It can be used to justify or downplay the lives that are being lost, and or the ways religion plays a function in loss outside of that.” In what ways do we see this happening? Where in history can we see the use of religion for the downplay or justification of death? How can religion play both sides?
3. Examine other protests like the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020, what can they show us about collective grieving? What can they show us about the understanding of grief and death in American culture?