



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Kathryn Lofton Thinks About Religion Through Unique Systems of Worship

The Yale University Professor of Religious and American Studies thinks outside the box when it comes to religion, and shares why she looks at everything from pop culture and video game communities to celebrities – like Oprah Winfrey and the Kardashians – for ways to talk about what guides moral decision-making in the U.S. Plus, how her background as a “red diaper baby” influenced her approach to American religious and social movements.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at HKelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Lawrence: Today I'm delighted to welcome Professor Kathryn Lofton, Lex Hixon Professor of Religious Studies and American Studies, Professor of History and Divinity at Yale University. Professor Lofton has written extensively about religion, capitalism, celebrity, sexuality, and the concept of the secular. Her first book, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, uses the example of Oprah Winfrey's multimedia productions to evaluate the material strategies of contemporary spirituality. Her second book, *Consuming Religion*, offers a profile of religion and its relationship to consumption through a series of case studies, including the Kardashian family and the Goldman Sachs group. Recent essays have described the role of religion in documentary film, musical theater, and American

popular music. At Yale, Professor Lofton has worked to strengthen faculty governance and academic freedom through institutional leadership, addressing community ethics, diversity, and inclusion. She currently serves as Dean of Humanities. Welcome, Professor.

Kathryn Lofton: Thank you so much, Fred. I'm thrilled to be here.

Lawrence: Katie, it's often said the United States is one of the most religious countries among the industrialized nations. I know there's this Pew study from a few years back where the United States is the only country out of over a hundred they examined that has higher than average levels of both prayer and wealth. So I'm going to ask you in a second, why that is and what we should learn from that. But first, I just have to ask what got you interested in studying religion generally and particularly religion in relation to its role in American history?

Lofton: Oh, Fred, I'm already so distracted by the Pew survey that you cited. I just want to leap in right away with you on all of this. I was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin by a vestige of the American socialist movement that had kind of a final heyday in the mid to late 20th century. And we elected a socialist mayor, and we, notice my phrasing, we, and even though there were many non socialists who voted for him, it was a big part of my activist childhood and my parents' relationship to that movement that forged a great deal of my youth. But what's important to notice is that although I was in the old school language, a red diaper baby, my parents also had all the typical anxieties of white working class people in the seventies and eighties. And in their own frenzy, made a lot of compromised and complicated decisions about how to raise their children in the way that they wanted politically.

Lofton: So we were farmers in our backyard. We worked a lot on our own home. My father rebuilt the house that they purchased on a GI bill for us to be in. That became a very important lesson. And where do you get materials to build things? Who are the people that produced the goods that you use? So it was a very hands-on lesson in what, fancily, we might call Marxist thought, but the name of Karl Marx was rarely used in my home. It was used in party meetings and in political conversations. But in the home space, there was just a very strong obsessive relationship to doing things as much as possible yourself, to living off the consumer grid. And when I went to college, I, like a lot of people in that community enterprise, was rebellious and had my own resistance to some of the things I experienced as a child.

Lofton: And I became pretty interested in why, number one, socialism so often didn't work as a public argument. What about it was a failed enterprise of speech and thought? And number two, what does work in this particular capitalist economy? What are the social movements that alter the shape of the things that people choose to do? Because that was the number one lesson of my childhood, which is, we need to change people's consumer, moral, political decision making. And when I went to college and started trying to answer that question in my way, I found that the answer in the United States was religion.

- Lawrence: So you were drawn to religion as a way of understanding and a way of explaining, and maybe even a way of trying to influence the world rather than as a, you should excuse the expression, believer.
- Lofton: Oh, absolutely, yes. No, I definitely entered in my field's parlance as a critic, more than a caretaker of the subject and study of religion. That said, I have become so compelled and really interested in exactly that line that you name, where does belief end and criticism begin? What is the relationship between belief and criticism? Within religions themselves? Some of the most operative and beautiful critics are highly what we would call obedient, believing, pious people who have produced extraordinary acts of philosophy, history, and criticism. And yet the academy has often divided those two things. So I definitely entered in the language of my field as a secular subject with a relationship to religion that was largely carved out by the ambition that my parents inlaid in me. But beyond that, I did not have a social movement other than the one that they had placed us in, which I did not stay as avid a member of, as they had trained us into. Typical, I fell away.
- Lawrence: Let me go back to that Pew survey that you wanted to bite off at the beginning. So when you talk about the role of religion, particularly in American society, as a major way in which we understand ourselves and which changes are made, and so a red diaper baby, a socialist baby, finds yourself studying religion because that's where the action's going to be. Is this an American story or is this a human story?
- Lofton: Well, first I love the history of religions, love that question. And I humanly am just obsessed by it. I'm not done answering it. I feel immediately incomplete. The long story that historians of the United States have taken is that there is something very unusual about what happened in the combination of the alteration of the relationship to both economy and established religion that the settler colonial story of America conveys. There were of course dominant religious voices that settled in a land that already was being co-occupied with other religiously interested forces. Those dominant voices, normally in certain parts of the country, Roman Catholicism, other parts, different varieties of Protestantism, played a huge role in the development of the legal code of this country, as you know better than I do. And as a result, we religionists say it was a disestablished state with a powerful Protestant view, ultimately of what kinds of religion would be welcomed and allowed free exercise.
- Lofton: So the field of secularism studies of which I have been a very involved participant, has been trying to think about when we talk about the United States, which has religious freedom, has a lot of different kinds of things we call religion, also has a lot of people who are religious by the measure of Pew surveys in comparison to other countries of our economic situation. What is that difference? And I would wager that there's something very interesting and telling about the particular relationship to violence in the early decades of settlement, that then lasted well into the early 20th century. And then secondly, I do think the question of free enterprise and of property ownership made a very big difference in the kinds of theologies and the importance in having theologies to defend the land. And I think we're seeing right now in the contemporary

United States, a reverb of an ongoing and 300 year old struggle about what rights do you have over my land? This is God's land with God's purpose, who gets to decide that, is going to be a battle always

Lawrence: One of the topics that you're going to be lecturing on as a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa this year is what you call, what it means to build an American religion. Can you talk to us a little bit about how you examined this question of building a religion in the United States and how you look at this through a secular lens? How does this, again, differ from how you would talk about building a religion in a different culture, different context, different country?

Lofton: So a lot of what I think about is the particular relationship between popular cultures. So I'm really interested in the things that occupy our time. How do you use up your time when you are not doing something that feels obligated? And how do you define obligation relative to the things you really want to do? So a TV show you can't stop watching, and also like to comment online about a artist you follow and perhaps quote regularly in your mind and in everyday life, a form of practice or game playing that you do that controls almost all of your time that is not spent earning money, and sometimes includes to have spent earning money, meaning the vast numbers of people who are right now at 2:37 PM on a Thursday afternoon, playing Minecraft at work with large groups of other people. So when I say how to build an American religion, I'm going for three things. One, I'm going for a very classic introduction to the study of what religious studies people call new religious movements. That is groups that are at their beginning, some of which will end up being wildly successful.

Lofton: The Latter Day Saints are a really strong example of a recent new religious movement that has held on and survived past its initial generations into a global movement. And then smaller movements that have a really interesting run like the Shakers, but did not end up enduring in numbers for many generations. But I'm analogizing between the formation of new religious movements and two other kinds of movements, popular culture, things that get taken up in culture, and secondly, political movements. What makes us think we can really change society in time for climate change's effects? We know we're already being affected by climate change. We know we already have early prophets of climate change in the form of scientists, but also in lay observers like Greta Thunberg. What will it take to make movements that respond to and alter our practices as it relates to climate change?

Lofton: I think the study of religion has a lot to tell us about what does and doesn't work when you're trying to encourage people to keep doing something without giving a lot of thought to it. Because I'm going to be watching the last season of Better Call Saul this weekend. I'm just going to binge the whole thing. I'm into the show. I'm going to watch it. That's the spirit with which we need people to come to social change is desire and interest. How do you do that?

Lawrence: So you just gave me a long, thoughtful, thorough answer about American religion and building an American religion. And we never used the G word, God.

Lofton: So my beloved teacher, Jonathan Z. Smith trained me very early, he taught a class on earliest Christianities. And it was a seminar and he was a mixed bag as an instructor, because he could be quite cutting and mean. But I kept on in one class period saying, "Well they believed in God. So they believed in God." And he kept on saying, "It's not God, it's a super human power." Superhuman power. God is a word a particular religion uses. It is not a comparativist word. So he kept on correcting my ... And I didn't even understand what he was saying. I was a sophomore in college. I was like, "It's God. There's Gods, right? I don't understand." And for him, the conversion to superhuman power was important because he wanted to figure out how we talked about things like Daoism and Confucianism, which don't possess in them ... let's say the Euro Christian idea of deity is not present in so many global religious traditions.

Lofton: And he's a part of a movement in the study of religion to figure out what vocabulary can we use. And capital G God kind of falls out. But in the United States, I sound like a mega nerd that's not very helpful. Because in the United States, we talk about God, G-O-D. And most religious movements have figured out how to talk about God, even if they don't have them, including some Daoist and Confucius believers, because the sway of the speech act in the US is so powerful to the big G. And I would of course align that fact of the interest in God, capital G God, with the history of patriarchy and white supremacy that this country is also allied itself with.

Lofton: There's a lot of reasons why God works well as a theological idiom here. But in my own work, I try to think over and over and try to encourage students to think about what's the highest good in your life? What's the highest power? What's the thing to which you pay obeisance? And that's going to be the thing we're talking about today. And when you think about so many sports stars and pop stars often get in trouble for saying sloppy things about themselves relative to God, because they have felt the worship of the community upon them. And so my own definition of religion ends up huddling at the question of worship, that the definition of religion should be one that thinks about systems of worship, what are you worshipping.

Lawrence: Talking about religion and public figures, your first book, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, what a great project, examining religion as a religious institution that exists outside of a not-for-profit structure, outside of clergy, qua clergy outside of scripture, qua scripture. So take us through the thesis a little bit. Well, I can't resist. First of all, how did you come to the project, and then take us through the thesis?

Lofton: Yeah, the arrival and the project itself are so simultaneous that I can answer both at once. I left home in college and immediately, like many kids from poor backgrounds, really did not know how to be a person at an elite institution. I dressed weird. I talked weird. I just felt immediately upon arriving at Chicago, a sense of recognition with certain friends I met. But also socially and institutionally completely out of my league. Everyone seemed to have proper nouns pouring out of their mouths. Everyone had taken vacations, I'd never taken a vacation my whole life, it was unthinkable. So it was just everything socially felt. And I found myself every single day, all of a sudden watching, and keep in mind, I also was not allowed to watch television my whole

childhood, that was a key element, so that when I got to college, I bought myself a television and became like many people have been denied something, a mild addict.

Lofton: And I found myself drawn to this show that was at 4:00 PM on Thursdays, the Oprah Winfrey Show. And I found myself so mammothly comforted by the existence of this program. Sometimes I would watch it in the common dorm space and a bunch of hipster characters, my classmates, would come sit next to me. And they would fall into the show with me. They would start speaking ironically about its contents. They'd start making fun of, and sometimes I'd get feisty and feminist and yell at them. How dare they send up what was obviously an incredibly nourishing space of female confession and struggle? But sometimes I joined right in because it was ripe for it. I mean, the queen for a day, so many features of it were kind of striking if you had any interest in a critical relationship to culture.

Lofton: But as I moved along in my studies, I could see that popular culture was, at the time, and I think still continues to have a very vexed relationship in the university. On the one hand, most of the things studied by humanists were once extremely popular items. But through our study of them, we often reify and make them into cannon that feel quite far away from everyday consumption. So I found that it became necessary to really get into more formal forms of religion in order to keep studying religion. But when I taught, I found I was constantly bringing up Oprah to explain to the student the concepts I was thinking about. Whether it was about prosperity gospel, or it was about thinking about the role of the new age and popular society, whether it was about missionary movements. Every object I wanted to talk about in US religious history seems so easily brought in and through the theater of religion she had created for her audience.

Lofton: And it allowed me also a way to talk about the intersection that fascinates me most, which is where does consumer culture and religious idea meet and manifest? And it seemed very clear to me, and I think subsequent years have only demonstrated the incredibly potent religious role she has played in the American moral and ritual landscape. So the book becomes a way to think about different features of American religious history and how rather than focusing as much on the religious right, which was what was popular at the time, I wanted to say, "I actually think our religious future is probably more tied to the thing that she is offering than doing." I think obviously it's both, that both of those sides are elemental to the religious conflict that's ongoing in this country.

Lawrence: Then you took this project forward in *Consuming Religion* in 2017, expressly dealing with the relationship between religion and consumer capitalism. Maybe a little bit of that red diaper baby coming back to the fore and bringing that lens to bear on the subject, that by then you'd been spending a good deal of time focusing on.

Lofton: There are two things I really felt I did not resolve well in the Oprah book. One was why is the process of a makeover so much what we can't let go of? That so much of our consumer culture ties around by changing how you look, how you act, you will change your life. How did those two things come so natural to the idiom of so many different genre of television show, podcast, fictional genre, that aha transformation that was

central to the Oprah project? And the second is I really wanted to think more about what is the engine of what I would call a pretty conservative morality that swims in a lot of American popular culture? American popular culture is really not the most radical place of human intimacy and betterment. And the thing I kept returning to over and over again in the writing of the book was the relationship between the category of corporations and families.

Lofton: And so my second book really thinks about what is the relationship that exists in this country between a corporate holding and family life. And as probably many listeners know, the vast majority of things we call corporations are still in some sense, family held operations. So I wanted to really look at what role does family play in imprinting on our consumer cultural practices? I have a chapter on the Kardashian family, which I became quite taken with because I became a step parent and found a lot of intimacy in sitting with my daughter and watching endless episodes of a show that her other mother could not abide, but I could really dig into with her. And we just ended up debating these family stories. And my daughter kept pointing out, "But look, they're making money. Look at how they've survived, look at how they survive with so little of the kinds of skills that we often assign to economic progress, yet they make and manifest massive profit for themselves."

Lofton: And they do it largely from the spectacular showcasing of their kitchens and their homes. And that for me is a very interesting feminist term. However complicated the feminism might be perceived as the Kardashian family, it was really exciting to watch how they made maternalism a profitable venture.

Lawrence: Let me shift gears a little bit, although not entirely. You have taught this remarkable and highly successful course on sexuality, sexual identity, which I understand you thought would be a seminar at one point, that didn't work, did it? It was so oversubscribed and met so much demand. So tell us a little bit about the course, but also what do you understand is going on in that room? And what is it that makes it so compelling for such a diverse group of students you attract?

Lofton: It has been really a shock of my life, for sure. Let me make the shock kind of double layered. Like a lot of minoritized persons, meaning there's an attribute to my social profile that I queer identify, that makes it such that when I enter the world and speak about certain topics immediately, I get marked, "Oh, you must work on." Prior to coming to Yale, I really didn't understand myself as someone who worked on sexuality or gender that much. I thought about gender in relationship to Oprah a great deal, but it was not the primary motif and it was not something, to be frank, I was especially well educated in. But when I came to Yale, I was in part recruited by a wonderful LGBT historian, George Chauncey, who really encouraged me. He said, "Oh, the students here are so hungry for classes on sexuality. Are you interested in sexuality?"

Lofton: And I was like, "Well, as a person I'm super interested." And as a student of new religious movements, there's no doubt that's an elemental part of what makes a new religious movement successful, is how does it assign and think about sexual practices? So my very first fall semester at Yale in 2009, I designed this class. Yes, I thought it was

going to be a seminar, ended up not being that. And I just realized right away, students were hungry for a way to think about their sexual practices that were not assigned by any natural term, that religion became a way of talking about consciousness and decision making around sexual life. They didn't want to be trapped in anything about any kind of piety about celibacy. They did not want to be understood as a single identity. I was so struck by the ardency of even very powerfully queer identified students wanting the right to think about is monastic practice something that might be understood as a valuable way of sexually experiencing the world?

Lofton: So the course became a way to create conversation about how is sex as important a set of decisions as those of economy and those of career, which defines so much of especially elite undergraduates in this country. And all of that became on debate in a really positive way and I have met the most amazing and passionate students through that class.

Lawrence: So let's talk a little more about that subject of debate in a really positive way, you just said. How do you think about having discussions about issues that are intense, that are complicated, that cannot help but be deeply personal, and as to which there is going to be a broad diversity of views and experiences? So you're going to get them talking about these things, but you've got chaos one millimeter below the surface at any given moment. How do you manage all that?

Lofton: I admit that this has been a question I've thought a lot about mainly in the reactions of others. I have not found it as a personal pedagogical practice, exceptionally difficult. And I find, one of the reasons one of my Phi Beta Kappa lectures is on cancel culture is I do find sometimes mystifying the level of difficulty many of my colleagues and many students seem to face in this regard. To me, it seems this was just the bedrock of my own education in the populist intellectual movement I was a part of. And then in the intellectual life, I was welcomed at the University of Chicago, which is the fact that I say something with which you disagree is not the end, it is the beginning. And what we need is appropriate rituals of exchange that create the possibility of really hearing the full range of how speech acts work, as not only rational conveyances of thought, but also feeling words at anyone who is in an intimacy. A marriage, boyfriend, girlfriend, whatever your love relationship is, you know that what your words say and how they feel are not the same thing.

Lofton: And that's just one of the most basic features of human relationship that somehow gets confounded in contemporary politics where it seems so unthinkable that a rational voice can sound violent. Well, it can. A rational voice can sound extremely violent to a person who has felt the razor's edge of rationalities, cruel classificatory systems. So to me, one of the ways that the classroom is exciting is how to figure out ritual procedures by which students can enter a debate and know the terms, know the safety with which they will be held, but also the standard of rigor that will be applied to assessing their success. So in the case of talking about sexuality, I open the class by saying one of the books that I teach is the *History of Sexuality, Volume One* by Michel Foucault. Michel Foucault

would, by any measure, be seen as a part of a critical left movement to rethink the shape of how we normalize sexuality.

Lofton: By assigning that book, there is no question I am participating in a politics, I am making an argument. But one of the first assignments that I make is to ask them to take a passage from the Foucault and to say, what in their minds makes it wrong? What seems completely wrong headed? And then I offer a rubric that says how I will grade that, so I make that very transparent. This is one of those mechanisms that some senior faculty feel will dull down their education or make it too insensible how they assess. For me, this allows more free debate. If I'm clear on, I'm not going to grade you on what you say, I'm going to grade you on how many quotations you use, or whether or not you seem to understand the opponents and that understanding is manifested in the following kind of habits, we want to have this kind of writing.

Lofton: So to be transparent about form and its relationship to argument seems to be what humanists train. I don't train you what you think. I train a series of forms that I do believe ultimately deduce to a space of real debate and difference. But of course, there's no doubt that many people who practice those habits do tend to lean in particular political positions. It's not surprising the way in which the American professoriate tends to often vote on one side of the political spectrum than others. But that does not mean that those practices cannot be equally and well held by all sides of the political spectrum, which I witness in every classroom that I teach.

Lawrence: Katie Lofton, thank you so much for sitting down with me today at Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Lofton: Thank you so much.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Jan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our visiting scholar program please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

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