

episode 4 Over the Hill

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Why do people line up at a pasta bar? Is it classification of political act?

Is football religion?

Why do they say fake news instead of propaganda? 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? Why? Why? Why?

Study religion and find out.

Welcome to study religion. The podcast produced by the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am your host, Mike Altman. And I want to open up this episode with an origin story.

Instead I want to direct your attention to a young, cigar smoking, motorcycle riding, anti-establishment, intellectual from Princeton named Joe Bettis. Who came riding into town to head up this very department for the first time. Joe was a phenomenologist of religion. He would be joined by Leon Weinberger, a specialist, now you got to get this one, Judaic devotional poetry during Spain's golden age. Both determined that the young people of this state would learn both of those things really well. Well, the young people of this state were not interested in either one of them very much. So in a brilliant move, they came west, got me at the University of Texas, and came back to save the day. We three went riding into the sunset to make this department what it is.

That was Patrick Greene speaking at our recent 50th anniversary celebration. Professor Greene taught in the department for a number of years. Retired in the year 2000. Came in 1969. And that's him narrating the early history of this very department that you're listening to right now. The Department of Religious Studies here the University of Alabama started-- we're saying, we're saying officially in the 1966-1967 academic year. That is the first year where you can find a department in this university that is made up of faculty members with PhDs in religion or religious studies, that is not being taught by local campus ministers. And so we've dubbed this our 50th year. We're wrapping it up right now. And it's been a great year. And we had a great celebration about a month ago. And so I want to bring you a little bit of the comments and the things that were said from that celebration.

We had Dr. Greene, who we just heard from. But we also heard from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dean Robert Olin, who had this to say about our department.

This department's in the top 10.

By which he meant comparing our department to other departments around the country, across various metrics of publications, and citations, and books, and articles. We're in the top 10. Which I think is just great. I just love that.

This department's In the top 10.

But the Dean had some other things to say. Some very kind words about the growth of our department, and how he sees it as the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, in which we all work. The other thing that crosses my mind, you know this makes me feel old rather than back to being a finishing freshman in college. I've hired everybody in this department, except for one person. And we arrived at the same time. 50 years ago the department consisted of three people. And how that has changed. It's more than tripled in that size and it's just fascinating. And we're working very hard under the leadership of Russ McCutcheon in the department. This fall we launched the master's degree program in religious studies. So we're very, very proud of that accomplishment.

And the dean of course is right. There's so much growth happening. But I think it's important to note that this this 50th anniversary could be read as the bringing about of something new, this new department that started. But I think it's better understood as a change. That there was a change that happened 50 years ago.

Because religion, the study of religion, was happening since the very beginning of the University of Alabama in 1831. When Alva Woods, our first president of this University, he was a Baptist minister from Vermont, and he led daily devotionals morning and evening, and chapel in the rotunda. The rotunda that was later burned to the ground by the Yankees. And he also taught philosophy classes and a class called Evidences of Christianity.

And that continued with Basil Manley, the president who was another Baptist minister from the Carolinas, became president in 1837. And so there was a tradition from the founding in the 19th century of this approach to the study of religion that was built on the idea of the evidences of Christianity. This was an idea that Christianity, Protestant Christianity, was a rational religion that one could defend one's belief through reason and through a reliance on the revelation in the Bible. But it was specifically a defense of Christianity against enlightenment, deism, and liberalism, and Unitarianism, and all sorts of other forms of belief that were growing, had their roots in the Enlightenment in the 18th century and were coming to fruition in the 19th century.

And so it's important to know that in the 19th century, the study of religion was the study of Christianity and the study of a rational approach to Christianity, that defended it against sort of deism, and liberalism, and atheism, and secularism. And of course there's the famous story of when during the Civil War, near the end of the Civil War, when the Union Army came through Tuscaloosa, and the university was a military school, and the Union troops set fire to most of campus. Only a few buildings were saved. And when they came to set fire to the library on what is now the quad, there was the librarian at the time who said, you can't, look at this library, you can't burn down this library. It's one of the best libraries in the south. It's a wonderful, how can you do this, and destroy it for no reason? This has nothing to do with the war.

And the commander said he would go in and take one book out of the library, one book out of this library. You can actually find if you want to go look at the catalog of the library at this period, it's online at Google Books. And do you know what one book they chose? No, no not that one. They chose a copy of the Quran. That was the book that was saved and the rest were burned. So religion right, and a very kind of a sense of studying other people, the value of a book like the Quran, the study of Christianity. This is what dominated.

And after the Civil War you had the YMCA hosted Bible classes. The Young Men's Christian Association hosted Bible classes in the late 19th century and into the turn of the century. So and then in the early 20th century there where religion classes offered. But they were taught by local ministers. And so even up until the 50s and 60s you had the local Catholic priests would teach a class on Catholicism, or on Christianity, or the New Testament. You had the Baptist minister who would teach a class. You might have a local rabbi teach a class. And these are all taught by sort of what we think of as an insider. So this was not, again this was still not the academic study of religion as we think about it now.

And so that's what we're signaling that changed in 1963. They hired Joe Bettis, who you've already heard described as this motorcycle riding rebel. And they put together an advisory board. And they put together a proposal to raise money from the Danforth foundation, who would help fund the founding of this new

department. And so that's what happened 50 years ago. These three men that you heard described by Dr. Greene began this department as a place to study religion as an academic discipline. And it has grown. And it has changed. And we're now full of so many people. How many people are there? Just listen. Just listen to how many people are in our department right now.

Russell McCutcheon.

Marinda Simmons.

Eleanor Finnegan.

Nathan Lorne.

Steve Jacob.

[? Baya ?] [? Toona. ?]

Ted Troste.

[? Suma ?] [? Ikiuchi. ?]

[? Stephen ?] [? Raymie. ?]

And all those people study a whole lot of things, so many things. Listen to all the things those people study.

In the Caribbean and the American South.

The acts of identification in [? social ?] information.

The contemporary religious identity in India.

Judaism, Hebrew Bible Old Testament, and Holocaust and genocide.

And the politics of classification.

Islam and minority communities within the Islamic tradition.

Philosophy, religion, and the intersection of development studies and religious studies.

Religion in popular culture and religious texts.

The ethnography of religion.

And so we have grown. We have grown from our founding by the motorcycle riding Joe Bettis, and the three path blazing early professors, to a large department with a master's program. But I think if you want to know the whole story of that growth, and what's happened as we've grown over the past 50 years, Ted Troste--

I'm going to be the one with the anecdotes.

Gave a great talk at our 50th anniversary, which he outlined a lot of the history of this department since its founding.

50 years ago today, in all likelihood--

But he started with a very interesting story.

Four seasoned, yet useful minstrels were connected by various electrical apparatuses to a Studer Jay 37 four track tape machine in a candlelit chamber, somewhere along London's Abbey Road. They were recording segments of the songs that would quickly acquire gospel status in the canon of rock and roll music. Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band by the Beatles appeared in retail emporia across the globe, just after the conclusion of the 1966-1967 academic year and just before the commencement of what was about to be called the summer of love.

Its opening track offers a story of origin. It was 20 years ago today, Paul McCartney intones, Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play. Foundation myths are tricky. Apart from the question of whether or not there ever was a Sergeant Pepper in the first place, the question we can probably hand over to speculative theologians for the moment, there remains the matter of interpretation. What does taught the band to play mean? Did the Lonely Hearts Club Band learn how to play together over the course of one magical day? Was their repertoire in place before the stroke of midnight? Or did Sergeant Pepper begin conscientiously to teach the members of the band how to play their instruments on that particular day? Or is 20 years ago today merely the arbitrary marking of an ongoing process that led eventually to the emergence of a musical collective under the direction of Sergeant Pepper?

The question of when the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama came into existence, is one to which the faculty and staff have given some consideration in recent times. In his article entitled, Celebrating Merrily Their Happy Anniversary, referring to a line that appeared in an episode of the cartoon program, The Flintstones, Russell McCutcheon details the deliberations that resulted in the designation of the academic year 1966-1967 as the beginning of the department.

Professor McCutcheon's article which appears on the department's website elicited some response from our alumni. One correspondent recalled with pride and affection that he had taken religion courses at the university as early as 1951. And that he maintained contact with one particular professor, Dr. Henry Fischel, for a number of years after that. Professor Fischel as it happens had been born in Bonn, Germany in 1913. He was an outstanding scholar of Jewish Studies at the University of Berlin. But had to escape from the Nazis before he could complete his doctoral studies. He traveled first to Edinburgh Scotland, and then to St. Catherine's, Ontario, where he served as rabbi in the Niagara Falls region, while continuing his program of study. He received his doctoral degree in 1945 and came to Tuscaloosa to serve as rabbi to the local congregation, direct the Hillel program, and to teach religion courses in the College of Arts and Sciences in the manner Mike has already outlined for you.

After Alabama Dr. Fischel taught first at Brandeis University, and later at Indiana University in Bloomington. Our correspondent suggested that it would be a shame to leave out this internationally revered scholar from our anniversary celebrations. In agreement with him, I'm happy to include Professor Fischel in these remarks recognizing among other things, the long tradition of Judaic studies at the University of Alabama that his tenure here reflects.

At the same time I do want to underscore the distinction Professor McCutcheon makes in his article between the teaching of religion courses in the college by religiously affiliated educators, and the appearance of a Department of Religious Studies, with its own faculty members. From the point of view of the department as it is currently constituted, this is an important distinction, and the one that determined the invention of this golden anniversary.

By the way, if you go as I did, to the internet to locate a photograph of Professor Henry Fischel, you will notice that he has acquired a second life as the alleged inventor of the academic exam. Numerous postings vilify our long lost colleague on account of this allegation. Not only did Professor Fischel not invent the system of examination common to liberal arts education, I suspect its origin was way before his time. But the photo used in the perpetuation of this fake news is not even Professor Fischel. It's not the official Fischel, so to speak. Rather the hoaxsters have attached to Fischel's name a photo of the American musician, Kimball Hadley.

One gain from this anniversary may be to clear the name of our newly discovered colleague. I wrote to Indiana University for help in this matter and received in return an enthusiastic letter and a picture of Professor Fischel from their archives. The person who wrote back to me was Doctor Carolyn Lipson Walker, the Assistant Director of the Bourne's Jewish studies program. Dr. Lipson Walker was born in Tuscaloosa. And her parents had been lifelong friends of Professor Fischel. So these stories go.

It was not 20 years ago today, but in reality only 19 years ago, quite close to this day, that I first set foot on the campus of the University of Alabama. It was a spectacular Spring day. This is a file photo though, this isn't it. I had arrived with my wife, Catherine Roach. There she is. We were both interviewing for positions in the College of Arts and Sciences. She primarily in the new college and I primarily in religious studies. I recall that I gave a talk on the use of religious language and imagery in the movie *The Matrix*, which had been produced recently by the Wakowski brothers, now sisters.

The movie was causing a bit of sensation for a high speed computer graphics, religious innuendo, and intimations of French cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard. We were overwhelmed by the reception we received here and went back up North inspired by the prospect of teaching in Tuscaloosa. We returned to Tuscaloosa in the middle of the summer to become acquainted with the Department of Religious Studies. Betty Dickey managed the department office at one end of the second floor of Manly Hall. And Donna Martin maintained the office of the Aronov chair at the other end of the mezzanine in those days. Both of these women have been with the department longer than any of the current faculty. Donna worked with Barbara Galli who was then the Aronov chair of Judaic Studies.

Dr. Galli, who specializes in the writings of Franz Rosenzweig, left the department soon after our arrival and returned to McGill University in Montreal. Reiko Onuma had been hired during the same Spring season that brought us to Tuscaloosa. She was graduated from the doctoral program at the University of Michigan with an emphasis on Southeast Asian Buddhism. Reiko left Alabama after a year and went to Dartmouth College, where she has pursued a very successful career.

Leon Weinberger whom you've heard a bit about already, came to Tuscaloosa in 1964 to serve as the rabbi at Temple Emanuel. He also taught courses in religion at the University and joined the Department of Religious studies later in that decade. During his lengthy academic career, Professor Weinberger served as a university research professor, the general editor of the Judaic Studies series of the University of Alabama Press, and he was the recipient of the university's Burnham Distinguished Faculty Award. He retired the year we arrived.

This left Patrick Greene and William Dodi as our primary mentors during the early years in the Religious Studies Department. Patrick as you already know, is an extremely charming man. He was famous among students for being a wise counselor and an inspiring teacher. In fact, he was the first recipient of the College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Teaching fellowship in 1988, as you also already know. Both he and William were engaged in key interdisciplinary initiatives across the campus, including the new college and the Blunt Undergraduate Initiative. Through them. It seems to me the tradition of involvement in the mission of the college was established.

William Dodi meanwhile, was a prolific writer who had transformed himself from a New Testament scholar into an authority on aspects of myth, particularly as advanced by Joseph Campbell. William took an interest in my talk on the *Matrix*, and shortly before the third *Matrix* movie appeared, he became the editor

of a book project on the movie franchise. I submitted a significantly more developed version of my earlier work to him and it was accepted for publication with the caveat that I rewrite portions of it. William wanted me to incorporate insights contained in another chapter proposal that he had received from a doctoral student in film studies at the University of Sydney, named Bruce Isaacs.

This seemed a bit awkward, as Bruce and I did not have a lot of disciplinary language in common. But eventually via email we produced something we both could understand and were happy with. This past summer I finally had the pleasure of meeting Bruce in person at the University of Sydney, where he is now a tenured professor. Turned out to be a wonderful man. I will always retain my gratitude to William, who died earlier this year, for forcing me and Bruce to work together.

At the turn of the century religious studies was a department in transition. During the spring of 2001, after a few years of interim occupation, Steve Jacobs provided much needed stability as he assumed the Aaron Aronov Chair of Judaic studies. Professor Jacobs has now held the position longer than any of his predecessors.

Later that year Russell McCutcheon came down from Missouri to become the chair of the department. Russ had recently completed his provocative book, *Critics Not Caretakers*, in which he argues that the role of the religious studies scholar is to foster critical thinking with regard to all things commonly called religious. The scholar's role is not therefore to advance or to defend a particular faith tradition, that is to say to be a caretaker, for certain doctrinal or ideological positions. As I recall Russ made a last minute appeal to his publisher to have his new position at the University of Alabama included on the book's back cover just prior to its publication.

The initiative set in motion by Russ McCutcheon as Chair, and pursued by the Department during the last decade and a half, are too numerous to recount in detail. But I would like to mention a few that are particularly pertinent to me, and I would venture characteristic of us as a community of scholars and learners. And I apologize in advance to those of my colleagues who are not mentioned in this admittedly eclectic survey.

The first Aaron Aronov annual lecture was held in November of 2002, and featured Martin Jaffe, Professor of Rabbinic Judaism at the University of Washington. All of the members of the department wrote responses to Jaffe's address. He responded to these responses. And the entire exchange was published in the *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* in the April 2004 edition.

This emphasis on expeditious publication has been a hallmark of the McCutcheon era. Another example of the strategy in action would be the conference planned and hosted by the department on the African Diaspora in the Study of Religion, which was held in April 2005. This conference aimed to attract emerging scholars, for the most part graduate students who are doing exciting new work in a variety of areas. The department brought 14 academics from as far away as Germany, England, and France, to present their work and to discuss it with faculty and students on our campus.

A book resulted from those proceedings. In addition, we were able to meet two colleagues who eventually joined our faculty ranks. Dr. Maha Marawan, who now teaches in the Gender Studies Department at Penn State University, and Dr. Merinda Simmons, who is enjoying her first sabbatical at this very moment after attaining tenure through the Religious Studies Department here at the Capstone. While the *African Diaspora in the Study Religion* volume featured primarily young scholars, the book, *Writing Religion--The Case for the Critical Study of Religion*, organized and edited by Professor Stephen Raney, features the writing of prominent national and international scholars in religious studies and related fields. The essays in this collection were composed by the first 10 Aronov lecturers.

This book provides a window into the kinds of discussions this department has endeavored to foster on and beyond this campus. These discussions have inevitably invoked and involved popular culture. In the 2012-2013 academic year the family of Zachary Daniel Day established an annual lectureship in the Department

of Religious Studies to honor their son's memory. Zach Day was a religious studies major who was graduated from the University of Alabama in 2008. He died quite unexpectedly three years later at the age of 26. The Day lecture series is dedicated to the study of religion and popular culture, reflecting interest that Zach had in rock music, gaming, film, and religion. Most recently Jason Bivens, an experimental electric guitarist and professor of Religious Studies at North Carolina State University, delivered the fourth Day lecture on the qualities of improvisation in religion and jazz.

The very first lecture in the Day lecture series was delivered by Monica Miller. Professor Miller had recently finished a book on hip hop and religion and was teaching at Lewis and Clark University in Portland, Oregon. Monica became a member of a collaborative research group that was established by the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. Called Culture on the Edge, this group interrogates religious, national, and ethnic notions of identity. They maintain a peer review blog on the department's website and publish books that pursue the themes of their common interrogations. As you can see from this image the editorial board is significantly populated with members of this department.

In the many ways I have just discussed, and in many other ways that time prevents me from discussing, the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama is thriving. The department is built upon the foundation of academic excellence established by Patrick Greene, William Doherty, and Leon Weinberger. It has been sustained throughout by a dedicated office staff that has included over the years a number of bright and talented student workers. The department has grown from three or four faculty members in 1997 to a compliment that goes up to eleven in 2017. We offer a wide range of courses to our undergraduate students and will begin a graduate program this coming Fall. We certainly do have a great deal to celebrate during this anniversary year.

20 years ago today, or thereabouts, under the direction of Ethan and Joel Cohen, the movie *The Big Lebowski* was being filmed in a bowling alley or perhaps a residential locale in Los Angeles, California. The movie recounts the adventures or misadventures of an unassuming character played by Jeff Bridges, as he encounters a variety of adversaries a ruthless capitalist who has stolen funds from underprivileged children, the trust fund performance artist, a drug dealing pornographer, nihilists with German accents. Since its release in 1997 the *Big Lebowski* has become a cult phenomenon. Indeed an entire religion has been constructed around the central character, *The Dude*, called dudism or dudaism. Practitioners of this religion espouse the doctrine of calm in response to all of life's vagaries. One can even become a Dudist priest for the purposes of presiding at wedding ceremonies. Though I'm not certain that the certificate of ordination is recognized in the state of Alabama.

One of the things *The Dude* has in common with the Apostle Paul, is recourse to the verb abide. For Paul these words often repeated at weddings are quintessential. And now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three and the greatest of these is love. For Jeffrey Lebowski the message is somewhat simpler, *The Dude* abides. What I enjoy about my involvement with religious studies is the occasion to place the disparate yet common texts like these two, side by side. The one text thoroughly profane and riddled with profanity even, and the other text revered by many as sacred and yet at the same time so mundane. Both of these texts keep before us as a community the question of what abides and why it does.

In celebrating 50 years or more of religious studies at the University of Alabama, we inevitably honor these questions. Thank you.

That was a great look at the history of the department from Professor Troste. But we haven't talked about students at all. And all of the students who have passed through this department in the past 50 years because they're really the ones that have made all this possible. They're the ones who've been in our classes. They're the ones that have inspired us on the faculty. They're the ones that we've enjoyed teaching, that we've seen grow. And they're the heart, the real heart of this department. So with that in mind we had a number of our graduates, of our alumni, on campus during this 50th anniversary. And I sat down with a group of them. I sat down with Kim Davis, Dan Mullins, Samantha Sastra, Kelly Brothers, and Brent Saunders all who graduated in our department really in the past 10 years or so. And we had a really good

conversation about their degrees, their time here, and how they're training as undergraduates in our department prepared them for the wonderful things they're all doing now.

Why don't we start by just going around and just saying sort of who you are, and what year you graduated, and where you're living now, just so we get a sense of who everybody is. Just start it this way.

So I'm Dr. Dan Mullins. I live in London. I'm a post-doctoral researcher, a research associate at Oxford University, and a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Hartfordshire.

And when did you graduate from the department?

2008.

OK cool.

My name is Brett Saunders. I graduated in 2014. And I'm currently living in Chicago, Illinois.

I Am Kelly Brothers, I graduated in 2009. And I currently live in Florence, Alabama.

I am Samanth Sastry. I graduated in 2006. And I live in the Atlanta, Georgia area.

So we're like all over the country. We got the Midwest-- all over the world. We've got the UK covered now. So my first question, and you guys can, whoever wants to jump in, but just thinking about this 50th anniversary, and when you look back what does this department, what does this department mean to you, when you think back? Whatever that means. I'm being very nostalgic and open ended to start off with. But what does this department kind of mean to you when you think about it, having been back here now for a day? What do you think?

I guess your use of the word nostalgic is apropos, certainly. Yeah it's a memory dump almost. You walk back into this building. You walk onto this floor, the second floor of Manly Hall and it's an immediate rush of memory and emotion. And even this morning listening to lectures from undergrads, imagining yourself back in the same shoes. It gets the wheels turning again. It brings back a different level of thinking than perhaps we're accustomed to on a regular basis maybe. With the exception of Dan.

No but my thinking is inspired a lot by what I did here. Obviously laid a lot of the foundation for what I still do professionally. But some of the people that are sitting around me now in this room, it's interesting to be with them, to hear about people who cared about things that I cared about, but at a slightly different time. For instance the Religious Studies Student Association was something that Samantha was in charge of. I wasn't aware-- I inherited things they just kind of existed, and you don't appreciate where they came from. And then you carried them forward. And then someone else came along and did more things with that or other things in the department. So it's nice to be back and relive my experience. But also to hear about other people's experience of the department.

I think for me, I'm the one who has most recently left the university. For me it brings back a lot of critical thinking times, a lot of diving into topics that I wasn't used to researching or thinking about. And having to train my brain to think a different way. Speaking with Dr. McCutcheon a lot. Meeting with him about my research paper and looking into for example, history and tradition I took a class on that. And really redefining my understanding of what history and tradition is. And sitting outside of the class for maybe an hour after the class and just like racking my brain about what like what did I just learn. What did I just go through? And it's awesome to be able to think about those memories again.

I'm kind of in line with you on that. This program represented enlightenment for me. I definitely thought I knew things that I had no clue about. And having those challenges from our professors in this program, to

make me think deeper and outside of that box. And that's what's nostalgic to me when I come. I just feel that sense of like thank you for opening my mind. That's what this is for me right now

I could not agree more with you on that. I feel like this department taught all of us so much. But at the same time taught us what we didn't know, and how much we didn't know, and how much we needed to know. And it's still doing it. It does it daily.

Well, that's great man. So getting a little more specific, what that you picked up in this department do you find yourself either using-- I don't know how regular you're coming back to it, but how did what your experience, and the training and the education you got as a religious studies major. How was that helped you get to where you are now and what you're doing now? Is it something that you see happening like regularly going back to? Or you see it sort of broad trends shaping the way you do things?

I think one thing for me, so my job is I work for Young Life which is a Christian outreach organization nonprofit and we work to bring kids for the cross. And one thing that I deal with a lot are labels, and labeling. And I hate labeling. And it's something that I learned from Dr. Ramie. We were reading this book, Routine Violence. And it's something that just stuck with me, and still sticks with me. And one thing that I try to actively do against my subconscious, is not put people into stereotypes or groups that would do them harm. And it may not be physical harm but it's emotional harm. And it's marginalizing them. And I try my best to look at someone and say, what are your unique attributes and what is unique about your personality that makes you who you are. And not putting you into a group or a type of person that I may assume you are.

One example is one of my friends works at a restaurant. And they saw an older black woman come in. And they immediately thought, OK she's probably not going to tip me that well. And she's probably going to be pretty rude to me. And then I sat there with him. And I said, what about that is so hurtful for that person's interaction with you. As soon as you walk up to them you have preconceived notions. And now you're dealing with them in a completely different way. And that could even go into code switching then. You start to switch the way you speak with them. You start to demean them. You know so many factors that layer onto that. So that's one thing that I deal with currently.

And kind of with that, that ties into what I do now. And that creates kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy of you know, you think someone is going to behave a certain way so you behave a certain way. Which in turn causes them to behave the way that you thought that they were going to behave. But for me in the counseling realm, I see so many people from different walks of life, and different faiths, and contexts culturally. And having had that enlightenment here of opening my mind, I can reach them in a better way than I would have had I not been a part of this program. I was very close minded and traditional, whatever that is. And this allows me to help people. To reach them where they are and not from my perspective, from theirs better.

I think the skills that you just really have highlighted are really applicable in any sort of a work place. I particularly work in sales. And almost just as you're saying, you meet people. And you interact with people. And you have notions of how they're going to be and how they're going to interact with you, and interact with your project as well depending on what sort of business you are in. Whether it's an intellectual business or a business of selling a physical object of some nature. My business, I work for an international company. So we have a lot of visitors come in. And you never know who is going to be in the office. You never know what's going to be brought up that day. You know they always say, never talk about religion or politics in an office setting especially. But you'd be shocked at how often it comes up regardless. And how it colors people's thinking. And how colors people's interactions with you and with your colleagues.

So it's beneficial to have that humanistic understanding of the type of people that you are going to encounter. And what may be coloring their background, their interaction with you. And conducting yourself in a way to best understand them.

I love having you guys here because you've all sort of made it through. And now you have jobs. We can hold up as success stories. And I'm curious what you would say to students, to I'm imagining the student in a 100-- really, the 100 classes and really enjoying it, but I could never major in that because my parents would kill me. Or I won't be able to get a job. What would you say to those students who are interested but sort of have practical fears or practical anxieties about going into a religious major?

I think that to a certain extent they're right, they should pause. There is reason to think--

Not what I wanted you to say.

I was a double major. I think that served me well. I think people need to think strategically about their employment afterwards, what their goals might be. Think about taking a minor that you might be able to use. But I would also say if they're a freshman in a large enrollment course, they haven't gotten to the really interesting part. Yes, they're getting the white lines or intro courses and getting surveys of things. But until you get into the seminars, that's where my mind really was challenged. That's where I learned to really listen to other people, engage with tact, defend arguments. And that's the bit that translates to my work most now, is that I'll invite archeologists, anthropologists. We'll have a big conference. We'll sit around. And it's almost precisely like the seminars we had in the second, third, fourth year. So stick with it. And you'll get to the good stuff.

The meat and potatoes.

What about you all that are outside of-- Dan's still in the academic world. For you all, what is your advice to people interested, thinking about this religious studies thing as a thing.

Thinks it's less of studies, I mean you study, but it's more of culture. I mean you're looking at cultural relevance in the past, present, and future. So I think if you want to do something in the Religious Studies department, realize that you're learning a lot more than just studying a certain religion. You're studying people. You're studying language. You're studying socioeconomic trends, and so many different things. You have such a broad spectrum to learn that if you really want to do this you can get plugged in well. And then it'll expand your ways of thinking. And I think that could prepare you well for moving into the world that is not academic. But instead it's something that maybe sales, or maybe ministry, or whatever it may be. But counseling as well. You have a way of discerning things that most people don't think of. I think you have a leg up, to be honest.

I agree. I think the skills that you learn in this department, in this major, are infinitely transferable. And you know, we talk about seminars. We talk about speaking to each other in these courses. But the writing too, the writing you can take with you anywhere. I can't tell you how many times I've had to help colleagues write something. And it seems very simple but when you come down to it there are a lot of people that were never truly trained in how to write. And how to express themselves critically through that medium. And that's certainly something you're going to get here. You get it from day one. And you will get it until your last day.

That's great. This is great. Well, that was my last question. So I'd like each of you to tell me your-- I don't know what the best way to phrase this, but I want to say your greatest memory, your most interesting memory? Just some bit that you remember about life in this department when you were here.

That's hard.

Just some moment you could-- but I'm just curious because I think it's important for folks to get a sense of-- well it's like what you're saying, I don't know if we were recording when you said this, Dan but that people are starting things and they hand it off to you. So I'm curious to sort of give us-- I'm stalling to give you all time to think. A sense of kind of a snapshot of that from your experience here.

In addition to being a major in this department, I was a student worker as well. So I spent probably 80% to 90% of my time on campus somewhere in this building or on this floor. And this is a silly anecdotal story. On the third floor in the attic, if you will, in the rafters, we had bats, a lot of bats, a lot a lot of bats.

I used to have an office Up there.

So you know.

No I didn't Now I know.

Maybe now you know. I'm sorry. Maybe I wasn't supposed to say that. One of my funniest stories was at one point I guess they had a bat expert come in from and so the story goes, he was from Auburn. And he stuck his finger in a hole up there and a bat bit him. And that was a running joke for a while. That you get the Auburn specialist and he gets bit by the bat that he's supposed to be the expert on. But my anecdotal story is being a student worker we had a class end in our main classroom 210. And the last students are exiting. And somebody starts shrieking. And so there's a big commotion. And everybody is coming out to see what the problem is. And there was a bat in the classroom. It had fallen from the ceiling. And we didn't know what to do. There was another class due to come in within the next few minutes. So we got a box and we caught the bat. We caught a bat in the box. And I briefly took the bat to my residence at the time and let it warm up. It was winter. And it was supposed to be hibernating. And I guess our classroom learning had awoken the bat from its slumber. So it fell through the ceiling. And landed in front of this poor girl who was terrified. And we caught the bat. Relocated the bat. And hopefully the bat lived a long and happy bat life. That's my funny--

Who is the we? You and Betty?

Betty didn't really want anybody to catch the bat. The class was, I mean they were about to come in. It was a spur of the moment decision. Catch the bat. Relocate the bat.

There you go.

Yeah, good stuff.

I think mine, I remember a lot of emotion. Emotion like, my point wasn't heard. Or I disagree with someone. And then learning how to channel that to a useful dialogue. Is something that stands out as a general thought. But if there's one episode that really stands out is after I actually left in 2008, I stayed here to do a masters in anthropology. In religious studies Dr. McCutcheon, Steven Ramey, others still provided my support network. They would be advisors. And when I got into Oxford University I got in without funding. And I was quite distressed because we're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars that they I thought were asking for. So I went into Dr. McCutcheon's office. And I was just, what do I do, panic panic. And he was giving me-- he's really calm, the professionalization is something that he thinks about, writes about, talks about. So he put me at ease during a time that was very traumatic. Then three weeks later you get the funding letter that was always meant to be sent with the acceptance letter but wasn't. Yeah things work out. But yeah when you need help, it was there. I'm grateful for that.

I would say one of my most vivid memories was I signed up for Intro to Religion for my first semester of taking religious studies. And along with that I took Religious Existentialism. And I remember leaving the intro class. And I was like all right, this is going to be pretty easy. This is fun. This is cool. And then around a hour later I stepped foot into the Religious Existentialism class. And I remember leaving and thinking, what did I get myself into. But it was such an exciting what am I getting myself into. Because I saw a kind of like you were saying, I saw a very distinct difference between the ways of thinking in the introduction class and the ways of thinking in the higher level class, completely different completely different. We were speaking about things in the introduction class that were very surface level. Speaking about world religions and things of that nature. And then when you get into the higher level class you're

looking at things that are deeper into religion. And like existence, experience, all wrapped up together and how that forms a way society looks at it. And I was sitting around with people who were constantly thinking in the class. It was so fun. Because in an introduction class you don't have to think all the time. You can turn it off. And just take notes. Or not even take notes and wait for Blackboard to upload the notes. You know there's so many things that you don't have to do. But in a high level class you have to constantly be thinking. You have to constantly be going deeper and trying to get what the point is. And then being able to verbalize it. And then not only verbalize that point but also being able to write about that point. And it just makes you so-- so being in those two classes really excited me about the rest of my time in religious studies. And I just wanted to get hungrier and learn more.

For me one of my favorite memories was given to me by Professor I call her Maha but Maran. We did a paper. And she gave it back to me and told me to stay after class. And I was like oh gosh I bombed you now. And she said, you don't speak enough. I still have that habit of observing more than I speak. That's just the counselor in me. She said people need to hear what you have to say. And I'm thinking I'm surrounded by these deep thinkers you know, that's what the culture of this program is. Everybody's thinking on such a different and high level than what I felt like I was at. And so I wasn't speaking. And she encouraged me in that way. And kind of challenged me like if you don't start speaking I'm going to start taking points away. And for me that was a powerful moment. Because the more I did speak the more I realized I am capable. You know I am capable of thinking at that level. That was a powerful thing for me. And one of my favorite memories.

That's great. That's a great place to end this. Thank you guys for doing this.

Thank you.

And I look forward to doing more events where you guys are speaking today. Thanks so much.

Thank you.

So with that we're going to wrap up this 50th anniversary episode of Study Religion. Thanks to everybody who did so much to make that 50th anniversary week so special. The students who presented at the undergraduate symposium, the graduates who came back and shared their stories, Patrick Greene, Ted Troste, and all the faculty who are here to make this such a special place. We will be back soon with another episode of Study Religion.

Hi, I'm Anastasia Teterenco. I'm a religious studies major from Rochester, New York. Study 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 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 [@StudyReligion](https://twitter.com/StudyReligion). Like to see pretty pictures of historic campus buildings and squirrels? Follow us on Instagram [@StudyReligion](https://instagram.com/StudyReligion). If you 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. Our opening and closing music is by Disparation. More information about them can be found at disparation.info. Special thanks to the RAL 490 Capstone Seminar for this show's introduction. Roll tide.