

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

SPEAKER 2: Is classification political?

SPEAKER 3: Is football a religion?

SPEAKER 4: Why do they say fake news instead of propaganda?

SPEAKER 5: Why do you wake up every morning and try to recreate the same appearance that you've had in the previous days to be recognized?

SPEAKER 1: Why, why, why?

SPEAKER 3: Study religion and find out.

SPEAKER 4: Study religion and find out.

SPEAKER 6: Study religion and find out.

ALL SPEAKERS: Study religion and find out.

MIKE ALTMAN: Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am professor Mike Altman, your host. And this is our third episode, episode three. And I thought it was time to tackle one of the most important, most prevalent aspects of academic life, the academic conference. So what we have is two stories from academic conferences.

And I was curious what other stories were out there about academic conferences, these things that happen annually that all sorts of people go to. And so I put out a call on Facebook and Twitter for people's best stories about academic conferences. And most of these people are religious studies scholars, so most of them are talking about the AAR, the American Academy of Religion or the SBL, the Society of Biblical Literature. The two have a conference together, AAR, SBL every year in November.

I'm going to keep these anonymous to protect people, but I got one, this is great, says guy, years ago when ASCH and AHA, that's the American Historical Association, was in San Francisco, who looked very disheveled, no name tag, kept coming to sessions and sleeping

through them, snoring loudly, then would ask pointed but hostile questions during the Q&A. We were never sure if he was homeless or on the Berkeley faculty.

I like this one a lot. I can't find the photo at the moment, but I walked by a room at the San Francisco AAR that had four chairs with velvet upholstery spray painted four different colors, purple, yellow, blue, and red, I think, arranged in a circle. All the lights in the conference room were off. But four spotlights were aimed at the back of the chairs. In the center of the ring there was a mirror with candles on it. Each chair was surrounded by a circle of glitter. No one was in the room when I walked by. And I didn't see a sign listing the upcoming sessions outside the door. I have no idea what this setup was for, but really wish I'd been able to stick around for the session. That's an interesting one, right there.

Last one, this is one I think a lot of people who have presented at a conference can identify with, procrastinating enough that I printed my paper out at the hotel before the session. And sitting at the table before realizing the printer ran out of paper before the end. Fortunately, mine wasn't the first paper so I hastily scribbled a final paragraph while number one spoke so as not to embarrass myself. Always bring your fully printed paper out with you.

So one of the things about conferences I think is really important, is there are moments where the field becomes very self-conscious. The discipline, any discipline, whether it's history or religious studies or literature or whatever, it becomes very self-conscious. To ask questions about what is interesting to us, what are people doing, what does it mean to work in this field, and so they become places of conflict in terms of what are the categories that we want to talk about, what the topics we want to have, what are the conversations we want to have, and what do we want this field to be?

They're annual moments of self-reflection. I often like to think about the Academy and sort of Durkheimian terms, the ideas of that French sociologist Emile Durkheim. And he talks about how the rituals that these tribes in Australia engage in are moments where they represent the tribe to themselves, the clan to themselves through the sort of symbols that they use. And that's what conferences are. We represent the field to ourselves in the field.

So there's going to be conflict. And I talked recently to Laura Levitt who was our Aronov speaker this past spring. She gave a wonderful talk here on campus. And while she was here I wanted to ask her about an experience she had at last year's American Academy of Religion conference.

And so I want to play this discussion we had. And you can go find a blog post where she writes about this. But a moment, a very arresting moment that she had at the AAR.

LAURA LEVITT: So I went to a panel that was devoted to the work of Michelle Alexander, the author of the new *Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. And you know, she's a quite famous lawyer and activist. And although I was not particularly keen on the kind of Christianness revolutionary love, I thought, well, this was a one-hour kind of lunchtime session, a major plenary.

So I walk into this darkened room and they had big screens. There was a nice velvet table. And on one end was the president of the AAR, Serene Jones, who was an attractive, middle aged, white woman donning kind of golden velvet or something on this side, and there were two black women sitting on the other side.

And I just was really going to hear Michelle Alexander because that's when I thought I was doing. But it turned out that the session was set up as a conversation between Michelle Alexander and another woman. And this other African-American woman, her name is Kelly Brown Douglas and she's a professor of religion at Goucher College and she's also a canon theologian at the National Cathedral. And Brown Douglas had just written a book called *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, which is an Orbis Press book.

MIKE ALTMAN: Orbis is a Catholic publisher, right?

LAURA LEVITT: Yeah. They were known for doing liberation theology so it's kind of progressive, religious press, et cetera. Social Justice ministry, she came out of union.

MIKE ALTMAN: Gotcha

LAURA LEVITT: And what I didn't quite understand, there was some banter as Serene Jones introduced the two speakers in the conversation, that they would maybe talk about the seminary and I just kind of blanked it out because I was here to hear Michelle Alexander talk about her work. And so she starts out. She tells these amazing stories about how she got involved with this. She is in California, she is seeing all of these young black men who are in the criminal justice system. She tells these amazing stories. It's very, very moving. Again, it's a darkened room. There are big television screens, jumbo screens, because there are a couple hundred people in the room. I mean, I would say 400 people in the room. I am not good with numbers but it's a lot of people in the dark.

And so as Michelle Alexander is going on and talking about revolution, how you can't reform the system. You need to revolutionize it. It's just really so bad. And I'm like, yeah, I'm with you. She's talking about the Black Panthers. I'm like, yeah. This is making sense. I'm going there. And all of a sudden she goes from revolution, she says, and what we need, the answer is the church.

MICHELLE ALEXANDER: Because there is a community that ought to be the center of that revolutionary change. And claims, by who they call themselves, they are. And that they're willing to have the courage to do that. And that's the faith community. That's the church. And so maybe there's a myth that there is a faith community or church in America.

Because it seems to me that that's the role.

KELLY BROWN DOUGLAS: You can rail against the system and call it out and talk about the facts and lay out what the law is. And you could rail against it all. But in the end it is all sound and fury, signifying nothing if it isn't really coming from that place of revolutionary love, If you aren't offering a path that is rooted in the recognition of the divinity of each and every one of us. And the necessity of building a movement grounded in that reality, it's all sound and fury signifying nothing. These systems will keep replicating ourselves and nothing in the end will truly change. And that helped to begin my own kind of path back.

LAURA LEVITT: I turn to the graduate student sitting next to me and I say, hey, crusade. That's all I can think of. It's like, oh my God. What happened? It was shocking to me I was just I was really like shaken and then it turned out, I slowly discover, because I hadn't been following Michelle Alexander, maybe that was my fault, that she had now left her sort of legal position and had become a new professor at Union seminary.

She's a visiting professor there. She had found her Christianity recently and this was kind of her debut.

MIKE ALTMAN: Right.

LAURA LEVITT: And I just was really, really shocked. And also there was no time for any questions. Because it was darkened room, it was an hour session. So by the time this happened, and people were amening, I mean, it was a whole thing.

MIKE ALTMAN: So I'm imagining our undergraduate students who hear this. What's the shocking thing? What

was shocking? Because I'm imagining some of our students and some of our listeners may not know. Maybe they sense it but they're not getting--

LAURA LEVITT: OK. So there are two things. One is that this was this progressive moment and I think sometimes people think, when they think about public religion that it's only on the right, OK? And they think, oh, it's those evangelical Christians like many folks down here in Alabama. But there is progressive religion and union is a side of that kind of progressive religious position.

And what I was surprised and uncomfortable about was, as a Jewish woman in the room at an academic conference, I was all of a sudden swept into this, or I would say interpolated, like taken over by. I was supposed to be a part of this big collective universal message that was revolutionary. And the revolution was Jesus and the church.

And I am not a Christian. And when I go to a professional conference in my field, I don't expect to be asked to amen a speaker who is best known for her work about the new Jim Crow. So I was a little shocked by this.

MIKE ALTMAN: So do you think, was this a unique moment? So in the American Academy of Religion or in our field or in this meeting? Or is this something that you think we see other times and places? This a trend, I guess as well?

LAURA LEVITT: Well, I think it happens at different moments because of the history of the field. So the field is this kind of mishmash, right? So that for a long time in many places I'm sure, I think I was talking to some of the other faculty here, for a long time this department had courses on religion that were only taught by Christian clergy, mostly Protestant clergy for a long, long time until about 50 years ago, when you started having--

MIKE ALTMAN: That's how we're marking this 50th anniversary next week is the day that it's shifted from the local clergy that were teaching classes to PhDs.

LAURA LEVITT: Exactly. So I know there is this history and I appreciate what some of those early folks were trying to open up. But it's also marked by a kind of hegemonic discourse. Real religion is a kind of Protestant thing. And so even when we define what religion is, it's usually defined as privatized, individual faith. And you know, I write about secular Jews. And I write about, being Jewish is about practice, you know. It's about doing. And if you're a Buddhists it's about what you do.

I mean, so I understand that my field was started by Protestant Christians and that the field

itself is always fraught because there are folks who have normative faith commitments. And they can be a part of some of the kind of work they do as theologians. Some of them teach in religious-identified colleges or seminary schools where actually in order to be tenured you have to be a Christian. Or you have to adhere to certain kinds of practices.

And even at Jewish seminaries there's some of that too, by the way. You can't be a faculty member, for a long time, maybe it's changed at the Jewish Theological Seminary, which is a conservative movement, which is not conservative politically but kind of liberal, which is also kind of conservative. But it's not orthodox, OK? That's important and it's been a real bastion of Jewish learning. But the expectation is that you are observant of Jewish law.

So not necessarily a place for secular Jews on the faculty. And lots of folks who teach Jewish studies teach a lot of different stuff, not always in a religion department. But I teach in a religion department so I appreciate that this can be a part of things. I knew what the theme was, but I just was not expecting it in this session. It was just shocking. I was just shocked by it.

MIKE ALTMAN: And I think the shock is doubled by it being a plenary session, so one of these main big sessions drawing on the overall theme of the whole meeting with the president of the whole thing there.

LAURA LEVITT: Right.

MIKE ALTMAN: This wasn't a side gig with 50 people.

LAURA LEVITT: No, no, no, no.

MIKE ALTMAN: Off in the bottom of a hotel somewhere.

LAURA LEVITT: Right, and not only that. I felt like she had introduced them. So my big experience at the AAR where this happened was many years ago, when the dancer Bill T. Jones came to the AAR to perform. And he thought he was going to a religion conference. And nobody explained to him that this was the study of religion and that it wasn't like we want you to create a religious experience.

And I went to that session because, again, he was this extraordinary artist. He is an extraordinary artist who I have oodles of respect for and who I just admire his work. I think he's a genius winner, et cetera. But we're in this huge auditorium there and he's doing this performative thing where he's bringing in the audience. This is many years, maybe 12 years

ago, I don't know.

And in Washington and I'll never forget it. He was asking us all to join in it. Join with him, like be a part of it. And I was a little younger and I was a little more feisty. I protested.

I kind of got up and I said, not all of us want to join. Because it's that appropriative move that I think I personally find very hard. I don't like being kind of taken over by somebody else's narrative. I don't want somebody else to tell me who I am and that I'm a part of this big thing that's not mine. And it's like, no. I was like, no, I don't want to be a part of this.

And I'm arguing with Bill T. Jones in this public setting. But there was a space.

MIKE ALTMAN: Well, it takes two to tango.

LAURA LEVITT: Right. Exactly. So I had done that and I have a friend who, it's one of his favorite memories of me doing this. But I couldn't help myself. But here there wasn't even an opportunity for me to say, time out. Because it was over and there was no interaction with the audience.

MIKE ALTMAN: And it's interesting. What always interests me about these situations when they come up, I think about when they had the Tibetan sand painting one year. It was which practices and which sorts of religion are let in this way, right? So for example, a couple years ago they had Jimmy Carter, right? But when he was alive no one ever thought to invite Ronald Reagan or no one ever thought to invite Mike Huckabee or anyone like that. I made the joke one year when they had the Tibetan sand painting, which was lovely and all that, but I have yet to see the snake handling demonstration that's at the AAR at the book exhibit.

LAURA LEVITT: Yeah, or apropos of that Tibetan practice, you know? Apparently prayer warriors are very concerned about those Tibetan practices. But they didn't do a prayer warrior official session.

MIKE ALTMAN: Right. Yeah.

LAURA LEVITT: I think you're right about that one.

MIKE ALTMAN: We don't have a prayer walk around the conference center. So it is always intriguing to me, there is a kind of politics to these religious practices that get celebrated in these sorts of ways. Which voices are allowed? And I mean, that's where I tend to fall in sort of a, let's just not do any of it. And I love Michelle O'Connor's book. I've actually been listening to the ebook of it. But again, I share your thing of I came for the social science.

So you wrote a blog post about this. Appeared on the bulletin for Study Religion. I'll put the link in our show notes for those wanting to read it. And it sort of lays out what she's already said. I'm curious what reaction you got back. Because it kind of zipped around the very small world of religious studies social media. It sort of zipped around. There were comments on it. I was curious what sort of reactions you got when you flagged this as, hey guys, this is kind of unnerving.

LAURA LEVITT: Yeah, well, I ran into Matt Sheedy, who is the editor not long after and he heard an earful from me. Because I just was beside myself and anybody who wanted to hear it would hear it. He said, oh, you should just write it. I'll publish it.

And I had written something else for him in the past. But apparently they got more hits. It was one of the highest read blogs that they've had. So it definitely struck a chord with lots of folks. And I think it was the folks who are critical of any kind of normativising, like some folks in this department.

It also, I think, for all of the minority communities who are a part of the AAR. So if you do Jewish studies, you do Islamic studies, if you do Hinduism, if you do Buddhism, if you are sick, this spoke to you in the sense that, are we welcome here?

So I think that was a big piece of it. I did hear from Jack Fitzmier, who was very respectful. He's the executive director of the AAR. And said he appreciated that I had called attention to this as a problem. And he didn't have to call me and I really appreciated that.

I never heard from the President of the AAR. And I really hold her responsible. I mean, in the sense that this was her vision. And again, I think Union Seminary does a really important thing as a liberal bastion, as a kind of left side of theological education. And has a very important history.

But I think what happened in this instance is she kind of conflated her role as the president of that institution and her role as the president of this professional organization. And because Michelle Alexander was new to religious discourse, I feel badly going after her because, you know, someone should have told her, like the president of the organization.

MIKE ALTMAN: There is a sense of like, she's like the new friend that shows at Thanksgiving. Doesn't know where all the family landmines are.

LAURA LEVITT: Right. And you know, and I think that the conversation with its theological turn may have made a great deal of sense at Union in a more sectarian context. But it was the publicness of this under the auspices of this professional organization that I found very daunting.

MIKE ALTMAN: So what do you what do you see happening in the future? So next year's theme, because the president changes every year, next year's as president is Eddie Glaude, or this coming year's president Eddie Glaude, who was our Aronov speaker last year. And I think his theme is something about religion and the marginalized.

LAURA LEVITT: Vulnerability.

MIKE ALTMAN: Vulnerability, something like that. And then the following year, the new president will be David Gushee, who has a master at a Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia on top of teaching at Mercer, where he's a Christian ethicist. So I'm just curious, you talk about something that happened 12 years ago and that this happens. Do you see, is it more of the same? Is this an issue you think's going to happen more often, less often? Are we learning from this?

LAURA LEVITT: I am not sure. I think what Jack Fitzmier said to me was something like, well, not sure if this theme thing is a great idea. And you know, I think it may have gotten out of hand. I mean, it's not clear what they're going to do. And as I say, he was incredibly gracious and respectful to me. I got this message saying that he'd like to talk to me and I was a little nervous. And I felt he was really respectful and I really appreciated that. I don't know. I mean, because this was revolutionary love so this is the radical religious left, right? Christian left.

MIKE ALTMAN: Although, I feel like ISIS still loves Allah even when they behead people, right? Like if you ask them, that's a word.

LAURA LEVITT: Yeah, I don't know. I think the love thing, I don't know. I don't know. I don't exactly know what to do with the love thing. Because I think of it much more in Christian terms. For me that's what resonates. So I don't know.

I mean, I don't know with what's going to happen with people who come from a different part of the Christian religious spectrum. Because even if you're a progressive within a kind of Baptist context it's going to have a different resonance. And I'm concerned about some of the normativising. And I think some of this comes through in the critical work of people like Finbarr Curtis, who was here for a couple of years teaching, who was really asking hard questions about, what is religious freedom.

So for someone in Jewish studies, historically, religious freedom was about freedom from that hegemonic Christian discourse. It was about, no, we're not going to have prayers in school. No, we're not going to have the reading of a Christian prayer at a public meeting or sing hymns in school.

And I grew up in a small town in Dover, Delaware. And my mother fought those battles. And so I know those battles well. But I think the critical scholars who are asking these questions both engage that history and also recognize that now, religious freedom is freedom from a kind of respect for cultural difference.

And that somehow all of a sudden, again, there's no acknowledgment of social power and historical asymmetries of power. And this is also a part of the Christian discourse, where when the Mel Gibson movie came out, right? People felt like they were oppressed. There were schoolteachers who could not share with their students the most important good news of their lives about how they had been washed in the blood of Jesus and reborn. And that they felt oppressed because they wanted religious freedom.

And I think that that form of religious freedom, certainly Mike Pence is a part of the group of folks who want to go there. So I'm worried about how it will play out. I certainly think that there are going to be lots of, and there usually are, even at this past AAR, there are great panels, small panels, with 20 people in the room where people are asking critical questions. And that's the stuff that really matters to me. Or publishing books like that like Finbarr's Aronov series in North American religion. That's really important to me so I don't know.

I think it's always a potential at the AAR given this. And then I think the other problem is that as there are fewer jobs in the field of religious studies in general, and seminaries are in trouble, there is a way in which some of us kind of do need to work together because there's a crisis.

So I have friends who are losing their jobs at the Lutheran seminary, losing their tenure, being asked to sign horrible contracts that have them teaching more for less. And they're not allowed to say anything about their experience. And so you have people who are full professors with tenure who are losing their jobs. And so my heart goes out.

So I don't want to rule out the possibility that we have to be under this tent. But I think we have to also be just a lot more careful about where some of the boundaries are.

MIKE ALTMAN: Yeah. No, I think that's right. And I think the struggle of the big tent, I think remains. And then it also produces panels about what do we do with the big tent. But I think you're right. The best panels at the AAR tend to be 20 people in a small room in the basement of the Hilton or whatever.

LAURA LEVITT: Yeah, and you can have really good conversations. And we go to them because it matters to see someone in the flesh and to actually have a face to face conversation. And then you can continue that conversation. So I mean, we have like I think now 11 books in our series in the last six years or something. And a lot of that is through the networking that happens. You hear someone give a paper, you talk to someone in the hallways. And so I like having that venue.

But I go to Jewish studies and Jewish studies, by the way, is very careful and very proud, The Association for Jewish Studies, to make clear that they are a professional, academic association, that they are not a Jewish organization. And that's a real source of pride.

And I think we have to remember that it should be a source of pride at the AAR, too.

MIKE ALTMAN: Yeah.

[PIANO MUSIC]

A big thank you to Laura Levitt for taking time to tell that story she was here. And I want to shift gears from a senior scholar a lot of experience at the AAR to young scholars, actually two of our undergraduate students, who rather than attending the large national American Academy of Religion meeting, they went to the regional meeting, the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion, which met in Raleigh this spring.

And Sierra Lawson and Parker Evens both went to the meeting. And Parker presented a paper. And they had a really kind of interesting experience. I often tell students that what we do in our department is special. We are not representative of the whole field. And even at a regional meeting, they had an interesting run in with what the larger field of religious studies looks like and how different it is from what we have here.

And so I just want to play you the conversation we had and see what their experience was like at their first larger academic conference.

Was supposed to be your first conference like this? Like, yes, no?

SIERRA LAWSON: I presented at a research conference for undergrads before. So this is my first conference that was professional and not just undergrads.

MIKE ALTMAN: Yeah. Your first religious studies conference, right?

SIERRA LAWSON: Yes.

MIKE ALTMAN: So what did you expect? So before we talk about what happened at SECSOR, about what SECSOR was like, what did you expect when you're like, all right. I'm going to the regional AAR meeting Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion. What was your expectations going into this thing?

SIERRA LAWSON: I expected a lot more people. And it seemed like every face that I saw within the first 20 minutes of being there were the only faces I saw for the entire weekend. I thought it would be a little more organized than just walking up to a table and signing your name to see you paid your registration online and getting a name tag.

And there was a more organization that came about later in the conference. But just the check in process didn't really seem like it was trying to get people to meet each other and hear about each other's work. It kind of seemed like you should come here already having made those relationships. Which, as an undergrad only knowing Parker and Dr. Finnegan, it was a little intimidating.

MIKE ALTMAN: What were you expecting, Parker?

PARKER EVANS: I talked with some of the people that went last year to Atlanta. I think Sarah Griswald and Anna Davis, I think, went as well, and Jared Powell. And I didn't really have a sense of the scale, really.

But I knew that there were field politics that I was going to encounter. It's not like these sort of, sit below the surface. I mean, it's very apparent, I think, in contrast to other departments, perhaps. But I think there's a specific set of politics that kind of has to rise to the surface in religious studies.

MIKE ALTMAN: So what are those politics as you saw them?

PARKER EVANS: Well, first, I realized that there were conversations that I couldn't necessarily have with everybody. Some professors and some students, I didn't want to step on any toes and I was

trying to just sort of make the rounds at my first conference and get to know people. But I mean, some of our basic sort of slogans I don't think would have necessarily flown if I had tried to employ those in conversation or religion in culture, classifications, political act, or party lines so to speak.

MIKE ALTMAN: And we have party lines.

PARKER EVANS: We do. I think we do. I mean, you know, it's branding. It's part of branding.

SIERRA LAWSON: I think in our travels there I mentioned, Parker, the kind of Twitter war that happened last year, where members of other departments were taking pictures of people from UA and posting on Twitter saying, citizens of Alabama, this is where your tax dollars are paying for. Like, are you proud of yourselves? All this stuff. And I remember you were really surprised to hear that.

PARKER EVANS: I was.

SIERRA LAWSON: But then the politics that I think we noticed were not so much politics interrogating us. It was more our relationship to Dr. McCutcheon and how we think about the category of religion. And I mean, even people who would nod to McCutcheon's theory, that's all they would do. They would nod to it and then just continue to employ this category as if it's like a naturally occurring thing.

And so that I was kind of interesting to me. Because the only parallel I can think of is Marx, is people saying like, oh, capitalism. And then going on and using terms. I don't know. It was really weird.

MIKE ALTMAN: So did you really feel like branded as an Alabama student? Was there some sort of reputation that preceded you?

PARKER EVANS: Several of the undergraduate students that I talked to were like, oh. You're from Alabama. You know McCutcheon.

MIKE ALTMAN: No one ever says you know Altman. It's always you know McCutcheon.

PARKER EVANS: Well, I mean, some people mentioned Dr. Simmons.

SIERRA LAWSON: Some Emory people that actually knew you.

MIKE ALTMAN: I'm not fishing, but anyway.

PARKER EVANS: We can make something up if you want.

SIERRA LAWSON: And I've met his kids.

PARKER EVANS: I mean, the students seemed to respond fairly positively in the sense that it's like knowing a celebrity. I mean, they weren't necessarily engaging with his work. It was more like, oh. I know that my professors are and that that's a sort of topic of discussion.

However, one of the panels that I went to, one of the presenters said, he was talking about re-instating the category of faith in the study of religion as if it had left. And he said something like, McCutcheon can't be saved but his students can.

So there, and I hadn't identified myself in the room at that point. So I felt like I was spying on this panel and, you know, going back to report what I'd had seen to the department.

SIERRA LAWSON: Yeah, and Dr. Loewen shared my blog post and said, UA student sleuths the regional AAR. And at first I was like, is that a compliment?

MIKE ALTMAN: Yeah, you should say that both of you wrote really great blog posts reporting about your experience at the conference. We should go check those out on the blog. I'll put a link in the show notes.

I'm curious. This is sort well, for both of you, your first chance to see the field beyond our department. And I try to explain to students, this is a very special place. This is not normal.

SIERRA LAWSON: This is a safe place.

PARKER EVANS: This is a safe place.

MIKE ALTMAN: But how did spending the weekend at this small regional conference, still I think, really fairly representative of the state of the field a lot of ways, how did that change your view of the field of religious studies or the discipline or what goes on under the big tent label of religious studies?

SIERRA LAWSON: So, I know in my blog post the first thing I said is that, this experience allowed me to see what's happening in the field of religious studies and what is not happening. And the first thing that Parker and I did, we looked at the books that were for sale. And we could not find a single book that was not theology.

PARKER EVANS: Christian-oriented theology.

SIERRA LAWSON: Christian, very Christian-oriented theology. And then I know I had breakfast, it was a women's group breakfast. And they were just making jokes about Paul's letters and stuff like that. And basically I feel ostracized because I have taken an introduction a New Testament course but I'm by no means super literate with the Bible to apply it in those kind of ways.

So I don't know. I sat in on one panel looking at narratives of dystopia and utopia. And one of the speakers was talking about multiculturalism in a children's cartoon. But it might have been a constraint of time or who knows what, but she didn't mention the problems that arise when you have a children's cartoon having characters from different countries that are representing only the dominant factions of those countries.

So that was the first time that I was like, they're not really thinking critically about what they're saying. Or they don't have the time to expand on it. And then someone else in that panel quoted McCutcheon. And I actually told there she was misquoting him and that it was Bill Arnal who they quote came from. So that really opened my eyes to how people were operating.

MIKE ALTMAN: What about you, Parker? What did you learn from this experience about of the state of the field?

PARKER EVANS: Well, one of the undergraduate panels that I went to I think had some of the best work. Of course, there were a lot of panels that I didn't see. But even though there was a use of the term religion uncritically, I think the papers were, I guess you would call them ethnographies, they were studies of several communities that these presenters had studied.

And even though they were using certain terms uncritically like religion, there was a greater effort to show the way that certain facets of what we call religion operate in daily life. So I think that that was closer in practice to our religion and culture take, which I found very interesting because I don't know what sort of training these students were getting. But they were certainly headed in a direction that felt similar to ours.

SIERRA LAWSON: I think that was also the reason that the undergrads had the most stimulating topics, was because when you're not an established name in the field, you don't really have that fear of who's going to come after you for saying those things. And so I think a lot of the people who were well established in their career were so calculated in their moves that they were not really saying anything at all because they were too afraid of what people would come back and

attack them with.

And so I think that's one of the freedoms you have as an undergrad, is you can pretty much say whatever ideas you have and you're not going to be super heavily reprimanded because you're taking from the well of information that you have so far.

MIKE ALTMAN: So, any last thoughts about the conference or anything? Big takeaways? Think you're going to go back to SECSOR next year?

PARKER EVANS: Yeah, I'd like to go back.

SIERRA LAWSON: I would like to go back since I'll be an MA student instead of a BA student.

MIKE ALTMAN: Right. You will be in our first class of MA students.

SIERRA LAWSON: Yeah.

[PIANO MUSIC]

MIKE ALTMAN: So a big thank you to Sierra Lawson and Parker Evans for sitting down with me to talk about SECSOR, and yes, as you heard at the end of that, Sierra is going to be part of our inaugural MA in religion and culture cohort. We're really excited. We have great students coming into the department to be part of that new MA. And you'll hear more from them on this podcast probably in the fall.

So I want to wrap up this episode on conferences by thinking about looking ahead, thinking forward to the 2017 and 2018 American Academy of Religion. I saw on Twitter a number of people talking about their experience of getting their rejections. So part of what happens at these academic conferences is people present their research and there is a call for paper process. And there's acceptances and rejections.

And a couple weeks ago the rejections for this coming fall's in November, AAR went out. And I have presented at the AAR a number of times. I am a co-chair of one of the programming units that people can submit papers to at the AAR. And Richard Newton on Twitter, go find him. If you don't follow Richard, friend of the department, you should find him on Twitter @seedpods.

Richard had a really good thread on the meeting and how we can better get young scholars

and good new work on the program. And he got me thinking. I talked to graduate students. I've been out of graduate school for four or five years now. And I talked to graduate students. I'm starting to talk to graduate students more and more about their experiences now and what they need to be doing in graduate school. And everyone's worried about the job market and how do you get a tenure track job and all this stuff.

And all of that anxiety often gets put on the AAR meeting, on presenting, on being there, on getting job interviews there, on presenting oneself, getting a name out there, networking, all of this. And I have advice for graduate students who want to get on the program.

Because a lot of people think, and I thought this way too, that the way you get on the AAR program is you write an awesome proposal for an awesome paper with awesome research. And the sheer power of your brilliance, your thoughts, are going to get you on the program. And that can happen occasionally. But there's more than that.

And I have three tips, three things I think undergraduates too, but three things I think graduate students should keep in mind when it comes to getting on the AAR national program. One-- it's a community. What I mean is, the way the AAR is set up, you have these different program units with different topics, usually content-driven topics. And each of those has a steering committee and a co-chair and there's a number of scholars who are invested in them.

The example that comes to mind most obviously, is Risa, religion in South Asia. Has a mailing list, has its panels every year at the conference, it is a community. So if you want to get on the program, you need to get involved with the community.

Now this can be tricky because that involves really going to the conference before you present the conference. It means taking a trip to the AAR where you just go and listen and meet people. And you go to the business meeting for the programming units that your research would fit. Hang out at the business meeting. Listen to people's ideas. Talk to people afterwards. Go to the panels and ask questions or go up afterwards and talk to the participants. But begin to get involved with the community life of the sort of specific subfield in religious studies of which your research contributes.

But that's hard because a lot of graduate students only get funding to go to conferences if they're on the program already. So a lot of times you need to reach out via email, via Facebook, via Twitter, to get involved in that community. Email when the call for paper comes out, email the co-chairs and the steering committee. Ask them, say you have this idea for a

paper. Do they know other people so you can put together a panel instead of just submitting a single paper?

But you have to find a way to get invested in the community behind the programming units that your work fits in. So it's a community, number one.

Number two, it's a conversation. It's a conversation. This goes with the community side. You would not walk up to strangers at a restaurant or at a bar and just start talking to them about whatever. You might, and if you do you're a much braver person than me. But it's a conversation so you need to know who your conversation partners are, who are the people that you're arguing with, because it's a conversation but it's an academic conversation which means it's really an argument. And you need to be able to locate yourself within that conversation.

So your proposal can't just be about how great your work is. It has to be engaging in a larger conversation and moving that conversation forward. So once you've been embedded yourself in the community, you'll have a sense of the conversation. And you'll have a sense of what you can bring to that conversation. And you'll have a sense of who your conversation partners are.

This is where working with other people to put together a panel proposal or a roundtable, even better. I love roundtables. As a co-chair I would rather put all roundtables and paper presentations on the schedule. But this is where you can begin to build a conversation and propose a panel that has a whole conversation instead of just your individual brilliant work.

So it's a community, it's a conversation, and the last thing is it's a committee, like most things in the Academy. Which means it's made up of a bunch of people who are super busy and doing it for free and have other things they'd rather do. As a co-chair, as someone who works with a steering committee, this is how it works. And so know that.

That's why panel proposals are so much more successful, because they require less work from the committee. But here's the other thing. If you show up at the business meeting and you are willing to get involved, there is a lot you can do in some of these smaller programming units. I have put people on our steering committee, graduate students and young scholars, on our steering committee because they showed up. And I said, hey, you're here. You're working on this. Do you want to be on our steering committee?

It's one of those things. That's why my grandfather used to say, if you show up sober they'll

make you a foreman. And that's completely true about the sort of committee work. So get involved. Now, if you're on the steering committee as a graduate student, you can put yourself as a presider. You can organize your own panel. You can work to get your other graduate student network that you're building at other institutions or at your own institutions and work to get them on the program, too.

So it's a community. You've got to get invested in the community. It's a conversation. You've got to make proposals that move the conversation forward. And it's a committee. And if you get involved, there are places for you to really make a difference. And those are my three quick tips for getting on the program at the AAR.

I want to thank, again, Laura Levitt for talking with us about her experience at the AAR. Sarah Lawson and Parker Evans, for telling their story at SECSOR, and I look forward to seeing all of you at conferences this summer and fall. And we'll be back soon with another episode of Study Religion. Bye.

[UPBEAT MUSIC]