

# Jeff Wilson TBR Interview

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## SPEAKERS

Ann Gleig, Jeff Wilson, Adeana McNicholl

### **Adeana McNicholl** 00:00

Hello everybody, my name is Dr. Adeana McNicholl. I'm Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. I'm here with Dr. Ann Gleig, Associate Professor of religion and Cultural Studies at the University of Central Florida. We're here today as part of the Teaching Resources for Buddhism, Race, and Racism project hosted at "teachingbuddhism.net", and funded by the Robert H.N. Ho Foundation at the University of Toronto. We're joined today by Dr. Jeff Wilson. Dr. Wilson is Professor and Chair of Culture and Language Studies at the University of Waterloo in Canada. His research and teaching focuses on religion in North America, East Asian religions, and Buddhism, and we're going to be discussing his syllabi today on engaged Buddhism and Buddhism in North America. So welcome, Dr. Wilson. Thank you for joining us.

### **Jeff Wilson** 00:44

Thank you very much. Glad to be here.

### **Ann Gleig** 00:47

Hi, Jeff. Thank you for making time. So we just wanted to start by asking you just to tell us a little bit about your own research interests, and especially if that relates to issues of race or racial justice.

### **Jeff Wilson** 01:02

Okay, well, my sort of research interests, broadly speaking, are Buddhism in North America and Hawaii, as well as Buddhism in Japan, and that's where most of my projects have sort of clustered. Current projects that are actively ongoing are a big project on engaged Buddhism, especially looking at engaged Pure Land Buddhism, another one on Buddhism economics in North America and Hawaii, and also just completing one phase of a project on Buddhist home altars and their use and disuse in North America and Hawaii. So those are some current projects, past ones have been on Buddhist post-abortion rituals, on regionalism and American Buddhism, the mindfulness industry, several projects on same sex marriage history and North American Buddhism, and all that sort of stuff. So certainly race comes into a number of these, particularly perhaps most strongly in my book on regionalism and American Buddhism, since my primary case study was in the south, in Richmond, a city which has

certainly had its share of troubles in the past, and was much in the news in the past year during the Black Lives Matter movement. So there was lots to talk about in terms of race, and even a whole chapter in there about a slave trade reconciliation vigil, which was held by my primary case study temple there in Richmond. So there was a lot of analysis of that particular ritual or event in there, and it shows up in a lot of my other works as well.

**Ann Gleig** 02:50

Yeah, I'm just thinking about your groundbreaking... Was it "Mindful America?", in which you kind of are one of the first people to identify kind of the "whitening" of the mindfulness movement, and I use that in my classes and it's super helpful. So just wanted to do a shout out for that. And great, so moving into your kind of institutional context, can you tell us a little bit about where you work and the type of course load that you have and the kind of demographics of your student body?

**Jeff Wilson** 03:24

Sure, I'd be happy to. So as was mentioned at the beginning, I'm working at the University of Waterloo. Actually, my appointment is at Renison University College, which is one of the affiliated colleges at the University of Waterloo, and I would like to mention here at the outset that Renison and Waterloo are both located on the Haldiman Tract, which is land on the 10 kilometers on the other side of the Grand River promised in Six Nations, and it's the traditional territory of the Attawandaron, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee people. So that's where my work does take place at Renison Waterloo. Renison is a small University College. It's something that Canadian listeners will understand, but for American viewers they don't quite have a comparable category. But the University of Waterloo is a large school, somewhat like the MIT of Canada, perhaps. It's a premier sort of math, computer science, engineering school. So the humanities are kind of an afterthought and Religious Studies, to be an afterthought suggests you're a thought in the first place. So it's, let's just say not a high priority for recruitment at the University of Waterloo. So even though we have a fine department, we mainly end up teaching electives to engineering students and this sort of thing. So there's not a lot of deep interest in religious studies or Buddhism amongst the student body. So, also in terms of demographics, my own courses are, because I'm cross-appointed in Religious Studies and East Asian Studies, I typically teach East Asian studies courses at the undergraduate level and about 50% of my students are of East Asian background, either, especially Chinese, or Korean, or Japanese students, in that order - international students or people from an Asian-Canadian background of all sorts. So that's a very common student body that I have. And then I also teach a variety of other sorts of Canadians as well. So that's kind of what my classroom looks like. Something that's very different, of course, about Canada versus the United States, in particular places such as Tennessee or Florida, where you both are, is there's a really significant difference in the black population in terms of percentage of the population, right, it's under 4% in Canada, and that's not even evenly distributed so you have many places where it's much much lower than that, and this is one area where it's not very high, versus the United States where it's like 13.5% of the population. So our classrooms are much less black than American classrooms, on average, at least at sort of like large schools such as the one I'm at, and on the other hand I have so many international students who are new to Canada, just for their education. So that's some of the demographics that I work with in the classroom.

**Ann Gleig** 06:39

Thank you for that. I also had noticed on your syllabi that you had a land acknowledgement statement on your syllabi which was, I think, inspiring and something that we would encourage our own listeners to think about adopting for their own syllabi. So thank you for highlighting that. Okay, moving more specifically to talk about your syllabi that you shared with us in advance, what classes have you incorporated material on race and Buddhism?

**Jeff Wilson** 07:10

Well, I guess I forgot to mention also my teaching load, but we'll just go past that, because I'm currently a chair, a departmental chair. So I have mostly teaching really, if I only have to do one per term. So I have taught no dedicated courses on Buddhism and race. That sort of specialty, well, very interesting is something that since my students typically have no background in Buddhism, and they're only going to take one course with me as an elective, most likely, I need to like just give them very much the basics, and in fact, I might point out as well, Canadian terms tend to be shorter than American semesters, only about 12 weeks of classroom instruction. So I have about 20%, less material that I can work with, with the students. So you have to be very judicious with your choices. The way I do that then is try to just interweave discussion of race or ethnicity or culture or other sorts of things that relate here, just directly into the material naturally, rather than reserving, say... I can't go big and just have a class on it, and I also don't want to segregate it and have "the day" or "the week" where we talk about race and this sort of thing. Instead, I just try to bring it in at all points as often as possible. Something I also do is a Gender Analysis and other sorts of ways of approaching the material. So at the undergraduate level then I have this course on Buddhism in North America, which I've taught several times. The most recent iteration was actually Buddhism in Hawaii, which was the version that I sent you guys, and that's because during my sabbatical a few years ago I served as a Numata Visiting Professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and taught Buddhism in Hawaii there. So I have that course and I have this new course on engaged Buddhism... I'm spooling up, I should be clear that's a new prep which I haven't had the chance to deliver. So that's a theoretical, unfinished course outline which you've received from me, so I'm sorry to give you un-playtested material for your repository, but hopefully it'll be useful anyways. So those are the two where race really comes in. Also at the graduate level, we have a PhD program in religious diversity in North America, and so especially with my own supervisees we do lots of class work on Buddhism and race, among other things, but I think we're focusing on undergraduate work in this discussion

**Ann Gleig** 09:39

Yeah, great. I'm gonna pass you over to Adeana now, but I also wanted to just mention that Jeff, to our listeners, was the founder of the "Buddhism in the West" AAR group, which has really been a groundbreaking platform, I think, for a lot of scholars to address race. So just wanted to kind of acknowledge that.

**Jeff Wilson** 10:03

Thank you.

**Adeana McNicholl** 10:05

I'm looking forward to hearing how the brand new prep on engaged Buddhism works out, and hopefully you can share that with us. So I was wondering if you had an example of where you feel like you successfully incorporated the topic of race and racism into one of your syllabi and classes?

**Jeff Wilson 10:23**

Okay, so since I don't teach a dedicated course, nor segregated it into a particular unit, it's a little more challenging to answer that. But the way I would say it is that this sort of arises naturally from my particular teaching method. At the undergraduate level, what I mostly do in terms of assignments with students, such as readings, I assign primary sources. So this is what I want students to work on, I want them to read primary sources and to hear Buddhist voices, a range of Buddhist voices. In the classroom I can deliver the secondary material directly, because I've read and absorbed all that sort of stuff. So I can talk about different theories or approaches there. But in terms of their reading, I want them to actually be able to encounter Buddhist sources, and especially these are primarily contemporary sources since I'm working on Buddhism in North America and Hawaii. So what you do is, of course, you are very intentional about making sure that you choose a wide range of voices from a wide range of different cultural, racial, and so on, backgrounds so that you display a range of different things that are out there. If possible, try to get multiple examples from different categories. So for example, if you really want to make sure that you include black Buddhist voices, make sure that that's multiple and not just one, otherwise one person has to carry the entire weight of blackness for an entire course, or whole syllabus, or for a student body. So you want to try to use multiple ones and have the students actually hear from them. Then the other way that this works is that I tend to then ask the same sorts of sets of questions, more or less, across all of these readings. So when they're having to do the writing assignments, they're just always being asked regardless of who is in front of them, how does how does race possibly impact this person's story? How does gender possibly impact their experiences or how they narrate them? These sort of things, and you just put it right in there so that they're always thinking about whether the author is white, black, or otherwise, whether they're male or female, or otherwise. They're just always thinking about these sorts of things. So I don't explicitly talk about feminism, or critical race studies, or post-colonial studies, I just do them, you know, I just put it in there without using so much of the theoretical words. I just do it and then they just pick up on that method and they just do it, they don't even know they're doing it, and it becomes sort of internalized that way, especially because they're working with actual people's actual experiences. So they usually respond better to that than like stilted translated sutra material, let's just say.

**Adeana McNicholl 13:20**

I think that's great. I think it's great to note that we want to be careful to not make any one individual have to be the voice for the entire tradition or community. That's a really good thing to keep in mind. So I was wondering, what themes did you find most engaged and enlivened the students?

**Jeff Wilson 13:38**

Hmm. Themes? That's sort of hard. I guess the problem is that students can be very idiosyncratic. So I'd love to say, like, one thing hit everybody perfectly, but really actually, they tend to... they're very much individuals, and so sometimes I'm surprised at what this person responded to or that person responded to. But actually, what I'd say is that they tend to be most often engaged or feel excited about the material if they can see themselves in the material in some fashion. So rather than it being some

particular theme, like race, or gender, or something like this, what I try to do is adjust the material to better fit the student body that's actually right in front of me in the classroom this time. So I'll often look at the class roster before the first day of school, look and I'll say, "okay, it looks like I have a number of Vietnamese students", so then I'll adjust the material on the course outline to make sure that I include some Vietnamese Canadian or American voices, or classical Vietnamese sources, or something like this, try to lean into the student body that I have, and on the first day... and that's just an example, there's all sorts of students one receives, of course. On the first day I usually ask, sometimes with an actual quick questionnaire I pass out, or maybe just polling the students on the day, I asked them what their interests are, why are they in taking this course, and what is it they'd like to get out of it, and then I take that and try to adjust the material and lean into those interests as the term goes along. So responding to student interest, and making sure that they see themselves represented in some way or included in the material is what I find tends to engage them the most. That's like, ah, maybe I'm American-born Chinese, and so when I see this sort of material in front of me then that's interesting to me, or Canadian-born Chinese, or whatever, right? So just trying to make sure the students are brought into the material in some way, rather than just captives like outside researchers, because a lot of the students are interested in the material because of some sort of personal interest or some sort of family connection. If if they have nothing, then I mean, they have a lot of other courses they could have taken. So I usually assume there's some sort of hook, if we can just find out what it is.

**Adeana McNicholl 16:21**

Great, I like the approach of collaboratively creating the syllabus, sort of in conversation with the students. Obviously, that takes a lot of extra time at the beginning of the course, and some quick prep. So I was wondering, did you ever encounter any difficulties or challenges? Things where you tried it out, and you're like, this didn't work very well, things that you might do differently in the future?

**Jeff Wilson 16:45**

Things that don't work well... there's too many of those, and it's hard to remember all of them, because I do adjust the syllabus every time and I take notes as I go along. If something just seems not to be working, I'll make a note about that and try not to repeat that the next time. So there's certainly been books that students didn't respond to particularly well, and I put those aside, and they're on earlier versions, that sort of thing. But in terms of something that I would do differently, I've been incorporating approaches from what you might broadly call contemplative studies into my courses. So like in the Buddhism course I taught last term under these sort of emergency remote teaching situations due to the pandemic, I created seven different practice related exercises, such as loving-kindness meditation, keeping the precepts, exercise, visualizations, and so on, and then the students had to write short, reflective essays after undergoing those exercises, which was an attempt to stimulate knowledge by sort of revealing aspects that just objective, or relatively objective, or etic approaches don't necessarily get at, right. Also I was just frankly trying to build some mental health and wellness supports directly into the course material given the teaching and learning circumstances we were in. So those were very successful, and students really seemed to appreciate them, and I got a lot of positive feedback on that. So I think that maybe in the future, specifically thinking about something about race is that I might try to incorporate some exercises also that stimulate a deeper introspection about race and racial issues, and maybe racialized experiences. So for example, maybe I would provide like a sort of guided visualization in which students imagine themselves as members of some other racial group, and then reflect on what

their experiences might be like throughout the course of their day if they were in some other group than the one that they have experienced up to that point in their lives. Of course, that is not really the same as actually living such a life, but you got to start somewhere, and for many students this sort of visualization exercise can be a safe way for them to begin to step out of themselves. Once they step out of themselves, they can begin to get at least a hint of what it's like for others and maybe think about why people act or think the way they do and other sorts of situations. This is related to one of the exercises I already do, which is a Shantideva-derived substituting self and other exercise, an assessment which they do in the course. So if I brought in a more specific racial element, I think that might be interesting to see how well that might work with the students.

**Ann Gleig** 19:50

Could I just jump in and recommend Rhonda Magee's book? I can't remember the title but I think at least the subtitle is "The Inner Work of Racial Justice", and she has several exercises, guided meditations on those lines, that you or other colleagues might find helpful. We actually adopted the book, not in the classroom but in my Buddhist group, which was a mixed race, racial justice group, and across the board we all found it really helpful.

**Jeff Wilson** 20:27

Oh, that's a good tip, thank you. I just wrote that down, Rhonda Magee, I'll look for that.

**Adeana McNicholl** 20:30

Yeah, and we can put it in the notes when this video is uploaded so then viewers and listeners can also look at that book and access it. So I know that your time is valuable and so we just want to conclude with one question. Throughout this entire conversation, we've been talking about the very local specificity of the situations your students come from, and also your institutional context. We've noted that you have a land statement in the syllabus. So we were wondering, given that your research focuses a lot on Buddhism in the United States, and a lot of works right now talking about Buddhism, and race in the West focus on the United States context, what is it like to be teaching about Buddhism and race outside of the United States?

**Jeff Wilson** 21:17

Right, that's a good question. So I have to say, I don't have much experience of teaching Buddhism or Buddhism and race in the United States so it's hard to make the accurate comparison. I did teach the Buddhism course one time in 2006 at North Carolina State, when I filled in for David Neil Schmid when he went on sabbatical, but that was a long time ago, 15 years ago, when I was a sessional. So that was one time, I don't have a lot of comparison, I can only really say what it's like to teach in Canada. I did note the different racial dynamics that we have, just in terms of demographics, how those exist in society, and therefore in my classroom as well, so that's certainly one of them, and I do find that I have to mostly rely on American material. Not only are there a lot more Americans, but the American publishing industry is vastly larger. So it just basically dominates everything, it's difficult to find other sorts of material. That's not that big of a problem. One thing I would say is different is, we've sort of alluded a bit to the indigenous situation, I would say that this is a much higher priority on the whole for Canadian society, or a much bigger issue for Canadian society, than anti-black racism. We certainly have far too much anti-black racism, but with a much smaller population and shorter slave history and

less... it's just a very different situation, it's really the indigenous situation which is at the forefront of Canadian thinking on race these days, and it's not very good, I have to say, the situation here. So because of that there's basically constantly conflicts between indigenous and settler peoples in the news, and because of that it gives you an opportunity, for better for worse, to be talking about that sort of thing. So I do look for ways to bring it in. However, there's not any sort of significant organic interaction between the indigenous populations and the Buddhist populations of Canada. So it can be artificial to try to do it, unfortunately, I'm still looking for those ways. I teach a whole other suite of courses on religion in North America outside of Buddhism, and there it's basically constantly under discussion, but it doesn't come into the Buddhist studies classroom as easily. Of course, the funny thing is there's actually significant issues with settler people and colonized indigenous people in East Asia, such as the Ainu or Emishi in Japan, one of my areas of specialty, but it's hard to bring that into the classroom when students have no idea what you're talking about, generally, because they have no real personal hook to that sort of thing. So anyways, perhaps a rambling answer, but I struggle to find the best ways to do this sort of thing, and especially the Canadian situation is different than the American one. I'm looking forward actually to, perhaps you guys will turn the cameras on yourselves and we'll get to hear a bit about your own experiences and challenges and successes teaching. You're both in the south so it would be very interesting to learn about how that's going.

**Adeana McNicholl** 25:01

Great. So I want to just conclude by saying thank you, Dr. Wilson for joining us today to talk about your syllabi with us.

**Ann Gleig** 25:08

You've given us a lot to think about. Thanks Jeff.

**Jeff Wilson** 25:12

Yeah, sure. My pleasure.