

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER 1: Why do people line up at a pasta bar?

SPEAKER 2: Is classification a political act?

SPEAKER 3: Is football a religion?

SPEAKER 1: Why do they say fake news instead of propaganda? Why do you wake up every morning and try to recreate the same occurrence that you've had in the previous days to be recognized?

SPEAKER 3: That's good.

SPEAKER 1: Why? Why? Why?

SPEAKER 3: Study religion and find out.

SPEAKER 2: Study religion and find out.

SPEAKER 4: Study a religion and find out.

ALL: Study a religion and find out.

**MICHAEL
ALTMAN:** Welcome to *Study Religion*, the podcast coming from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am Professor Michael Altman. And I want to begin with a story about a tablecloth.

The tablecloth? Do you know I'm talking about?

RUSSELL The tablecloth?

MCCUTCHEON:

**MICHAEL
ALTMAN:** Yes. I sat down with the chair of our department, Russell McCutcheon, to get him to tell me the story about a tablecloth.

RUSSELL I've written a few blog posts, and I got to admit, they start to blur. I end up repeating myself.

MCCUTCHEON:

MICHAEL This is the one about-- I think it was your first Honors Day here, about just bringing a

ALTMAN: tablecloth.

RUSSELL Oh, yes.

MCCUTCHEON:

MICHAEL The importance, or the difference that a tablecloth can make-- can you--

ALTMAN:

RUSSELL That's good. I'd forgotten that. I have a photograph in my office, my incredibly cluttered office,

MCCUTCHEON: anyone who's seen it, of that very first Honors Day. So Honors Day is in April here at the University of Alabama every year. Other schools do something comparable.

Student awards are given out, grad awards, undergrad awards. Departments do ceremonies. Some classes are canceled on the Friday of that week. And I'm not sure whether the department did it prior to 2001, but we decided to do it in 2001.

Now when we do it, we have banners hanging on our balconies-- anyone who's seen our building pictures on social media might know what I mean-- students' names on them, some nice catering. Moms and dads come. Some awards are given out. Some fun things are given out.

In 2001, on the other hand, we had none of those accoutrements. And it was, in hindsight, a little pathetic. And that was back in the days of taking a roll of film to be developed. And if you wanted it on the web, you would then scan the photo. So we invested in a scanner. So I brought in a tablecloth from home.

And Eddy, the long-standing department secretary who still works here, brought in some vases and got a little-- I won't say pathetic, but a little bouquet of flowers to put on a table on the balcony pulled out of a classroom to have our little Honors Day ceremony, which was-- I can't remember what I wrote in the blog post, to be honest, but it was, in hindsight, just a sad little event, a sad little event.

MICHAEL You were much more positive in the blog post.

ALTMAN:

RUSSELL But it was one of the early rumbles of what we've become now, that we, for one of the first

MCCUTCHEON: times, recognized some student work with, at the time, what were tiny little scholarship opportunities we were able to give them, tiny, right? But faculty were on the balcony. Faculty

congratulated them, younger faculty.

The department at that time had long been three or four faculty members, often three, who had worked here since the '60s or late '70s. And they had retired. So people who have now been here quite a while, at that point in time, had only been here a few years. And it really was a changing-of-the-guard kind of moment where they-- I think, in hindsight, I would hope, I was the only person with tenure at the time-- started to feel a new ownership for the place.

And the tablecloth wasn't completely responsible for that. It was largely responsible for that, I realize. But it was that little moment where you-- anyone who studies ritual is going to start talking about this, right?-- where you try to use little devices to create a different sense of a space. That wasn't literally the start. But I mean, that was the start of a lot of efforts like that in a lot of different places to get to this place today.

**MICHAEL
ALTMAN:**

I love that story about the tablecloth, because I think it sums up so much about what makes this department special, not just special in the field for all the really innovative work that we're doing here, but special for the community that we have here, special for the department and the way it feels. And so that's part of what we want to try to communicate on this podcast.

This is a new venture, a new experiment that we're launching. And I thought the tablecloth was a great way to introduce ourselves. For those of you who don't know what we do in the Department of Religious Studies here at the University of Alabama, please keep listening. You'll find out a lot more. I want to let Dr. McCutcheon continue to introduce our department. And one way to do that is to talk about the logo.

**RUSSELL
MCCUTCHEON:**

We got a logo pretty early on, because I still remember coming up with the idea for that logo when I saw a different building on campus, our natural history museum that had a stylized version of their own building. And that was their logo. Well, the tablecloth logo-- I thought of the logo for that reason, The tablecloth, studying religion or culture, that some units-- departments of religious studies in other places-- might have the illusion of the luxury-- and I say illusion for a reason-- of taking their social existence for granted.

Ask any good social theorist, and I think they would tell you that social groups do not exist of their own inter-momentum, right? They exist because members continually re-inject new energy into the group, right? And here, as I said a bit ago, the department was longstanding three faculty members. A fourth or a fifth would come in, but then they would leave. And it was this core three. We're now 10 people.

And one of the things you don't have to worry about when you're just three people, and if you're in a day and age of higher ed where you don't have a lot of productivity and student credit hour pressures-- that you probably don't have to worry much or think too much about your unit's existence and the ability to get a new line, the ability to replace a line if somebody retires or leaves, the ability to say, hey, that's my turf, that part of the curriculum is what we study.

But as we grew-- not even as we grew, thinking back to just trying to make an argument to the state higher ed body that we shouldn't lose the major, that we can be reinvented-- you need to convince probably a wide array of social actors that this thing is real, worthwhile, et cetera. So it's not just students and faculty, but that's administrators, that's members of the public, that's members of state credentialing boards if, as in our case, a number of units in the state of Alabama in the late '90s and early 2000s that we're not graduating enough people by state standards.

So it's not all about tablecloths. But it's trying to take social theory seriously. It's about all the various devices that we use. Read your Durkheim, right? Durkheim's an old piece of work, but not in a lot of ways. Trying to use the devices that you have access to to create the conditions in which members are willing to invest in the group.

**MICHAEL
ALTMAN:** Yes, read your Durkheim. Read your Durkheim indeed. So I asked Professor McCutcheon, as we're introducing ourselves to this new podcast audience, what one thing-- what one thing do you want folks to know about our department and what we're doing and what's going on here? What's the one thing you want to leave everybody with here?

RUSSELL One thing?

MCCUTCHEON:

MICHAEL One thing.

ALTMAN:

**RUSSELL
MCCUTCHEON:** Oh, I don't know. We're innovative. We're trying to do some different things here, that this is an interesting moment in American higher education, North American, European. The study of religion is, like any department, not a taken-for-granted necessity of higher education. So in that kind of environment, and if you add to that an environment in which the study of religion in a lot of places is, in my opinion, rather sympathetic to its object of study instead of just

rigorously descriptive, cross-culturally comparative, and explanatory.

Why do people do these interesting things? In many cases, it's not studied as simply another form of fascinating behavior, human behavior. It's studied as somehow unique. So that kind of environment, all those different factors. You don't have to do it the way we've done it. Some things we've done here have been quite successful. Some things haven't. Will there be a second [INAUDIBLE]?

MICHAEL This might be one of them. We'll see.

ALTMAN:

RUSSELL But faculty-- students as well. But faculty, knowing that they have the long-term stake in the
MCCUTCHEON: department. Some faculty-- I've written about this, too-- I think see service as an incursion on their time. But I'm also amazed by that, because the service they do-- bigger than tablecloths, but the tablecloths-- benefits us directly, because we're the ones hoping to have 25- or 30-year careers in this place. The students who seem to benefit from our service-- they come and go. They're gone at three years or four years.

So the one message, I guess, would be is that we've been trying to be very entrepreneurial and innovative and a little inventive here in our department. The new MA, I think, speaks to that, the dual emphasis on social theory and digital skills, the public humanities. So how can you be a little inventive, and what benefit will you yourself get from it, let alone students, to help secure your place in the university?

MICHAEL And that's what we're trying to do, is be a little innovative, little inventive, little entrepreneurial.
ALTMAN: And that's what this podcast is part of. It comes from me looking around at podcasts on religious studies and seeing a space for something that wasn't just interviewing scholars about their work or putting a public lecture on iTunes, but doing something more, trying to open up our department so that you get a sense of what it's like around here.

What is it like to walk the balconies at Manly Hall on our beautiful campus here in Tuscaloosa? What are our students working on? What are our guests that come through and give talks-- what are they thinking about? And also a place to comment about the state of the field. What's going on in the field, the discipline of religious studies? And what do we think about that?

And so there'll be all sorts of genres of audio that come through here, whether it's student projects, audio projects, whether it's interviews with people here on campus in our department

or guests, whether it's roundtable discussions about television and culture and politics, but just all the ways that the great work, the innovative work that we're doing here can get out. And you can get a sense of what it's like to be in this department and a part of this department. I hope those of you out there who have been a part of this department will find this is a cool trip back.

So in that vein, I sat down as well with Miranda Simmons, who is the graduate director of our brand new master's degree in religion and culture. And you heard Dr. McCutchen mention that a little bit in my talk with him. And so I wanted to ask Dr. Simmons, what is this degree all about? What's going on with this? And I thought she had some great answers.

**MIRANDA
SIMMONS:**

Well, it's a master's in religion and culture. And there is some back and forth about whether we're supposed to call it-- do we name it a master's in religious studies? Do we name it something about cultural studies?

The fact we landed on a master's degree in religion and culture, I think, tells you a little bit about the basic gist or emphasis of the program, because we want to emphasize what we see as the two basic strengths of the department, which are social theory and an analytical approach to religious studies that we more or less share, and then, on the other hand, an emphasis in digital humanities, public humanities, which are not conflatable, which is a thing that you can talk more about. But the emphasis that we've had in the program about-- on social media.

So there's social theory on one side, but then there's social media on the other side. So how do we get these questions and analyses out into a general audience, broader publics? Who's hearing the kinds of-- the kinds of work that we're doing or the kinds of questions that we're asking? And how do we have those conversations with them? So this is a degree that will blur the boundary between those two worlds.

**MICHAEL
ALTMAN:**

And so I asked Dr. Simmons-- this sounds great, but where's the religion? We're a Department of Religious Studies. Where's the religion in all this?

**MIRANDA
SIMMONS:**

Yeah, I mean, that's part of the whole thrust of the way that we think about social theory, though, right? Religion is this conceptual tool that we use to think about society, to think about something that we call culture. How is that different from something we call politics or something we call history or something we call the past or text or whatever?

If we think about religion as a conceptual tool, if we think about that in relation to culture and the world around us, then hopefully all of these things are super relevant. There was an article a while back about how a humanities degree is a humanities degree is a humanities degree is a humanities degree. I don't want to put that kind of blurry face on disciplinary boundaries.

MICHAEL So is the English PhD [INAUDIBLE].

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA
SIMMONS: But I have a PhD in English. And so, I mean, when I first came into-- when I first met the department, the initial conversations that I had with a person who would become a future colleague was, oh, you do what we do. Are you sure? But sure I did. And sure I do.

Because I talk about the rhetoric of authenticity and how do we think about truth claims or how do we use rhetoric to make claims in the first place. So yeah, I think that that's-- that religion is a byproduct, but is something that's not the starting point. It's a thing that we can apply our questions to. It's not the starting point.

MICHAEL --another master's degree in religious studies?

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA
SIMMONS: Yeah, I mean, I don't know that we need another master's degree in religious studies if religious studies is conceived of as a space where people go to get descriptive knowledge of all sorts of different kinds of areas of the world or religious traditions. I think we have a lot of those. I think that the proliferation of that kind of approach to religious studies, though, is exactly why we need something happening in religious studies at a higher-- higher ed grad level that allows students to think about those analytical skills in a broader, more marketable, job-based skill set acquisition mode.

I think that too often the crisis, the so-called crisis of the humanities is projected in this super defensive way by people who don't see the humanities as being relevant outside of a very traditional, classic model of just learning about ideas and being super interested in those ideas, but then not really seeing they're-- they're so self-evidently important that we don't have to think about what we do with those ideas. So simultaneously, we make a case for the self-evidency of those ideas and fail to utilize them in any way that actually articulates their importance.

MICHAEL I have a bucketful of ideas. Why?

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA All of the ideas.

SIMMONS:

MICHAEL I don't know, but I have it.

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA That's right. And so this degree, I think, is going to allow students to really think more broadly
SIMMONS: about the kinds of skills that they're getting intellectually and to start getting equipped with certain things that they can take out into a variety of job sites. So if they go on to get a PhD in religious studies and work to change the field and to add their own critical intervention, awesome. But if they want to go work for a nonprofit or some kind of archival library or some, I don't know, NGO--

MICHAEL There was a job I saw at the National-- not National Endowment of the Humanities, but
ALTMAN: National Humanities--

MIRANDA Humanities Center.

SIMMONS:

MICHAEL --Center.

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA Yes, or [INAUDIBLE].

SIMMONS:

MICHAEL Social media and marketing.

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA Strategic planning. Yeah, I mean, there really, really are endless options. There have been all
SIMMONS: sorts of articles written simultaneously with the whole crisis of humanities things. It seems like there are a lot of things coming out about why the business world needs more humanities majors, why the corporate world needs more liberal arts degrees, et cetera. So I think that this is a way to really start thinking ahead in those domains.

MICHAEL If I'm an undergraduate or a teacher of undergrad-- well, I am a teacher of undergrad. If I'm
ALTMAN: looking--

MIRANDA Imagine, if you will.

SIMMONS:

**MICHAEL
ALTMAN:** Imagine, if you will-- if you're thinking-- if you're a student thinking about graduate school or a faculty member somewhere who has great students, how do you know-- what's the candidate for this newfangled program look like? What are the qualities that are going to make-- well, successful applicants, but also successful MA students in religion and culture at the University of Alabama?

**MIRANDA
SIMMONS:** Yeah, I think that what really characterizes our students in our department, and really the kinds of students that I imagine thriving in our graduate program, too, are just really intellectually curious. And there's almost a sort of-- how to say-- I mean, I hear a lot of my students, at least, talking about themselves in a way that I recognized when I was an undergraduate, and even into grad school for me, because this sort of thing wasn't really available. I was in a pretty traditional path in my graduate study.

They talk about how excited they are about ideas, but how frustrated they are because they're just interested in everything. I'm too interested in all of the ideas. And so what do I do with that and how do I-- and I think that this is a way to hone and give a space that appreciates that kind of broad-scale thinking and almost intellectual restlessness and gives a way to channel that into a lot of different and exciting and innovative ways to-- to think about how to use those ideas instead of trying to say, you need to decide by the time your first semester is over that you are really interested in 4th century tech, or I don't know.

MICHAEL The Vedas.

ALTMAN:

**MIRANDA
SIMMONS:** Right? I get not-- I don't intend to go all *Seinfeld*, not that there's anything wrong with-- that's also great, right? So it gives a space where, if you are super interested in the Vedas, sure. How can you make the Vedas relevant and pitch your work with the Vedas in a digitally-savvy context of 21st century academia? What does the study of the Vedas look like now?

So even if there is a really singular, specific, super invested study of a very particular subject area, word. But then how do we make that marketable? And how do we make the way that you approach that something that isn't going to restrict your options, but just going to give you more?

Yeah, well, I mean, I'm thinking about when I went to grad school, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to study. I just knew that I wanted to keep going to school. And I think that now with the kind of economic anxiety and professional anxiety that plague a lot of incoming students across higher education, that's not-- and it's not like I had just money lying around to do that.

But at the time-- this is whatever this was ago, 15, 16 years ago when I'm thinking about graduate school, it was still seen as a net gain to go get loans and keep studying. Now that's no longer a thing that we can take for granted. Study for study's sake isn't something that I think gets translated as an end in itself. But the intellectual curiosity that students get as undergraduates that just-- where they don't necessarily have a super specific career path in mind, but are really interested in whatever kinds of questions they have about their social worlds is still, I think, a thing, right?

So how do we speak to the economic pressures and the job anxieties about making marketable the kinds of questions and the kinds of interests that students still have, and make that not some kind of risk-benefit analysis that they have to make where they need to choose between their intellectual pursuits or their economic viability in a job market that punishes them, right?

MICHAEL Hence the two tracks, or the two aspects of this. Not really tracks, but the two aspects of it,
ALTMAN: yeah. So applications are live for the fall?

MIRANDA They're live.
SIMMONS:

MICHAEL If you hear this and you're like, I've got to be there--
ALTMAN:

MIRANDA That's right.
SIMMONS:

MICHAEL --it's open at--
ALTMAN:

MIRANDA Go to our website, click on Degrees. The master's degree in religion and culture is one of the
SIMMONS: things that you can click on once you get to the Degrees page. And then with the description of the program, you'll also see this big button that says Apply Now.

MICHAEL Apply Now.

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA You click on that, yeah.

SIMMONS:

MICHAEL All right, thanks.

ALTMAN:

MIRANDA Hey, thank you.

SIMMONS:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MICHAEL And that will do it for the first episode of *Study Religion*, the podcast from the Department of
ALTMAN: Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am Professor Michael Altman. And the music you're hearing right now, you've heard throughout the show, is from Disperition, more information about them at disperition.info. And we will see y'all next time. Goodbye.

KEELEY Hi, I'm Keeley McMurray. I am an English and religion major from Huntsville, Alabama. *Study*
MCMURRAY: *Religion* is a production of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. For more information on our department, go to www.religion.ua.edu, or find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/relatua.

Have a comment or question about the podcast? You can email us at religiousstudies@as.ua.edu, or reach out to us on Twitter at [@studyreligion](https://twitter.com/studyreligion). Like to see pretty pictures of historic campus buildings and squirrels? Follow us on Instagram at [@studyreligion](https://www.instagram.com/studyreligion).

If you've enjoyed the show, please subscribe to us on iTunes and leave us a comment and a rating. That helps other folks find the show and makes you a very giving person. Special thanks to the REL 490 Capstone Seminar for the show's introduction. Roll tide.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MICHAEL All right.

ALTMAN:

SPEAKER 5: I feel like we're in the *Democracy Now--*

MICHAEL See, now I can--

ALTMAN:

SPEAKER 5: Firehouse Studio, the NPR Radio Hour.