

Episode 7: Exploring Saint Leo's Religion and Theology Programs

Speaker 1:

Saint Leo 360, a 360 degree overview of the Saint Leo University community.

Greg Lindberg:

Welcome to another episode of the Saint Leo 360 podcast. This is your host, Greg Lindbergh and my guests on this episode is Dr. Randall Woodard, who is an associate professor of religion and theology here at Saint Leo. Dr. Woodward, thank you so much for joining us.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

It's great to be here, Greg.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. So I just have a few things I'd like to chat with you about today. First off, talk to me about your background as far as religion and theology. What was your first introduction to that world, if you want to call it and how did you eventually get into higher education and teaching?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Okay. Initially I was attracted to the study of theology for the power and for the money. And then when I found out that wasn't going to work out, I shifted gears. No, but to be honest, I grew up Catholic with a great family. We would go to church every week and it was something that was always of interest to me. I can remember being like nine or ten years old where Jehovah Witnesses would come to the door and I'd be inviting them in and chatting with them. I always just found it fascinating to think about some of the bigger questions. And then I really got immersed in it. I had a high school teacher who's probably one of the biggest influences I've ever had in my life in terms... Besides my parents and siblings, just a man of deep faith and then an excellent teacher and during high school, I think I got much more involved and much more active in my own faith. And then really got interested in theology as an academic area. And I was very fortunate.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

He ended up helping me get a sponsorship because I couldn't have paid to go to the one college that he really recommended as one of the best places to study theology and really actively live your faith. So it was wonderful. He ended up finding someone who would support me and paid for my entire college degree. And then things just progressed from there. I had one of my best friends go on to grad school at Providence College and he really encouraged me to do it. I was working as a youth minister immediately after I graduated and he just really pushed me and said, "You would love this. It's something you'd be good at. Why don't you give it a shot?"

Dr. Randall Woodard:

So I went and did my masters at Providence College and he continued to be a great influence. He went on to get his doctorate at Duquesne, but I also met Dr. Michael [Taissa 00:02:28], who's one of my colleagues here now at Saint Leo at Providence College and he was just, again, a tremendous influence and he really encouraged me to go on for further studies. And again, said this is something I would be good at, enjoy. So I gave it a shot.

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Dr. Randall Woodard:

I went and did my PhD at Duquesne University, thanks to Michael and my friend, Dan, who really encouraged it. And taught for a while in the DC area and then went back and got a degree up in Canada where I grew up in my family was. And then I ended up at Saint Leo just because... I ended up thinking I was going to end up in Ohio where family was. So I only applied for two dream jobs outside of Ohio. One was in Central America and then one was here and it was just Saint Leo jumped out as an absolutely beautiful place to be. It's a small teaching focused school. It's got a beautiful benedict and background and spirit. And then the area, the focus on teaching the small classroom sizes and the idea that we're here to really focus on students and their learning, and really are trying to recruit people interested in teaching, making a difference, really connecting with students and being a part of a family.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

So by the time I got down here, saw the place, interviewed, I was overjoyed when I was offered the job and I turned my back on a couple of other offers just to be at a place with this benediction tradition, the small student focus and a wonderful, wonderful group of colleagues in my department.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Very interesting. Talk to me about your teaching style. And I know you have taught both, in the traditional classroom setting and also online classes. How would you describe your style, your approach to a class, whether it be traditional or online?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

You know what the traditional... I'm the kind of teacher I would have hated when I was an undergrad, because I was just the wallflower that wanted to sit in the back of the room, just listen and take notes and really not be taking any risks or speaking much or really active and engage. I just wanted to sit there quietly, listen, pass an exam and get out. And I've found, especially through one of the graduate degrees that I have is, is focused on higher education teaching that I've shifted and I've become that person I hated where, what we do is we're very active and everybody's participating. And I've found that I do a lot of hard work to prepare for classes, but if I don't get students to do some of the heavy lifting and the heavy thinking and the heavy creation of some of the content and active and engaged, then a lot of times people just don't retain much information.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

They just sit there quietly, like I would have passively and not really taking responsibility for their education. So I try as much as possible to really have a diverse set of strategies in a class where I'll lecture a little bit, but then we're processing, we're doing something with it. We're creating something that ends up, hopefully being a little bit more meaningful and more well retained. And it's amazing. When I first arrived here, I really had some doubts in online education. I had never participated in myself. I'd never taught online. And I was amazed to find out, especially in work with our university technology services and some of the other support structures here that when designing and teaching online classes, you can pretty much do anything in an online class that you would do in an on-ground class.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

So as much as possible, I try and have a lot of the active approaches and then with the online you're removing time and space. You're constantly involved in online discussions and checking in every day,

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asking questions, sharing ideas, challenging people a little bit, and making sure that people are really getting the most out of it that they can.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Right. Interesting. So I did want to touch on our two programs here that are in your wheelhouse. First of all, our bachelor's program or bachelor of arts program in religion, if you could just give me a broad, basic overview of that program. And is it entirely on ground or is there some online components of that?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Sure. For the undergrad we do the degree completely on ground and completely online. So students, what they do is they go through almost what you'd call a traditional systematic theology degree. So you're getting a piece of the Old Testament. You've got a piece of the New Testament. You're getting a chunk of history and then you're getting an in-depth study in what is the church? Who is Christ and what was his mission? What are the sacraments? All those kinds of things where you get really a broad brush of the entire history of Judaism, Christianity and how it's meaningful today. And then the master's degree is also face-to-face and online. And additionally, we serve five different Catholic dioceses in the U.S. where we do the academic formation for their Deacon Formation Programs, so we end up teaching deacon candidates in Charleston, Richmond, Savannah St. Pete and Orlando. And those end up being a little bit different.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

The program is very similar to what I just described for the undergrads where it's a master's degree in systematic theology. So you get a whole wide range of the courses from the Hebrew scripture, Christian scriptures, Christian history, sacraments, ecclesiology, the same kind of things I just described. But the online and the on-ground flow a little bit differently for the deacon candidates. We teach these mammoth classes once a month. So either eight hours in one day, or we split it up in a few of the places, four hours Saturday, four hours Sunday with interaction between. And people are really getting a degree in contemporary Catholic theology. And of course it's open and ecumenical. So we have a huge portion of non-Catholic Christian students that are doing it to better lead their own church communities, either as Baptists or Lutherans or whatever it might be.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

And then we try to form people in a faith seeking understanding perspective. So it's academic theology in the sense that it's rigorous and that the standards are high for research and writing, but it's also from a posture of faith too. So it's inclusive of all, but it's really doing it from a perspective of faith seeking, understanding, and really trying to draw individual students more deeply into their own faith, but while also embracing reason and philosophy and science and really raising difficult, but important and essential questions for the future of the church and the world.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. I see. Going back to the bachelor's program, who would you say that that's really intended for as far as candidates, prospective students?

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Dr. Randall Woodard:

We find a lot of the traditional students that we have on campus who ended being the 18 to 22 year olds, a lot of those folks... and a lot of our students double major too. So they might be an education major with a religion major. Or they might be a psych religion major. So it's a lot of people who have grown up with a faith background and they either want to have some career serving in a church position, or they want to have that dual role where they might be an education major and end up being an elementary school teacher. But they really thirst for that deeper knowledge of their faith and they really want the stronger, higher level academic understanding rather than just relying on perhaps the Sunday school lessons that they had learned. They're really hungry for a higher approach and more information and want to grow in their love and service to the church.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

What we find too is our online student body's a little bit different and it mirrors what you'd find across our whole board where students are a little bit older. They might be in a military career, just finishing up with a military career. And a lot of those folks end up... they're serving in some volunteer position in their church, and maybe they do something else for a living. And they really realize I'm ignorant when it comes to the faith background that I want to share with either the youth group I'm volunteering with, or maybe I'm teaching Sunday school or Bible study Wednesday nights. So a lot of those students have other careers. They've done a full military career and now as they're in a different part of their life, they really want to go back and get a lot of the academic study so that they're better prepared to stand in front of a youth group or a Bible study group on a weeknight and really have a more formal authoritative background and knowledge.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah. Got you. And then talk to me about some examples of topics or specific courses covered in the bachelor's program.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

So in the bachelor's, what people do is they go through a much longer process, the four year process, rather than just the two year master's. So most students will end up with what we call a basic foundational class in what is Christianity. And then there are a few of the classes that they get at the lower level. So the intro to the Hebrew scriptures, intro to the New Testament. We also have a great class in world religions. And what it does is, different Christian groups will look at other religions in very, very different ways in the typical Catholic approaches with respect and dialogue. So we're looking at these other religions and what we hold in common, how do we work together as brothers and sisters? And how do we learn to respect more deeply our Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu brothers and sisters?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

And then people work through a history class, which takes a look at, where's the birth of the church? What are some of the important people and topics that have taken place? So you get that quick 2000 year stretch of what's happened in Christian history. We have a spirituality class. We do the Christology class, which just... it spends an entire semester just asking who is the person of Jesus? What was the mission of Jesus? How has he Messiah and how has he been understood over 2000 years of Christian history with some of the great thinkers that you would encounter in a class like that? So how did some of the early church fathers articulate the person of Jesus? What did Augustan say? How did Luther raise

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new questions? What did St. Thomas offer? And then what are some of the contemporary challenges in the church?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

And then the students on ground end up doing an internship, which is not required for people off campus. So students have a fantastic opportunity to get experience under their belt. And we've had people work as youth ministers for a semester, or spend time in an elementary school working with the religious education office. Had people do summer camps where they're working as missionaries. One last summer worked for LifeTeen and spent the summer ministering to high school students and then use that as the experience. What it does is it really gives what people call that peak experience. So you're really getting to apply this stuff, getting to live it, getting feedback about how well you've pulled it all together. And it really, for a lot of people, ends up being a life changing experience where you realize, I'm going to spend the rest of my life with high school students and I just fell in love with this.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

However, for some people they find out I'm never going into an elementary school or a high school again. So it ends up being a really good opportunity to dive right in, see what your skill sets are, and really reflect on yourself as a practitioner.

Greg Lindberg:

I see. And I know you touched on it a little there, but as far as specific career tracks with a bachelor's degree in religion, what would you say are some other examples?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

It's a fascinating mix. Our majors ended up doing things like education and youth ministry are probably two of our biggest... So they get into fields like that. There was also just an intense growth in terms of jobs available in churches and parishes because of some of the decline in vowed religious. So there's less sisters typically, there are less priests, there are less monks and brothers. So a lot of the things that traditionally over a long period of time were done by vowed religious people are now done by lay people. So there's an explosion in terms of the amount of jobs and the different types of ministry. We've had some people go and do some foreign missions. So a couple of students have gone down to Haiti and worked down there. Some other students in Central America and there's a fascinating other branch off and I've seen this with a lot of my friends who studied theology with me as undergraduates 20 years ago.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Religion ends up being just an absolutely fantastic major in the sense that it's teaching you transferrable skills and some of the skills that employers want. So you walk out of religion and also some of the other humanities with an incredible ability to communicate in written and oral form. You're able to analyze things, draw conclusions, solve problems. And a lot of people do church careers for a little while and then move into an absolutely diverse set of employment opportunities, just because of the soft skills that they have that are transferable into almost any other major. You're hearing more and more when people are doing research about what kind of skills do employers want? They really want thinkers and people who are able to solve problems and work as a part of a team, rather than people that just have memorized certain things. So religion is wonderful in the sense that it's a career opener for the future because of the wide variety of soft skills that you gain during the studies.

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Greg Lindberg:

Right. Right. Very interesting. And then transitioning to the masters in theology program that we offer, am I understanding correctly that that is... it's primarily online, but there is a potential on-ground component to that?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Yes, we do. So what I mentioned before with all of the diaconate formation, we do that face to face, and we also do, what's called a lay ministry and Pastoral Ministry Institute up in Richmond, Virginia. So that's a group of people who are already involved in careers in a church. So might be director of religious education or pastoral associates. So they end up getting their masters together as a cohort face-to-face and we have a few locations where some of the students, just from that area and diocese jump in with the deacon students. So in St. Pete, for example, our local students from Tampa study alongside the gentlemen and their wives who are in formation for the DAC and then getting their masters along with them. So we do the on-ground in those respects. But besides the diaconate, the fastest growth has definitely been in the online platform.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

And what we're finding is we have huge groups of people who come from states without a Catholic university or a Catholic university would be too long of a drive. So they're turning to the online because it frees you up from being stuck in a classroom that you've drove an hour and a half to, a couple of nights a week. And people are finding, especially when you're working full time, you're raising a family, that the online ends up being a very attractive way to do it because time and space end up being completely removed for you. So after the kids are in bed and after your papers are graded, you're able to jump online. And what we try and do is, our online classes literally replicate exactly what we'd be doing on-grounds, the same assignments, the same teaching, the same interaction, but just done in a way that really effectively meets the needs of contemporary students that can't necessarily move to a new state to go back to college or have the time and ability to drive somewhere and pull it off.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Very nice. What would you say are some examples of courses or topics covered in this masters, this graduate program?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Yeah. A lot of it mirrors some of the traditional undergraduate because what we do is we offer really a degree in systematic theology which touches and spreads out to all of the branches. So rather than a master's degree in Christian Ethics or Hebrew Scriptures or New Testament, what this program does is it introduces you to every single element of that. So you get the slice of history, the slice of ethics, the slice of social ethics without narrowing too broadly, too early. So rather than walking away with 12 classes in ethics and really only be able to focus on that question or those set of questions, it introduces students to a wide variety of courses. So a lot of the ones that I've mentioned already, but then we have some specialized courses in youth ministry.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

We've got one we're offering a summer on Saint Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality and spiritual direction. From time to time, we've got a special topic course in marriage and family. So really an interesting mix because we've really got a very strong, diverse faculty with some real unique interest in special topics

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and more narrow things that we're able to do every now and then. But then generally though, everyone's getting this big picture, 2000 year of Christian history and spirituality and sacramental thought that gives you this really broad educational experience.

Greg Lindberg:

Very nice. And then also, as far as career tracks, what would one potentially, what type of role would one want to attain after completing this master's program?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

We've got a really interesting mix. We've got a lot of non-Catholic students. So a lot of our other Christian brothers and sisters are already in ministry, and they're doing this... some are, in fact, are pastors and working in churches. So they're doing this as a... "I'm already doing this and I need professionalization." And even a lot of the Catholic students we find are in the same boat where perhaps their undergraduate degree was in business or math. They start volunteering, they start teaching, they're starting to work in churches and they find that they just don't feel confident and they haven't had any of the academic study or backgrounds. So it's people with just amazing hearts. They're volunteering a lot, they're doing all sorts of work and they realize, "I've got to go back and fill up my tank so that I'm able to give it to other people."

Dr. Randall Woodard:

And then a lot of the students are in probably one of two fields, education or youth ministry. And they end up feeling the exact same way where they're teaching high school and they really do want that extra background and they're already in love with the subject and the studies, and they realize, "I'm not inadequate, but I do have some weaknesses here that I'd love to fill out with a more professionalized degree." And then we're finding the exact same thing with our deacon candidates is, the five diocese that we work for, they require the deacons to either have the master's degree in theology or pretty close to it before they get ordained. So there really is just a new, and I think very positive desire to professionalize church workers so that it's not just somebody with a wonderful heart and a great desire to share their faith, but it's somebody with that in addition to a real solid academic study of their faith, so that they're able to better articulate it and better understand and better nuance some of the big ideas that we struggle with as a contemporary church.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see. Very nice. One other thing I did want to bring up just to wrap up here. I know in my opinion, what makes Saint Leo unique is that we do have both Benedictine nuns and monks on campus and certainly in the area. And I'm just curious, do they have any involvement with either of these theology and religion programs? And if so, what extent is that?

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Yeah, absolutely. So on a basic level, all of our faculty practice their faith and chose to work at a Benedictine school and have embraced them with spirituality. We have a weekly opportunity where a lot of us will go to the monastery and do noon prayer with the monks or noon mass with the monks. So there's this growth that all of us have undertaken just in terms of our own understanding of Benedict and spirituality and history. And then there are a few other examples. We have one of the monks who teaches for us in the undergraduate program here on campus. And it was pretty interesting. We have a great relationship with both the prioress and the Abbott. So Abbott Isaac for example, showed up in one

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of our courses talking about ministry and youth ministry and spirituality, and he was kind enough to show up and do some video shoots for us and help inform some of the classes.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

And then there's this great relationship with the sisters as well, where they invite us to some of their professional opportunities or spiritual opportunities. Several of us go and speak to the sisters every semester on topics that they're interested in and just want... "Can you get a theologian to show up and share some ideas with us?" So there's a really nice working relationship, both with the sisters and the brothers here. And we're definitely enriched as an entire campus, but also particularly as a department of religion having those two great groups here.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. Very cool. All right. Well, I definitely want to thank you for your time, Dr. Woodard. I appreciate all the insight and info that you've given. And thank you so much for joining us here on the Saint Leo 360 podcast.

Dr. Randall Woodard:

Oh my gosh. It was a pleasure and it works out well because I've been told in the past, I have a face for radio. So this is better than showing up on a video for you. So thank you for having me.

Greg Lindberg:

Sure. Glad we could accommodate. All right. Thank you .

Speaker 1:

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