

## CORH Values – Season 4, Episode 2

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### *Spencer McNairn on Religion and International Relations*

We spoke with Spencer McNairn who graduated from the Religious Studies program at CSU, Chico in 2021. He is now a student at Syracuse University in New York working on his Master's degree in the esteemed International Relations program there. We talk about the role of religion in International affairs and explore ways in which it can both bring people together but also create rifts. We look at the role of religion in life today around the globe, explore the importance of diversity, and talk about Spencer's experiences traveling in Asia and Latin America.

#### **Podcast Link:**

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#### **Transcript:**

Hello, welcome to CORH values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the departments. Daniel Veidlinger. This season, we're going to be catching up with some recent graduates and finding out what they've been doing. Hi everybody. I'm here with Spencer McNairn. He's a recent graduate from our program in religious studies. He graduated from California State University Chico in the spring of 2021, and he's now a master's student at Syracuse University studying International Relations. Hi Spencer, welcome and thank you so much for having me, Daniel, what a pleasure. It's so great to reconnect. Yeah, it's great to see you. Great to hear that you're doing well. And I'm really interested to hear what you have to say, about your new program and how studying religion helped to prepare you for it. And we're really proud of our students who've gone on to all sorts of amazing things, both in the work world and more education. And you are one of the students that we're very proud of. Why don't you start by telling a little bit about how you got interested in religious studies. Why did you choose that major when you were at Chico of all things? Certainly, almost simply, it was, in my opinion, the perfect nexus to explore a lot of my different interests including behavior, psychology, history, anthropology, philosophy, governance and environmentalism, even religious studies. This intersectional program among these social sciences and humanities that explores the human experience in a truly humanistic way. That was one of the biggest motivators for me coming into this program. Whether it's obviously manifest today or not, religion is still one of the strongest motivators among our lives. If someone is even spiritual or non-religious at all. Regardless, this human experience seems to be coupled with beans terrifying moment. So, when we realize, oh shoot, I'm alive what now? And this program helps to offer some solace or, or at least an outlet to explore these considerations further. Similarly, religion, seeing this wobble positive trend and studying I thought was really a key in becoming a global citizen in our ever-connected world. Thank you. That's really one of the best definitions that I've heard. Let's back up a second and focus on this point that you brought up when you first started speaking. The interdisciplinary nature of her, they just studies because a lot of students don't really know what they want to study. I mean, when you think about you come into a university, having you now paid a little bit of attention during high school to things. But you don't know what's anthropology even is really when you come into a university, you don't know what sociology is. You don't know what philosophy is. You might have read a couple of books that are so-called philosophical. But all of these things to ask students at, let's say if you're a first-time student who've committed 18 and 19. And then they said, Well, do you want to do philology or do you want to do cultural anthropology? They don't even know what those are. So how can they choose amongst those majors? And one of the great things about religious studies is that incorporates a lot of different approaches into the study. So, in our program we do sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, art, and these kinds of things. So, I liked that you appreciated that element because I know that you're a very your interests are very broad. You have all sorts of you've traveled a lot and you'd like learning languages. You'd like learning about ideas, philosophy, culture. You also are deeply into music. Thank you. Play guitar as well, right? So, you're somebody who doesn't want to be pigeonholed into any one particular box. And I think Religious

Studies, I hope are they just studies, was a really good outlet for all of those interests to come together. Yes. Yeah, that's certainly true and really was one of the greatest aspects that I've enjoyed about this program. And as I'm sure we'll discuss later, it was certainly helped to benefit me. And now coming into a new interdisciplinary approach to international relations. That's, that's fantastic. And I know that well. When you came into the program, did you think that you had to be religious to have an interest in religious studies or did you understand that you don't? I suppose I had this general idea that it was not teaching how to be religious, but the academic study of religion and what is it? How do people who are religious behave in a social environment? How does religion motivate others? So, I suppose that's kind of probably what I was interested in, again, is exploring these different ways. As I mentioned earlier, of how different people in different geographical and cultural contexts have grappled with these, these moments of what next, we have our hands over our fates and thinking, oh my goodness, what is happening? Yeah, life hits us with a lot of strange things where we had the pandemic the last two years. We've got global insecurity, food insecurity, climate change. All of these things sale us in our daily lives and were born, as I said in the very first podcast that I ever made for this program, that we're born without an instruction book of how to live life. So, in different cultures, different times people come to all sorts of conclusions about how to do it. And religion, the religions of the world are basically store houses of much of that knowledge that is built up over the years on how do we negotiate our way in the world. And as I often tell students, whether God exists and not just one small part of that, but it's not the be-all and end-all. People always ask me, well, how can it be that people act religious but don't really believe in God? Now this is a, this is a quandary that people that haven't really explored all that religion has to offer. People get a little confused about. But as you know, there's a lot of rich features to religion that don't necessarily stand or fall on whether God exists or not. It's something that we can't really know for sure one way or the other. And many people just kind of bracket it and put it aside and say, well, who knows. But nevertheless, my people have been doing this for 2000, 3000 years. And in order to gain a sense of connection to my culture, my background, my history, I do those things. Yeah. Well, yeah. We do lots of things that we don't believe in. Right. I mean, like I always say, when people say that I say, well, do you read Harry Potter? And they said, Oh yes. And I say, do you get a lot out of it like about the meaning of friendship and the meaning of loyalty and the meaning of sticking, staying true to your beliefs. Yes. But do you think that Harry Potter's real? Well, no. Okay. But you still go to the conventions. You still dressed like that. You still get a lot out of it, even though in the back your mind, you kind and though it didn't really happen, yeah, yeah. Racket that it's the same utility, right? I remember that one of the first lectures I had and the entire Religious Studies Program in Religion, 200 religion that South Asia. The very young Daniel Veidlinger, we were discussing the foundations of what is religion, how do we know when and where to recognize it? And similarly, you brought up an example of the Grateful Dead. These people, yeah, where these, they have their own culture amongst them there and they have the ritual of going to the shows or they have the kind of the experiential dimension of listening to the music and whatever else comes with that, to enjoy the music with their whole body. And yeah, it's amazing. I know one aspect within religion that you're particularly interested in is sustainability and climate change and how the different religions of the world shape our approach to the environment. So, before we get into the international relations stuff that you're now doing, just tell me a little bit about how the study of religion helped to inform your understanding of sustainability and environmental problems that the world is? Yeah, absolutely, That's a great question. So, I come from a very scientific family from these natural sciences. My grandfather was actually a professor at Chico State in botany, in plant physiology and similarly, you might I didn't. Yeah, yeah, and this was ballet, I believe. Similarly, my father has his undergrad in Biology. My older brother has his undergrad degree in biology. So that, that goes without saying that the natural sciences, our discussion and, and how we can interact with the world. So, I suppose my approach and understanding and merging these two fields of Religious Studies and Sustainability kind of go hand in hand. And that if we were to, for example, let's think of biodiversity kind of at its core. Imagine the Galapagos Islands or a Peruvian rainforest or even upper Park and Chico. Maintaining a variety of life in an ecosystem that's necessary to its proper function of the greater environment. If there are too many squirrels, it puts a strain on the natural activities and the other organisms, like the woodpeckers are going to have as many acorns to eat. The, suppose the beautiful thing is, is that nature will always find its way to balance itself out on this kind of larger equilibrium of interspecies VM of the overpopulation of squirrels might influence more hawks are more coyotes too. No, valence it out in that way. And once the coyotes and the hawks meet their demise, that again supports the turkey vultures and the bugs on the ground. And that's repeats the process. So that was kind of the foundation I had growing up. So similarly, if we were to apply that

similar idea of bio-diversity and apply it amongst ourselves in a social environment. Looking at religious diversity and maintaining international religious freedom, it's just as necessary and maintaining a functional and healthy social environment to challenge ideas and develop empathy and participate in that same way. Experiences are other cousins throughout the food web. From here. And suppose the danger is that we've begun to capitalize on these social behaviors that create this imbalance and the social dynamics that exist among us humans. So, excuse me. So, so in understanding that too much of one thing doesn't support the healthy balance that mirrors nature's way. So, in understanding sustainability and its connection with religious studies, it's, it is maintaining that balance. It is understanding and recognizing that diversity is the natural process. And in the social process. I did not think you were going to go there with that answer. I was expecting you to say, talk more about the different religious approaches to humanity's relationship with nature, right? The idea that some religions talk about humans as being the caretakers of nature, others as being the masters of nature. And yet others are just being one part of nature and nothing particularly ontologically special. And that those different religious approaches might flavor the way the people of that religion approach nature. But you went in a totally different direction that I hadn't really thought about before. I really, really liked that, that the diversity of nature and recognizing how systems, complicated systems such as nature are delicate, but have their own balance that they want to constantly like in a state of equilibrium that they will naturally bend towards if it gets upset. And that if you look at the diversity of religions and ideas, this also a natural balance of those. And that if you try to force one over the other, it might temporarily be larger, but then it'll slowly kind of move back towards an equilibrium. Certainly. And I think it's easy to forget that we, as IT, human species are social creatures. We are animals really are. And recognizing that nature within us is important to recognize that nature that surrounds us. I think one of the most influential religious scholars beyond yourself, of course, is, is Emil Durkheim, who in a nutshell, believe that religion inspires group allegiance through shared symbols or morals. Again, it's investing that thought in the group community and, and, and recognizing the, again, the nature that that fulfills us in and recognizes our, I guess, the cooperation that is necessary for us to function and survive as human beings. Similarly, I wrote quite a few papers in my undergraduate degree on the neuroscience of religion, just as kind of a general passion and an, a, and a general interest. And yeah, understanding that natural stimuli, this is speaking towards to put in contexts. If we were to look at, again, Mini and smart as our framework. If we were to look at the social and experiential dimensions of religion. Asking questions like how to outside stimuli from nature, mode and, and inspire feelings of AAC or greatness or holiness. So again, recognizing that we are a part of nature is, I think, important in recognizing the importance of sustaining and maintaining nature. Because hearing the birds chirping in the morning or watching the sun come up from behind a mountain or sitting quietly on a beach and hearing the waves. That's, it's a part of us, it's a part of our body. It's kind of where we came from. So, recognizing the importance of sustainability, it's really connecting all that we know in the natural environment. One of the things that I've often been concerned with is that seems sometimes like a lot of Western organizations have a mold or a model of how a society should develop based on the western history of development. And then try to impose that on to all the various different cultures and developing countries around the world. And I know you've thought about this issue as well. So, what is your standpoint on that problem of trying to impose a Western idea of human rights, let's say, or of economic organization on some culture that as you say, might be in a completely different environment with a completely different history and a completely different background. It really comes down to understanding the commonalities and the shared experiences and studying each other and the great thinkers of our time has really allowed this opportunity to sympathize and slowly accepts that cooperation is that key among our current. Naturally conflict is inevitable. It's going to happen regardless because of these ideological differences. But maintaining that recognition that we do have different experiences, I think is key and understanding. And having an open mind to an opportunity when conflicts do arise. That it's important too. Adapt and move beyond these rest between our differences of opinions. Yeah. And that's a beautifully put your absolutely right. That the best way to think about it is that there are differences, but there are also commonalities. The whole trick for a successful campaign is to build on the commonalities and appreciate the differences. So, I don't think it's one or the other, Right? It's not like you've got a cookie cutter Western idea of what a society should look like and you try to just force it onto all the cultures around the world. But on the other hand, there are certain aspects of human life that are common to everybody. I mean, nobody likes to get a physically hurt, for example, I don't care what culture it is. Nobody likes being injured, nobody likes being hungry. So, in as much as we can give people the rights to the right to physical safety. That is good, and the right to have food or the

ability to grow it. Those things are good. But on the other hand, you don't want to force cultures that to change in ways that don't really mesh with the way they've been doing things all along. So, you've got to find that common point. If we look at Afghanistan, The certainly interesting lessons there. And when people say, well, what uses religion today? How is this going to make money? Of course, in today's modern return on investment-based society, people like to know I'm studying something, how's it going to help save money? Well, we spent \$2 trillion in Afghanistan. And I submit that if we had a more sensitive understanding of the local culture, we might have done a little bit better and trying to, in trying to model the new Afghanistan after Western ideas, right? Yeah, I absolutely agree with you. Religion as we, what is a major motivator in an individual's behavior. But similarly, it is on a, on a larger scale. These worsening humanitarian crises that we are seeing in Afghanistan caused by these acute food shortages or political instability is really all coming down to a lack of representation in the lack of, I suppose human recognition ISIS might be the right word of the Taliban government and saying we have this idea of how things should, should be run. And suppose that's where the conflict comes in, is the recognition that someone is going to behave and move towards how base you should be 2p1. And of course, others are going to take it into your engine. I mean, it's a, it's a really complicated question because yes, as you say, a lot of the sanctions that are on Afghanistan now because the Taliban is not following the kind of pathway that we would want the government to follow are hurting the common people of Afghanistan for sure. So how far should we push it, enforcing our ways onto them? That's evade deep and difficult question. So, let's talk a little bit about your own field of study because I'm curious as to what you're studying in the program now. So, you're doing international relations program. What sort of courses have you taken so far? Yet? So, within this international relations program, I'm also simultaneously pursuing an emphasis in governance, diplomacy, and international organizations. Similarly, I'm also enrolled in a certificate program in conflict and collaboration. So that's inspired a plethora of interesting now that you have it all, I really just did these very discussions we're having right now. Last semester. Actually, I was, for example, I was in a class with the former Deputy Secretary of State, James Steinberg. This class, we would observe, each week, we would observe a different international issue. From a geopolitical tension in the South China Sea or climate change or international approaches to mitigating COVID-19 and other global health pandemics from there. After recognizing this issue, we would. Kind of create a list in and understand all of the actors involved, not just the primary governments involved, but the local actors, the civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, the regional associations and organizations. And from there, once everyone has their place met, then we would understand the issues in a more complex dynamic. Who wants what, who is taking a position on one issue and who has taken a position on another issue or the same issue, and how is it different? So really the key was understanding each these different issues as conflict or collaboration. And then we would apply we would apply some methods or some different strategies to move beyond and mitigate and maneuver through these issues. I see. Okay. Okay. Is this religion ever come up in the classes? Yeah. Well, that's the thing. Religion, unfortunately, it usually takes its place through issues of security or violent social dynamics. Instead of exploring the different solutions to live cooperatively, which I think religion certainly has the, the opportunity to do in a pluralistic society. And understanding religion as an academic field as we do in the department here. It, it certainly doesn't get it doesn't get the recognition that I think deserves. That goes without saying there are certainly organizations that do exist that focus specifically on international religious freedom, such as the Religious Freedom Institute or the United States commission on international religious freedom. But as far as religious dynamics go to politically within this program, it seems to be more of the source that yields these issues or potential nexus or an outlet and understanding how and why these issues exist in the first place. What are students with? No, but if you don't and you wouldn't know, is that many religions that are in conflict now have gotten along quite well in the past. Yeah, certainly. And then recognizing the kind of context of a lot of these issues that exist is, is necessary and understanding why or how these, these different religions might have evolved to either cooperate or live in conflict. Uh, one example I'm thinking of is between the Muslims and the Buddhists in Myanmar. Of course, for centuries, the two religious groups who were living in harmony separate, separated by a mountainous region from the R constant and the Eastern Valley. And in the 19th century, I believe, when the British influence was expanding eastward from India. And they created this colonize government. They were already, well, I suppose the, the Muslims in this area or the Rohingya, were accepted and included as a part of the colonized government structure in Myanmar. And after World War II, once Myanmar gained their independence, the primary, primarily Buddhist majority population wanted their turn to maintain the power of the political and social dynamics within the country. So, the roles were reversed

essentially. And now today we're seeing kind of the ongoing bleed on that. Just so happened to Creep is rectum or the British have done that a lot in many places where they took, where they ruled. There were different groups that had slightly different positions under the British than they did after the British and then that led to conflict. It's interesting you were pointing out that you're also doing a certificate that involves international organizations and things like that. And I mean, I'm sure they don't talk about that in the certificate programs, but the first international organizations were of course, all religiously based. That's one of the things that first made humans think that they could organize themselves across borders and across cultures and across languages by having us a singular religion. So, Buddhism, for example, is a kind of community that spread outside of northeast India where it started into all sorts of different countries and created a sense of community. They had meetings of monks from all over Asia, Asia that would get together and discuss these matters. So really that was probably one of the first international organizations in the world. Then you've got the Christian church, you've got Islam. So, religion really set the pattern for the whole idea of having an international organization if you think about it. Yeah, that's absolutely true. I'm actually in a course right now called NGO non-governmental organizations management in developing countries. Of course, there are many religious elements that are explored in this class for the very reasons that you suggested that the approach to religion philanthropically is seen as a kind of and spreading the influence or spreading the humanistic desire to alleviate suffering that exists in the world. I think that's a pretty common trope among many religions. So, to spread this in an organized and official way through a non-governmental organization. Materialism doing good for people. Absolutely. Of course, the problem with that because it's complicated because what you think is good, they might not think is good. Yeah, yeah, certainly. I again, I think to the common point that has been reoccurring throughout this discussion is that religions do motivate you and they do motivate on an international scale through the vessels of individuals. And today, wow, we live in a country that might be predominantly secular. I hate to use that term because there is religion in the United States. But, but remember what we learned in class, secularism. Secularism doesn't necessarily mean that you personally don't believe in any religion. It means that the society doesn't advocate anyone, particularly with it, right? And then put the word often gets used as a synonym to atheists, but it's not really at all. It just means you don't think that public life should be dominated by religion, but in private you can do whatever you want. So again, that goes to the point, once again, that religion and whether one person is ascribed to a specific belief system or not, still does motivates individuals. I think the degree to which religion motivates people is far underappreciated. In my travels around the world. This the amount of people that I've met who just don't even think about it. It's just that's their belief system. And they will do lots of things that might in a utilitarian way not necessarily help them in their life. It won't get them more money or more food. But they do it because they believe that that's what they ought to do. And I think that Modern Political Science and International Relations does have to take that into consideration. So, you've traveled a lot and as a student, tell us a little bit about where you traveled as a student for longer periods of time and what you gain out of that? Yeah, absolutely. Let's see. In fall of 2019, I studied abroad for one semester in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Are now this happened as mostly a coincidence and that it was an available program. I had just finished a class with professor Jason Clower on the religions at Southeast Asia. And thought, sorry, Thailand sounds fun. And, and sit up there and really got to see how religion operates in everyday life via Buddhism. And that you could probably throw within Chiang Mai, you could throw a stone from one temple to the next. And I'll always be within range of at least the architectural influence of religion. I guess now that's a good point where the whole layout of the city based around with the destructors for sure. And within that, it becomes difficult to forget or two, I suppose push religious influence out of your mind. But the way that, again, Tallinn was structured, it seemed very happily integrated into society. In that you would see students sitting at an altar probably before a test coming up and gaining motivation or influence to do well. And I think in Thailand, especially this outward expression or this kind of architectural influence really did support local communities in that. And that there is this collective process towards group cooperation through again, this nexus of religion. I was fortunate enough to participate in a volunteer opportunity teaching English to local Buddhist monk students. They were probably around my age at the time, anywhere from maybe 18 to 22, 23. And a lot of these students were coming from rural villages and talent to, to this Buddhist University in Chiang Mai. And it It was, it was so fun just to be able to connect through this educational opportunity between religions and sharing our influences. But also recognizing that we are all, are we word than young adults and just having fun? For example, after a lesson on English grammar structures, we spent some time to teach these Buddhist monks very popular tongue twisters in English. And it was just so fun so to

recognize the humanity that exist among us. And you also did some work in South America, didn't you, building houses, am I mistaken? Yes, that was done much earlier. And we've taken a small trip down to in sonata, Mexico to build a house or believe it was, or a couple with a young child who were educators for an all-female school and Sonata Mexico. And really observing and integrating in these cross-cultural environments is truly the best way to emphasize this opportunity to explore these commonalities between a hole through these different social connections, connection opportunities. Yeah, fantastic. I'm really glad that you did all those things and I'm sure you learned a lot about yourself and about other people. But traveling and working with people around the world. Absolutely. Yeah, It's chilly as a great experience. So, let's finish by just having you say a little bit about what you plan to do after this degree, what kinds of opportunities does it open up for you? I ultimately would like to get back into the world of research and supporting policy development with adequate and equitable information. So, the primary goal that I'd like to pursue, as I've mentioned earlier, program or an organization. And working with the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. This organization, there's an independent advisory council to the US State Department and policymakers on issues that, that threat the fundamental right to the freedom of religion or their freedom of belief. This organization produces annual reports on the degree of religious freedom among all countries in the world, and then suggest various policy recommendations that the US government could take on these particular issues. If anyone is interested, I highly suggest checking out their 2021 Annual Report to really investigate and look at these different issues that exist in countries around the world. They have kind of a tiered system on the degree of or how a country sits on their scale of international religious freedom. Additionally, after procuring more of this tangible experience, I would gear international relations and sustainability to issues on international religious freedom. Well, that sounds fantastic. I'm sure if anybody can do it, you can. And I wish you all the best in your studies and future, and do be sure to keep in touch with us. Thank you very much. And before we finish, if I could share a quote that I read today, the language is a bit outdated, so I'll read an amended version that captures the same emphasis. So, it reads, strange is our situation here on Earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why. Yet sometimes seeding, seeming to divine in a purpose from the standpoint of daily life, however, there was one thing we do know that we are here for the sake of each other. And that's written by Albert Einstein. I like it, let's end with those words So thank you very much. And all the best Spencer McNairn. Great. Thank you. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at [CSU Chico.edu slash CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH). That's [CSU CH ICO.edu slash CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH). I want to point out that the opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our departments. Well, when I grow up, I want to become Professor Veidlinger.