

John Penniman, ORHS Class of 2001 – part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 22, 2021)

Benita Albert brings us part two of a great story of yet another amazing Oak Ridge schools graduate. John Penniman's story is one Benita selected because of his contribution to the 75th anniversary book on Oak Ridge schools. It is a two-part story and rich in detail exploring John's intriguing life since leaving Oak Ridge. You will be drawn into the story and enjoy reading part two where Benita focuses on his first-person account of his life since leaving Oak Ridge.

John Penniman graduated from Oak Ridge High School in June 2001. He began his freshman year at Elon College in North Carolina just two weeks before the traumatic and confusing events of September 11, 2001. He wrote of this time: "On a college campus, for people just starting college, it was especially disorienting. I was in a religious studies course at the time, fulfilling a general education requirement.

The professor was incredible. He adjusted the class content to provide a space for serious and informed discussion around the events, their histories, and the implications. I was hooked. I felt like the academic study of religion was opening up a window between the past and the present, providing a way to make sense of how the world has been shaped by people's beliefs. I wanted more of that. So, I decided to switch majors and never looked back."

John had originally planned to major in communications with a specialty in journalism. However, this serendipitous alignment of a major world crisis and an enlightened and responsive religious studies professor reset and redefined John's future.

John said, "I began spending Friday nights in the library. I got straight A's for the first time in my life. I was reading things not on the syllabus. I ended up writing a senior thesis comparing historic approaches to violence in Christianity and Islam... I studied abroad during my senior year at St. Andrews University in Scotland. It was an amazing time. I happened to overlap with Prince William during that semester, but only ever rubbed shoulders with him (and his security) in the frozen pizza aisle of a grocery store. While there, I studied the history of the Crusades, pored over the writings of German anti-fascist Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and traveled to historic sites like the abbey on the island of Iona. It was there that I decided I wanted to pursue studies in the history of Christianity full time. I submitted my applications to grad school from abroad."

John continued studies, attending the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and completing a master's degree in Theological Studies with concentrated work in the pre-modern history of Christianity. In 2009 he joined the History of Christianity doctoral program at Fordham University in New York City.

Of this time, he wrote: "I spent the next six years in and around New York City, learning to read ancient Greek and Latin, learning modern French and German, and taking courses in theology and Greco-Roman history. I taught courses for three years for Fordham undergraduates ('Faith and Critical Reason,' 'Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther,' and 'Early Christian Writings'). I taught adult education courses at several metro-NYC church communities, and I graduated with my PhD in 2015. New York City was an amazing place to be a graduate student. With access to multiple world class universities, museums, libraries, and cultural centers, there was always something new to learn and experience."

John accepted a full-time faculty position at Bucknell University, a small liberal arts school in Central Pennsylvania immediately after receiving his PhD. I asked him to describe his current assignment, to which he replied, "Bucknell was immediately a great fit for me. I was hired to teach broadly the history of Christianity, history of religions (especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as well as theories of religion. Some of my regular courses include: 'Dying for God: Martyrdom from Antigone to ISIS,' 'Digesting Divinity: Food and Religion,' 'The New Testament and Christian Origins,' and 'Intro to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.' In 2020/21, I am offering two new courses. One is called 'The Bad Place: Apocalypse, Hell, and Horror in Religion.' The other course is: 'How to Be Alone: Religion, Solitude, and Loneliness'."

John's ancient world interests collide with his current world experience and lead him to search for answers. Carefully read his poignant accounting of a personal crisis of conscience, belief system, and the search for meaning. Perhaps we have all had similar questions, but John is the courageous one who has opened his inner thoughts and conflicts so that we might better understand his motivations.

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"As a historian, I am drawn to religion in the ancient Mediterranean world. I study the development of Christianity out of its Jewish, Greek, and Roman contexts. But my research and teaching are always spurred on by questions about how the past and present are deeply intertwined. I got into the study of early Christianity, in part, because I couldn't quite reconcile how so many Christians in 2003 were celebrating the invasion of Iraq while also singing hymns about Jesus as 'The Prince of Peace'.

"I recall one memorable moment, in college, when I was attending a concert put on by a prominent Christian band. They performed a song called 'Warrior' in which the chorus repeated the phrase, 'The Lord is a Warrior.' Before the song they dedicated it to the Air Force, and to the pilots currently dropping bombs across Iraq. They said they supported this invasion and played the song at every show as a sign of their support. Everyone cheered and raised their hands in the air to sing along.

"Now, regardless of how one feels about that moment in American history, as a budding historian I was really fascinated...and a little troubled. Where does one turn in the Christian tradition to comprehend this kind of thing? How does one reconcile the jubilant approval of death and destruction with the religion's origins as a small/fringe group anxious about becoming the target of Roman military power? Put another way, when did Christianity transition from a religion focused on dying for God to one capable of killing for God?

"I wanted to understand the history of this tension better. And it took me deeper into the rabbit hole of the past. Of course, there are no simple or uncomplicated answers to any of these questions. And for that reason, I was hooked."

John authored the book, "Raised on Christian Milk: Food and the Formation of the Soul in Early Christianity" (Yale University Press, 2017). I asked him what motivated this subject, and for a brief synopsis. He wrote, "I was really interested in how early Christians viewed food as essential, not only in physical development but also in moral and spiritual development. In a sense, I was digging into the history of the idea that 'you are what you eat.'"

"The book especially focuses on how ancient Christians—like their Jewish, Greek, and Roman neighbors—were particularly concerned about who feeds infants and the quality of food they are given. The source of an infant's milk became a potent symbol for their familial belonging, intellectual ability, religious orthodoxy, social status, masculinity, and a whole host of other identity markers in the ancient world.

"I studied authors and texts from 400 years prior to 400 years after the time of Jesus. And, as we know, food in general, and mother's milk in particular, continue to function not just as sustenance but also as political icons that are used to categorize people in various ways. 'You are what you eat' is not just a cliched metaphor. It has done work in the past and the present to organize or divide humans."

John's research and writings continue. I asked him to describe a current project. "My current research has moved from food to drugs. I am at work on a book that will examine the main rituals of the Christian religion in light of ancient medicine and pharmacology. I'm really curious about how early Christians understood their practices as medical events in which participants were viewed as sick patients in need of healing substances.

"The book will focus on the specific substances Christians use most (wine, bread, oil, water, incense), comparing how early Christians understood the effects of these substances to what we find in Greek and Roman medicine of the time. With high mortality rates and abysmal public health systems, religion and medicine were more tightly knit in the ancient world.

"And healing drugs became popular symbols for different religious groups. I'm interested in the possibility that early Christians, too, can be viewed as a drug culture that formed around a shared hope in the power of certain substances to heal and to transform. Working on this project during the COVID-19 pandemic has been jarring, but it feels even more timely as we once again encounter the close relationship of religion and medicine during a public health crisis."

John hopes to publish this book, tentatively titled, "Christ's Pharmacy: Early Christian Ritual, Greco-Roman Medicine, and the Making of an Ancient Drug Culture," after a return to Greece for more field work and a possible release date in 2022. The final request I made of John was to speak to his spiritual side, and if he would, to offer comforting words for the current trying and uncertain times we have faced in the first half of this year, 2020.

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His thoughtful answer follows: "As is probably clear by now, my own journey through religion/spirituality has been complicated. I was baptized by the Catholics in Ohio and then a second time in a swimming pool in Oak Ridge. I've answered altar calls with evangelicals, I've stood very still with Presbyterians, I've gone through all the meaningful motions with Episcopalians, and I've done 'church' in bars and homes and parks and temporary storefront spaces. I was a youth minister in college and was a pastor's husband for about a decade.

"I find the Christian story, with all its attendant practices and contradictory interpretations, overflowing with beauty and richness. Yet, I find the history of Christianity just as vexing and troubling, just as often tilted toward violence and wrath as it has been toward grace and mercy. The poet Anne Carson once wrote: 'My religion makes no sense and does not help me: therefore, I pursue it.' These words have become, for me, a personal mantra as much as they are a professional motto."

John continued, "As I write this mini-Oak-Ridge-centered autobiography, cities around the country are on fire literally and symbolically. From my vantage, the single most pressing issue facing us—which has always been the most pressing issue in this country—is our willingness to reckon with the antiblackness that sits at the core of America's founding.

"Like sexism, as Teju Cole writes, 'American racism is atmospheric. We breathe it in when we are not paying attention.' I cannot say: 'I am innocent of racism. See, I have never said 'X' or done 'Y.' I am innocent.' I am learning more and more that I can never say, 'I am not a racist.' I can only say, 'I am committed to anti-racism.'

"And this commitment must be an active habit that is inflected through my entire life, directed at myself as much as it is elsewhere. I must unlearn certain ways of being in the world that have benefitted me to the detriment of others. This is hard and painful work.

"If I have words of encouragement to my fellow Oak Ridgers, to people I hold dear in my memory but I haven't seen in many years, it is that hope must be an action. Rebecca Salnit describes hope as the axe hanging in the In-Case-Of-Emergency glass box.

"Like the axe, hope must be wielded as a tool of rescue. I am working hard right now to educate myself on the histories of mass incarceration, police brutality in black communities, the role of chattel slavery and the Reconstruction Period in shaping our present moment, the bombing of Black Wall Street in 1921 in Tulsa, and the role of redlining in creating neighborhoods that exclude black families.

"The list goes on. But I must dismantle my own ignorance about these histories if I hope to be of any use to the better future, we all hope to build. This means educating myself, organizing as an ally with communities facing injustice, and doing a lot of listening. That is how I wield the tool of hope in a moment like this. For anyone uncertain how to begin this process: a library card and a conversation with a librarian is often a really good start."

John looks forward to a future, year-long sabbatical leave, saying: "Two years ago, I got to spend three months in Athens, Greece conducting research for my second book while at the American School of Classical Studies. I had never been to Greece before, despite the fact that it is what I study for a living. I loved it there. Athens is a beautiful, bewildering time warp of a city.

"I traveled to as many important sites as I could afford: Delos, Delphi, Corinth, Mycenae, Epidaurus, Crete, Naxos, and even over to Istanbul for a whirlwind weekend. I hope to return for a longer stay, perhaps for the full year. Nothing is better than living within the history that you are studying."

My wish for John is that his teachings, travels, writings, and research continue to reveal an understanding of historical thoughts and events and the relevance to understanding ourselves and hope/actions toward a peaceful world community. John has given us much food for thought in all that he has so generously shared of his personal journey and his continuing search for answers to a meaningful and fulfilled life.

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If you read the full article to this point, you must be impressed with John Penniman, as Benita was. I found his in-depth research refreshing and his perspective on our modern-day issues insightful. Thank you Benita for bringing us yet another great example of the type of person graduating from Oak Ridge schools and the huge impact their lives are having on the world.



John Penniman