Interview with Dr. Mary Foskett
Professor of Religion
by Sarah Sparks

SS: Can you just tell me a little bit about your background?

MF: Sure, do you mean my educational background?

SS: Just start maybe growing up and how you got into what you’re doing now.

MF:

Ok, I’ll try to do a short version, and then you can ask me more questions if you have some. I grew up mostly in Long Island in New York state, and went through public education there and then did my undergraduate degree at NYU. I worked in New York for a little while after that, and did some work as a social work assistant. Then I went and did my MDiv [Masters of Divinity] degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York, so I stayed in New York, and then I worked as a social worker after that. Even though I didn’t have my MSW [Masters of Social Work] degree, I was able to, kind of, because of my prior experience, work myself in, and I got a couple years of really good experience.

I was on the fence about what I wanted to do for the future, so that was a really important time for me to work, and also to do some other things like continue taking classes, and continue to do more studying. I wasn’t matriculated but I was on the fence between either going on and doing more social work, or going into another academic program, so it took me some time for me to find my way through that.

Then I decided to pursue my PhD in New Testament studies, and I went down to Emory University to do that, and so I completed that degree and did some teaching while I was down in Atlanta at Emory. I did some undergraduate teacher training, I co-taught some classes there, and then I also taught a course on my own for the Candler School of Theology. Actually, I taught a couple courses there. I also did some teaching at another nearby school called Columbia Theological Seminary. Then, as I wrapped up my degree, I hit the market, and I came to Wake Forest right from Emory and I’ve loved it here--so I’ve stayed.

SS: How long have you been here?

MF: I’ve been here since 97, so yeah, it’s been really fast.

SS: Well I’m glad you’re here! So just maybe start from the beginning. Can you tell me a little about your family and just growing up--your childhood up to NYU--and how you got there?
MF: 
Yes, so it’s a little complicated. I was born in Japan. I was born to an ethnic Chinese mother, to my birth mother. I ended up being placed—well, I ended up being taken—to a hospital in Tokyo. I don’t really know many details about that story. I’ve heard the story throughout my life and it was confirmed through communication that I’ve had with a catholic sister over the years.

The story was that my birth grandfather brought me to this hospital. I was very premature, so I was at the hospital for several months, and then ended up going to an affiliated orphanage in Yokohama, which is also in Japan. Both the hospital and the orphanage were run by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. So I ended up in Yokohama where my family was living at the time. My father was in the Navy and they were stationed in Yokohama, and my mom and my dad had four boys who had been born to them—four boys in five years!

SS:  Jeez!

MF:  I think my mother really wanted a daughter.

SS: Yeah, exactly.

MF:  So they adopted me and we lived in Japan for another… at least another year after that, and then we came to the U.S. We were in Florida for a few years and then my father was stationed in Morocco, North Africa. So then we went there, we were there for a short time. Then my father retired from the military (he retired in New York) and that’s why I ended up growing up on Long Island for the most part.

SS:  So what was it like growing up with four boys in the family?

MF:  So it’s pretty much probably why I’m a feminist. (laughs) I mean seriously, I grew up really aware of, you know I wouldn’t have articulated it in this way at the time, but I was very aware of really strong gender expectations and dynamics. I saw how that impacted both the lives of my brothers, and [it] also impacted me. So it was very interesting. But I grew up in a close family, and I grew up close to all of my brothers.

SS:  So what are they [the brothers] doing now?
MF: They are spread out in different parts of the country. Some are up in the Northeast. They’re really doing quite various things. My nephew is here at Wake Forest now, he is the son of my youngest brother. Their family is now outside of Boston, but my nephew is here.

SS: Oh really? Do you see him often?

MF: I see him when I can; he stays pretty busy. I want to give him his space, but we keep up—it’s great, I love it.

SS: So did your upbringing shape what you thought you wanted to do? How did you get started in social work?

MF: That’s a great question…

SS: Or how did you get to NYU, did you just want to be in the city?

MF: I really wanted to be in the city. I really, growing up close to New York, I really was intrigued by the city, though didn’t spend a lot of time there, but when I did go it really just captured my imagination, and I thought, “I really want to spend some time here”. I always knew about the city because my father commuted, he was one of these commuters, so unfortunately for him his life was pretty much framed by this train ride back and forth everyday into New York.

SS: Where on Long Island did you live, sorry to interrupt?

MF: East Northport, so I’m commuting distance. I think, you know, I was raised a Roman Catholic by a very devout mother, by the way my mother lives here in Clemmons, yeah, she moved here a few years after I came to Wake – it’s been really nice. I was raised to care about people, you know, and to note where there is need and to respond to that. So…

SS: It’s a very good quality to have.

MF: Well, it was just a very important part of my upbringing, so I have to thank my mother for that. So when I decided to go to NYU, I actually started out with a different intention: to go into special education. It was a very small program. But in those days you were asked to major, declare your major, very early on, very different from the Wake Forest model, which is why I love the Wake Forest model.

It was just too soon, I just, I was not at all ready to be making that significant a decision. And so I pulled back out of that and realized I needed, I needed time, I needed to do more study, I needed, you know, to kind of learn a lot more, discover a lot more, before I made a
commitment to a particular major, and to a profession at that. So that’s my plug for how we do things here. It’s also, I can assure people that when students are nervous about what they major in not to be so nervous, to really follow what you love and you will find your way, which is what I ended up doing.

I ended up majoring in psychology, which I loved and then after I graduated from NYU, I looked for a way in which I could use my degree. It was limited, you know, just having my bachelors [degree], but that’s how I ended up finding work as a social work assistant at an agency in Manhattan. That was really good experience.

At the same time, I was very much interested in making connections between theology and psychology. I was interested in psych and religion, and that’s why I ended up going to Union Theological Seminary, which has a very strong psych and religion program. Along the way though, I discovered as part of my requirements the academic study of the bible. I discovered biblical studies, which was a complete surprise to me. I went into the class begrudgingly--it was just a requirement--and ended up really loving it. So by the time I finished that degree, I had, you know, which I hear from a lot of students here at Wake Forest, there were too many things that I enjoyed doing, and it was great to enjoy so much, but I really wasn’t sure what to do with all that-- that’s when I decided that I needed to get out and work, but then also take some time and then make some decisions about where to head next.

So I ended up doing work as a social worker as I said, I worked first for the agency that focused on what was called preventative services--working with families who are at risk for child abuse and neglect. Particularly, I work with homeless families. It’s very challenging work, it was challenging. I learned a lot, I brought to it, I did a lot of volunteer work when I was a student, as an undergraduate and then work when I was in seminary so I brought that experience with me, but I also got to do great training. I, you know, I had a lot of support for continuing education, I learned a lot on the job.

One of the things that I learned was how it [religion and the understanding of the Bible] was really impacting people’s lives, the choices they were making, and I saw ways in which the interpretation of the biblical literature could really lead people out of difficult situations and also keep them stuck there. And that was eye opening for me.

At the same time I was doing that I was taking classes at Union, just because I wanted to, and I was still trying to discern which way to go in the future. I was also doing some part time campus ministry with women students at Barnard college, which is the women’s school at Columbia university, and learning a lot from them, and how their understandings of Christianity, and in particular how their interpretation of the bible, was impacting their lives. It was really those experiences that made me decide that I really wanted to go ahead into biblical studies,
because I really found in those experiences confirmation of, of how important the interpretation of the bible is in the lives of individuals and communities.

SS: That’s a very interesting combination of psychology and the bible. So then you went to Emory then after you decided that’s what you wanted to do? And then to Wake?

MF: Yep, came directly here from Emory University.

SS: Sorry, just a minute.

MF: No, you’re fine, it’s kinda, you know…I took a very meandering route.

SS: You did a lot of neat things along the way

MF: And that’s what I tell students, I tell them “You know you’re going to use whatever you learn, and you’re going to learn a lot if you keep following what you love and what you find meaningful”.

SS: I like that advice - so you’ve been here for about 10 years…what courses do you teach?


SS: What do you think about your job in comparison to Wake Forest and how Wake Forest runs as a university?

MF: Do you mean what do I think about my place?

SS: I guess your place or how do you see yourself fitting into the Wake Forest Community? [What is] the importance of your job?

MF: Well, so, I think teaching is a really core key; it’s the heart of why we exist. I will say that I teach both undergraduates and graduates, and I really love both. One of the things I really treasure about being in this department at Wake Forest is that I’ve had the chance to teach both undergraduate and graduate students. And they’re really similar experiences in important ways but also really distinct experiences.

SS: How so? Can you further describe that?
MF: Well you know, I mean, so here at Wake Forest we say we educate the whole person, and I love that, and I believe in that, as a teacher and [as] one of the things I love. I think I knew in my head that this would be the case teaching undergraduates, but experiencing it directly is a whole other thing, and what I’ve discovered is what a privilege it is to be a part of students’ lives. At this time in their lives it’s so, you know, it’s so formative and when you get to work with undergraduate students you see real transformation and that is just tremendously rewarding. I mean there’s nothing better than that. And so I see, you know, both in students who come to the department in general, but in my students in particular, you see when things connect, you see when their worlds expand, you see when students, if they haven’t already discovered their voice they discover it, or their voice is strengthened, you know over the course of the semester, or over the course of the year. They gain confidence in their own critical thinking, you see them interact with material in very creative ways that I think, really comes with the territory of being undergraduate students and getting to teach undergraduates so I really love that.

With graduate students, I’m teaching students who have already decided to specialize in a particular way: they’ve either come to do their MA in religion, or they’ve come to do their MA in religion specifically to work in biblical studies, and to really specialize in that area. And so in that regard, I get to, you know, be a part of students who have decided that they really want to really deepen their mastery of a particular subject and that’s very exciting to be a part of that, so both experiences are great.

SS: I can definitely tell your favorite part of your job is the interactions you have with your students, so do you see yourself just staying here at Wake?

MF: I’m really happy here. Wake Forest is a great place for faculty like me, so, you know, we talk about the teacher/scholar ideal here, and it’s, it’s a real thing. I also love the research and writing that I do, and find great meaning in that. And Wake Forest gives its faculty time and space and support for scholarship and for teaching both, and that is, that’s a really wonderful thing. I’m really happy here.

SS: Do you have a family of your own?

MF: Yes. I’m married and my husband works at UNCG, so it’s kind of an academic household. His name is Scott Hudgens and he’s the assistant dean of the graduate school at UNCG, and we have a son named Daniel who’s 10 years old. He’s in 5th grade and we adopted him; he was born in Vietnam and we adopted him, so we have two generations of adoption in our family. It’s exciting.

SS: So where does he go to school?
MF: Summit, he’s just been there for a little over a month--he transitioned in and has had so far a really smooth transition. It’s been a really good experience so far.

SS: So obviously you and your husband are both in academia, do you have any hopes for your son in the future?

MF: Yeah I mean, how much time do you have? We have lots of hopes for him… Do you mean in terms of academic [hopes]? 

SS: Academic or just in the future when entering into the job force, would you want him to enter any particular field?

MF: I really want him to be able to discover what he loves and to follow that, but at the same time, I want him to be equipped, right? So his generation…they’re getting ready for a world we can’t yet envision, and I think that’s always true for every new generation, but with technology and, I mean, things change so quickly. So I want him to be secure in who he is as a human being. I want him to be well equipped intellectually, I want him to be socially mature so he can develop and thrive in really good strong healthy loving relationships.

I want all those things for him, so that he can have the flexibility that he’s going to need to find meaningful work, and to respond to changing opportunities in terms of work and vocation. So there are things I want in place for him just as a human being, but then I want him to have, you know, certain intellectual, academic, [and] technological skills in place so he can use them for the good in his life and in others.

SS: That’s a nice way to phrase it. So our class is basically talking about the American dream and how it has developed and changed over time, since 100 years ago the dream was just coming to America to try and make a better life for yourself. And so one of the things we’re thinking about is if there is an American dream anymore, or how has it developed and changed over time…that’s why I asked you about your dreams for your son. How would you define the American dream?

MF: I would say that my take on that, and I think for everybody, is that you have the general kind of American myth, the American dream, and then you have the personal experience of that. So I would say that the way I would define it is that the American dream or ideal is that anybody can come here, be here, find and construct a meaningful life and thrive. That’s how I would paraphrase or the way that I would understand that. And I would say that in regard to my son and to me, that’s very much been wrapped up in our personal histories, which are particularly
interwoven with narratives of loss, and relinquishment, and adoption, and migration. So we were both born in circumstances in which we had to be relinquished, we were both adopted, then we both traveled a great distance to a very different culture, a very different space to live out our lives, so that’s, you know that’s fraught with a lot. And I would say that on one level certainly my life has embodied what I just iterated as the American dream. And I think my son’s life so far is part of that.

On the other hand, I’m acutely aware that it didn’t just happen. Right, it happened in part because I’ve had the benefits of a loving, caring family. My family was able, had their own opportunities to pursue because of various other social privilege, and while we were not a wealthy family, my parents had the means to support us. And I was in a very good public education system, public school system, and so there’s a lot of opportunity there, you know, that was provided for me. So certainly you know that’s true for my son too. We’re able to provide for him the means for an education—a really good education. We just moved him to a private school.

So that is to say that while on one hand I can say I think in many ways I’ve experienced the American dream in the best sense of, of whatever that means, I’m also aware that’s really predicated upon opportunity and privilege that I have had, and that’s not extended to everybody all the time. So I’m sure you’ve talked about how the American dream is variously achieved or realized and how there are lots of contradictions.

**SS:** Exactly, changes about class. Does the American dream have any personal connection to you?

**MF:**

Yeah, I think it does, again because it’s so woven with these personal stories of certainly my life and my sons. To me, it really is about—what it means most to me—is that it comes with a lot of responsibility. And I think when you are fortunate enough to have the opportunities that have been afforded to me, I just think it’s incredibly important to always keep in mind first of all, all the people that made it possible. My life has been completely shaped by people who have done good for me, who have, before I was even old enough to know it, were there for me and cared for me.

I’m also aware at the same time that for every one of me there are lots of people who have had no opportunity or very little opportunity. My life could have been very different, very, very different because of dynamics of race and ethnicity and class in Japan, and there are those dynamics throughout the world. My life could be very different, and my son’s life could be very different. And I don’t mean that they would be bad lives, they would be different lives, so I think it’s really important when you’re living the “American Dream”, to be really aware of who’s not
a part of that or on the underside of that, to be aware of all the people, to who you owe your good fortune and opportunity. That way you’re always mindful of fixing what needs to be fixed, doing your part to make things better, thanking the people who have been there for you. If you want to hold on to that as an American ideal, then make sure that with every generation more and more people can experience it. I mean I just think you can’t have the dream without all the rest of it with it. And you have to achieve with what you’ve been given.