

Mike Altman:

Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am your host, Mike Altman, coming to you from my dining room in West Tuscaloosa, Alabama, about three miles from campus. This episode is one I thought was never going to happen, because I thought that the audio had been long lost due to some technical difficulties. But what I have are the lost tapes from American Examples, 2020.

Mike Altman:

So for those who don't know, American Examples is a program, is a series of workshops for early career scholars of religion in America, whatever that means, very broadly defined religion in America, American honors history, American religious studies, whatever you want to call it. But it's for any non-tenured scholars of religion in America. It started in 2019 with one workshop that was focused on research. And then with generous funding from the Luce Foundation, it has expanded to include not just a research workshop, but also one on teaching, and one on public humanities.

Mike Altman:

We launched the new expanded version this year in spring. We had a call for papers last fall, had the first group in here this spring, in March. And right before everything shut down, literally like the weekend before, we had the research workshop for the 2020 group. We also brought in a couple of people who had been part of the very, very first group in 2019. That was just a research workshop. So we had Hannah Scheidt and Travis Cooper from 2019 come back and be part of the 2020 group, read the research that was being circulated. So the way we do the research workshops is everyone shares a chapter length piece with the group of nine participants, and we spend about an hour on each essay, each chapter. It's a really intense kind of research seminar that everyone gets this sort of focused time on their work. And then they get to see everybody else's work.

Mike Altman:

So Hannah and Travis had done that in 2019, and then in 2020, they came back and sat in and helped for a day during that research workshop. And we also took some time while they were here to talk about the program, talk about what they got out of the program in 2019, what they thought of the program, how it fits into the study of religion, to religious studies and the study of religion in America. And then after we recorded the interview, all hell broke loose. There were some technical difficulties with the recording equipment apparently, and I thought that this recording and this interview had been lost forever.

Mike Altman:

Thanks to Jack Bernardi, who is the American Examples fellow, who's one of their MA students in the religious studies department here, religion and culture MA students who works with the American Examples program. He managed to dig through all the audio files that we thought were messed up and salvaged a good portion of the interview. So like a lost Phish recording somewhere, we've dusted this off. It's from March of 2020.

Mike Altman:

It's from a pre-COVID time. But I want to share this with everybody, because right now, right now as you're listening to this, we have a call for participants out for the 2021 cohort. The 2021 program will be

virtual, but it will still have workshops on research where we'll share those chapter-length pieces where you'll get intense feedback, not just from other members of the group, but from wonderful mentors like Steven Ramey and Vaia Touna who you'll hear about in the interview. We're going to also then do the public humanities and the teaching workshops. All that information is at americanexamples.ua.edu. That's americanexamples.ua.edu, and you can find application there, find out about the workshops, about the program. It's open, like I said, to anyone who thinks they're studying religion in America, whatever that means to you, I don't know, and anyone who's not tenured.

Mike Altman:

We do prioritize people that are off the tenure track. We welcome people who are in all [inaudible 00:04:44] careers. It is open to PhD candidates as well. So it's a wide range of folks. So listen to this interview. It's about 20 some minutes long. This is from earlier this year talking about the 2019 program and the 2020 program. And I hope it'll encourage folks to spread the word and apply to be part of the 2021 American Examples cohort. Applications are due October 31st.

Mike Altman:

Again, more information @americanexamples.ua.edu. And with no further ado, I take you back in time to March of this year for a conversation I had with Hannah Scheidt and Travis Cooper.

Mike Altman:

Welcome to Study Religion, the podcast of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. I am Mike Altman and I'm joined this morning by two participants in last year's American Examples workshop who are here to help out with this year's American Examples 2020 workshop, Travis Cooper. Hi Travis. How are you?

Travis Cooper:

Hello. I'm good. How are you?

Mike Altman:

And Hannah Scheidt. Hannah, how are you?

Hannah Scheidt:

I'm great this morning. Thank you.

Mike Altman:

So to start off with, I'd like for each of you to introduce yourself, so who you are, what you're doing, so that our audience knows who you are and what you're doing. Travis, go ahead.

Travis Cooper:

Hi, I'm Travis. I'm a lecture at Butler University in Indianapolis. I have a PhD in religious studies and anthropology, and my current research is studying in Columbus, Indiana, which is one of the top architecture cities rated by the American Institute of Architects. So my project studies how people are building architecture, kind of literally reifying ideology and stuff like that. So that's my current book project. For American Examples, I presented one chapter of that.

Mike Altman:

Cool. And Hannah?

Hannah Scheidt:

Hi, my name is Hannah Scheidt. I'm currently lecturing at Lake Forest College, which is a small liberal arts school north of Chicago. I did my degree in religious studies at Northwestern. That's where I did my PhD, and my current book project, which was my dissertation is about the atheist network. So about how atheist culture is built through these media channels, kind of across multimedia platforms. I presented a chapter from that last year at American examples, that was about atheist parenting blogs. So that's a little intro to my work.

Mike Altman:

So it's great that you're both here. You're both were part of the very first American Examples group. I'm just curious. Going into the American Examples thing, what did you expect and then coming out of it, was it what you expected? What did you get out of it? What was the whole thing from your perspective, as someone who went through it? From my perspective as someone who organized it, it was a lot of work. But from your perspective, what was it?

Travis Cooper:

I mean, I guess coming into it I expected kind of a diversity of perspectives on whatever this American thing is that we're calling, you know, with sneer quotes or what have you, what is the American? And I think I got that. I came away kind of pleasantly surprised. I don't know. I found it pretty rewarding to see how people are considering their own work American, and it kind of expanded my own understanding of what that is, I guess. So I was surprised and I think it helped kind of benefited my work in that sense.

Mike Altman:

What did you think, Hannah?

Hannah Scheidt:

I think it met and exceeded expectations from my perspective. It was joyful, not a whole lot of work actually. It was really nice to show up and just be kind of invited into this research family and supportive community. I think that's one of the challenges of being a young scholar, especially when you don't always know like where you're going to be next year, and sometimes you just left a program that you've been in for the better part of a decade. To get a new research community where you have new resources to talk about some of the ideas that are really central to your work, I think that's what I was looking for. And that's what I found after the workshop last year with American Examples. So.

Mike Altman:

So thinking about like, you all came in with a chapter. Yours, Travis, is from your next book. Hannah, yours was from the dissertation. I'm curious. Are there specific things, or maybe they're not specific but general things, that shifted about those individual chapters, those little projects that came out of the workshop?

Hannah Scheidt:

Yeah, I can start. I think for me I'd always kind of, even though I was technically in an American religions track in my graduate program, I'd kind of avoided the question of how my work was or was not American. And part of that had to do with the nature of my work is digital. It's through media. It's not geographically located definitely in that way. And I think, although I study primarily English speaking network and a lot of the sources that I read are by people who are located in America, a lot of them aren't. And so in that way, the network kind of sprawls across national boundaries, the way that a lot of networks do now because of the nature of digital media.

Hannah Scheidt:

And I think when I left the workshop, I had a new sense of how to call my project American. And that was that it's not necessarily American in terms of geographic location, or in terms of my sources, like citizenship, necessarily. But that the way that my sources, these atheists involved in these networks, this culture, think about religion is in a way very influenced by American culture. So the religion that acts has kind of the necessary foil to the atheism that is being constructed in this community, that religious foil looks very American. It's an imagined, but not necessarily an imaginary kind of Christian fundamentalism. And that's the religion that's used to kind of create atheism in opposition, if that makes sense.

Hannah Scheidt:

So this was a new way for me to kind of think about the nature of my project as American, even though all of the sources and the people involved in the project, the people creating this culture, might not necessarily be American, if that makes sense.

Mike Altman:

Yeah. We've been going back and forth as we're moving from the workshop phase to all these chapters becoming a publication. Look for it next year, this time next year, hopefully. And I remember when we were talking about your chapter that it's both American, there's this kind of American understanding of religion that these atheists are positing themselves against. But that move to define yourself against this other thing, and the whole idea of the kind of religion that they imagine as American Christianity or fundamentalism, is actually not just American. So there's this interesting way, I think, in your project and a lot of them, that you're both talking about the Americanness of the thing, but then also pointing towards these other bigger questions that aren't just questions for American religion that I think is really, really useful. Really helpful.

Mike Altman:

Travis, what about you? How did this shape your project? That's pretty early on-going, I think.

Travis Cooper:

Yeah, it's still on-going. It really did have a hand in shaping it. I was a little worried coming in, being the only person if I recall, doing kind of the built environment, material culture in that sense. And I really got tons of good feedback though. Really, even if you're not studying architecture per se, everybody who was around the table is studying things like people and power structures and how material environments or infrastructure shape people in that sense. So I got a lot of feedback like that. Made some kind of neat network connections with people who the American Examples people knew outside of that and stuff. So I made some good connections in that sense.

Travis Cooper:

But the specific one Vaia Touna was studying, I think it was traditional societies in Greece, right. She had tons of good feedback for me, and it helped me think about how monuments, whether they're buildings or statues or what have you, how they're made. It's kind of this universal thing. People are trying to kind of establish a sacred space in some sense. Sometimes it's political. Sometimes it's religious. Sometimes it's secular, all this kind of slippery language. But it was really cool to have this comparison, right? To think about something built, something being traditional versus modern. And her coming from the Greek context, but really having tons to say about my specific project in the Midwest.

Mike Altman:

Yeah. That's a really good point. So one of the things I think sets apart American Examples as a program is that we have mentors who are not Americanists. Last year, it was Vaia Touna who studies both ancient and modern Greece and the kind of relationship between the two Greek paths, and then Steven Ramey, who does all sorts of stuff in sort of contemporary modern South Asia. They sort of led the way. I tried to hold back. I tried to limit myself to sort of one comment per paper. What was it like having these readers of your work, who are not at all in the sort of American religious worldview, who may have very different questions or concerns as they kind of came to your work, who were kind of directing the conversation?

Hannah Scheidt:

I found that so valuable and so fun too. I think part of the adjustment that was hard for me in grad school is as you decide on a field and then narrow down to a project, there's the sense of narrowing, like the breadth of your study is going to be diminished. I found that kind of a hard adjustment coming from undergrad, where I was just curious about everything. And religious studies, too, is just this like so many diverse perspectives and subjects of study. I've always really valued kind of exposure to, or those kinds of cross pollination moments. And I loved that in the American Examples workshop actually. I mean, some of the moments like Travis was talking about where you see these connections that you just wouldn't have thought of if you're more limited to a subfield.

Travis Cooper:

Yeah. Yeah. I agree too. So the interaction with Vaia was one of the most valuable I think that I had. Then I even remember Steven Ramey having tons of good kind of feedback on the project in terms of power and how we're theorizing the terms we're using and stuff. So I thought that was what was cool, was moving out of the context, from the American to kind of the global sphere, which is what I teach in right now. So that moment, I think, was particularly useful for me.

Hannah Scheidt:

And I think those moments can be elucidating in that they can both help you kind of expand so that you can really see the theoretical import of your work in a more expansive sense. But people from outside the field can also let you know what's confusing or lacking in your work because we develop this kind of insider language or these assumptions about what people know and what they think about our topics.

Mike Altman:

Yeah. It does make you have to come to terms with sort of when you throw names around, or things around, or citations around, that I think makes your work more accessible. I mean, one thing I've

thought about, especially last year, because no one last year was tenure track. We only kept it to only people who were not on the tenure track. We've since expanded it this year with more spots. But when you go on the job market, very few places have multiple, quote-unquote, American religion people. So the ability to make that move up, that shows a colleague in biblical studies, ancient Greece, South Asia, whatever, that what you're working on is something they could talk to you about too. I think it's a real benefit. I think it's something that I think we've seen with the folks that we've hired here, and I was hoping it would be helpful for folks going forward coming out of the program.

Mike Altman:

I'm curious. Sort of stepping back, how do you see what American Examples is doing fitting into the larger field of American religious history or whatever you want to call this thing, of this sort of amalgam of jobs and journals and books and people? Where do you see American religions fitting into that larger subfield? You don't.

Hannah Scheidt:

You know, I think that the field of American religions has for a while been starting a bit of a reevaluation.

Travis Cooper:

Yeah, no. So the appraisal thing I think is important. This is maybe too simplistic, but if you think of American religious history, especially history coming out of church history, right? That's kind of the lineage we're dealing with. I mean, it's been going on, a revisiting reappraisal, but I think just recently we're getting kind of to the new, which is cool. So we have American Examples is one. We have the New American Religion Journal, which we've been talking about a little bit, is another way to kind of refocus the American on the, maybe something else. The old stories are still going on. But I found, I think, that American Examples is kind of one of the most promising venues of what the religion in the America's track could be, if that makes sense so far.

Mike Altman:

No, that makes a lot of sense.

Hannah Scheidt:

What I'm thinking is that the way the program has expanded this year to include these other kind of groups apart from research is that it opens the field of American religion or American religious history up to be involved in these bigger conversations, these bigger theoretical comparative conversations, right? And like Travis says, then it's not just about church history. It's not about institutional history necessarily. And I think that this is something that is really important, not just in the academy, and not just for American religions as a field, but brings what we do into the larger public, and for undergrads as well.

Hannah Scheidt:

I see in my own teaching I've realized that kind of subconsciously without even thinking about it. The way that I've designed both the courses I'm teaching this semester is to get deep into American case studies and then to ask the students to think about how that changes their thinking about contexts outside of the American context. Because I think that's a very accessible way for people to start with something that they know, start thinking differently about something that they know, and then to use

those kinds of whatever theories, methods, frameworks of thinking that they build from that, what's familiar, to start thinking about something unfamiliar.

Mike Altman:

Yeah. The shift to teaching, I found deeply challenging because I realized that I'm not happy with the way I'm doing my American religious history course. I want to head towards a model, like you're saying, where it's not necessarily driven by narrative but by case studies that have larger theoretical questions. I already know, we all have our favorite moments, or case studies, or people, or events to talk about. And it's like, man, it'd be way better if I just pulled those out, then tried to knit together some sort of larger narrative. Now I'm doing this., I don't have time to redo my syllabus. So I'm hoping we get to the teaching workshop. I'm just going to like learn a lot because we'll have really good mentors, Emily Crews and Merinda Simmons. And then we're also having two other people who were in last year. Samah Choudhury and Prea Persaud are coming back so they can teach me stuff. Then I'll know how to make my syllabus better for next time.

Mike Altman:

So we have this edited volume coming out in the spring. Hopefully I'll have an announcement about who it's coming out with. We haven't actually got it into contract yet, but the manuscript is almost done. What do you think about this model of workshop to publication? Was that useful? Was it stressful? Were you worried about the publication process, the practicalities of it, dissertation chapters in books? What was that like for you?

Travis Cooper:

For me, it was pretty straight forward since I have this project forthcoming. It's a book, right, and the chapters are all kind of in the air at the moment. So this was a nice way to focus down and kind of put some bounds on what one chapter would be. So that was nice. It just kind of grew as a natural outgrowth out of that. Then coming into it, how many people did we have six total?

Mike Altman:

Yeah, six.

Travis Cooper:

Yeah. So it was like getting six sets of peer review comments almost, I mean, so to speak. And then the mentors as well. So really when you're done with it, you're getting tons of feedback, like I mentioned earlier. I think that was pretty useful. Much more than you'd actually get with a journal article or something like that too.

Hannah Scheidt:

Yeah. I thought it was useful too and very straightforward, kind of easy to figure out. I liked that we had this publication as kind of the vision, the goal, because then you leave the workshop and the work continues. There's a definite means, a way that you're going to process what we talked about. And also, the chapter that we talked of mine last year will be a chapter in my book. But it'll be different than, I think, the version I'm editing for the collected manuscript in a way that takes into account the importance of larger theoretical questions and kind of the comparative value of that chapter. And then

that way I like being able to take a different perspective or find a different value in that chapter than strictly what it does for the book project. If that makes sense

Mike Altman:

Since yours is closer to the end of the project than Travis's, has what you're doing in that chapter for the American Examples volume, has that fed back into the larger framing of the whole book? Or is it more of like I'll do the American Examples thing and then the book is doing its own thing?

Hannah Scheidt:

I mean, I think there are definitely ways that it's kind of helped me understand what the bigger questions of the project are, which we were talking about earlier today. Oddly, it's like the last thing you're still thinking about at the end of the project that you've been working on for five years, you're still thinking, what is the big message? You know, what is important about that?

Travis Cooper:

I felt like I knew when I started, but now I'm not so sure anymore.

Hannah Scheidt:

Right. And obviously it's natural and okay that that morphs or changes. But yeah, my involvement in the workshop, I think definitely helped me clarify.

Mike Altman:

Yeah. So our last question, because we're running out of time because I couldn't find a microphone that worked. So what would you say? We've opened the program up now to people from assistant professor all the way down. Basically, if you don't have your book published yet, we want you. What would you say to folks who are thinking about, or who are in the field, to encourage them to apply? What would be your words about the program?

Hannah Scheidt:

If you're wondering, does my project qualify? It probably does. I'm sure it does. And in fact, the more you're questioning, the more it probably does fit.

Mike Altman:

I said this before we started recording. I really want the American Examples chapter on Jonathan Edwards or George Whitefield. We do seem so far to attract atheism. We have a bunch of Caribbean stuff this year and last year, which is great. I love that. But I would love to put that work alongside content or subjects that are more old school. I don't know what's better word, the right word.

Hannah Scheidt:

Yeah. I think a lot of the projects last year, I think I said this in one of my reflections on the workshop, were on the boundaries like mine is. Is it even really about religion? Is it really about America? And so if your project is on the boundaries, apply. But also if your project is so much in the middle that you're like questioning, apply too. Because again, it's all about comparison.

Travis Cooper:

This transcript was exported on Nov 02, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Yeah, I don't have anything super inspiring to say. Just apply. You're going to get a good interaction. You won't regret doing it. It's a good program.

Mike Altman:

Awesome. Well, thank you all for doing this, for being patient with some of our technical difficulties. You know, everything about this project is an experiment. The chapters are experiments. The workshops are experiments. The podcast is an experiment. So thank you for being part of the big-

Hannah Scheidt:

The food is great.

Mike Altman:

Oh yeah. The food is great. Thank you. We have catering this year, so I'm excited. Yeah. But thank you all so much for taking the time to be here.

Hannah Scheidt:

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 [@facebook.com/rel@ua](https://www.facebook.com/rel@ua). For more information on American Example, go to americanexample.ua.edu. Have a comment or a question about the podcast? You can email us @religiousstudies@ua.edu, or reach out to us on Twitter or Instagram [@studyreligion](https://www.instagram.com/studyreligion).

Mike Altman:

If you've enjoyed the show, please subscribe to us on Apple podcasts and leave us a comment and a rating. And you can also find us on Spotify. So make sure to subscribe there too. Study Religion is produced by me, Mike Altman, with help on this episode from Keely McMurray and Jack Bernardi. Special thanks to Travis Cooper and Hannah Scheidt. Our opening theme is Two Minute Warning by Stephan Cartenberg. And the closing theme is Saturday Night by Texas Radio Fish. Both are used under creative commons license. Thank you for listening. Don't forget to apply to American Examples. And roll Tide.

Speaker 4:

I'm the one from Chicago.