

Speaker 1:

Glory, glory, Hallelujah. Glory, glory, Hallelujah.

Erica Bennett:

Hello everyone. I am Erica Bennett, and welcome to Study Religion, a podcast produced in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Alabama. I am a second year student in the Religion and Culture Master's Program in the department, and I have appreciated how the program strives to provide a variety of opportunities in and out of the classroom for grad students to develop our skills as researchers, writers, and academics. One project in particular has recently gained national attention. The Uncivil Religion project, spearheaded by our very own Mike Altman, in collaboration with Jerome Copulsky and Peter Manseau, from the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, digitally archives the events that took place during the January 6th attack on the Capitol. On this episode of Study Religion, I sit down with the three first year grad students, Ciara Eichhorst, Phoebe Duke-Mosier and Katie Johnson, who worked with Professor Altman on this project, to discuss their contributions and what they learned from this hands-on experience.

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

Hi, I'm Phoebe.

Ciara Eichhorst:

Hi, I'm Ciara.

Katie Johnson:

Hi, I'm Katie.

Erica Bennett:

I was wondering if you could summarize the project in your own words and what your role was in the project.

Ciara Eichhorst:

So the way I like to describe the project is it's a compilation of audio and visual artifacts, so pictures and recordings, that were taken on January 6th. And the goal of the project was creating a localized resource that both the public and scholars could utilize. And then for my role, at the beginning of the project, when we were just starting out, we had to go through a bunch of artifacts to find what we were going to use on the website because we couldn't use everything because there were so many. So I started out by going through dozens of hours of footage of videos that people had taken and initially posted on Parler and YouTube and Twitter, but then that had been taken down, but they were archived into one central place. So I went through videos that people had taken to try and find content that related to what our contributing scholars were interested in writing about.

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

The project overall, I think, was just a reflection on the role that religion played in the events of January 6th. My role, and our role, generally, I guess, was mostly curatorial and administrative. We didn't write anything, but like Ciara said, we were in charge of calling all of the resources that we had available in finding the artifacts. And then we helped put the website together.

Katie Johnson:

I would describe our project and that it's a digital exhibition of the January 6th insurrection at the US Capitol. Our role primarily was, as Phoebe said, we were essentially curators for the project. We helped, along with Mike, create the website and do the research to decide what we would exhibit.

Erica Bennett:

How, as a first year graduate student, did you feel about working on this project?

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

I was really excited to work on this project. Obviously, the Smithsonian is a really prestigious institution, and it was exciting to be able to work on a project that was going to have, potentially, a national audience, as a first year graduate student. So yeah, I think that was definitely an opportunity that I wasn't expecting but was very glad to have.

Katie Johnson:

Yes. I think it was a very great opportunity, especially to get hands on experience working on something, which, typically, I feel you don't get, especially in undergraduate. So to really get to work on a project that you get to put your name on was just an amazing opportunity.

Ciara Eichhorst:

Yeah. I agree with what Katie said about having that hands on project. You always do fake hands on projects in undergrad. You design something, but it's not something that you're actually putting out there and that other people are going to access. So I was super excited to hear about it because in my last year of undergrad, I took a social theory class, and we had started talking about QAnon, and I got really interested in studying that. So then, when I found out that we were going to get to work on this project that was related to it in some ways, I was super excited, but it was also, obviously, a little intimidating at first because you know that really important people are looking at it and are going to read it, and you want to make sure that it's up to the standards.

Speaker 6:

[inaudible 00:05:41] because only Jesus Saves [inaudible 00:05:46].

Erica Bennett:

How does this project connect to your larger interest in religious studies?

Katie Johnson:

So I'm interested in a career in museums, specifically collections. So once I learned about it and knew that we were working with the Smithsonian, I was super excited because that's pretty much right in line with my career goals. So to really get to work with something, especially a different spin on exhibition, having a digital project, so it's learning this new skill that I might have to offer in my potential career.

Ciara Eichhorst:

Like I mentioned, I got interested in studying followers of QAnon and whatnot, so it connected in that way. But also, I'm interested in the intersection between religion, law, and law enforcement, so all of

that was present. And then I want to have a career in federal law enforcement, and eventually, what I'd like to do is be able to teach law enforcement agencies about religious studies with the hope of decreasing misunderstandings or violent situations between law enforcement and groups or people who are labeled as religious. So working on a project that, yes, it was academic, but then we also had to tailor it in a way that it would be digestible to the wider public, so translating that esoteric language into something that was understandable and comprehensible, is something that I'd like to do when I interact with law enforcement because it's translating something that could be confusing and making it understandable for other people. So I think it related in that way.

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

Broadly, my interests in religious studies have a lot to do with just the way that religion exists and functions in popular culture, so it was interesting from that angle. I also am doing a library science degree, so from an archival perspective, looking at the narrative of January 6th and how we are choosing to memorialize it and things like that was also interesting.

Speaker 7:

But either way, this American revolution must take place because our sovereignty, our Constitution, and our country has been stolen from us. We'll accept nothing less. We are going to take our country back, and you know exactly what that means.

Erica Bennett:

What was your biggest academic takeaway from this project, meaning what was the biggest skill or lesson that you learned about this project that will be useful in your academic journey?

Ciara Eichhorst:

I think that the biggest thing I learned was there are a lot of elements that go into designing a website. It's a really big process, and you have to take it step by step. Otherwise, it's just chaotic because there's so much that goes into it. So just learning to be strategic about the way that you go about something is, I think, the biggest takeaway I took from it.

Katie Johnson:

So my background isn't in religion, so it was very interesting for me to get, essentially, a broad overview of religion in America. So getting to see some of, especially, the smaller or the lesser known about groups, that was something that I think is very beneficial for me in my academic career. Also, working on a digital project such as this is something I'm not really skilled at, so I learned a lot of things having to do with, I guess, website interface that I think will be useful.

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

I was not really familiar with the concepts of the digital humanities or the public humanities. I had only encountered them in undergrad as just buzzwords. And I know that the digital humanities is something that UA's program puts a lot of emphasis on, but that was not on my radar. So I think just exploring what the public humanities are, what the digital humanities are, and the potential for doing scholarship in those modes was probably the biggest takeaway for me.

Erica Bennett:

What was your biggest personal takeaway from this project? And by that, I mean what did you find most interesting about this project or the work you did on the project?

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

I mean, just from a purely human interest standpoint, it was really amazing to see all of the different people who were there.

Speaker 8:

[inaudible 00:10:37] on this side, right?

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

And to some extent, we also got to see the reasons why they were there. And I think, just as a member of the public who had seen the mainstream narrative about January 6th, it was interesting. I keep saying interesting, but yeah, it was interesting to be able to see the nuance.

Ciara Eichhorst:

I think for me it was... I didn't totally have an understanding of just how intense the insurrection was before we started the project. Obviously, I knew it was bad, but I didn't know that much about it. And so when I started watching the videos that people had taken inside the Capitol and whatnot, it was incredible to me how large and violent it was because I didn't really have a way to conceptualize it until I saw it.

Ciara Eichhorst:

And we talk about rhetoric and propaganda in the context of historical instances, but this was the first time that I was living that history and actually seeing something like that play out. And so just watching all those videos and seeing how many people of all these different backgrounds connected whatever they wanted to with their goal and how the propaganda and the rhetoric worked, that was something that I found to be just really incredible. I don't know.

Katie Johnson:

Yeah. I think when people usually consider those who took part in the insurrection, grouped them under one category...

Speaker 9:

The blood of Jesus.

Speaker 10:

We love this country.

Speaker 9:

The blood of Jesus.

Katie Johnson:

But working on this project allowed you to see, essentially, the different subcultures that all came together, took part. There were so many different groups, from Catholics to Mormons to people part of... I was less familiar with this group until this project, but those who were part of Kek or Kekistan. It was interesting to see all these different people come together and their specific motivations.

Speaker 11:

Freedom! Freedom!

Erica Bennett:

And of all the various digital objects that you went through, are there any that really stuck out to you or stayed with you? What are they, and why?

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

One of the things that I came across on Twitter, it didn't actually end up being one of the objects that was written about, but it was... Yeah, I think Katie and Ciara already know which one this is, but there was a guy who was walking around dressed as a globalist non-player character, a globalist NPC was what his little sign said. And he was wearing an Illuminati pyramid on his head, and it was just... Visually, it was unforgettable.

Speaker 12:

Execute traitors. Execute traitors. Bring them out, string them out. Bring them out, string them out.

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

It wasn't clear whether he was serious or whether he was trying to be ironic, so it was possibly a satire, or possibly he is just very anti-globalism.

Katie Johnson:

Yeah. Like I said earlier, the Kek essay we have really stuck out to me because that was something I had pretty much zero knowledge about, other than casual internet experience, so specifically reading the essay and learning the background of it and some of other similar groups, such as the Pastafarians, really stuck out to me. Also, one video material that we have that I really enjoyed was the Captain [inaudible 00:15:31] just because it was just so amazing to see how dedicated people are, how motivated they are, going so far as to essentially cosplay as a religious figure.

Ciara Eichhorst:

We have a media gallery on the webpage that has sights, sounds, rituals, and there's a signs and symbols section. So I got really interested in all the different flags and the different signs that people were carrying around. So you'd see things that you thought were incompatible with each other all present at the insurrection. So there were LGBTQ for Trump flags, women for Trump, Blacks for Trump. But then there were just so many other things that seemed really unrelated that people were carrying around. So I asked Dr. Altman if I could go ahead and screenshot flags and upload them onto the website so that there was a gallery so that people could just see all these different things. So there were Pepe the frog. There were Chinese Communist Party signs. There were Jesus Is King signs, a lot of Trump Train, the Thin Blue Line flag. But there were just so many different things going on, and I thought it was all really cool, so I thought the flags and the signs that people were carrying were really memorable.

Speaker 13:

Honestly, I think people talk about socialism a little bit too much. The real threat to this country is not socialism. It is globalism.

Erica Bennett:

How do you think this project will be received in the academic community?

Ciara Eichhorst:

So I think, from what I've seen on Twitter, it's been really well received by the academic community. The religious studies Twitter retweeted a lot of what people were tweeting about it. And so I think it's really well received among scholars, and I think it's really cool to see that.

Erica Bennett:

How do you think other scholars may end up using this project in their own work?

Katie Johnson:

I think it'll be a useful tool, especially for undergraduates who maybe just want an overview of just the different groups, as we've said, that that took part, as well as, I think, it is a good example of collaboration.

Ciara Eichhorst:

Yeah. I would just add on that I think people will be putting it in their syllabi. I've seen a few people talk. Stephen Prothero retweeted, talked about adding it to his Religion in America course. And I saw someone else tweet. They were like, "I was working on my Religion and Violence syllabi. I'm going to add this." So I think it'll just be a resource that it's centralized and that people can go to to just reference.

Erica Bennett:

Do you think that this style of project is helpful to the humanities, and why?

Phoebe Duke-Mosier:

As we discussed, this was a public humanities and a digital humanities project, and we looked at some other public humanities projects, and I think this is a pretty accessible way of presenting scholarship to the public. So yeah, I think that's helpful.

Ciara Eichhorst:

Yeah. I think none of us are surprised anymore, when we tell people that we're studying religion, when their response is like, "Oh, my grandpa was a pastor," or, "Oh, so are you religious?" Just those misunderstandings about what we might study, it doesn't surprise us. So I think having a project this that can hopefully showcase to the public that religion intersects with so many different aspects of society and that it's not just about studying the Bible, but it's also about seeing what people do with what we call religion. I hope that this can be a resource for the public to help understand religious studies.

Katie Johnson:

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Yeah. To go off Ciara, that's one thing I appreciated about this project, just the digital humanities as a whole, is that it allows people who usually wouldn't have access to this type of information to... Not only is it free, but anybody could access it. That's something that academia is missing a lot. Only a very niche group of people usually have access to these type of conversations.

Choir:

Foundations of the world are laid bare at the [inaudible 00:21:04] of his [inaudible 00:21:04]. The Lord will fight the battle for his people. [inaudible 00:21:06].

Erica Bennett:

Thanks for listening and make sure to visit uncivilreligion.org. Study Religion is an American Examples production from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. This episode was produced by Erica Bennett and Ciara Eichhorst. Follow the Department of Religious Studies on Twitter and Instagram @studyreligion or on Facebook at facebook.com/RELatUA. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast, Study Religion, on SoundCloud, Spotify, or Apple Podcasts, and give us a rating and review.

Choir:

Foundations of the world are laid bare.

Katie Johnson:

... pursue similar. Can you hear him?

Erica Bennett:

That was the funniest [inaudible 00:21:57] yell I've ever heard. Ever.

Katie Johnson:

He hates when I'm on Zoom or FaceTime or anything.