

**SPEAKER 1:** Hey, what do you study?

**SPEAKER 2:** I study the ethnography of religion.

**SPEAKER 3:** Religion in the Caribbean and the American South.

**SPEAKER 4:** I study [INAUDIBLE].

**SPEAKER 5:** I study contemporary religious identity in India.

**SPEAKER 6:** Theism, Hebrew Bible, Old Testament, and Holocaust and genocide.

**SPEAKER 7:** History of the field and the politics of classification.

**SPEAKER 8:** New philosophy of religion and the intersection of development studies and religious studies.

**SPEAKER 9:** Religion in popular culture and religious texts.

**SPEAKER 1:** What do you study?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. You may have noticed the new introduction for our podcast. Think of this as the beginning of season 2 of Study Religion. We're going to get this as the first episode of season 2. It's our first episode of the new academic year. And we have a lot of firsts to talk about this year.

Firsts are interesting because they point to the past because you look back and say, that was the first time we did that or the first time that happened. But they also point to the future because, if you have a first, you probably have a second and a third and fourth. Otherwise, it's not the first thing that happened. It's just the time that happened.

And groups like to mark firsts. Firsts are a way of representing ourselves to ourselves, representing the group. When we say that that's the first time we did that, it's another way to describe who we are.

So in this episode, let's share two firsts that tell us a little bit about who we are in this department. Let's start with our new MA, or new master's degree in religion and culture. We

welcome our first cohort of MA students the Manly Hall this fall.

So this week, I sat down with our three MA students-- Sierra Lawson, Emma Gibson, and Sarah Griswold-- to talk about the courses they're taking, what surprised them about the program, what are they reading, what are they doing, and what's it like to be in the first cohort of the first year of a brand new program. And they had a lot of interesting things to say.

So I'm here with our three MA students. Introduce yourselves. Let's start with you, Sierra, and work--

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Sierra Lawson. I don't know what else there is.

**MICHAEL J.** All right. Perfect.

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Grilled cheese connoisseur.

**EMMA GIBSON:** I'm Emma Gibson. I mostly do philosophy of religion. I've been reading a lot of Derrida recently in my independent study and delving into religious theory. I'm going to read you mine after this.

**SARAH GRISWOLD:** OK. I'm Sarah Griswold. I'm finishing my master's this year. And I'm into studying colonialism and how all of that worked in India.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** All right. So what I wanted to do now is hear about the program now that we're like halfway through a semester of the first semester of the first cohort of the first MA students. I'm curious, what are you guys-- you're all in the two foundations courses, right? The 501, the social theory class, and 502, the digital public humanities class. So what's the 501 class like? What are you all reading in there?

**EMMA GIBSON:** Yeah, a ton of stuff. This week we're reading Bona Silva, right?

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Bonilla Silva.

**EMMA GIBSON:** Bonilla Silva. And we've been reading Bourdieu and--

**SIERRA LAWSON:** A lot of, like, basically, if our professors could just keep running with their blog posts, I feel like that's what we're reading, like just really intense social theorizing about pop culture or like historical phenomena essentially.

**MICHAEL J.** How's that class organized? What's the structure of the class? Is it like--

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** None.

**SARAH** There are some structure. So each week has a theme that isn't really necessarily like readily  
**GRISWOLD:** apparent other than looking at the syllabus. So each week, the readings are centered around that theme. And last week, we were reading about identity. And Dr. Ramey's response to our readings was, "Who knew identity was so complicated?" Yeah, and we've had a history week, an identity week, a culture week.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Power.

**EMMA GIBSON:** It's a really cool structure to the class though. We come in, and since it's so long, I guess-- what is it, like 2 1/2 hours, a little more-- and so we'll come in, and then we'll pick a reading and then just roll with it. So we talk for basically the whole time. We don't take breaks because we get caught up in what we're talking about. And we tie in other stuff that we've read.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** One of us does an example application where we do like a mini blog post essentially in the class. We just pick something that we think helps us to get at the author's general intentions.

**EMMA GIBSON:** Those are fun.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL J.** So it seems like it's got a good balance of sort of the theoretical readings but then also sort of  
**ALTMAN:** actually using it practically.

**EMMA GIBSON:** Yeah, is like what Dr. Ramey is a master of. He's a master of many things, but I think he's really good at that. And so it's a good placement with who's teaching the two foundations courses, I think, for the first cohort.

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah, now is the awkward part. I'm trying to ask you about the class you're in with me.

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH** Well, we hate it.

**GRISWOLD:**

**MICHAEL J.** Well, what's the class been like? What have we been doing in that class for those who aren't--

**ALTMAN:** since we're all in the class. But for those listening, what are we doing in that class?

**EMMA GIBSON:** Literally things that I've never heard of before. So that's been nice. Like how to navigate blogging Omeka, like learning how to make humanities digital, I guess.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Seeing the back side to all of the stuff we've been exposed to before, like all the stuff that's supposed to make us super-jazzed about the potential for scholarship. We're learning the back end of it, I guess.

**SARAH** I think it's kind of funny how it's working out too because so much of the stuff that we're  
**GRISWOLD:** actually working on, I've thought about doing in the past but didn't have the drive to figure out how to do. And now you're just sort of like, here's options. Do it.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Same. And it's really cool to see like other places at the University being also really excited about the stuff we're doing, like the Digital Humanities Center? The ADHC.

**MICHAEL J.** ADHC. Alabama Digital Humanities Center.

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** So I don't know. It's cool.

**MICHAEL J.** And then today, after this, we're going over to the Sanford Media Center to learn how to make

**ALTMAN:** podcasts. So pretty timely. So thinking about the program so far-- well, besides those two foundations classes, what are you doing? What else are you guys working on, taking, doing?

**SIERRA LAWSON:** I know Emma and I are TA-ing. So we're alphabetizing and grading a lot. In my independent study, I'm reading pretty broadly on Virgin of Guadalupe studies but also reading quite a bit of social theory. And just thinking about how we represent the groups that we study, I guess, would be my independent study thing.

**EMMA GIBSON:** We're in Russell's 440 class.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Oh, yeah. We're in an undergrad class on theories of religion, and we're kind of there-- we set the stage for the course in the beginning of the day. We meet once a week. And we give a little synopsis of two theorists, historical or contemporary. And then each of the undergrads has a topic that we engage with in like a roundtable discussion-- so like myth. I don't know. We've presented a lot of different people.

**EMMA GIBSON:** Gender, race.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** What have you been doing, Sarah? This is a podcast. So no one can see me looking at Sarah when I say, "What have you been doing?"

**EMMA GIBSON:** Identities.

**SARAH GRISWOLD:** Yeah, so I turned in my thesis proposal this morning. That was groovy. And so I've been doing a lot of reading for that, centering around like narrative formation, and, I guess, theories of myth and how those all operate together in this site that I'm working on. And then I'm also taking Vaia Touna's theories of myth as like supplemental to all of that so that I can have people to talk to besides just you and me sitting in the room.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** Yeah. Most of your classes are you and me talking about a book.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Yeah, I think that's my whole next semester is just me and Russell talking about books.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** You should cherish that. This is like a rare thing.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** No, I'm not lamenting it.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** Suddenly, it's like we're in Oxford. And your whole graduate career is you and your advisor.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Yeah, no. I don't lament it all. It's just--

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** You're not stuck in 15, 20-person seminars like I was.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Yeah, where we awkwardly just stare at each other waiting for other people to talk.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** So I'm curious, what's been your favorite thing to read or to do or-- not necessarily favorite. It could be favorite, but most favorite or unexpected thing halfway through your first semester in your first year?

**SARAH GRISWOLD:** Just like overall?

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah. I mean, you all named different classes and independent studies and TA-ing and all that

**ALTMAN:** stuff.

**SARAH** TA-ing is totally their favorite.

**GRISWOLD:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** I really liked reading Judith Butler in 501 because, since I do philosophy, it was so philosophy. And I was like, yes! I didn't know I would be reading this in religious studies. This is awesome. And applying that to religion and theory and stuff like that was really cool.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** We fondly refer to her as JuBu now. It's a shorthand. Like PoMo for post modern.

**MICHAEL J.** Jubu's was, in American religion, a shorthand for-- there are a lot of Jews who got interested in Buddhism were going by JuBus. And now it's Judith Butler, I guess.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Yeah. My favorite part is actually the bio domain name that we did in your class, because it's like a tangible place that I can go and realize that I'm an actual person doing things and putting them out the world and is a good reminder to myself about my future goals. Yeah, I don't know. I love that I have a website.

**MICHAEL J.** That's awesome.

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** When Russell shared my blog post, that was probably peak academic success. I saw that on Facebook. I was like, whoa!

**MICHAEL J.** That was the 501 blog, right?

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah, yeah. I need to spread the love for those blog posts on 501 more broadly. So if you're listening, go to [blogs.religion.ua.edu/rel501](https://blogs.religion.ua.edu/rel501). There's like two or three posts? Two posts up there right now.

**EMMA GIBSON:** There's two.

**MICHAEL J.** Three?

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** Three.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Three?

**SARAH** Because you had a second one. I haven't printed one yet.

**GRISWOLD:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** And Steven has a nice blurb.

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah, and Steven, to his credit, built that whole thing. What about you, Sarah?

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH** I think mine's probably related to Sierra's because I got way too into that Omeka project. And  
**GRISWOLD:** that day that I got in the depths of the programming of the plugins but then also like just organizing all of the things.

**MICHAEL J.** So for folks who don't know, what's Omeka?

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH** Oh, gosh. So isn't it billed as the WordPress for Museums? But it can do other fun stuff. It's like  
**GRISWOLD:** this platform where you can build exhibits of stuff and organize them in interesting ways so that you have something to present to the world.

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah, digital collections.

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Collaborative curation program.

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah, and so we built something. We need to figure out we're going to-- that's our  
**ALTMAN:** conversation after we finish this conversation is what are we going to do is the AAR archive, the ARR archive that we built, but you got really into that. Why?

**SARAH** Because I got into all of the deeply organized parts of my personality but also my background  
**GRISWOLD:** with math stuff. I really like figuring out how to organize and present things in meaningful and interesting ways.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** It was a solvable problem, and you were not satisfied by the fact that we did not want to solve it, and we were OK.

**SARAH** Yeah. So that's why.

**GRISWOLD:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** We've been telling people though about it because we went to one of the ADHC's little mini talks and shared with them our experience and how you could avoid some of the things that we face maybe. Yeah, I don't know. We got people checking it out.

**MICHAEL J.** Oh, wow. I don't know if it has a stats tracker. We'll have to look at it.

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** Off the charts.

**MICHAEL J.** What was the ADHC talk we went to?

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** It was one of the-- what is it-- 10 workshops that we do for our certificate.

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah, for the digital humanities certificate.

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** I think it was on metadata.

**MICHAEL J.** Oh, OK. That makes a lot of sense.

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** So even though it was kind of like we did it backwards, it was really nice to get an explicit--

**MICHAEL J.** Build the digital collection, then go to the workshop on metadata.

**ALTMAN:**

**SIERRA LAWSON:** It was cool to sit in on an explicit standardized, informational talk about what metadata is because-- I don't know. I just found myself getting lost in a lot of the Dublin Core ways of organizing metadata. And it was really reassuring to know there's other ways of doing it out there and how other people, that this is their full time profession, view these elements that they draw upon.

**MICHAEL J.** You know, there's metadata librarians, like that's a job.

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH** Yeah. That's actually--

**GRISWOLD:**

**MICHAEL J.** Yeah. So we've talked about Omeka. We've talked about Judith Butler, JuBu. Hashtag JuBu.

**ALTMAN:** We've talked about-- that should be a t-shirt.

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Oh, no.

**SARAH** You're welcome.

**GRISWOLD:**

**MICHAEL J.** Judith Butler's face. Anyways, we've talked about-- so what does all this have to do-- you're in

**ALTMAN:** a religion and culture MA-- what does all of this have to do with the study of religion, all of this stuff? What does it add up to to you as you think about getting your MA in religion and culture, but you're doing all this stuff?

**SIERRA LAWSON:** Just adding more layers to the onion of my life in religious studies, I guess. I'm just expanding my method in theory and figuring out how to get it out there to a broader audience, refining skills, I guess.

**EMMA GIBSON:** It's definitely opened my mind to the different ways of studying religion that I wasn't really exposed to before. So instead of studying religions, it's studying how we study religions, which is-- I didn't know we would go so in-depth with it, but I'm glad--

**SIERRA LAWSON:** So meta.

**EMMA GIBSON:** Yes.

**MICHAEL J.** You're glad though?

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL J.** Why are you glad?

**ALTMAN:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** Because it's so philosophy. That's why I like it. I don't know. It's just really cool to the theory instead of history. I don't know. It's just a different way of doing religion. What do you think, Sarah?

**SARAH** So I'm thinking about the well that is the center of my life.

**GRISWOLD:**

**EMMA GIBSON:** When are you not?

**SARAH**

I know, right? And like it's really nice because I feel like I can talk about this thing that exists in

**GRISWOLD:**

the world but not just talk about the fact that it was a statue of an angel that had an inscription of the Apostles' Creed. And I can say other interesting fun things about it. Fun is really not an applicable word here.

**MICHAEL J.**

Yeah, fun things are about this side of-- just multiple sets of death. There's lots of death.

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH**

Yeah, fun maybe not accurate there. But I can say interesting things about it and have those

**GRISWOLD:**

interesting things be related to the other statues and other sites of commemoration in the same spot that have to deal with similar things. But it's not just on the level of Christian versus Hindu. It's on the level of varying forms of social formation and why colonialism and nationalism, at this particular site, affected those things.

**MICHAEL J.**

Yeah, so you have a much more-- you know, you're further along. You're finishing up this

**ALTMAN:**

year. So I feel like you have a more specific-- I see how these things help me with this thing I'm doing.

**SARAH**

Right, because I have this one thing that I'm trying to finish.

**GRISWOLD:**

**MICHAEL J.**

Yeah, you have a giant pile of dirt you're trying to move.

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH**

Right.

**GRISWOLD:**

**MICHAEL J.**

Yeah, yeah.

**ALTMAN:**

**SARAH**

Shovel ready.

**GRISWOLD:**

**MICHAEL J.**

Shovel ready. That's right. That's the phrase. Well, great thanks for telling us all about what you're working on in the program and everything. I think this is helpful.

**ALTMAN:**

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**MICHAEL J.  
ALTMAN:**

Thanks again to Emma, Sierra, and Sarah for taking the time to talk about the program. For anyone interested in being part of our next cohort of MA students next fall, we are accepting applications now. The deadline for applications for full consideration for funding is December 1st. You can find out more about the program at [religion.ua.edu](http://religion.ua.edu) and click on the graduate tab at the top of the page.

I need to do two quick plugs for projects that those very same REL 502 students are working on. First, you heard them mentioned Omeka. And as they've learned Omeka, which is a content management system for digital collections. They built a collection of materials related to the American Academy of Religion. That's been the kind of object of study for the 502 class. As they've learned these digital tools, they've been applying them to thinking about the institution of the AAR as a kind of object they've been analyzing and examining.

And so they have a collection of images and all sorts of things related to the American Academy of Religion, which is the national scholarly organization for the study of religion. They have everything from books signed by scholar religion JZ Smith when he was at the meeting to buttons and tote bags, old copies of the Bulletin of the American Academy of Religion from the 1960s which was kind of like a newsletter before there was websites and internet. This bulletin has all sorts of really interesting stuff. And they scanned them and put them in there.

So they're calling this collection, AARtifacts like A-A-R-tifacts. Get it? ARRtifacts. ARRtifacts. So you can find it at [AARtifacts.michaeljaltman.com](http://AARtifacts.michaeljaltman.com). I'm hosting it on my server for now. So that's A-A-R-tifacts, A-A-R-T-I-F-A-C-T-S.michaeljaltman.com. And just come check it out. It's got a lot of cool stuff.

Soon they'll be adding a plug-in where you can submit images and data of your own AAR stuff. So if you've got a stack of tote bags, or you've got cool buttons or an old hotel key or old papers of manuscripts that you presented or anything related to the AAR, you can contribute to AARtifacts-- AARtifacts. Yeah, we'd love for you to do that.

The second thing I need a plug is, looking to the future, those same REL 502 public humanities students will take over the next episode of this very podcast. And they need your help. They had a great idea. So dear listeners, we need your help.

As part of our REL 502 course, we're putting together a collection of stories about people's experiences at the Annual American Academy of Religion National Meeting. This year, it's going to be in wonderful Boston. The AAR is more than just an academic conference. It's a social and cultural event. There's all these conversations that happen. Dinners that happen. And funny things, interesting things, amazing things, scary things happen. And so we want to capture those aspects of the meeting that don't show up on the conference program.

We will take the best stories we can gather and use them in an upcoming episode of the podcast-- this very podcast, Study Religion. You can submit your story to us three ways. And we welcome anonymous submissions. You don't have to tell us who you are or anything. You can if you'd like.

So three ways-- one, you can call our AAR Stories Hotline at 205-626-9346. That's 205-626-9346. And you can leave us a message, and we'll pull that off the voicemail and use the audio on the show. Or you can record yourself telling your story and email the audio file to [religiousstudies@ua.edu](mailto:religiousstudies@ua.edu). Be sure to put "AAR story" in the subject line, so we can make sure those get put in the right place. So again, that's make an audio file and email it to [religiousstudies@ua.edu](mailto:religiousstudies@ua.edu) and put "AAR story" in the subject line.

Or lastly, we set up a forum on our course website. So go to [blogs.religion.ua.edu/REL502](http://blogs.religion.ua.edu/REL502)-- I know it's a long URL-- and click on AAR Stories in the menu, and there's a place you can submit your story there in text, write it out for us. Or you can also look at our Facebook page or our Twitter feed or my Twitter feed to find that link to that as well. And that same link has other information if you need the phone number again. So please help us out. Check out the AARtifacts and send us your stories. We'd love to hear them.

Now we've had other firsts besides these first MA students. Two faculty members celebrated a very important first-- their first books. Vaia Touna and me published our first monographs this summer. And rather than interview myself about my own book, I caught up with Professor Touna to talk about her new book. It's called *Fabrications of the Greek Past, Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*. It was published by Brill in their *Supplements to Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* series. And I'll read the publisher's description to give you a sense of what it's about.

"Taking seriously critiques of historiography produced in recent decades, Vaia Touna advocates for an alternative approach to the way the past is studied. From Euripides tragedy,

*Hippolytus*, to the notion of voluntary associations in the Greco-Roman world to the authenticity of traditional villages in Greece, *Fabrications of the Greek Past* argues that meanings-- and thus identities-- do not transcend time and space, and neither do they hide deep in the core of material artifacts waiting to be discovered by the careful interpreter. Instead, this book demonstrates that meanings are always relative to their present-day context. They are historical products created by social actors through their ever contemporary acts of identification."

So Vaia was kind enough to stop by my office for a chat about the book and how it reflects her approach to the study of religion. But actually we started by talking about toast.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**VAIA TOUNA:** We say toast.

**MICHAEL J.** For panini.

**ALTMAN:**

**VAIA TOUNA:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL J.** Well, there you go. I learn something new every day.

**ALTMAN:**

**VAIA TOUNA:** It's a cultural difference.

**MICHAEL J.** All right, so let's do this. Let's talk about this book. So the first thing I wanted to ask you about the book is how did you come-- there are so many different sources in here, right? You've got plays. You've got these mystery cults. I love, in the epilogue, the example of the tower. What was the way in for you to all of this? Was there one of these things that caught your eye, and you started looking for other ones?

**VAIA TOUNA:** Well, I'm trained in ancient Greece. So when someone would ask me, what is your field of expertise, I will say ancient Greece. And the first chapter, Euripides' tragedy, *Hippolytus*, was actually my master's. And when I started my PhD, I wanted to do something again about ancient Greece, something about mystery cults, which became my second chapter.

Well, I started my PhD. There was a shift in the way I was approaching material-- ancient past things, text, meanings, and all that. So it was a kind of frustration about how we talk about the

past. So these two were the way into the problem. And then, as it happens, you write a paper that you see connections. And you say, oh, my God. There's something here. There is a story here, right?

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** So when you say the problem, for you, what's the problem of the past as you see it or the way people--

**VAIA TOUNA:** To accurately describe it, there is a constant-- whatever I'm reading is this critique of other scholars who have misunderstood how the past has been described or represented. And they want to tell us how it actually happened. But when you look at how fragmentary it is, you can but constantly filling gaps to construct this past. And no one takes that seriously, the filling of those gaps. They think that they are just putting together a puzzle by looking at secondary sources.

And this is my frustration of not taking seriously that this filling of the gaps to reconstruct or to talk, to describe the past is our doing. It's very modern. It's very in the present. And it has to do with where are you coming from, what are your readings, what are your positions, what are your influences that go into the filling of?

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** So is history, as a social science, just doomed then?

**VAIA TOUNA:** Well, no. I don't think it's doomed. I always get this question. But there is a lot of work to be done by historians if they change, if they make a shift in the way they understand their work. There's a huge number of books that, if we were to change the way we approach the past, we would probably say a much more interesting story.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** When you say change the approach, what does that look like? What do you mean? So you're saying there's a sort of filling in the gaps that we don't necessarily pay attention to, or folks aren't aware of. So what would the change look like? What's the kind of history that you're--

**VAIA TOUNA:** Well, I--

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** You can say, it's my book. It's a perfect example if you want.

**VAIA TOUNA:** It is. I don't want to sound like too much. But this is what I tried indeed to do in my book-- to expose those gaps, to look at modern discourses and what they try to authorize in the present.

And then a shift is, I think-- and that's why I was not thinking of my book. I'm thinking of my next book, actually, my new research, which is very in its beginnings-- that I'm taking seriously what I'm saying in this first book that we should, instead of looking at reconstructing the past, and look in the present at what is happening.

I'm interviewing, this past summer, archaeologists and local people at an archaeological dig and how they talk about the past, how their relationships construct perhaps, or construct a certain kind of discourse and how the past is understood by them. So my shift is to the present.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** So what do you see is the relationship between this book and what we're doing now with this interviewing of archaeologists and stuff? How do you see the trajectory of your research? What was this book? And then what is this next book?

**VAIA TOUNA:** I think the first book set the stage for me. In each chapter, I'm examining a way with which the past is fabricated, like its interpretation, its categorization, its classification and representations. So having established that, then, OK, what do I do in my next book is taking those things seriously and see how they operate in different settings-- in modern settings-- but that are related to discourses about the past.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** So you look at your Euripides' play in one chapter, the mystery cults that you talked about, the frescoes, and then the-- The traditional village was my favorite chapter.

**VAIA TOUNA:** It's a wonderful village.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** As an American, it's like, we do this too in lots of ways-- especially living in the South when I was in college in Charleston, all the different plantations you can go tour. But that gets me to my question, which is-- so you have these four very specific examples from your work, both in ancient Greece and modern Greece. What's the thing that me, the scholar of American religion, that the scholar of South Asia, that the scholar of Islam can take from your book and export into our own-- what's the sort of bigger lesson for those of us in the field more broadly?

**VAIA TOUNA:** I don't know, depending on the interest of every author, right? I think that everyone is dealing with the issues that I'm dealing with in the book. And that is, in one way or another, eventually we will be talking about the past. I mean, at the very least, this is what the book prompts everyone to do, to take seriously, or to be self-reflexive, I guess, about the way they approach the past, not as something that is stable and that we can have access to but what is our

implication in looking at the past and how we use it.

So I think anyone who is, whatever field, is working, we are all dealing with interpretations. We are all dealing with categories and classifications and representations, right? So how do we take seriously those tools?

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** I was actually talking-- so one of our MA students, I recommended read your book, who actually working on South Asia. So I think that's right. I think there's a lot of people that are thinking about these questions of the past and tradition and history.

My last question is-- OK, so how does this book reflect your approach to the study of religion, to religious studies as a discipline? It has religion in the subtitle-- *Religion, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Identities*. But you talk about mystery cults and frescoes but like also plays, villages. I don't see myth or ritual or text in any of these-- sacred texts or holy or any of these words in the chapter titles.

**VAIA TOUNA:** I'm actually glad you didn't-- only because--

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** As first book, a kind of statement of what I think the field should look like. You What does this reflect about your take on how we do religious studies?

**VAIA TOUNA:** I always hear complaints about how religion is defined or studied. And actually there are books now out that want to get rid of the word religion. And they go on to talk about the things that they have always been talking about. And that is rituals, and that is gods and myths, which to me doesn't really change-- OK, you take off the word religion. But then you go on to study the things that you were studying by using that term, religion. I think this book shows exactly this-- that we can study other things and not necessarily myth and ritual.

Now, one may ask me, well, is it about religion? Well, is it ever about religion?

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** Yeah, that's a whole other book.

**ALTMAN:**

**VAIA TOUNA:** OK, here you go. I mean, I have two.

**MICHAEL J. ALTMAN:** So we'll close, if you want to feel more about this archaeological project that you're working on. Where is that headed?

**VAIA TOUNA:** I'm very excited about this. Now, as I said, it's in its beginning. This past summer, I stayed in a

village in Greece. That was an experience, speaking of tradition, because I had in mind the traditional villages that are characterized as traditional villages by the state. And here I am going at a village that it's not characterized as traditional, but I think it was very traditional. And that was an experience. But tells you a lot about me coming from a big city and the kind of ideas I have about what is a village, what is a traditional village and all that. Anyway, that was a parenthesis. That was not your question.

But all of this, I think, my experience and being there for two weeks, talking with people about their past, which is actually very interesting to say only this-- like, no spoilers-- they don't talk about the past. They talk about the present. They talk about them in the now in reference to the past, which I find fascinating I think it's going to be a wonderful work.

**MICHAEL J.** Awesome. Well, thanks for taking the time to hang out and talk.

**ALTMAN:**

**VAIA TOUNA:** Thank you very much. [NON-ENGLISH] Should I say that in Greek?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**MICHAEL J.** Those of you in the Tuscaloosa area that would like to hear more about Vaia's book or my own can join us for another first in the department in the next couple of weeks. We'll be having our first ever REL book event at the Ernest and Hadley Booksellers on 7th Street in Tuscaloosa on November 3rd. It's a Friday night at 6 p.m. You can find out more information on our department web site or our department Facebook page under events or Earnest and Hadley. Find them on Facebook as well.

That wraps up our show. 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](http://www.religion.ua.edu). Or find us on Facebook at [facebook.com/relatua](https://facebook.com/relatua).

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[MUSIC PLAYING]