

Univ. of Alabama | Episode 6

SPEAKER 1: A quick note before we start the show-- that this podcast has been taken over. We have handed over the reigns of the *Study Religion* podcast, for this episode, to our master's students in religion and culture. Here's the show.

Hey, what do you study?

SPEAKER 2:

I study the ethnographic of religion.

SPEAKER 3:

Religion in the Caribbean and the American South.

SPEAKER 4:

I study acts of identification and social formation.

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:

[INAUDIBLE] 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]

SPEAKER 10:

So as you may have heard in the previous episode of *Study Religion*, we, the masters students in the department have taken over-- at least for this episode. In our digital humanities course, headed by Dr. Michael J. Altman, the ominous voice whom traditionally hosts this podcast, we have been looking at the material culture and ephemera produced by the American Academy of Religion or otherwise known as the AAR. And this material and ephemera has been produced for the purpose of their annual conference. And the AAR is often considered the central professional organization for scholars in the study of religion, especially scholars in the study of religion that are based in the North Americas.

So because it is the big tent that unites scholars that would otherwise see themselves as entirely opposed, possibly, or at least very distant in their research interests-- because of this unifying quality of the AAR, its annual meeting became interesting data for our foundations course to understand how the field of religious studies is characterized both by the AAR and also the scholars within that organization. So my cohort and I, as you'll hear later, analyze everything from plenary addresses to tote bags to get at this issue. And as Dr. Altman or Mike has previously mentioned here, we've collaborated to make our acquired data publicly accessible through our digital collection titled, AAR Artifacts, which is currently being hosted on Mike's domain name if you want to go check it out.

So for this podcast project we send out requests for personal stories about the AAR, but also began to analyze presidential addresses all the way from 2013 through 2016. So we didn't include the presidential address from this year because when we start working on the project it had not taken place yet. So today the MA students from the religious studies department will be hijacking this podcast to use our findings to get at this broader issue of the development of the field of religious studies and how this development is cataloged by the data that we've gathered from the AAR. So now without further ado, here's my colleagues Emma and Sarah to discuss the role and duties of a scholar and the nature of the study of religion in regards to the presidential addresses from the AAR.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So Emma and I are here to talk about the past four presidential addresses. And I think we're going to start with 2016's, which was Serene Jones, who's the president of Union Theological Seminary. And the theme that year was revolutionary love. Her address did some interesting things.

It was delivered less than two weeks after Trump was elected president. And so you can see a lot of that reflected in what she talks about and how she talks about the future of the AAR and what the goals of AAR people should be as professors in the classroom.

So Emma what are your thoughts in general about Serene's address?

EMMA GIBSON:

So like you said there is a lot of themes that reflect the sentiments of the nation post-Trump election and she takes a very emotional stance on the role of the AAR. And even the title, The Revolutionary Love, I think is meant to bring up an emotional response from the audience and the role of the AAR as something pertaining to social justice, which is not something you would usually associate with the American Academy of Religion.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah, definitely an interesting move.

SERENE JONES:

And I also want to say a final thanks to all my Union friends and my friends from all over the country. My friends who don't know anything about the study of religion, but like you talk about love. They like to talk about revolution. The people at Union who got sick of me talking about revolutionary love and particularly all of the people of different-- across a multitude of faith traditions, who shared a commitment to social justice and social action, who talked about what revolutionary loves means in these very traditions.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So we see even in her introduction even before she started her actual address, she is already in the mindset of the goal is social justice and doing things for the good of the people, which is interesting coming from a professional organization that you wouldn't normally necessarily think of academics having to serve a social justice role. But clearly serene Jones thinks that this is a

duty of academics, especially in her mind-- especially academics in the study of religion.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah, I think it's interesting that you said the word "duty" because I feel the same way. She feels it's the burden of academics to guide other people in the right direction, but she definitely takes a-- I mean, it's definitely political. It's politically driven and there's-- it's just an interesting take on the Academy as being responsible for guiding people in the right direction, which I think comes up in other presidential addresses as well-- or at least one that I can think of.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

This reminds me too of something, I think I mentioned in class when we first talked about this is that-- I can't get over the fact that this was delivered less than two weeks after Trump was elected.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Clearly this speech would have taken a very different form if what everybody thought was going to happen had happened.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

And I think we'll get to that more towards the end of her speech, but I think that's an important thing to keep in mind throughout the entire thing because I don't think it would have taken such an emotional and political turn if it hadn't been for that context.

EMMA GIBSON:

Or at least it would have seen some kind of being proud or being hopeful for the future and feeling accomplished in our--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

--ethical--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. Because the phrase revolutionary love couldn't be taken either as a call to revolutionary love or as a pat on the back.

EMMA GIBSON:

Exactly.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So.

SERENE JONES:

I'm especially mindful tonight of those of you who teach heroically in classrooms across the United States, but particularly in the middle that are filled with Trump's supporters. Let's say it young neo-fascist, who don't even know there young neo-fascist. What a challenge it is to teach religion, and philosophy of religion, and history in those context. You will be outrightly cursed and demeaned by your own students. We know that. But there are others there that will listen. Your heroism is essential and we appreciate it.

EMMA GIBSON:

Can we talk about the fact that she used the word "heroism."

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So many things to say about this.

EMMA GIBSON:

Go for it, talk to me.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

It's so divisive. How can you say that if you want to completely alienate half of the country that voted for Trump. As disturbing as some people, myself included, may think that is, it's just taking a highly political stance and not even an appropriate political stance. It's just-- you can't call people fascists. It's so--

EMMA GIBSON:

Oh, my God. It's so-- it's a lot.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah, it's not-- it's-- there is it's this very particular view that it's our moral duty to correct these young manipulated minds as though that's not its own manipulation.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

And again whether or not you agree with that isn't really the point it's that even in saying this is our duty, which I keep coming back to-- but even in saying that it's already alienating those people that you're trying to reach or whatever.

EMMA GIBSON: Such a-- it's such a problematic word choice. I think she could--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON: --have worded it differently.

SARAH GRISWOLD: Can you imagine somebody who-- say, Mike Altman, for example, was in this room, heard the speech, and said, all right, it is my duty to go correct those young neo-fascist minds. And so he walks into class the next time he has class and he's, all right, young neo-fascists, let's talk about your mistakes. That's just not, OK.

EMMA GIBSON: And then when she was talking about your students will stand up against you, they'll do this--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah, if you call them fascists.

EMMA GIBSON: And this-- it's this whole stance of they're going to rebel. They're going to fight. They're going to challenge you, but stay strong and persist and change their minds. And that's not-- imposing your own beliefs on students has never been the right way to win over people's minds.

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON: You have to get down on their level and talk with them. And if you want to treat them like adults and have an actual discussion with them, I think that would benefit more than going in and--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON: Standing strong and separating yourselves from them and realizing that you are more ethically evolved than they are. And imagine if someone on the opposite political spectrum of her was saying this--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON: If they were--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON: If Kellyanne Conway was saying that, we would freak out.

SARAH GRISWOLD: Exactly.

EMMA GIBSON: And--

SARAH GRISWOLD: We would not be down with that. So why would we be down with this.

EMMA GIBSON: Exactly, you have to be objective about this and not--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Right.

EMMA GIBSON: --let your personal opinions guide something like a presidential speech that isn't targeted towards Democrats--

SARAH GRISWOLD: This is a professional organization--

EMMA GIBSON: Right. Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD: And that's-- I mean, obviously we're taking our own particular stance about it and I think you and I both have strong feelings about this address more so than the other ones--

EMMA GIBSON: Yeah. Just fascists threw me off. That word.

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah, it's clearly crafted because of an emotional response to the political context. I would be surprised if she delivered this address now.

EMMA GIBSON: Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD: Now that we're further into what it means to be in a Trump presidency-- in the Trump era or whatever.

EMMA GIBSON: Those first few weeks were very emotionally charged--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON: --which, given in this context, it probably wouldn't have been that surprising in November, but looking back on it--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Right. Because we're being exposed to it now for the first time, but if we had seen it--

EMMA GIBSON: Right.

SARAH GRISWOLD: But if we had seen this address when it happened it may not have felt as out of place as we're reading it now--

EMMA GIBSON: Exactly.

SARAH GRISWOLD: Which is why we keep going back to the context of-- it wasn't even two weeks.

EMMA GIBSON: Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD: And it really makes me wonder before Trump got elected what her speech looked like--

EMMA GIBSON: Yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD: --because obviously it wasn't this. So do you have any further thoughts about this address? Concluding thoughts.

EMMA GIBSON: Yeah, I guess when-- if we talk about what this means for the field, to sum it up, it's this call to, not just activism, but political activism--

SARAH GRISWOLD: Right.

EMMA GIBSON: --in the context of the American Academy of Religion, which is definitely a unique vision for what the organization should look like.

SARAH GRISWOLD: That was 2016's address. Should we move on?

EMMA GIBSON: Moving on.

So Thomas Tweed, from UNC Chapel Hill, gave the 2015 AAR presidential address. And it was titled, "Valuing the Study of Religion-- Improving Difficult Dialogues Within and Beyond the AAR's Big Tent."

SARAH GRISWOLD:

And so the point of this talk was basically, there's theologians and there's non theologians and however else people classify themselves in this organization. And we should all just get along-

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SARAH GRISWOLD:

Exactly.

EMMA GIBSON:

--basically. There are different values in the study of religion, and it's worthwhile to take other people's values seriously--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

[LAUGH]

EMMA GIBSON:

--and, yeah, consider them as all relevant to Religious Studies as a field, as a whole.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

Which is not a bad thing.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So this is, like, the professional version of "you do you, fam."
Right?

EMMA GIBSON:

(CHUCKLING) Exactly. [LAUGH]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

And you were, like, this was your favorite one, right? Like, you agreed with this.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah I feel, like, out of all the presidential addresses, the main message was not only, I guess, communication within the field and a recognition of different values in the field but also interdisciplinary work, which, I mean, I find valuable as something that should be prioritized in academia. Because pushing one agenda is obviously going to isolate other groups,

so--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

--yeah.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

And I see that, too. Because the AAR isn't-- the meeting isn't ever just the AAR. It's the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. And so you have a bunch of people who couldn't care less about colonialism or, like, whatever, because they're-- and, I mean, they may be interested if you're a good colonial scholar who knows how to present your work in an interesting and whatever kind of way, but they're in the depths of whatever, like, Trinitarian theology.

And so that particular approach in the field isn't their jam. Which is, I think, kind of groovy. Like, why not have a bunch of different people doing their own different thing?

But then there's also those, like, you have to take into account the history of the AAR and the field of Religious Studies as a whole, because obviously it's been dominated by Christian theologians for a very long time. So I'm down with the, like, "you do you" thing, as long as the "you do you" thing also isn't just, like, non theologians accepting theologians but also theologians letting non theologians do their own interesting work.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- We can ready ourselves for that exchange, one in which we state the reasons our judgments are warranted and actively listen to our interlocutors' counter arguments, by committing to the principle of fallibilism, not regarding our own conclusions as free from criticism, and by cultivating the requisite virtues-- including empathy, humility, and generosity. In other words, inculcate habits of

thinking, feeling, and doing that enact our principled openness, as we try to understand the other.

But it's about more than the humility and empathy. We should also demonstrate the virtue of receptive generosity.

[END PLAYBACK]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. So this kind of language shows the very-- I mean, it's also emotional but in a different way than the 2016 address. So, you know, empathy, generosity, compassion. It's definitely a more--

But it's about, like, empathy and compassion towards each other.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah, exactly.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right? It's not this, like, moral-- as we saw in the 2016 address. It's not, like, this moral fight between you, the professor, and your students. It's-- like, I see these disagreements in the field of you professors against each other, so, like be nice to each other, please?

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah. And sort of like a call to political action. It's like a call for understanding and making an intentional effort to get to know the beliefs and ideas of the academic other.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

Which is cool.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Like, it's political with the organization, rather than political in the, like, national-politics political. And I think it's a type of political that you and I would agree with and that, like, to be a good professional person, you've got to be able to get along with your colleagues even if you disagree.

EMMA GIBSON:

And, like, he is advocating for this position of tolerance in the

academy, which I agree with. Because no one's going to listen to you if you don't take the time to listen to them.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

But.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- The study of religion yields many goods. There isn't just one answer to the question of the discipline's value. To improve our chances of success in exchanges with stakeholders, we can cite the evidence we have, but it would be helpful to get more information, perhaps collaborating with other ACLS organizations to commission a new survey that would give us more comparative data about the relative value of the Religion major.

And, wherever we say, in our fraught internal dialogues about our competing values, as we negotiate with campus administrators and respond to public critics I hope we focus on the commitments we share. Most important, wherever we stand in this big and clamorous tent, we stand with others who agree about the intrinsic and pragmatic value of the study of religion.

[END PLAYBACK]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

There is a point in there, I forget exactly what he said, but he was basically calling for a look at the Religion major, relative to other majors. And he wants to take this into interdisciplinary approach beyond religious studies and theology but outside of that, towards other humanities, and, I guess, potentially sciences, which you know I just love.

[LAUGHTER]

I love-- because I don't think anybody should ever, like, see their work within one field. Because I think you're alienating a lot of good work if you exclude other disciplines. And I think interdisciplinary work is an awesome thing.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah, I agree. I think that I really liked his address, because it didn't, like, lock in on one value-- which we saw as a theme in a lot of other presidential addresses, where we're like, this is what we should do, this is the stand we should take. And instead he's like, no, we need to realize that there are numerous values that we all hold, within this academy and this organization. And recognizing that is the key to operating better. Or, like, you know, just really, I guess [LAUGH] like, just being better academics.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON:

And I agree with that.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So our values as an organization are not one or two things, but our values are the values of the collective whole. We value multiple values. We'll all tied.

[LAUGHTER]

So Laurie Zoloth gave the 2014 AAR presidential address. And it was titled "Interrupting Your Life-- an Ethics for the Coming Storm." Which, being an ethicist, is really reflected in her speech. Because she talks primarily about our responsibility to each other, this constant interruption that forces us to welcome the unknown with hospitality and our--

This goes back to a lot of what we've seen, in other presidential addresses, of duty. And so the duty of scholars to be present in the public sphere.

EMMA GIBSON:

OK, So it's more self-reflective than the other ones. And it's more about yourself changing than about something outside of

you changing.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. So I guess we as scholars recognizing this interruption as something valuable, and how if we-- I guess if we all make this move, then we will be better academics. So, yeah, I guess you could say it's more geared towards the individual than the collective. But I think it's definitely-- if we do focus, or if we all make this individual move, then it will affect the collective and affect society and the organization and things like that.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- Letting the danger and the power and the endless mercy of religion to be excellently told is the task of a scholar of religion. To teach religion excellently is to engage in the public examination of things, the task of the scholar since Socrates spoke this truth to his [INAUDIBLE] [INAUDIBLE]. And our teaching, if it is actually parrhesia, should raise the questions that will doubtless interrupt the usual way of things, which in our academy would mean the disruption of the institutions that govern us, the ratio and the episteme of the marketplace, a marketplace devoted to continuous expansion whatever the cost.

[END PLAYBACK]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So I thought I saw a lot of themes similar to the 2015 presidential address, except focusing a lot more on religion. She goes on, after saying, like, we have a unique role as scholars of religion. And she goes on-- I made notes of, you know, her four powerful capacities of religion, which are confront the terror of death, gives people the ability to believe in their own power, allows for prophecy, and religions are without borders.

So, because of this unique, you know, like, because religion is a unique, I guess, discourse or act or all of these things, it opens the doors for us to have a very special presence in the academic field. Which is a big claim.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah. And I guess my question from that is, like, wouldn't an English scholar think that their role was unique?

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah, and--

EMMA GIBSON:

So, like, what makes the fact that we study religion different?

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. And she would say it's this, like-- this, you know, powerful, unknown, like, kind of attitude that religion offers that no other discipline offers. Which it's obvious that she is targeting those in the audience. And it's not this call for-- I mean, like, yes interdisciplinary, yes the unknown, the other, but for the people in that room.

So it's kind of, we do have this duty to be present in the academic sphere, because we can offer insights that other disciplines can't.

EMMA GIBSON:

Right.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Which is interesting, but.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah. And I guess, like, if you're a professor in a classroom of, like, 18- and 19-year-olds, trying to teach them about stuff that they've maybe not encountered outside of, at most, whatever Sunday school they got. So it's sort of this thing where you're dealing with sensitive material, because the students handle it sensitively. Not necessarily because it's, like, it's own sensitive-- like, that's its own different argument.

But if you allow yourself, as a scholar of religion, to be changed by your interaction with the other, you have to recognize that you have a responsibility as-- at least in the role of professor, to

your students-- to teach them well, I guess.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Hmm.

EMMA GIBSON:

Not call them neofascists. I keep coming back to that. I'm sorry.

[LAUGHTER]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

We can coming back to that. Because that's nutsy.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. I mean, I like her speech, but I do think that there may be a little too much emphasis on religion being this, you know--

EMMA GIBSON:

Unique special thing?

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. And I mean, like, I think that comes from her being an ethicist, though.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah, I mean, you take pride--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Ethicists are, like, into religion being--

EMMA GIBSON:

I like ethics.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

--the thing.

EMMA GIBSON:

I love ethics, but, like, it's definitely-- it's just a speech not meant for other scholars, but it does, like-- you know, it evokes pride in being in a religious-studies scholar in an environment where religion isn't really taken seriously. And I think that she's trying-- not that it's not regarded as a legitimate academic field, but usually people don't reference religion as, like, oh, let's go ask the religious-studies scholar what they think about colonialism.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. There's this thing I have noticed outside of Religious Studies in academics where they just sort of take religion as a given, and it's not even, like--

EMMA GIBSON:

Like history.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. And it's not even, like, an intentional move on their part. They just don't really recognize that Religious Studies is a field and that maybe they should consult a scholar of religion before saying, like, Hinduism at the time of colonial rule blah-blah-blah - like, because there's all sorts of claims that they're making there that they may not be aware of. And I think that's a good point about this address, because she's sort of getting at that point, that, like, this is a legitimate field but if we as scholars in this field treat it well then people outside of the field will treat it well, as well.

EMMA GIBSON:

And recognizing that Religious Studies has something more to offer than theology. And, like, the nature of religion and studying religion opens doors for new kinds of theory and just, like, perspectives that you wouldn't have otherwise and that have historically been ignored in the academy.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

And, yeah, I think it would be-- like, you know when she says that we need participation and we need to disrupt the institutions that govern us. And I think it's cool that she sees religion as able to do this. I don't know how true that is, or whether religion should be prioritized over other disciplines. I don't know if she's saying that or not. But I definitely think she's trying to emphasize that religion has this potential, just as well as any other field.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. I can sort of see how this led into the 2015 address, too.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah. I thought it was really neat. I love ethics. I love this kind of stuff. So I found it very inspiring [LAUGH] and definitely a unique insight, whether or not her claims about religion as being something separate and distinct and its fundamental qualities or fundamental modes of research is true or not. But it definitely opens the doors for some investigation into what that might be

or examples of this. Which I would love to look into.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. OK! Great.

EMMA GIBSON:

Cool. Moving on.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Let's move on to the last one.

EMMA GIBSON:

So this is the 2013 AAR presidential address by John Esposito. And it's called "Islam in the Public Square." So, to give a brief background on this, he talks about the ways we think and talk about Islam in the public sphere and how this can be problematic and how scholars of religion can change this. And, looking at the broad ideas of his speech, I got that as scholars of religion it is our duty to take our findings and research and make it available to the public, so that the public can have a more complete understanding of religions and whatnot.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

It sort of has this underlying-- like, even if he doesn't say it, it has this underlying moral, political, activist call that I think we see much more explicitly in the 2016 address. And that it's our moral duty to inform, which is obviously a different flavor, but--

EMMA GIBSON:

It's more of a civic duty. Like, instead of, like--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON:

Not necessarily political, but--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. Like, the way he's framing it, you know, we did see-- we saw moral in Zoloth. We saw political in Serene Jones. And now, him, we see it as, like, our duty as citizens and what our civic duty calls us to do as scholars. Because we have to take ourselves as-- you know, our academic duty, and also our civic duty, which requires our research becoming available to the public. Which is interesting.

EMMA GIBSON:

Right. And arguably this is something that you could pick up and

deliver to a conference of historians. Right? Because especially in our current political climate of, like, what counts as-- and not just our political climate, but also, like, what I study and write about for my thesis. But of, like, what gets to count as legitimate history and what the dominant narrative is.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- Well, as both scholars, we provide data that's important for people to understand the context. And as citizens, we should be out there also applying that data, too, and raising issues to real-life situations. If we're not the go-to place, and we're still not there, media does not immediately call the AAR as if we're the privileged place. Even though we have that kind of bureau set up, we need to address that.

[END PLAYBACK]

EMMA GIBSON:

So, yeah, here he's just reinforcing that we need to keep putting our scholarship out there. And then he also recognizes that we aren't-- or that the AAR is not-- cited often in media, and that reporters don't go to the AAR to get information on x, y, and z, and that we have to constantly work to reach that point.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

So the media usually turns to historical events-- so, like, when a terrorist attack happens, they'll cite other terrorist attacks, but they don't really say, oh, let's talk about Islam as a whole. Let's just look at this one specific event. Like, you wouldn't say that Westboro Baptist Church is an accurate depiction of Christianity. Because we-- you know, America is predominantly Christian, but America doesn't have that much exposure with the Muslim

world. So it's, we form our opinions of Islam based on what affects us.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right, and what we see-- what we're exposed to, which is often what we see in the news.

EMMA GIBSON:

So we need to be exposed to these, like, not more complete but more, like--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

More complex--

EMMA GIBSON:

Right.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

--I'd say.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Like, all of these different ideas and conceptions and, like, examples of Islam that don't have this violent nature, just as we wouldn't say all Christians are homophobic and offensive.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. And so, like, it becomes sort of a question of balance between other examples of, if we're taking Esposito's examples, other examples of Islam, but also, at the same time, getting somebody like Esposito, who studies Islam, in there to say these are all flavors of this thing that we have come to call Islam, and maybe there is more going on here than just religious belief, in this event that we're talking about.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah, like, what happened for this organ-- like, ISIS to become so big and so prominent? It goes beyond extremism. It's, like, what was happening in the Middle East, for this group [INAUDIBLE]. Like, there's so much involved.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. Because ISIS didn't just come out of nowhere.

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah. It was, like, this whole political-- and, like, I mean, like-- and also religious conflict that has been going on in the Middle East for decades. It's not just cut and dry-- here's an extremist

organization that came out of the blue. It's just--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right. And if you go so narrow as to only talk about religious motivation, then you have absolutely no understanding of why ISIS exists.

EMMA GIBSON:

Right. And someone who is a scholar of Islam has that kind of background. And this goes back to, like, the value of interdisciplinary engagement, of--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Getting the context.

EMMA GIBSON:

Right.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

So what are our concluding thoughts about John Esposito's address in 2013?

EMMA GIBSON:

Yeah, I guess, like, just going back to the duty of academics to inform the public. Which is interesting because that just ties into all of these addresses as having-- like, what is our responsibility? And what is the responsibility of the AAR? And, even further, what is the responsibility of scholars?

And, for him, that is to keep doing what we're doing but, you know, getting it out there and publishing and becoming, like, a reliable source or a reference source for the public sphere-- as in media, you know, news-- just how we get our information every day, instead of the AAR having to be something that we go out and find on our own time. It needs to be something that is brought to the public, just as, you know, any other discipline is brought into the public.

Like, you know, Poli Sci or History or English, just as that is fed into the news, Religious Studies and the AAR should be, too. Because we're doing the same kind of academic work. It's just not being recognized as something valuable to current political climate, because it's kind of seen as isolated or, like--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Just theology?

EMMA GIBSON:

Right.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON:

Exactly.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

It's a lot more complex than you think. So I guess the first thing to address, in concluding all of this, is what we see as the themes that tie all four of these addresses together. Because these aren't just isolated speeches. Right? They're on a trajectory of, I guess, reflecting on what the AAR is and should be, by the people who have been chosen to run the AAR.

And so, yeah, what do you think? What do you see as a theme that runs through?

EMMA GIBSON:

So, each of the presidential addresses work to point out what the AAR could be doing better. And I think they do so in very different and unique ways. So each year it focuses on a different element that we need to work on.

So, being available to the public, paying attention to the different values within the AAR, our moral duty to the other, and, [LAUGH] I guess, the political duty to change young minds. So they all have different opinions on what not only we need to be but what we need to work on, I guess. So, yeah, they're all very distinct visions.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah.

EMMA GIBSON:

And, I don't know, would you say that they flow together? Or do you think that every year there's a presidential address that just is completely different? Do you think that there's, like, a consistent aim?

SARAH GRISWOLD:

I think, yeah, to some extent I see them sort of building-- we

went backwards, but I see them building on each other, as each year passes. And I think [LAUGH] there's a way where I don't see that happening with 2016's address, but I think that has more to do with my understanding of it and my own particular--

EMMA GIBSON:

Fascist!

SARAH GRISWOLD:

[LAUGH] --feelings--

EMMA GIBSON:

[LAUGH]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

--about it. But I think there is a point where it does tie in with the other addresses, in this-- because all of them have a call to action, in some way, whether it's one we agree with or one that we have a lot of problems with. And I can see--

I keep going back to this 2016 address, but I can see, maybe because it's more fresh in my memory, but I can see the political context that it came out of. And, to me, that one sticks out as sort of an outlier. But, at the same time, I can also see where that fits in.

And so I see the four of these, along with the 2012 one, which we read for class, and the other ones that Don Wiebe dealt with in "The Politics of Religious Studies." We can sort of see this trajectory of development of what this professional organization sees itself as. And, in recent years, it's sort of taken on this labor of getting along with each other, because we have our own differences within our organization but, at the same time, being available and reaching out to people who aren't scholars. And whether that's through political activism, in 2016, or education, in 2013, there is some sort of outreach beyond our professional organization.

Which I think, at the end of the day, is kind of the point, because we're not an entirely insular organization. There's no point in having this organization if we're not going to engage and

address things outside of the organization. So, yeah! Those are my thoughts. [LAUGH]

EMMA GIBSON:

So I know that we've been, in our 502 class, we've been talking about the underlying theological aspect of the AAR. And listening to these recent addresses, you know, it's a little unclear as to the role of theology. But you can definitely see it in, like-- I know that, in some of these, there's a preacheresque tone.

So, like, Zoloth's speech definitely has religion as unique because it deals with the beyond and its role in our understanding of death and all of these huge topics that I guess she doesn't believe other fields have to deal with much. So, in that respect, there is some kind of theological language, but it's definitely decreased since some of very early speeches that we've read a couple weeks ago in class.

So, yeah, instead of, we need to convert our students and we need to give them access to the Bible, it's more of, like, let's think of what religion can offer you know, in its-- like, what are the fundamental qualities of Religion that make it different from other fields?

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Right.

EMMA GIBSON:

Which I think is a better move, more inclusive, maybe.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah. So I guess our takeaway from all of this is that the AAR is very complex, and there's a lot of people with a lot of different viewpoints on what we do as an organization. So maybe the answer isn't that one person has the answer, I guess. And I think that's kind of the beauty of examining multiple addresses, too, because we see multiple perspectives. And, at the same time we can see certain themes and agreements between those addresses, we also see those differences. And it's not necessarily about deciding who's right and who's wrong but just understanding that there are multiple perspectives and those

multiple perspectives are worth addressing.

EMMA GIBSON:

And, like everything we have learned in this department, there is no homogeneous definition for any word for religion--

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Nope.

EMMA GIBSON:

--term-- anything.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

[LAUGH] Ever. What does anything mean?

EMMA GIBSON:

[LAUGH] Especially the AAR.

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Yeah.

SIERRA LAWSON:

Cool. So, thanks to Sarah and Emma for that discussion. And, as you guys can see from the data we analyzed in this podcast, but as well as our multitude of digital projects from this semester, we were able to identify themes in how the AAR, and in particular its presidents, view the scholars within the AAR in terms of not only their work but also their role as a professor, their teaching duties, and as a general member of society at large.

Emma at one point mentioned the role of religious-studies scholars in improving and facilitating difficult dialogues. And, for me, that's also one of the main takeaways, in addition to feeling out a place for theology and also a place and time for interdisciplinary work that can enhance the study of religion.

So that's all we have for you now. Thanks for listening. And remember to study religion, and find out.

[THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER:

"Study Religion" is a production of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. For more information on our department, go to religion.ua.edu. Or find us on Facebook, at facebook.com/rel@ua. Have a comment or a question about

the podcast? You can email us at religiousstudies@ua.edu or reach out to us on Twitter at [@studyreligion](https://twitter.com/studyreligion).

If you'd like to see pretty pictures of our beautiful, historic campus and the wonderful Manly Hall, where we are recording, follow us on Instagram at [@studyreligion](https://www.instagram.com/studyreligion). And if you've enjoyed the show, please subscribe to us at iTunes and leave us a comment and a rating. That helps other folks find the show and makes you a very helpful person.

Special thanks to Sierra Lawson, Sarah Griswold, and Emma Gibson, our three MA students in Religion and Culture, for the hard work they put into this episode. And if you're interested in our MA program, you can find more information at our website. Roll Tide!

[THEME MUSIC]

EMMA GIBSON:

Are you not nervous at all? [LAUGH]

SARAH GRISWOLD:

Not really. Because, if we hate something we say, we can just delete it and move on.