

Eric:

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Speaker 2:

Hello, and welcome to our second episode of a special series we are calling Examples. Often in the study of religion, we find ourselves interested in and exploring topics that, on the surface level, seem to have no connection to religion. And many people ask us, you're a scholar of religion. Why are you studying this? We hope that, through Examples, the audience will learn some new things along the way and discover that those who are in the academic study of religion contribute to, and gain knowledge from other fields of study as well. I'm your host [inaudible 00:01:06], and I am a second year Masters student in the Religion and Culture program at the University of Alabama. In this episode of Examples, I have interviewed Dr. Eric Klein, an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin River Falls. Dr. Klein was in the second cohort of American Examples in 2020, and is a co-editor for volume three of the American Examples Anthologies. American Examples is a Henry Luce Foundation funded grant that allows early scholars of religion to investigate larger theoretical questions. The foundation of American Examples is the Examples approach, which allows scholars to use examples from America to present analyses about how religion shapes politics, gender, race, et cetera, without an audience needing extensive background knowledge in American history.

Eric:

Yes. Hello audience. My name is Eric Klein. I am an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin River Falls. I've just been up here for a year now, starting my second year. I received my PhD in English from the University of Alabama [inaudible 00:02:31], and I primarily focus on 20th century American literature. So, Modernism and Postmodernism primarily, though I am working on a project right now that looks a little bit further into the past in American literature, connecting with the present. I do like to look at those cross temporal connections in American literature, which even though Blake isn't American, but I think that we can see that in my chapter looking at the ways that past literature influences the present. My monograph, which is in revision right now, looks at the intersection of religion, specifically religious creation or invention in the post-war period, along with how that intersects with intoxication and travel. I've also published on various aspects of disability studies in literature, some stuff with looking at the rhetoric of spectacle and freak shows in Southern literature, addiction and alcoholism in Fitzgerald and the Modernists. So, I'm interested in a lot of different ways that body and mind appear in 20th century American literature.

Speaker 2:

So, we're going to be talking about the atomic bomb. So, I read your manuscript chapter for the second volume of American Examples. And so I found your chapter super interesting because I had never thought about the atomic bomb before, even really just in general. I was like, "Oh yeah, the atomic really is like a bomb. It exists. It's a thing when I think about the atomic bomb, I think about that Indiana Jones movie where he's in the refrigerator."

Eric:

Oh, nice. Yeah. The Indiana Jones four. Yeah. The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, the aliens one.

Speaker 2:

So, when I was reading it and I was like, "Why am I reading about the atomic bomb and religion right now?" I thought it was super interesting. So, that's why I wanted you on the podcast. And so can you tell me what piqued your interest in the atomic bomb? What got you like into the writing on the American literature and the atomic bomb?

Eric:

Yeah. There's a lot to unpack here. I think my initial interest in it started with focusing as I do on mid-century literature, whether American or European, existentialism is really in vogue. And so I think when I was a younger reader and scholar, that was the initial point of contact. What's something that can fuel existential despair more than this bomb of capable of human eradication? I find the bomb itself, as both event and symbol, and thing, such a coalescence of so many different disciplines, so many different ideas, coalesces philosophy and science, and ecocriticism, and environment, and politics, and myth, and religion, and even race and gender, which people might not immediately associate with a bomb. But when we think of the language of bombshell or a bikini, that's a reference to the bikini [inaudible 00:06:00] where they were doing nuclear tests. Sexualized language is anchored in the bomb.

Eric:

As people have pointed out, there's also the racial implications of the bomb, both domestically with the Trinity site in the Southwest. Leslie Marmon Silko writes about this in her excellent novel *Ceremony*. She's a native American writer and it's native Americans in the Southwest, and it ends with them at the Trinity test site and the environmental destruction on it. And then the dropping of it on Hiroshima Nagasaki is very much motivated by racial understandings of the Japanese. This is really highlighted in, it's a little bit of an older book now but still fantastic, it won the National Book Award, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power In the Pacific War*, by John W. Dower. But basically, this rhetoric during World War II that the Japanese were subhuman in some way. He makes this argument that really acted somewhat as permission for this eradication of these cities with these never before seen weapons. The very nature of the bomb, I think, invites myth.

Eric:

And that's not my original observation. Even in the immediate dropping of it, we see in newspaper articles comparing it to, primarily what you'll see is comparisons to Prometheus. And in fact, Kai Bird's definitive biography of Oppenheimer, the so-called father of the atomic bomb, is called *American Prometheus*. There's this way of what happens when humanity controls the destructive capability of a God. Something that had only been reserved before to gods and goddesses, or Book of Revelation, or prophecies, or things like that. But now it's actually in our control. I just find it to be such an intriguing and also, yes, horrifying and tragic. Kind of crux that there's so many different angles. It's also imagistic. And I think you'd see that in my chapter. I'm also very much interested in the intersection of language and images in my research. I guess I was going to ask you this, but you already answered.

Eric:

And it wasn't the answer I was expecting. If I were to say atomic bomb, what would instinctively come to your mind? I wasn't anticipating Indiana Jones. Though I can make some leaps that still is a visual, the refrigerator being launched into the air. But I think for most people, myself included, just unconsciously almost if somebody mentions atomic bomb, you just think of the mushroom cloud. It's an imagistic icon of a period that created just so much cultural change. It's an icon of what Thomas Kuhn calls a paradigm

shift in his book published in the '60s, you know what I'm talking about, I think it's motivated somewhat by the physics of the time, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. I just don't think that there had been really anything like it before, and I don't know that there has been since, I'm excluding Operation Ivy and the H-bomb, but I think that it is such a wily symbol and so hard to pin down that it's really just intriguing.

Speaker 2:

And so speaking, you talked about the bomb being a racialized image. So, can you explain the concepts that you talk about in your chapter coined by Alan Watts called Turn East?

Eric:

Yes, I will say, I don't know if Watts coined the term, to be honest, I don't know who did it. It's something I've just come across quite a bit, but Watts is certainly an early adapter of it and somebody who embodies it in a certain amount of way in his blend of psychology and philosophy, and religion that was popular. At the time that obviously Ram Dass fits into as well. Basically, it's the idea or the concept of Western cultures and countercultures looking to traditionally Eastern texts or religions, or philosophies. So, looking to the Bhagavad Gita, looking to the Diamond Sutra, looking to Daoism, looking at traditionally Eastern texts and philosophies, particularly in the post-war period, to make sense of or to cope with their existentially dubious present. So, with [inaudible 00:10:59], from what I've seen, it's often used as a term of critique.

Eric:

And I also talk about that in chapter two. I see it often paired with this declension model. But it's often a term of critique that these cultural and countercultural productions were either half baked. It would be the most generous interpretation like, "Oh, they don't really know what they're talking about, but look at those cute Hippies," or appropriate of at worst. That they're actually taking some, and there's absolutely truth in there. I don't think it's as clean cut as one or the other, but that's kind where that Turn East comes from, and some of the complications with it. In essence, it becomes a question of that inflection point of ideas of authenticity or sincerity, as opposed to performance, or something like that, or affect.

Speaker 2:

Can you expand on what the declension model is?

Eric:

The declension model is this idea specifically of the '50s, '60s, early '70s, it starts with this utopian ideas of harmonious loving man, and back to nature, communal living, idealistic take of that. Specifically, I think in terms of postwar through the Turn East but also just, in general, the utopian thinking in that postwar period, specifically among the counterculture. So, the beats, and then into the Hippies and stuff like that, and all of the cultural movements that come with it. But then what critics will point to is come to the end of the '60s, we have the Manson murders, but the declension model is this idea of what started with these utopian dreams descends into just chaotic Dionysian, getting high in being violent. Dissimilarly, I think that's much too simplistic of approach. Just like I think the Turn East, it's not one or the other, there are absolutely aspects. I mean, we look at the Manson family, we look at different religious creations that are popping up all over the time that do become pretty problematic. But I think it's also unfair to say that in turn invalidates what some of those earlier idealisms were.

Speaker 2:

If we're talking about psychedelic mysticism, which I want to ask you to expand on, that took place during the counterculture movement, but that was years after the atomic bomb was dropped. So, where's the relationship created between those two things?

Eric:

The relationship, I think, there is the atomic bomb testing is still going on. So, even though the atomic bomb has not been used in warfare since 1945. So, it's been a decade and a half, at least since the actual use of these as weapons in war, there's time has gone past, really I don't think that 15 years is too terribly long. But it's important to also consider the Cuban missile crisis in the early '60s. There's still testing going on. There's a huge sort disarmament movement going at the time. So, even though the actual use of the atomic bomb comes, like I said, about 15 years before the rise of the psychedelic mysticism, the anxieties imposed by the atomic bomb are still ever present in the early '60s, in this early Cold War period. Indeed, at this point, the nuclear arsenals between both the Soviet Union and the US are still just kind increasing exponentially. So, it's more about the ever present fear, ever present threat of it. At any moment, and this was just where Dr. Strangelove comes in, it could be just bad communication and we're all dead. So, there's this real existential threat of it that it's hard to put it as something that only existed 15 years ago or more.

Speaker 2:

Okay. And can you talk about psychedelic mysticism?

Eric:

Yeah. So, it's a phrase I borrow from the scholar Morgan Shipley. I mean, it's pretty much what it sounds like. It's a religious experience induced by consuming a psychedelic plant or chemical. Of course, I always have to amend that. It's much more interesting, I think, than ... I'll get sort raised eyebrows as if I'm just looking at people's like, "Oh, I am just going to eat some LSD and see God type of thing." It's more complicated than that. Though again, with the [inaudible 00:16:10] than the declension model. I think that's what critics of Shipley and his ilk would suggest. That it's just a grab bag term. It doesn't have any specific contours. I don't see that as a limitation. I see that as something to continue to explore different permutations of it in the period. Some might consider that this idea of psychedelic mysticism is enjoying something like a Renaissance right now, though I would probably argue that this Renaissance is treating psychedelics more clinically than spiritually.

Eric:

Of course, I'm thinking of Michael Pollan's How to Change Your Mind, a book that came out a few years ago, and they just recently made a documentary on Netflix about it. He has another one. But there's a number, I'm thinking of Silicon valley bosses like, "Hey, we're going to go like company retreat. We're going to go to the Joshua Tree and like macro dose, and come together as a company." So, there's definitely a Renaissance in moving away from the horrific, "Oh, if you trip on psychedelics, you're going to jump out the window," that was popular in the '70s and '80s, and very much motivated by that Go Ask Alice book. Though it has often been treated skeptically. I think culturally right now, both in science and in the humanities, there's some rethinking of that. There's a reevaluation of the medicinal, the clinical, the spiritual value of these plants and chemicals. And I think part of that has a lot to do with scholars really starting to understand just how much the war on drugs was politically and racially motivated. That when LSD and psilocybin are made schedule, and as well as marijuana are made

schedule one, narcotics that had nothing at all to do with the actual danger that these drugs may or may not have. It had everything to do with disrupting these countercultural communities. And Nixon's very ... We have recordings of him saying those exact things.

Speaker 2:

You talk a lot about Ram Dass and William Blake. So, can you tell us who those people are?

Eric:

Yes. Ram Dass, he's born Richard Alpert, born pretty well to do, New England upper middle class Jewish family. He was a countercultural spiritual leader from the late '60s until his death. And actually he just died of a few years ago, December of 2019. Before his metamorphosis to Ram Dass, again, this can become an infection point that some people might accuse him that appropriation. Others might say, "Well, that was actually the name that was given to him by his Hindu guru in India." But his metamorphosis to Ram Dass before his metamorphosis, when he was still Richard Alpert, he was a psychology professor at Harvard in the late '50s and early '60s. He was a colleague of Timothy Leary. Readers might know Timothy Leary for his slogan, the turn on tune in and dropout. But him and Dass were largely together responsible for these Harvard psychedelic experiments. And they famously get kicked out of Harvard.

Eric:

And then Alpert eventually goes on this pilgrimage to India to study Hinduism and there he begets this new identity of Ram Dass. He's probably best known for his book, which is published in 1971, *Be Here Now*, which is the title that I talk about in my chapter. The main part of the text is entirely hand drawn. There's a narrative at the beginning and different rituals and practices and recipes at the end. But the main text of the book is entirely hand drawn, both the words and the images in it. And the book, as a whole, captures a perennial philosophy or a very comparative religion, in that it borrows and, at one point in my studies, I talk about it as a blender. He takes Christianity and Judaism, and Buddhism, and Hinduism, and that he just takes all these things and throws them in a blender and then infuses it with pop culture and hip language, and stuff, and then it turns into this book.

Eric:

And it's become definitely a staple of psychedelic culture since then. I think that there's very few books that if one were to try to create a canon of psychedelic literature, this would certainly be at the top, along with maybe *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tester*, or something like that. So, that's Ram Dass. William Blake, on the other hand, is somebody quite different obviously. William Blake was very similar, but in a quite different time. William Blake is an English engraver and poet, alive in the late 18th, early 19th century, so during the heyday of British romanticism. And he's a bit of a proto adopter of the romantic thought and even early romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge, they look to Blake as inspiration. His composition process. So, one of the things that makes Blake unique is that as an engraver and poet, he would create these metal plates and then he would press them.

Eric:

And then he would watercolor and paint all of his books. So, of his different books, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Visions of the Daughter of Albion*, one of the things that makes them so remarkable is very few of these books actually exist in physical form, or very few copies of them exist in physical form, because he handmade all of them. So, they would be handed out to friends, he would.

And so if you go to the Blake archives, you can see the different ways that he would paint his plates. But if you look at Blake's just the visual aspect of his books, there's definitely a psychedelic quality to him in terms of it being very swirly and very colorful, and very bright. Even in his narrative of his first trip on [inaudible 00:22:53] the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, Richard Alpert / Ram Dass compares his visions to a Blake poem.

Eric:

And interestingly enough, which I find fascinating, is in one of his poems, William Blake ... And William Blake also wrote a lot of sort prophecy and created his own mythology, and own ages, and stuff like that. But in one of them, he says that he gets his visions by eating dung the way that indigenous Americans do, which I argue is a nod to the mushrooms that would be used for sacrament. So, there is a weird interplay between Blake and Dass, that they do have these nods to each other. And it's also worth noting that just, in general, Blake becomes incredibly popular during the 1960s. A lot of people are looking at his works, both from the psychedelic aspect, but then also in the perennial religion aspect. One of his famous poems is All Religions are One. So, he similarly does this thing of trying to rework myth for a shifting period. Ram Dass is writing in the Cold War where things are changing rapidly. William Blake is writing at the end of the Enlightenment during the revolutionary age. So, the French revolution, the American revolution, like all of these, and he's also living in a very tumultuous time when things are changing very quickly. And I would argue he's engaged in a similar project of we need to create a new kind of myth to make sense of this rapidly changing present.

Speaker 2:

You're a professor of American literature as we've discussed, and you received your PhD in English. So, what has that discipline taught you when it comes to religious studies? So, when you went to American Examples, when you went to your first workshop, and you were like, "Whoa, this is so different than what I'm used to." What was there from studying English that you found helpful to talk about religion with other scholars of religion?

Eric:

Yeah. Okay, good. So, one of the things I will say that I felt very unequipped for is the social sciences aspect of it and the ethnography aspect. I mean, I have literally no experience or training in any of that, except for going to some festivals, if I can count that as auto ethnography. But what helps me as a literary scholar explore the study of religion is its attention to language, its attention to non-literal representation. I think that the social sciences aspect of it focuses a lot on the literal, and I'm not very much interested in literal meanings or things, or rigid categorizations. I do think it offers a different avenue of understanding religious experience or community than, say, an ethnographic study. And this is not at all to knock the very important work and very intriguing research and work done on that side of religious studies. But just that the literary study is indeed different. That's something I very much learned in the conversations that I had at American Examples. Just the way we approach a text is very different. And cultural representation says as much as lived experience does.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. And so how did you hear about American Examples? What made you interested in being part of that?

Eric:

Yeah. Okay. So, before I ever heard about American Examples, I started getting interested in this religious studies stuff, looking specifically at religion in American literature. So, I think there was probably some unconscious connection across what I read and what I was interested in, and how religion kept on popping up. I think what clarified the connection for me though is a graduate seminar course I took at the University of Alabama called Conversion Literature, and it was taught by Dr. [inaudible 00:27:17], who ended up being my dissertation Chair and mentor. I think that class really helped me to make some of these connections more consciously and provided me some of the language to discuss them.

Eric:

We read all kinds of stuff which also, in terms of a methodological way, helped me with some of the stuff of connecting Dasso to William Blake, because we would be reading things like [inaudible 00:27:45] and St. Teresa and Simone Weil, and Malcolm X, and reading all these things and making these cross-cultural and cross historical connections. So, not only, I mean it helped me articulate my ideas of literature and religion, but it also did help me with those cross historical connections. So, that definitely shows in my American Examples chapter, I think. How did I find out about American Examples? So, Dr. Merinda Simmons in the Religious Studies department who is fantastic, and involved in the American Examples workshop, she was on my dissertation committee as well. And she just introduced it to me.

Speaker 2:

Was there a point at which while you were in your studies on reading and learning, and studying about the atomic bomb and the counterculture movement, and psychedelic mysticism, that you realized you could connect it to religious studies?

Eric:

I mean, I wish I could say that I had some epiphanic moment that it's like, "Oh, this all is coming together and makes sense." And those research moments do happen and they are some of the best feelings in the world, but I don't think this happened that way. I do think this was slower and more organic. I think a lot of it came from I had focused a lot on Beat writing in general, the Beats being ... Do you know what I mean when I talk about the Beats?

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Eric:

The Beat movement is in the '40s and '50s. They're progenitors of the Hippies. So, Alan Ginsburg, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Naked Lunch, the poem Howl by Ginsburg, the novel On the Road by Kerouac. These are the monuments or best known works, probably. So, it was doing a lot of reading of Beat writing generally, and especially Ginsburg. And in his poem Howl, one of the sections, it's this sort of chanting prayer to Moloch, who is a Canaanite God of fire and you fed your children to him and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And of course, Ginsburg in Howl is writing it specifically to the military industrial complex and the atomic bomb of post World War II America and Cold War culture. And I think it was a lot of the writers I was interested in were making these connections, and I was able to piggyback on their writing and dive in a little bit more.

Speaker 2:

So, can you give me a brief overview of the research that you did for your chapter in American Examples?

Eric:

Okay. Yeah. So, the research I did is what a lot of literary researchers do, is I just read a lot on, I did some historical work in doing a little bit of archival work, but not a whole lot. But the overall argument is that the atomic bomb, and it's important to note, I don't necessarily want listeners to think that I am making some strict causal argument. That it's like, "Oh, the atomic bomb caused psychedelic mysticism or caused this counterculture, or anything like that." I don't agree with that. I think that making historical causal claims is pretty slippery in any case. But I would argue that there's an undeniable connection between what happens with the bomb and these countercultures. And when Lawrence Langer, who is a Holocaust scholar, in his book *Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*, he points to both the Holocaust and the atomic bomb.

Eric:

And I think it is important to keep in mind the Holocaust in there, though I don't talk about it in this chapter as much. But that the Holocaust of in Langer's argument, and I would agree with him, the Holocaust demonstrates a desire for fellow human eradication and a mechanistic control of doing so, but the atomic bomb represents as efficient as the death camps were, and we know that was one of the things that made them so horrific, is they're quite efficient. They're not nearly as efficient as dropping a bomb that can kill a hundred thousand once we get into more powerful bombs, millions of people, in the flash of a second.

Eric:

So, in my argument, there is something that the atomic bomb influences this sense of existential dread, of anxiety, of indeed a mass crisis of faith, I would argue. And some of this mass crisis of faith, we see a lot of. Famously, this is also when America becomes ... When we invoke religion or God on our currency, or all of this stuff comes in this period because of the godless communists. So, it's not like all of this crisis of faith is specifically in the counterculture. Though I think that's precisely what makes them countercultural, while a lot of the square culture is going to church. Even if they're not true believers, the countercultural thinkers and authors, and young people are these traditional religious ideas that we grew up with no longer make sense. The idea of an omnipotent, benevolent God can no longer hold because, symbolically, we have achieved that divine level of power.

Eric:

President Truman, when he announces the bomb says, "We have harnessed the basic energy of the cosmos. We've harnessed the power of the sun." Oppenheimer, of course, references the Bhagavad Gita. There's something in the language of the bomb, even among people involved with it, of it being somehow deeply religious. So, that's what starts off. And then I move to talking about the ways that these countercultural, misfits maybe, respond to that. And a lot of cultural critics of the atomic age have made these. Paul Boyer is probably one of the best known scholars of this. He's published several books of it around the cultural aspects that the bomb affects. And so people have pointed to the Turn East and these kinds of things. But one of the things I thought was of missing was also this turn to the Romantic period, the British Romantic period. These countercultural writers, the Beats and then the Hippies, they're all very well read people and very specifically inserting themselves into a literary tradition, consciously doing so, they write about this. We are a part of a literary tradition. And so that's where I

make this connection that not only is it helpful to look at the comparative religion in Be Here Now and how that might represent the countercultural religious turn in response to the bomb. But also we should understand that they're looking to history and British Romanticism, and other aesthetic movements as well.

Speaker 2:

In your chapter, when you were referring to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, you wrote, "The event marked a paradigm shift in religious and aesthetic representation, as much as it did in ideas of scientific and technological process." Can you expand on that statement?

Eric:

Yeah. So, basically atomic energy, I mean not just weapons, this is not just the time of Dr. Strangelove, it's the time of the Jetsons. So, atomic technology generally is undeniably, without having to need a history of science, I think we can all understand that is certainly a paradigm shift in terms of our understandings of science and technology, and what we can do with science and technology. What I mean when I say it also marked a shift in religious and aesthetic representation, is that because of that shift in how we understand science and technology, authors necessarily find that they have to change how they represent experience. Because the old systems of representation, specifically in my case, in language that we can look at, visual art as well, but that the old systems of representation no longer makes sense.

Eric:

Just in the same way, as I was saying before, the old ideas of what they may have inherited religiously, specifically in thinking of Christian Protestant American tradition, that no longer makes sense. Similarly, literary form of the past no longer makes sense. And so they need to resuscitate it or reinvent it, which is what Alan Watts calls it. And so that's where I think we see the influence of the Romantics, is they were similarly interested in breaking away from ... And of course the irony here is that in reinventing or resuscitating these writers are looking back to history. I mean, nothing is ever truly new or original. So, we see that a lot in literary studies, in the postwar period we call it Postmodernism, and the reaction to Modernism. And quantum physics has changed how we understand the universe. Therefore, we need to change how we represent the universe, or represent experience. So, because the sublime is another connective tissue, I think, between the atomic age and the Romantic period. So, the sublime is a late Enlightenment and then early Romantic idea. Romantics rejected Enlightenment in a similar way that the 20th century counterculture rejected science in their own way.

Eric:

But Edmond Burke writes about it his philosophical inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, published in 1757, he characterizes sublime as something you find in nature, it's often attributed to mountains or the Grand Canyon, or giant storms, or hurricanes, but something found in nature that is so gigantic and huge. It is utterly awe inspiring, and is also utterly terrifying. Something that invites both wonder and fear at the same time. And importantly for the Romantics, and that's why one of the characteristics of Romantics is its very indebted to nature writing. Percy B. Shelley's famous Romantic poem Mont Blanc, he's writing about the sublime of looking at this mountain and how powerful it is, and all it represents. The reason that it connects to the atomic age, and this is an idea borrowed from Outside the Gates of Eden by Peter Bacon Hales, he coined this term called the atomic sublime.

Eric:

For the Romantics, the sublime is only found in nature. It shows humanity's tininess. The atomic sublime is when we first are able to like that sublime is now human made. That the mushroom cloud becomes this new icon of it. That our own tiny humanness is now in what used to be something only found in the natural world, something beyond the capabilities of humans to create, now humans have. And so I think that idea of the sublime, how it twins wonder and fear at the same time, is also something that can help us understand why these writers felt a need to change or, again in Watts' words, reinvent or resuscitate different modes of representation.

Speaker 2:

So, moving forward, it's been a few years since you wrote this chapter for American Examples I believe, what it's been like one or two years [inaudible 00:40:27].

Eric:

Two, I think, because we were 2020. Yeah. Wow.

Speaker 2:

So, it's been a couple years since you've written the chapter. I'm wondering if your research has expanded or if it's changed since then. If so, in what ways? Are you working on anything new?

Eric:

Yes. Well, yes and no. Obviously, yes. My research has expanded. If it hadn't, I wouldn't admit it on a podcast. But it's definitely expanded and evolved, and developed in different ways in looking at different authors and different avenues. As I had mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, I'm starting work now on looking at some of the less celebratory treatments of the period, like *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous, really by Beatrice Sparks. I'm developing ideas of looking at making connections between the Romantic and the postmodern. Specifically, right now I'm looking at doing a similar thing between the commune movement and the transcendentalists of the 19th century in America, and how those get of evoked again in 1960s literature, thinking of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father, folks like that. And I'm also looking at the implications of this analysis, the stuff I do looking at religion and science on how it affects science fiction writers of the period, looking specifically at William S. Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, and Samuel Delaney, and looking at how a lot of what I have focused on so far comes at it from the so-called maybe spiritual angle of writers. And so I'm interested in also looking at it from the writers that write in a more, commonly referred to as science fiction, or something like that.

Speaker 2:

So, I think this is all super interesting. I could keep talking about this for probably two more hours. I'm wondering what is the importance of studying the atomic bomb and the counterculture movement? Why is it something that should be studied, and what can studying the past help us to learn, or teach us?

Eric:

Well, I do think there's value in studying and learning things just to study and learn them. Because I think we should embrace curiosity. But as scholars, we always need to justify what we do, especially in the humanities. As I said before, I think one of the biggest thing is that it represents such a terrifying

conundrum, and it represents so much, is balled up in it in terms of environment and religion, and science, and race. And all of these things are tied up in this icon. And I think that in itself, the very richness of it remains, though increasingly more work is coming out about atomic culture. I think that there's a lot of work to be done about the nuances and complications of all of these things coming together in this singular event, thing, icon, whatever. For religious studies, I think that the atomic bomb represents a dubious space between human and divine. That's really interesting. It's maybe an access point. But maybe more importantly, it reflects itself into the everyday life for post-war America. So, if we are to look at ideas of habitus and these kinds of ideas of everyday life, I don't think that we could ever really take the threat of atomic holocaust out of the picture. It's always present.

Eric:

I don't necessarily think only Americans dealt with that anxiety of the threat of atomic warfare, again to the American Examples, the thrust of American Examples. I don't think that this is uniquely American per se, that these anxieties are present. But because of where the United States is on the geopolitical stage as a nuclear power in the early Cold War period, where for a while, we're the only one and then there's only two, that it does make it somewhat different than nations that might otherwise just be casualties, let's say. And then finally, one last plug, and this might be the most important. I do think that, as humanities scholars and scholars of religion, and scholars of literature, I do think that justification is important. I might make jokes about it. I do think that there's value in studying things for their own sake, but we're currently again on a precipice. In, I think it was in 2000 or 2001, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, which was established after the dropping of the atomic bomb, people might be familiar with them because of the doomsday clock. And they move the doomsday clock, the time of the doomsday clock where midnight represents Apocalypse.

Eric:

Midnight represents humanity ceases to exist. In 2000, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved the doomsday clock to a hundred seconds to midnight, which is the closest it's ever been. Based on the last few years we've had, that feeling of anxiety, of existential despair, of the world is going to end y'all, is not something that feels so distant. That's something that I think we, especially for younger people in our present, in the same way that the counterculture was. I mean, it's not like it was solely youth movements, but it was primarily anchored in these youth movements. And I think youth today feels this existential dread that is similar to it. And indeed, it's only compounded. There are more nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapons we have now are powerful.

Eric:

We have missiles that are supersonic that so that they might possibly be able to resist what missile defense systems we have. More countries have atomic weapons than ever before. And more countries are getting atomic weapons than ever before. In the '90s we did see some disarmament. But starting in the 2010s, it's growing again. Couple that with the pandemic. Couple that with climate change. Trying to understand how we make sense, both in terms of religion and of science and of sort humanities, is of paramount importance in our contemporary moment. And I think that in studying the early Cold War period, not that we should necessarily look to these people for answers. I mean, again, it's fraught. Yes, we have stuff like Ram Dass, but we also have stuff like Charles Manson. So, it's not like we can just look at these places like, "Oh, these were our answers," but we can look to them and say, "How did previous people deal with this feeling?" And I think that there's something that could be very healing there. I think that there's something to be very informative there. And I think that it is a very pressing

humanitarian concern. So, not to get on a giant pedestal and say, "Everybody should start looking at the bomb the way I do."

Eric:

But I do think that we're at a similar inflection point. That there's a lot of resonance of the anxieties of the period with our own, as well as the political division and everything that we saw in the 1960s, and then that we obviously are experiencing today.

Speaker 2:

What a great note to end on. Existential dread.

Eric:

Yay. It all comes back to it. But remember, we must imagine Sisyphus is happy if we are able to continue in this world. So, I guess we can leave it at that.

Speaker 2:

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