

Mike Altman: Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast produced by the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. My name is Mike Altman, and I am an associate professor here in the department and this is the first of a series of three short podcasts that we're going to put together, and they're all answering the same question. It's a, I think, a really important question about, when is it time to make a change? When is it a time to think outside the box, to make a jump into something new? And this is something that I have a lot of conversations with undergraduates, but especially graduate students and other colleagues, about when is it time to take your academic background, your training, and in our case in religious studies or whatever, and turn it into something new and different, or something that most people wouldn't see, or something that most people wouldn't understand or think about and to take a kind of risk.

Mike Altman: So, I wanted, I had conversations with three different people who have a background, academic background in religious studies, who are doing three very, very different things in very different places than what you might expect. The first one, in this episode, is talking to Tenzan Eagle, who, I don't want to take the story already, but he made quite the jump. A jump that took him halfway across the world. Tenzan, can you just sort of tell everyone, our listeners, sort of where you are and what you're doing-

Tenzan Eaghll: Sure.

Mike Altman: [crosstalk 00:01:50] right now?

Tenzan Eaghll: Sure, no problem. Thanks for having me on. I currently am living and working in Thailand. I, um my current position is lecturer and chair of the MA program at the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Bangkok. I've been here now, two years working at the college, well, almost three years, but the college now for two years, two and a half years. I ended up here through various series of random events. I mean one, just like most grad students when I was finishing my PhD in 2015, 2016 at the University of Toronto. Every day on Facebook I would see a barrage of articles about just how horrible the job market was and how detri-how bad everything was once you finished. Then on top of that, there was all the, the gun violence in the States and there was the rise of the Donald Trump. I was just like, "The idea of going to the States just scares me on various levels."

Tenzan Eaghll: And then also at the same time, I was traveling. I kind of figured out midway through my PhD that I could travel to like South America, and Africa and Asia, and stay in cheap hotels and hostels and stuff while I was writing my dissertation. And in the process of that, I had kind of fallen in love with Thailand and met a girl here, so when I finished it all just kind of makes sense to move here and look for a job instead of looking in the States. And I just kind of got lucky, I actually didn't have any, I didn't know. Well, I thought that maybe when I came here, all I would ever be able to do is just do English stuff like teaching

English or teach English at a University. I had no idea if there was even a religious studies college, and I only stumbled upon the college I'm at, at a random job advertisement that a friend sent me. It all kind of randomly came together, but it worked out well.

Mike Altman: So, it's interesting, so, it seems like you kind of made the decision more for your own kind of personal, what you wanted to do, um and...

Tenzan Eaghll: Yes.

Mike Altman: Sort of these, so how do you see that? I mean there's this, I think this idea that folks have to kind of give, you know, sacrifices in the right word cause it almost glorifies it, but there's this sense that people have to, you know, give up some sort of personal, sort of freedom or personal things they want in their life in order to do academic work because of the nature of the job market and all of this. But, it's interesting that what, when to hear you narrated that you kind of, did what you, what you wanted to do for a variety of reasons, detached from those kind of, from academics and then wound up finding an academic place in the long run.

Tenzan Eaghll: Yeah, no, that's definitely true and that's actually advice I've given to other PhD students who are still in the West and then, you know, just finishing, for instance, my, the girl I was dating when I was finishing my PhD, she's a biological anthropologist. And when she got right out of school, not even before she was finished because she had quite a bit publications. She was offered a position at the University of Montreal, like tenure track. And so she was really excited and she, but she was kind of afraid cause she didn't even want to live in Montreal and she didn't even speak French. So, for the position she was going to have to, well she spoke a little bit, but she's going to have to learn how to lecture fluently in French and so that's what she's done and it's worked out, she loves being there.

Tenzan Eaghll: But I, my advice to her at the time was, well, you know, you're so talented, you could get a job in many places. Why not ask yourself if I could live anywhere in the world, where would I live? And her answer to that was Amsterdam. She would love to live and work in Amsterdam. And I thought, well, why not just go there and do that? Like you could find the position. I wonder that with a lot of academics, you know, I finished and I kind of wanted to come back to Thailand, but I think you know, there's positions all over the world.

Tenzan Eaghll: So, if you find a place you love, like in South America, anywhere else in the world, you could just go there and kind of see what happens. I mean there's lots of jobs doing various things that a person can do to kind of get their foot in the door and make some money and then build up and work their way into the academic system, that way too. So, it doesn't always have to be direct, like I have a tenure track position, so I'm moving to, you know, China or Singapore, Denver or something. It can kind of be side road, side route. Like you can just

have kind of a position that'll help pay the bills and then try to find some guest lecturing spots and weasel your way into a department.

Mike Altman: Yeah. You, I liked the idea of weaseling your way into department. Where do you, why do you think, Oh, it reminded me of the story that an old, um, she's now retired professor once told me about how she just showed up at the department office and just sort of demanded a job and kept doing that for a number of years until they finally, they finally gave her some courses they teach and then slowly, slowly she worked her way to, into a tenure track job.

Tenzan Eaghll: That's one way to do it.

Mike Altman: Yeah. Why do you think, why do you think, so many early career scholars lack that kind of, I mean what you're giving as a kind of global vision in a kind of wide openness? I think so many people feel cornered or trapped by their PhD by the end.

Tenzan Eaghll: I do think some of it has to do with commitments. I mean, I mean, I did a, I'm kind of, I don't have any kids. I'm not married, so my career and life choices are wide open and especially where when I first finished two years ago, three years ago. But a, lot of people have a kid or a longterm girlfriend back in the West or something or in that girlfriend or boyfriend has a career of their own. So, you can't just like, pick up and move everybody overseas.

Tenzan Eaghll: I do think that's part of it, but then also a lot of people, and I would even put my brother in this camp who is actually doing his PhD in religious studies at McGill right now. Who just don't like the idea of traveling. They love Canada and they want to live there and they don't like the idea of going overseas. He's never even left America. I don't like North America, I don't think. And not that he couldn't, he just never chose to. I think some people, I don't know, just don't prefer. I've always kind of been more of a global citizen in that respect. I just love traveling and going all over the place.

Mike Altman: Yeah.

Tenzan Eaghll: And I'm not afraid to do it on my own. That's also a big part of it. Lot of people are afraid to go somewhere on their own because they don't know people. But, I never really had a problem meeting one or two friends or something to hang out with, so.

Mike Altman: So, having made this kind of move out, out of the West and, and all of this, how, how has it, how has it shaped your work academic work? Like what do you see as relationship between your kind of geographic location and, and your kind of the academic work you do as it, how do you yeah, how do you see the effect between one on, one on the other?

Tenzan Eaghll: At the moment it hasn't effected any of the specific publications that I have coming out or have written, but it will. And I say that just cause you know as academics we're often in a backlog mode. You know, you had a whole bunch of stuff like scheduled and planned and I've kind of had various ideas that I've been working on for a while, go back several years. But, I do have a couple projects in mind going forward related to it. For instance, one of the biggest differences about teaching here is that all my students, all my BA students and grad students, they're all ESL students, so they're all English second language. So, like today I was teaching a class on political ideology to one hundred and twenty Thai, VA students. And there's only about maybe five or six of those students that are kind of fluid-ish, right? There's, there's a, there's a big swath in the middle, who understand about like eighty percent of what I'm saying. And then there's some who struggle even to keep up with that level.

Tenzan Eaghll: And so, it changes how you teach because you have to introduce terms very slowly and you have to kind of build your lectures methodically upon your terminology that you're using. You know, you can't just be like, well Martin Luther, wrote this, and dive into some complex topics because the students will have no reference, but you'll have to be like, Martin Luther was this guy, in a pier, show map of Germany and Russia here. And then build in to the concept or the thinker or whatever it is you're, so it's a, it's a, it's a slow process. You know, you're, you have the, each class you'll have just a, a basic idea almost that you're trying to get across and you're trying to get them to be able to not just understand it but read the idea and write something about that idea in their own hand.

Tenzan Eaghll: I always use like worksheets or just something I never did when I was teaching in the West because when you're working with ESL students, they need very hands on stuff every single class, so they can write down the terms and they can write down the concepts and try to develop them on their own. And I say all that just because one of the future articles I have in mind is, is teaching religion as an ESL and kind of talking about some of the methods and stuff I've developed as I've tried to work with both BA and grad students here.

Mike Altman: So, you mentioned the, the, no, the teaching article that you're working on coming up. But is it, do you feel like, you know, I had a colleague say to me one time at another institution like, you know, you can kind of work anywhere these days. With the idea that it really doesn't matter the institutional affiliation, as far as what you need like the kind of infrastructure of libraries and access to journals and things, but that like work is not so much gatekeeper to by where you're working anymore. Do you find that the case working, you know where you are now?

Tenzan Eaghll: Do you mean that?

Mike Altman: then when it comes to research and publication, that kind of stuff

Tenzan Eaghll: like the, the, the, the, the university facilitates or does not facilitate? Is that what you mean?

Mike Altman: Just that- No, just that more like, whereas institutional affiliation, you know, where you were kind of mattered as to, to what kind of voice you got in the field. But that seems to matter less and less. And I was wondering as someone who's, you know very far and with a very particular kind of space that you're working out of, does that, how is, is that shaped your ability to kind of find audiences for your work or feel like you're connected to larger conversations in the field? Yeah, what do you, how do you build all that?

Tenzan Eaghll: Well, I might, this is, this could be, let me see if I going into this, that one thing I've realized, you know, post finishing my dissertation and going out to the job market, well not the job market but just the teacher market in the publishing market; is how fortunate I am that there is such a, it's a tight knit group of critical scholars like on Facebook and the religious studies project and various projects that come out of your university, Russell McCutcheon. Where people are often collaborating and working on publications and book projects and podcasts and it creates kind of a critical network of scholars that I think is, is best and will be best if it has like, you know, global reach and can influence students around the world. And that's beneficial, that's almost been more impactful than any particular job in the sense, right?

Tenzan Eaghll: Like it's, it's kept me in contact with various scholars in the West. Whether it be, it's with Nassar or with religious studies project that I find is a great, you could say, that publishing this network of scholars who were all, you know, like minded and interested in the same critical venture. I find, I think that's more important than my institutional affiliation. Like, being a lecturer and chair then my program here is fine, but I could probably still do the same writing if I was working at just a college here teaching English or something. Like it wouldn't have to be with the studies' department per se. I could still, you know, publish the same stuff on the side and read all the same books. And so I think you need the, you need the university to give you the space but what's more important is having a community of scholars that are like minded that you can kind of work with and do.

Mike Altman: Yeah, that makes, that makes a lot of sense. I mean in some ways a lot of things have kind of, the ability to build communities across, you know, across geographic space, without, you know, necessarily relying on everyone being in the same room all the time at conferences or whatever, has become a lot [crosstalk 00:15:02] easier.

Tenzan Eaghll: Yeah, I mean I guess the best example I would have with that is just the blog work. Like I kind of became familiar with a lot of people throughout North America and Europe, scholars from like Susan Owen to Mallory Nine and others, just through writing blogs and stuff and then you know, interacting with them and having conversations about theoretical ideas and so that when you meet

them at places like NASA or conferences, you've already known them for several years and you have kind of this and that.

Mike Altman: Yeah.

Tenzan Eaghll: and that's, that's really awesome. And it, and it kind of, it kind of, it seeds beyond the, it takes away the parochial, I guess you could say limitations of just being, you know, supported by your, by your university. You have this sense that even if you were to leave this particular job and find another one, there would still be that group of scholars that you could see at the AR and NASA and work together with.

Mike Altman: Yeah, no, I think that's right and that makes a lot of sense. And it's actually similar to my experience and I've been in the States the whole time. So, I think that, I think that works sort of, regardless of what space you're in. So, yeah. So, to kind of put a point on this, I think when you, where you are now and you, you, um, found I think a pretty good niche for yourself in building a career in the field, and I'm curious, what you would, looking at where you are now, where you kind of see yourself heading, what do you, what have you learned from this whole, you know, it may not seem like a big, I don't know, I don't know how much, it seems like a big decision to you, like a big leap or not, and I don't know how much it was, just the thing you wanted to do, so you did it.

Tenzan Eaghll: Yeah.

Mike Altman: I think from the outside to a lot of people, it seemed like a big leap, but what is that kind of leap that, what does that kind of leap taught you or, or have you learned from? What about the kind of nature of navigating academic careers, the structures of the academy in the West versus people's ability to navigate them or opt out of them or, or what have you kind of learned from this process?

Tenzan Eaghll: I think that in today's economic climate, one has to think globally. I mean the West is no longer the central point of the world, economically even. And we have to, you know, whether, no matter whether your humanities or social sciences degree is focused on, your job applications are not limited by the West. And you should try to think globally. Think about places you'd love to live, thinking about anywhere you could work outside of the West and don't let the limitations of the West, whether it's political or economic, limit you in your, you know, aspirations to do whatever it is you want to do. Write about whatever it is you want to write about, cause there are so many places around the world with jobs who were academic positions that need teachers and need educators. Whether it's simple English or you know, complex academic subjects like political ideology. So just don't, don't let all the negative news in the world constantly get you down and you just gotta to kind of keep venturing out and going forward.

Mike Altman: I like this, a challenge to just look broader and not, not be so hemmed in by what you assume is the kind of limits for your degree or for your career.

Tenzan Eaghll: When considering a degree in the university, I think you have to think globally.

Mike Altman: Yeah, that's great. Yeah, I think that's, that's a great place to land it when thinking about a career, think globally. Yeah, thanks so much Tenzan. I really appreciate it.

Tenzan Eaghll: Yeah of course, thanks so much.

Mike Altman: Yeah.

Tenzan Eaghll: Yeah, thank you.

Mike Altman: Study Religion is a production of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. For more information on our department, go to www.religion.ua.edu or find us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/rel@ua](https://www.facebook.com/rel@ua). Have a comment or question about the podcast? You can email us@religiousstudies@ua.edu or reach out to us on Twitter, Instagram at [@studyreligion](https://www.instagram.com/studyreligion). If you've enjoyed the show, please subscribe to us in iTunes and leave us a comment and a rating. It helps other folks find the show and makes you a very giving person. Special thanks to Kyle Ashley, major in our department for his help editing the show. Our opening theme is Two Minute Warning by Stephan Cartonberg and this closing theme is Saturday Night by Texas Radio Fish, both are used under creative commons license. We'll talk to you later, roll tide.