

Mike Altman: Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast produced by the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I'm your host, Professor Mike Altman. It has been a while since we appeared in your podcast feed. But now, the semester is over here at Manly Hall. The students have left, and it's starting to get warm. Soon, it will be hot and humid, which means it's summer. Now, we have some time to put together new episodes of the podcast and catch folks up on what's happened around the Department of Religious Studies this past year.

Mike Altman: What I want to bring is the first of a few shorter episodes of the podcast, and in this episode, I want to bring listeners into a conversation that happened here in Manly Hall recently. We welcomed Doctor Tim Jensen from the University of Southern Denmark to Tuscaloosa to give our annual Aronov lecture, an annual lecture we give every spring.

Mike Altman: While he was here, Doctor Jensen also spent some time sitting down with Professor Richard Newton and a few of our religion and culture graduate students to discuss the field and his role in it, as the President of the International Association for the Study of Religion, or the IAHR. I want to share a bit of that conversation, as Doctor Jensen discussed the history of the IAHR., its role in the field, and how he sees the purpose of the academic study of religion. I also think this is a very cool example of the sorts of scholars that we bring into our department, of the international reach of our department, and the great experiences our graduate students get in a smaller program like ours.

Mike Altman: Doctor Jensen, when he starts this conversation, does as all good guests should, he opens by complimenting his host.

Tim Jensen: I think this is a unique place, in terms of the Study of Religions, not only probably in the United States, but worldwide.

Richard Newton: Your international experience probably puts you in a small cohort of working scholars who really have a strong sense and background working outside a particular continent, outside a particular country. I'm wondering if that was something that you went out to accomplish in your academic work from the get go?,To think internationally, and working at an international level?

Tim Jensen: Not at all.

Richard Newton: Not at all?

Tim Jensen: No. I wanted to become a professional soccer player and I had no idea about studying religion and having an academic career. I was extremely disappointed not to become a professional soccer player. I'm not going to go into details, but that was what I wanted. Then, at some point, very early in my life I realized that I could not use my hands for anything. So I could not become a carpenter, or anything else sort of useful. I had to go into academia. I simply had to, in order to make a living. After the upper-secondary school, I looked around, what could

I do? I called one professor in Copenhagen, at the Study of Religions. It was called History Religions at that time, department. Ask him, what are the requirements? How can I get enrolled and start after summer in the semester for the Study of Religions?

Tim Jensen: He said "no problem, you just go and register".

Tim Jensen: "Fine" I said.

Tim Jensen: And then I started to study religions, comparative religion. I had no plans whatsoever to have a life within the academia, and then I ended up with what was called a macista conference, highly specialized in Ancient Greek religion, but that means only a fragment of it, name it, the religion, whatever you want to call it you find in the Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey and my special field was, the interest I had was the concept of hybris, you have heard about that right, and I had the idea from reading little bit that it was not at all something about insulting the gods or nemesis or all that. I had the idea that it was all about human beings it was what do you call it this way it was not [crosstalk 00:04:40]

Richard Newton: Horizontal and not vertical.

Tim Jensen: Exactly right it was horizontal and not vertical. I was convinced that that was how it was and then I sat down typewriting my dissertation 400 pages and I think one or two persons in life have ever read it, that's it. Then I defended it, but defense had nothing to do with the subject matter I was tested on the theory of Manhart's [foreign language 00:05:10] the history of the research of religion. We had to [inaudible 00:05:14] everything you say that you have here. That included, one way or the other, theory of the myth, but at that time back in the early seventies, nobody mentioned the word theory, nobody the word method, nobody at all. That's just how it was. Then I was there after ten years of study, history of religion, comparative religion, and there was nothing to use it for because in Denmark at that time that was nineteen hundred and eighty, we had one professor in Aarhus, one professor in Copenhagen, one assistant professor each place. We had about ten students, master student, both places all together.

Tim Jensen: So there was no hope for me to ever get a position at the University, because there were no students. It was plenty with two professors. What I did was I finished my degree and then I took an extra degree in [foreign language 00:06:17] that is sort of ancient culture religion, Greek, Roman, architecture, et cetera. Because that made it possible for me to apply for a position at an upper-secondary school because you had to have two subjects there, you couldn't go and teach with one, that was unheard of.

Tim Jensen: So I finally got a position in eighty one, in an upper secondary school teaching religion, non-confessional religious education, on the one hand, and

Altertumswissenschaft on the other, lots of Homeric epics and so on. and I loved it. That was for fifteen years I was employed there then fifteen years later, I moved to the University because there was an opening and because over these fifteen years in the eighties, the number of students who had figured out that it was interesting to study religion had just gone like this. It was incredible! It had to do with the whole democratization of University, many more people came to the university, they came to upper-secondary school in larger numbers, but they also came to the university. And that meant that at a certain point in the mid-nineties I could get a position in a third place in Denmark, in Odense where they had established a study of religions in the early eighties, but they were sort of developing.

Tim Jensen: So that was it, I have written an article about that for from ten students to a thousand students, from two professors to thirty-eight professors within a span of about fifteen, twenty years. So that was how it was in Denmark, and I have tried to also analyze the reasons for this, but this is sort of my story.

Tim Jensen: Then I came to the academia and the only reason I managed to get a position was that I had managed to not only teach in upper-secondary level, you will teach twenty two to twenty five lectures per week, but I also had managed to write a few articles, have an extra position at the university, so I sort of was okay for the university, they could hire me. And I got that position, started there in Odense and a few years later I became head of the department and we managed to developed it so it became a department that was sort of able to compete with the big places in Copenhagen and Aarhus. We gradually increased the number of staff, the number of students, and today we are in between. We are not a big department, but we are not a small department, and we are making still good money. We have a very good reputation in Denmark and internationally, and I would say that what happened very early, coming back to your question was that I figured out that I like to teach.

Tim Jensen: It was as head of the union of teachers for religious education I very soon became head of that, I always become head of something, this is what I like to do, so it doesn't have to be international, it's also national. Then I became very soon after I had entered the university at this I became the president of the Danish association for the study of religion, before that I had been launching a journal called CHAOS, on the study of religion in Copenhagen, and we had a small association where we gave lectures and the first lecturer we had was Erik Schaff, so he was the first professor I welcomed as a young student, and I booked a room for him in the most fashionable hotel in Copenhagen and I bought flowers, and I put flowers in the room to make sure that he liked it. It was very much fun, and Schaff was a very nice guy and he gave the first lecture we had him that.

Tim Jensen: So I got into it and becoming president of the Danish association, I was president for seven years. Then in 2000, I was there when they founded the European Association for the Study of Religions, not history of religions, in

Cracow, in Poland and it was sort of a child of IAHR, it was Michael Pye, it was Armin Geertz, other... these prominent figures who thought it was time to have a European association, and I became the first general secretary of the ESR and I was general secretary from 1999 to 2004.

Tim Jensen: In 2005, I was elected general secretary of the IAHR in Tokyo, 2005. And then it has become my passion now that I couldn't become a soccer player and I became the entrepreneur and I don't know what is going to happen with the IAHR in the future, it has been here since 1950. I have called as a president for a summit meeting in September 2019 in Delphi, in Greece, so I'm going, I'm retracing my steps, I'm going back I was the one who persuaded a lot of people that we had to have the AR as a member, and with the help of the AR and with the help of NASA people actually

Tim Jensen: was that a answer to your question?

Richard Newton: It was

Tim Jensen: It was long, right. I know, but it- [crosstalk 00:12:03]

Richard Newton: It's a great answer

Tim Jensen: But see it's sort of important for me to say that, yeah I do believe that I have been part of a mission, I fight for a better world, I fight for a better society. I just happened to think that an open democratic, pluralist et cetera society is better off with, than without a scientific study of religion, but I have done all of this in my life. I have been an activist so you see international, I say entrepreneur, I say activist in order to promote the study of religion in many ways and I have done other things that I can also be very open about now that I'm so old as I am, even if I am the president, I have arranged for inter-religious dialogue meetings where I have been asked to find the right persons from the various religious communities and put them together to discuss for instance the ecological crisis.

Tim Jensen: Now when I say, this it's because when I promote the IAHR, I promote an II together much stricter version of what is sort of the main task for a scholar of religion. I just read the draft for the criteria for accepting papers for Otaga in 2020. And our statement about the sort of non-confessional, non-apologetic, et cetera, it's there. So a paper that can be seen to have just the slightest of that will not be accepted. We don't want it.

Tim Jensen: This is where we have tightened up our profile since I came in in 2005 after Tokyo, because in Tokyo there was a little bit of it, again there was something in Durban, but we think this is important, but again, I don't know if this is something of a total consensus now a day and the first piece of evidence of that was the 1958 sort of out of the way conquest in Tokyo, normally, it would be 1955 that it was in Rome, then it should have been 1960 but then they had one in 1958 in Tokyo and that was because they started to work together with

UNESCO, this is another very important thing in the history of the IAHR that I'll come back to. UNESCO in Paris funded the beginning of NUMEN and together with Brill, publisher, but can younger generations still see the future of themselves and the IAHR in the statement of [crosstalk 00:15:04], in our sort of pledging ourselves to sort of be true to this or not.

Tim Jensen: So, I think that when... after Tokyo 2005, we once again had sort of this coming back to Tokyo 1958, Tokyo 2005, and in Tokyo 2005 there was a sincere criticism of the program for having too many religious people there, for being too much into inter-religious communication, peace, et cetera and having the start of religion contribute to tolerance, human rights et cetera. That was the reason why the general assembly of the international committee told the incoming executive committee you have to tighten up, and that's when we added this sentence to the first article that's going to be no apologetics, et cetera right.

Richard Newton: I think if looking at other narrations of the history of the field, we see other crises, it seems to me that those crises actually come out of sort of the theoretical edges of what's being debated within those fields. I mean if you look at Kippenberg and talking about sort of enlightenment history and how we work that out in the nineteenth and twentieth century, or Tomoko Masuzawa's work on the invention of world religions, there seem to be these questions that are being raised about have we taken this current trajectory to its end, and what are the new questions we must be asking about ourselves as either scientists of religion or somehow apolitical actors or whatever the case may be. I wonder if the question of globalization as it's being raised here, and hopefully in Delphi as well, will the critiques there come about because of the theoretical work that happens the science of religion as opposed to a desire for pluralism and inter-cultural dialogue and agendas being imported-

Tim Jensen: I'm sure but I mean it has been part of course and I think it's only good it is part of our constitution to talk about diversity the whole executive committee is constituted with regard to diversity, geographical, gender, et cetera.

Richard Newton: I think one of the tensions there too, especially as the international association grows is thinking about how to wrestle with the history in a critically appropriate manner of the history of how is it that we got interested in studying here and in these places, and I think you've been quite forthright in discussing your own interests and how you've narrated that and navigated that in these different spaces, but I think as new conversation partners are brought to the table they start looking at other people's pasts and say well what do I do with that, can I take that as- [crosstalk 00:17:53]

Tim Jensen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Richard Newton: a study and study that [crosstalk 00:17:55] or, is that something I need to make a stand on-

Tim Jensen: This is why I find it worthwhile doing and I'm just trying to do my little part to fit but it is a very complicated field. This is why I want to have sort of a representation on the board as we have it. This is why we want to have diversity we want to learn from people who are sitting there we want to learn from people who want to do the study but who has local knowledge. If we don't have that local knowledge we're not going to move. But it's a difficult thing.,

Richard Newton: And you've given us great ideas to think through and challenges to think through and we also have the book that you've been referring to, with the NUMEN imprint the academic study of religion and the IAHR past present and prospects edited by yourself and Armin Geertz which you can check out and we'll have a link on our website for the podcast. Thank you very much.

Tim Jensen: And let me add a thing. Thank you for the conversation. I think that when you read this you will see that there are lots of questions to be posed, answered so we can improve in terms of globalization in many many ways but we have to find the right balance between globalization and expansion for the sake of globalization and expansion. Then for the sake of strengthening, empowering so that we call the academic scientific study of religions because this is I think is our raison d'être this is why we are there and I just hope that we can collaborate with scholars all around the world also in the future too to improve, to become better.

Tim Jensen: Thank you for being here and my final thing is just to always to ask young scholars, and that is you, people sitting around this table, never stop asking questions. Asking questions, that's what it means to be a scholar. This is what I want professors to do that is to force students to think for themselves. So everything I've said, don't listen to me, don't, go your own way. Okay.

Mike Altman: A big thanks to professor Richard Newton who hosted that conversation with Dr. Tim Jensen thanks also to Tim Jensen for taking the time with our graduate students to talk about the field and IAHR a lot in that conversation. That was just a small portion of what was like an hour long time they had together, but that was just some key bits for the podcast audience. I think it's valuable to remember that the study of religion is an international field and too often we in America fail to engage and interact with our colleagues in Europe and around the world.

Mike Altman: The Study of 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://www.facebook.com/relatua). Have a comment or question about the podcast? You can email us at [religious\\_studies@ua.edu](mailto:religious_studies@ua.edu) or reach out to us on Twitter or Instagram at [@studyreligion](https://www.instagram.com/studyreligion). If you've enjoyed this show, please subscribe to us in iTunes and leave us a comment and a rating that helps other folks find the show, makes you a very giving person. Study religion is produce by me, Mike Altman, with help from our production assistant Sierra Lawson and the faculty of the department of

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religious studies. Our opening theme is "2-minute Warning" by Stephan Cartenburg and this closing theme is "Saturday Night" by Texas Radio Fish, both are used under creative commons license. Until our next episode, Roll Tide!