

Mike Altman: Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am Professor Mike Altman. I have a cohost because we bought more microphones. I'm joined today by Nathan Loewen. Nathan, welcome to the podcast.

Nathan Loewen: Thanks so much, glad to be here.

Mike Altman: Yeah, this is a very fresh revival all of a sudden, and we're trying out new microphones, a whole new system, so we'll see how this works. Hopefully, this sounds good. Nathan, the reason I brought you here, do you know why I brought you here?

Nathan Loewen: Yes.

Mike Altman: Why?

Nathan Loewen: Because I have some fabulous students in REL 502 from the fall, in the master's program at the Department of Religious Studies here, and they've made some brilliant podcasts that I'd like to share with the world.

Mike Altman: Yeah. Before we dive in these two podcast episodes, I wanted to talk to you about the class. So I've taught this class a couple times. You taught it for the first time. It's a class required for all of our masters students. Having just taught it, what is the 502 class? What's it called? What's it about?

Nathan Loewen: Well, it's one of the core courses in the M.A. program at the Department of Religious Studies. And the intended focus of it, is to have students learn about the public humanities and the digital humanities. Sort of an entrée to both of those, and to also help students be equipped with a skillset that would allow them to apply what they've learned in the course across whatever sorts of professional or academic circumstances they might find themselves in.

Mike Altman: So if I'm a prospective M.A. student at Alabama or I'm looking M.A. programs, what's the thing about 502 that makes it different from what I might take another, every master's student probably takes three courses a semester. Sell me on this course and why it would be useful to me, or why I should think about it?

Nathan Loewen: Well, it's really hands-on. We do a lot of experimentation. So, perhaps that's like a lot of seminars other people have experienced, perhaps not. But we spend a lot of time mucking around with things, futzing with stuff, fiddling around, seeing what works and what doesn't. That applies to the ideas and concepts, as well as the tools that we use.

Mike Altman: So you sat in the first time I taught it, I had no idea what I was doing. And how would you have seen, because you sat in the first two semesters when I did it, and then now you've done it yourself. What do you see? Like what do you think

the evolution of the class has been over the last three years? As you've taken over, as you've sort of saw what I was doing?

Nathan Loewen: I think the evolution has been really organic in terms of what my interests are versus perhaps what yours are. We are talking on a podcast right now, and I know that you wrote an article about podcasts in religious studies. That's one of the things that I kept in the class. I think there's a lot to be learned in making a podcast, and you can apply those skills to video. You can also apply those skills to other digital projects as well. So perhaps one thing that we kept was the podcast element, but one thing that changed was an additional emphasis on helping students think through project development, as well as project management.

Mike Altman: Yeah. So what do you think, looking back on the semester last year, last semester, how did students react to these tools? Were there some that you thought, because podcasting is one of them, can you talk about some of the other ones? And what do you think students really were attracted to, what do they find difficult, what did they think was most useful, least useful?

Nathan Loewen: Well, like I said, we do a lot of experimentation in the class. And so when it comes to the digital humanities tools, the emphasis was not necessarily, learn tool X, but rather we talked about some of the methods behind what's going on. And then we did small entrées into those methods. I think overall, the way I would characterize the relevance of digital humanities across the disciplines, is that it fulfills what Bruce Lincoln said is the nature of scholarship anyhow. Lincoln said, "Scholarship is just mythology with footnotes." And he's basically saying, "Show your work."

And so in my emphasis in the course on project development and project management, I really was trying to emphasize that when you get technology involved in a humanities project, an important piece of the puzzle is to constantly be documenting and showing your work. Some people were not used to that. Others were, depending on their professional experience, perhaps in the jobs they'd had outside of the classroom. But that element of going beyond footnotes to actually talking about every piece of your design. What worked, what didn't, what you did to go back and rebuild it, why are you rebuilding it? What choices are you making? How are those choices revised based on the outcomes? That's the piece that was slightly different, and that's the part that perhaps was very new to people as well.

Mike Altman: Yeah, I think that's too, that's the part that you brought to the thing. Every class is, for me at least, I think for a lot of people is kind of an experimental. Is this going to work or not? And one of the things when I was kind of keeping my eye on what's happening and talking to students around about 502, is that emphasis on sort of project management and documenting what you're doing and thinking about sort of the thing as a long-term project was a really helpful

addition because I think my thing was just kind of like, oh, let's play with this and see what happens.

And that was effective to some level, but I think moving forward for the students who may want to go on D.H. work at a PhD level, or who may go work in museum or some sort of historical heritage site, that larger organizational structure. And that was really something really good I thought you brought to the class.

Nathan Loewen: Yeah. And when it came to podcasting, I think one thing I'll do next year, is we'll do a lot more experimentation. So that part that you just said you emphasized, I want to bring more of that back in. One of the things that I did do differently, we had several people come in and talk about their art and craft of podcasting. So for example, Chris Carter from the religious studies podcast came in through Zoom, but then we also had some people from on campus here.

So Dr. Heather Pleasants from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness came in to talk about digital storytelling. And she did a second by second analysis of a few of her favorite podcast episodes. And then Holland Hopson, from the New College also came in and talked about the difference between sound versus video and how that affects the way that you create context. And so both of them, Heather and Holland, you can really see in these podcasts that were done by these grad students in 502, that they took those lessons to heart and really worked at creating context, and telling the story and adding in those kinds of elements that really produced, I think, a lot more depth to what they were doing. They went back, they dialed back the scholarship side. That was just the bedrock and emphasized the narrative and the context side. And I think that really produced some excellent work.

Mike Altman: So I have two questions before we dive in, and turn on the podcast. The first one is, what do you see and what discussions that came up when you're discussing with students about this; the role of podcasting in religious studies? Let's have a very meta-discussion about religious studies podcasting on a religious studies podcast because that's very on-brand. I've written about it years ago, but it's lots changed since then. But what did you guys sort of see as like the possibilities for podcasting within the field?

Nathan Loewen: I think this is where the public humanities versus digital humanities distinction comes in. We spent a lot of time trying to suss out the differences between those things. As I said, digital humanities, the useful part of it, is that it asks you to show your work.

The public humanities side is to ask the question, to whom do you want to show your work? And if you are interested in having a venue for your scholarship beyond your guild or your group, or the specific group of people who are interested in your methodology or your topic. Then you have to start talking

about, to whom do you want to show your work? And podcasts are a great way to think that process through.

Mike Altman: So before we listen to these podcasts, what do you think we should know? Anything you want to say to kind of preview, introduce them?

Nathan Loewen: No, I think they're great. They stand on their own.

Mike Altman: Great. Well, so then we're going to turn it over. These are two episodes, two short podcast episodes put together by our students in REL 502. Thanks so much, Nathan.

Nathan Loewen: No problem, glad to be here.

Speaker 3: From the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. This is...

Group: The Million Dollar Podcast.

James Gilbert: Where we explore the identity of the University of Alabama.

Speaker 5: [inaudible] going deep on his first throw to Smith. He's gone! Touch down, Alabama!

Allison Isidore: Hi, I'm Allison.

Morgan Frick: And I'm Morgan.

Ana Schuber: And I'm Ana. We were sitting around wondering whether or not Alabama football fans actually know the traditions that they experience.

Speaker 3: I've been an Alabama football fan since I can remember, even though I grew up in Virginia and eventually in Texas, my mom always raised me as an Alabama football fan. She attended the university in the '80s, and my grandmother also graduated from the University of Alabama. My uncle still even lives in Tuscaloosa, so when we decided to do a podcast about traditions of Alabama football, I was all for it, and I thought I knew exactly what to expect.

Allison Isidore: So, I didn't have the "Alabama-experience." During my undergrad. I went to a D3 school with a much smaller sports program than Alabama has. And so, when I came to Alabama's first football game of the season with Morgan and our friend, Ellie, it was a totally different experience. The fan experience is kind of crazy.

Savannah Finber: They just grabbed me by the hand and bring you to a tailgate. I don't know what's happening, but I kind of like it.

Ana Schuber: I was actually born in Alabama, although I didn't live here until I came to the University of Alabama in 1990 to teach. So I've had 30 years of lived experience with Alabama football. That's mostly why I stay in my house in Alberta city now.

Morgan Frick: So, as students of religious studies, we look at tradition a bit differently than most people. We consider it to be constructed social norms, perhaps created generations ago and still viable, although changed through time. Almost like a game of telephone.

Allison Isidore: So, we decided to put traditions to the test. We went to campus on game day and asked tailgaters a series of questions, all of which had something to do with Alabama football traditions. One of the questions we asked was, why do we say "Roll Tide?"

Ana Schuber: The funny thing about the term "Roll Tide" is that most people assume that it's just attached to football, but if you live in Alabama, especially the mid to North Alabama area where "Roll Tide," is a common term in everyday life. Often, like my grandchildren, their first word is Roll Tide. People use it as a greeting, "Roll Tide" saying hello or, "Roll Tide" saying goodbye. So it doesn't have a whole lot to do with football most of the time and off the field, I guess one would say. Roll Tide is such a common term down here that ESPN even made a commercial to illustrate how Roll Tide is used in everyday life.

Jeremie Nute: It is such an honor, Roll Tide.

Speaker 9: By Marion Dacey, Roll Tide.

Savannah Finber: You will always be remembered. Roll Tide.

Allison Isidore: So, we went to the Quad on game day and asked tailgaters why we say Roll Tide.

Speaker 10: It's just something that you chant to bring people together. I don't know.

Speaker 11: It's something about a guy and like halftime, he saw the elephants storming through, he's like, "Oh, we got a Roll Tide." And they were like, "Oh, okay."

Speaker 12: I want to say it has something to do with Auburn, but I don't know. It's up my head. So...

Speaker 13: When they were coming on, I don't remember who it was, but when they're coming on the field, they look like a tide of Crimson coming out onto the field.

Speaker 14: Well, because our defense, it was again 1930-ish time. There were waves and waves of Crimson. And so that's the Roll Tide.

Morgan Frick: So, origins are messier than expected, which we should have known. Scholars like JZ Smith and Bruce Lincoln have examined this very phenomenon. Origins are contingent and contestable and complicated. The problem isn't which origin of Roll Tide is correct. We can't time travel and see for ourselves, after all. But which narrative becomes dominant? Roll Tide is a phrase so well known that ESPN made a commercial about it. Yet most Bama fans are reluctant and unsure of which story is the right story.

Speaker 15: But I don't know.

Speaker 16: I don't remember who it was, but-

Speaker 17: He's a lawyer. He knows more than I do.

Speaker 18: I don't really know.

Speaker 25: I didn't know I was getting quizzed.

Speaker 20: To my best recollection.

Speaker 21: No. Am I wrong?

Speaker 22: I can't remember his name.

Speaker 23: I don't know.

Speaker 24: I don't know.

Speaker 25: There's no wrong answer.

Speaker 26: I got no wrong answers.

Allison Isidore: The university's identity then is made up of signifiers with no absolute origin, but still we tell these tales to create a legacy. This is the university, where legends are made.

Ana Schuber: Thanks for listening and...

Students: Roll Tide. (singing).

Allison Isidore: We don't own the rights to some of the sound clips used in this podcast. All rights reserved to the original owners.

Jack Bernardi: Coming to you live from the University of, oh wait, we're not live. Cut. Coming to you from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

Jereme Nute: In the religious studies department.

Jack Bernardi: Located in scenic manly hall.

Jeremee Nute: Due one week from now for our digital humanities class.

Jack Bernardi: Welcome to a new podcast. We're calling it Machina ex Deus.

Jeremee Nute: The name, as you may recognize is a twist on the phrase Deus ex Machina, which refers to a certain type of literary device.

Jack Bernardi: Today, though, we'll be shooting for the literal instead of the literary.

Jeremee Nute: Is there a place for machines and robots inside religious spaces? Which have, until to now, been considered a purely human activity?

Jack Bernardi: My name's Jack Bernardi.

Jeremee Nute: And my name's Jeremee Nute.

Jack Bernardi: Thanks for joining us on this journey of discovery.

Jeremee Nute: And enjoy the show.

Jack Bernardi: So, originally this was going to be a podcast about math history. Jeremee and I both have math backgrounds from undergrad, and we really miss talking about that stuff now that we're in a humanities department. But then we realized it's really hard to do a podcast about math, since there's no visual reference.

Jeremee Nute: So our plan B was to indulge in our love of sci-fi, we're both fans of movies like Ex Machina, Blade Runner, and even Futurama where robots exist alongside humans as social agents. Since we're religion students, the intersection seemed obvious. Let's talk about whether or not robots can have something called religion.

Jack Bernardi: In our hunt for data we found that Andrew Mark Henry of the lovely Religion For Breakfast channel on YouTube had already done a video on something kind of close to what we were thinking.

Andrew Mark Hen...: We live in an increasingly automated world, automated cars, automated baristas, but what about automated priests? Can a robot carry the gravitas that a priest carries with him? Will society ever grant artificial intelligence with the recognition of ritual expertise? I'm personally skeptical.

Jack Bernardi: Being the sci-fi nerds that we are. Jeremee and I were curious about Henry's skepticism. What would it take for a machine to be recognized as having that gravitas, as having personhood?

Jeremie Nute: Originally, we started emailing church groups on campus, but no one got back to us in a timely fashion. We even reached out to some of our old professors, but we're left in the cold. Come on guys. It's for our class.

Jack Bernardi: Left with our own assumptions and surroundings to analyze this data, we sat down with fellow M.A. students, Savannah Finber and Kyle Ashley to explore the question of whether or not robots are capable of something called belief.

Jeremie Nute: Supposing that robots and humans, we have to kind of tackle what are the differences between a robot and the human? Because we'd like to think humans as having self agency, right? They can impact the world around them while robots are kind of fed instructions and perform those things out.

Kyle Ashley: I think I know how my friend would respond and I think he would say what really differentiates us between, humans and robots, is the conception, at least in Christianity of imago Dei and also in Judaism, right, that they are created within the image of God and so I think he would point towards that robots themselves are not created within the image of God, right?

Savannah Finber: I think that's true, but also they are created in the image of man, to an extent, and if man is created in the image of God, we can go back to that Derrida quote about derivations. Is it just a different iteration of God? Because it's designed to be like men, which was designed to be like God?

Jack Bernardi: Our conversation with Savannah and Kyle left us wondering what are we talking about when we try and distinguish something called a robot from something called a human?

Jeremie Nute: The next day we went to [inaudible] Library to talk to our department library liaison, James Gilbert.

James Gilbert: So, offhand? Well with the interiority thing in particular, if you have, as soon as you have a machine that passes believability as being another human being, at that point you could make the argument that it can then events, interiority because I mean we can't really tell.

Jeremie Nute: Just from a qualitative standpoint. What are some of the traits that you personally would look to as being markers of a convincing performance of humanity?

James Gilbert: That's interesting. One, can there be randomized errors in the transaction of whatever it is? Which would add some believability to it. If it performs the same action perfectly every time. I guess what it's getting at is there has to be some humanity to it, however you want to define that, because like personally for me as someone who's not a particularly religious person but likes the idea of ritual and stuff like that, there has to be a human element to it. Otherwise, it's just, it seems kind of hilarious somehow and I can't put my finger on exactly why.

Jack Bernardi: As we walked back to Manly hall, Jeremee and I felt stumped. It still didn't seem like we had a sense of what the difference between machines and humans, the difference essential to our podcast premise, was all about. What was that element of humanity that Dr. Gilbreth, not unlike, Dr. Henry felt that rituals required?

Jeremee Nute: Out of our wits, we went to visit department chair Russell McCutcheon, who was feeding Cardinals from his office on the second floor. Although he declined to be interviewed, he pointed us in a key direction. First off, where did the words robot and machine even come from? We hadn't stopped to think about it.

Jack Bernardi: The term robot was first coined in the 1920 play by Czech writer Karel Capek, the term derived from the Czech word robotnik or robota, which refers to a certain type of slave labor in the feudal system. So in that sense, the term robot explicitly defines itself against the human relating to what humans are capable of as abstracted from human bodies.

Jeremee Nute: Machine comes from the Greek machina and generically refers to any type of system, structure, tool, or even a trick or contrivance. So, in that sense, while humans both have and use machines, we could also very well say that humans have a machine equality themselves, as Kyle noted in our conversation.

Jack Bernardi: Reviewing these definitions forced us to ask what we were expecting to find interviewing those church groups we had previously emailed. In forming our questions about the comparison of humans and machines, did we put the cart before the horse? Rather than talk about machine priests, why didn't we, as Dr. McCutcheon suggested, simply ask, "When was the last time you interacted with a robot?"? Posed in a more open ended way, we could find out whether people saw robots as everyday, or as unfamiliar objects to begin with.

Jeremee Nute: Have you heard of the Uncanny Valley? It's a phenomenon relating to our perception of human-like objects, like robots. As an object gains anthropomorphic qualities it becomes more familiar to us, more likable, more human.

Jack Bernardi: Imagine a regular old rock. Let's say I drew a smiley face on there, now it's kind of cute, maybe I'll name it.

Jeremee Nute: But at a certain point, if we keep adding these human-like traits, the object starts to become creepy and unfamiliar.

Jack Bernardi: And now we're getting into the territory of weird porcelain dolls or wax models, or the CGI in the Polar Express movie.

Jeremee Nute: What is it about the space of the Uncanny Valley where robots are almost like us but not quite, that provokes such discomfort? It might not be related to why

we see robots as inherently challenging the unique status of human beings. Much like the etymology of the word robot is a category defined in relation to those things we consider human activities.

Jack Bernardi: Jeremie?

Jeremie Nute: Yeah.

Jack Bernardi: I think we have to scrap the podcast idea.

Jeremie Nute: Again? No, we can't. It's due tomorrow!

Jack Bernardi: But we were all wrong. Our podcast isn't about robots at all, or even religion.

Jeremie Nute: Then what's it about?

Jack Bernardi: Humanity! It's the about the tools, the tactics, the codes that make us, us.

Jeremie Nute: No, man. That's way too big of a topic. We can't do a podcast on that.

Jack Bernardi: Crap. I think you're right. Well, we can always chalk it up to human error.

Jeremie Nute: I don't think he's going to buy that either.

Jack Bernardi: But then just when all hope seemed lost on the day the podcast was due, we found someone other than a friend, classmate or professor who was willing to talk to us.

Ruth Vann Lilli...: I am reverend Ruth Van Lillian, I'm a minister at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Tuscaloosa. Well [crosstalk] we started out talking about funerals, and that took us to ... Then I said, "Well, it makes a lot more sense for weddings because many people seem to be just looking for a very basic perfunctory wedding ceremony." A sort of a one size would fit anybody and the ceremony and the officiant are the last things that they are looking for. If a couple want more than going through the motions of a ceremony, then I don't think, at least nothing that I observe now or can imagine in the near future in terms of AI, would be able to counsel a couple on the dynamics of their relationship. I mean the wedding is one thing and it's become quite a performance. And you can set up a performance with the right staff and that staff could be AI. But are you going to go back to the AI when you and your spouse are in tears and it seems like the end of the world?

Jack Bernardi: For Reverend Vann Lillian, it wasn't a question of whether robots passed this invisible litmus test of humanity. It was a practical question of how well the machine and its capabilities were suited to the task at hand, and this way, we think, the conversation shifts. It's no longer what is a human? But instead what can a human do?

Jeremee Nute: Before we could even go out in the world and figure out what machines are doing to alter the ways humans practice religion, we had to settle a much more basic question, what's a robot and when does it encroach on that so-called human domain? Perhaps we shall explore it on our next episode if we ever make it.

Jack Bernardi: Join us next time on Deus Ex Machina where the podcast might have a totally different name, a new topic, and a new set of guests. In fact, the only thing that will probably remain the same is the hosts. Maybe we should call it podcast Otheseus?

Once again, my name is Jack Bernardi.

Jeremee Nute: My name is Jeremee Nute.

Jack Bernardi: Songs for the podcast were produced by Wesley Shifflett with additional sounds contributed by freesound.org users, Inspector Jay and Sunsai. Thanks for listening.

Jeremee Nute: Thanks for listening.

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. Have a comment or a question about the podcast? You can email us at religiousstudies@ua.edu or reach out to us on Twitter or Instagram at [@studyreligion](https://twitter.com/studyreligion). The Instagram has a lovely pictures of squirrels. If you've enjoyed this show, please subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts and leave us a comment and a rating. Or we are now on Spotify, so make sure you subscribe there too. Study Religion is produced by me, Mike Altman, with help this week from Keely McMurry, our MA student and American examples fellow. Special thanks to professor Nathan Loewen and our graduate students, Morgan Frick, Alison Isidore, Ana Shuber, Jeremee Nute, and Jack Bernardi. 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. Thank you for listening and Roll Tide. So, Nathan, what'd you have for breakfast this morning?

Nathan Loewen: Toad-in-the-hole.

Mike Altman: What?

Nathan Loewen: Toad-in-the-hole.

Mike Altman: What is ... What is that?

Speaker 27: I have no idea what that...

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