

Speaker 1 ([00:05](#)):

Hello and welcome to our third 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, Sierra Iort, and I'm a second year master student in the religion and culture program at the University of Alabama. In this episode of examples, Dr. Joshua Urich talks to me about the topics of ridicule and mesmerism as well as the corpse of an alleged mermaid. He is a visiting assistant professor at Bowden College in Brunswick, Maine, and was in the third cohort of American examples in 2021. Dr. Urich is also a co-editor for Volume four of American Examples. American Examples is a Henry Lu 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.

Speaker 2 ([01:37](#)):

My name is Josh Urich. I'm currently a visiting assistant professor at Bowden College where I teach religion in the Americas. And I think I'll wait to get, I won't give you the whole research spiel. We'll sort of get into that as we go. Cuz I think that's always such a hard thing and such a boring thing to listen to, especially if you're not an academic.

Speaker 3 ([01:56](#)):

So we're gonna be talking about your chapter in the upcoming American Examples volume and can ask you when you write about mesmerism in your chapter, what do you mean? What is mesmerism?

Speaker 2 ([02:14](#)):

Good question. Besides being like the darling of American religious historians, mesmerism I think the best, when I teach it to my students, what I do is I ask them if they've ever been to one of those sort of stage hypnotist shows a lot of colleges will bring in a hypnotist for their welcome week, and then hypnotist brings everybody on stage and then they say this stuff and people go into a trance and the hypnotist makes them do things. If you've ever seen that, you've basically seen the descendant of mesmerism as a practice in the United States. It began in the 18th century in France, there was a guy named France, Anton Mesmer, after whom it's named, who claimed that all living beings possess an invisible natural force, like a substance actually that permeates them. And he called this force animal magnetism. Now, certain people were skilled enough to be able to manipulate this substance, this animal magnetism that permeates all living beings.

([03:35](#)):

And if you can manipulate the substance, you can manipulate the person. So the idea is a mesmerist, someone who can manipulate this fluid, could make someone vomit or scream or heal them of illnesses by block, by clearing blockages in their body, whatever is blocking the flow of vital fluids. Now, this practice achieved some popularity in France, such enough that there was actually a Royal Commission done. Royal Commission designed to investigate whether or not these claims were valid. And funnily enough, Benjamin Franklin was part of this initial commission and they did sort what we basically call

empirical testing. Now, they would have someone thrown into a mesmerist trance. And in this trance, people are said to be in a clear voyance state, meaning they can see things that they shouldn't be able to see writing in a sealed envelope or the expression on someone's face in another room.

[\(04:42\)](#):

And so effectively they just tested this and they had people go into a trance and then asked what's in this envelope? And of course, they all got it spectacularly wrong. And so Benjamin Franklin was part of the group that wrote up their findings, which is basically that mesmerism is nonsense. And he said that he really hoped mesmerism wouldn't make it to the United States because if it did, it would catch on wildfire. And we didn't need to be dealing with that as a new nation. And he got his way until 1830s when some mesmerists made it to America and they were actually phenomenally successful. And they would travel around basically putting on lectures, much like the traveling hypnotist shows that undergraduates might see as they're welcomed into college, where they would talk for an hour about the theory behind mesmerism and then bring up usually a young lady and put her into a mesmer trance and do all sorts of feats to convince the audience that this is real.

[\(05:43\)](#):

So that's the short introduction. <affirmative> another kind of branch of mesmerism, you might call it practical mesmerism as opposed to the sort of stage mesmerism. And there were people who traveled around and did healings using mesmerism. There's a guy named Rubens Peele who actually owned a museum that was rival to PT Barnum's Museum. And I talk about this PT Barnum a lot in the chapter. And at the time that I'm studying the 18, early 1840s, PT Barnum owned what a museum called the American Museum in New York. And his big rival was Ruben's Peele and Ruben's Peele loved mesmerism, Barnham, thought it was garbage. So Ruben's Peele put on a mesmerism exhibit himself where he did a stage show, he lectured and he did this thing. And then Barnham put on his own in which he basically had a whole fraud mesmerism performance go on. And then he revealed to the audience that it was a fraud. And so doing he totally torpedoed Ruben's exhibit. And then, I don't know, I don't think that was the nail in the coffin, but it was one of the nails in the coffin for Rubin's Peels museum, which eventually began to fail and Barnum bought it. So then Barnum owns both of them. Ruben Rubins leaves the museum industry and travels around New York countryside healing people of things like alcoholism, for example, using mesmerism. And he keeps careful notes in his diary like A healed such and such and is connected to your whatever.

Speaker 3 [\(07:16\)](#):

And is that where how we use the word mesmerized now? Yep. Is that a,

Speaker 2 [\(07:24\)](#):

That's exactly it. If someone's mesmerized now, it just sort of means they're enraptured. But at the time it would've meant you were put into a trance by somebody else doing mesmer passes. So if you think about the hypnotist moving the watch in front of someone, were getting sleepy. It is sort of like that, not necessarily with a watch, but some physical manipulation that somehow taps into that substance in your body. So we still use the word mesmerized. We don't mean the literal animal magnetism fluid anymore. I know it sounds crazy, but you think about, people still talk about vibrations a lot, right? I'm gonna put these vibrations out or this is my energy. It's from that frame of mind. It's not as bananas as you might think initially.

Speaker 3 [\(08:16\)](#):

I even think about how growing up, I remember my parents always told me that my grandpa used to smoke and he got healed by a hypnotist, dude. A hypnotist made him stop smoking.

Speaker 2 ([08:30](#)):

It's such a thing. And that, so now with hypnotism, there's a, there's, so there is a branch of psychology sketchy that does hypnotism, I think it's Eric Erickson, I think I could be wrong about that. It's been a while. But then there's a similar related one that's meant to be a gussied up, more scientific version of hypnotism. It's called neurolinguistic programming. And I knew a kid in college who claimed to be a practitioner of NLP and he said he cured people of their addiction to cigarettes. So this has a long history and it's still very in the right circles, a very rich practice today.

Speaker 3 ([09:12](#)):

So who was AEs?

Speaker 2 ([09:16](#)):

So in the chapter, I cite a letter to the editor, basically in this 1843 Charleston newspaper and it's signed by E AEs. And when I was originally researching this piece and reading all these newspaper articles, I was like, I didn't even think of it. I didn't even think about it because I was so focused on other details. And then when I was writing the American examples version of this chapter in which I was trying to stretch myself beyond what I'd been doing before, I was looking more at things like the names that people used as pseudonyms, cuz that was really common in the 19th century America in these kinds of letters. And so I actually had no idea who Eran Aus was. So I had to google this Eran Aus character. And coincidentally, maybe the vibrations of the universe were such that this worked out for me.

([10:14](#)):

But I learned that Aus is a, was I guess a second early third century Greek bishop who worked very hard to combat the nos heresy and establish Christian hetero or orthodoxy, sorry. And it just so happens that one of my colleagues at Bowden wrote the book on ology. His first book is about, And so he and I had a conversation about using heresy basically to define what orthodox means, which is exactly what here Aus did. He wrote, his famous text is called Against Hearses. And in defining what was a heresy, he helped cord off what was acceptable Christian belief in practice. And so that actually turned out to be a huge moment for this, for the way this chapter shook out.

Speaker 3 ([11:14](#)):

And that was the real E Aus?

Speaker 2 ([11:16](#)):

Yeah, the real e Aus was this second, third century bishop. And this Charleston guy, whoever it was, I still don't know who it was, who chose this name E Aus, he clearly identified with E a's mission of identifying hearses and exposing them as humbug is what he would've called them. And so he wrote this angry, very, very, very sassy letter to a Charleston newspaper in which he complains about mesmerism as a total fraud. And at the time there was these traveling mesmers who had just passed through Charleston. And right before, I think, and after PT Barnum sent an exhibit of a traveling of a mermaid. He was this object he claimed was a real mermaid, a mermaid corpse. It arrived in Charleston. And so a is like, Oh my God, first we got the mesmerist, now we got this mermaid. And then in the letter he says, We might as well invite the millerites while we're at it if we're just gonna have a bunch of heretics around. And so

the Millerites, they believe the prophecies of William Miller who said that the world was basically about to end, it was right about to end, and everyone was selling their stuff and getting ready for it. And so the Southern Urin Aus, he's like, We might as well invite these millerites because this is just a breeding ground. Charleston's become a breeding ground for Hearses. So he loved this project, he loved the original Ur Aus, apparently, or at least knew who he was and wanted to convey that kind of vibe.

Speaker 3 ([12:51](#)):

Can you expand on the mermaid

Speaker 2 ([12:55](#)):

<laugh>? Yeah. You mean that's not a normal thing. Just to drop into conversation a mermaid corpse on national tour? Sure. <laugh>. So the mermaid is, this is a whole situation. Most people know PT Barnum as the circus guy. But the thing is, he didn't even do the circus until after the Civil War. So he was originally famous starting the 1840s. So full 25 years before, we'll say 20 years before the Civil War. He has his first exhibit, which is basically an elderly enslaved woman. And he calls her the world's oldest woman. He claims she's like 160 years old, and he puts her on exhibition and she tells stories about her time being like George Washington's nurse. So she tells all these stories about changing George Washington's diapers and it works. She brings in a bunch of people and then her popularity kind of wanes. And so PT Barnum sends an anonymous letter to the newspaper that says, actually she's an automaton, she's a robot.

([14:02](#)):

People come in now to see if she's an automaton. That was Barnum's first major success. So after this major success happens in New York, there's a guy named Moses Kimball who had just acquired, we would call it a curiosity, a curio, this little strange object which was the desiccated corpse allegedly of a mermaid. Now, I guess I'll give you a spoiler, it's not really a mermaid, it was a, Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. It was, it's acho. It's a little gift. It's like a gift you'd buy at a gift shop. Japanese craftsmen would make them and sell them to sailors passing through. And what they did was they basically chopped a monkey in half and they chopped a fish in half and they sewed the top of the monkey to the bottom of the fish. And they did it pretty carefully. So you couldn't really see the seam.

([14:58](#)):

And they made it look like a real creature. And then they sold it as, here's this cool thing. And so Moses Kimball gets this mermaid and he thinks, I feel like I could make a lot of money with this, but maybe I don't have the skill set. Whereas PT Barnham, the man who exhibited the world's oldest woman and then convinced everyone that she was an automaton and then by the way, sold tickets to her autopsy to prove whether or not she was an automaton or the world's oldest woman maybe he can sell this mermaid. So Moses Kimball hops on a train with a mermaid in a briefcase, I guess, and brings it to Barnham and Barnums all in. So he leases the mermaid from Kimball and engages in what we would now call Gorilla marketing. He writes anonymous letters to newspapers around the country, like bragging about this cool mermaid that people have seen.

([16:03](#)):

And then he sends his business partner slash lawyer, a guy named Levy Lyman, He sends Levy to Philadelphia, which was the scientific capital of America. And Levy proceeds to pretend to be an English naturalist, like an English scientist. So he struts around with some version of an English accent and puts on gentlemanly manners for a week, gets himself known in town. And then right before he leaves, he invites some newspaper editors to see this cool thing that he found. He shows them the mermaid.

They're like, Wow, this is nuts. They write about it in their papers. Suddenly New York newspapers are picking up articles about this thing that was seen in Philadelphia. Barnham then has like 10,000 little pamphlets printed and sells them for a penny each about this mermaid. He puts up these huge transparencies or basically banners around the New York City concert hall where the mermaid's gonna be exhibited and then opens this exhibit of what he called the Fiji mermaid, which is a mermaid that was captured off the coast of Fiji and has been preserved and is now on display for your edification.

[\(17:19\)](#):

So he opens this display and it's a massive success. It's huge. And that no one knows he's running it, by the way, no one knows that. It's the Joyce Hef guy. No one knows. And what he does is he says, Look, he writes a letter to the newspaper in his own name, and he says, As the owner of the New York Museum, it is my job to help educate the city and make curiosities available to them. So I will host the mermaid when her exhibit ends in the concert hall. And so if you just come to my museum, you pay your quarter, you get in, you can see the remain. So he runs her for another two weeks pretending that he's just hosting it and then he sends it on a national tour. Charleston was the one stop in this tour where things didn't quite go so well. Essentially it so angered locals that two gentlemen, almost dueled, they almost killed each other because one of them was positive. The mermaid was fake and the other one was positive. The mermaid was real. That's their mermaid in a nutshell.

Speaker 3 [\(18:29\)](#):

<laugh> s what did people not have a preconceived idea of what a mermaid looks like? And then when they saw this mermaid corpse, were they not like, that's not really how I imagined mermaid Look,

Speaker 2 [\(18:44\)](#):

It's such a good question. Barnum was very clever about this. So in the 18th century, right, intellectuals, like philosophers speculated about the existence of mermaids. And so periodically there would be these reputable people talking about mermaids who might exist. And when Barnum did the advertisement, he reproduced pictures that looked a lot like the pictures that would appear 50 years before, which exactly like you're saying, it sort of looks like Ariel from Little Mermaid. It's a pretty lady with some fishes tale. And there are accounts of people going to see the mermaid and basically being, what the fudge is this? This is absolute garbage. And so New Yorkers seemed to have a pretty good sense of humor about it. They're like, Oh, we just got taken for a ride. This is junk. But some people fully believed it was true. They were like, Oh my God, this is a real mermaid.

[\(19:51\)](#):

And the reason for that is, is because Barnum was very clever. His job was not to trick people. His job as he saw it, was to invite them in to see whether or not they were being tricked. So what he did when he exhibited the mermaid was he said, Look, this is a missing link between species. So remember this is pre Darwin. There's no conception of evolution here. So the way that people conceived of the natural world at this time was as a chain of being. So it starts with God and then it goes to angels, and then it goes to humans, and then it goes to primates and so on and so forth. So what Barnum said was this chain of beam, it's kind of confusing what would connect, what would a seal to a duck <affirmative>? And he said, Well, the duck build platypus, which he exhibited next to the mermaid, what might connect a fish to a bird.

[\(20:59\)](#):

The flying fish, which he also exhibited next to the mermaid, what might connect a monkey to a fish, perhaps the mermaid. So he was really clever. He said, Look, there, this fits in with things that we

already know. So come and see for yourself if this is real. And of course, the duck bill platypus very real flying fish, very real <affirmative> and these shoe horns in the mermaid. And at this time there are periodically you'll see articles in newspapers about curiosities from around the world. And one such article that appeared around the time that Barnum's exhibiting this mermaid is the story of a village somewhere in I think Southeast Asia in which the people had crossbred with orangutan. And so this article talks about this village of half orangutan, half human creatures. So when you put it in that context, this hideous mermaid corpse, and if you Google it, you can see drawings and even a sort of paper mache reproduction. It's not a attractive creature. But you look at this and it's ugliness almost makes it seem more real. Cause if it's like a taxidermied platypus and flying fish, you might be like, Oh, you know what? I know it's kinda a lot to take in <laugh>.

Speaker 3 ([22:27](#)):

The fact that people were gonna shoot each other <laugh>,

Speaker 2 ([22:31](#)):

Oh dude, they were so riled up about it ballooned so fast. It started as letters to the editor back and forth this guy named John Bachman, who actually worked with ottoman in identifying national and species in America, bird species in America. John Bachman considered himself a naturalist and a gentleman of learning. And the mermaid came and he was just having none of it. And so he wrote a letter to the editor, signed by no humbug and humbug sort of means scam or fraud or something. So he's clearly marking himself as someone who's not tolerating this humbug. And he says, This mermaid is fake, and the guy who's exhibiting it better get outta here before we teach him a lesson basically. And so he gets super mad. His opponent in this conflict is a guy named Richard Yean, a lawyer, and he's an editor for another newspaper in town.

([23:32](#)):

So he publishes in his own newspaper about how the mermaid's real. And these people who haven't even examined it should keep their mouth shut because they don't know what they're talking about. And so you get the sense that there's some background conflict going on, which in fact, because those same two people had earlier argued about mesmerism. Cause I told you there's all these mesmerists coming to town. Well, Bachman was also like these mesmerists are full of it. And Yean was like, Well wait a minute, let's hear 'em out. So that conflict just bubbled over into the mermaid conflict. And once letters started getting exchanged in the newspaper, it became a public issue. And because this is the Antebellum south, it becomes an issue of honor. And one thing leads to another and a third party has to intervene to make sure these guys don't kill each other.

Speaker 3 ([24:24](#)):

How did the political landscape and the economic marketplace of the time play into your chapter?

Speaker 2 ([24:32](#)):

Those factors to me are what actually explain that near dual. That fight that almost happened between Bachman and Yin other scholars gave basically the rundown that I just did. That it was either a conflict about mesmerism or it was a matter of honor. But if you stop and think about it and you go back and read the documents, the letters that they write, I'm not sold that. It was just mesmerism. I'm not cuz why? What made them so mad and what gave the conflict the kind of momentum to carry on? And if a

matter of honor is pretty convincing except why did this become the thing that they had to stake their honor on?

[\(25:28\)](#):

And so what I started to do as I did this chapter for American Examples is I began to rethink the context cuz I was so focused on mesmerism, I was so focused on following in these other scholars footsteps that I sort of missed the forest for the trees. And so I went back and I reread all the newspapers, and this time I read the whole paper instead of just these letters. And what I saw in these papers was a lot of mounting frustration in general. At the same time, these cats are arguing about the mermaid or the mesmerists. They're also getting increasingly agitated about northern abolitionists coming in and telling Southerners how to run their business. So you think about that and then you think about this mermaid exhibit, for example, this Yankee salesman coming through and trying to pitch a mermaid and rile people up in Charleston and leave town again, which is exactly what Bachman was worried about.

[\(26:37\)](#):

He was like, This guy's gonna come in, he's gonna rile everybody up and he is gonna leave. And that's exactly what the mesmerists were doing too, cuz they'd pass through, they'd r everybody up and they'd leave, take their money and go. And Bachman says, We don't need another Yankee swindler coming through here. And so at the same time that's happening, these articles about abolitionists coming down to the south and riling people up over abolitionist and they're starting to talk about what's the relationship between north and South right now. They're starting to reconsider this Mason Dixon line and what's happening above and below it and why these two things are connected in the first place. And so that's sort the political landscape going on. The economic landscape is a little more a little subtle because it's so pervasive. What stuck out to me, I think what made me think about this was Barnham is so clearly just trying to make a buck.

[\(27:38\)](#):

He wrote a book called The Art of Money Getting, He has no qualms about doing whatever it takes to make money. And I'm reading these newspapers and I, if you look at an Antebellum newspaper, which you could easily do on the Library of Congress website, even Google Archives has newspapers go look at the Charleston Courier or the Charleston Mercury. That one's easy to find on Google from 1842. The first page, the first full page just advertisements, tons of advertisements. And these advertisements are insane. They are columns of text advertising like Johnson Johnson sa Barilla, which will cure you of pretty much anything you got going wrong. You have some of the SaaS barilla, you're good to go. And there's their firsthand accounts of people who almost died but drank this sa barilla or this tonic or that tonic. And suddenly they're healthy again. And you start to think, Man, there's a lot of things being sold here.

[\(28:41\)](#):

People are getting sold a number of bill of goods and they're aware of it. One doctor, he put an advertisement on that front page and he said Doctors such and such is moving offices. And in the meantime he wants all of his clients to be aware and to be alert for all of the various scams that are going on right now. Don't fall for these health scams, don't buy these junk products basically. And so I'm thinking the mermaid, the Mesmerists who are coming through the Millerites, it's resonating with this political conflict. It's resonating with these changes in the national economy, the 1830s, 1840s, this period's called the Market revolution in which the capitalist marketplace expands nationwide and people are suddenly doing business anonymously, giving rise to all of these various possibilities for fraud. And so you feel that resonating with the mermaid too? And so as I was thinking about it, I was

thinking this mermaid, it's really encapsulating the most tense aspects of the political and economic moment

Speaker 3 ([29:59](#)):

<affirmative>. It makes me think that really things aren't any different. Now, <laugh>, I was thinking about how Gwyneth Paltro has her Goop website.

Speaker 2 ([30:13](#)):

God yes. I'm overly familiar with goop <laugh>.

Speaker 3 ([30:17](#)):

Like we're still just always told about these health care and whatnot that aren't actually scientific in any way. And now I'm just thinking about how different even are things today than they used to

Speaker 2 ([30:34](#)):

Be. And the overlap of these things. Jim Baker, formerly of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, like the televangelist he is still around and he is peripherally connected to the anti-vax borderline sort of conspiracy community. And he's connected in part because he sells silver gel and silver spray. And he actually just got sued a few a year ago because he claimed that the silver spray would cure. And so you look at the ways that people reacted to Covid, for example, and the overlap between QAN on and masking and all, and the election of Donald Trump. These things are still so deeply woven together. When I write about the mermaid in a lot of ways I'm writing about today, I'm trying to figure out, well, why are we getting so riled up with each other?

Speaker 3 ([31:33](#)):

Can you tell us a little bit about the United States exploring expedition?

Speaker 2 ([31:38](#)):

Boy, can I <laugh>? The United States explored expedition. It was the United States. It was its first foray into international scientific exploration and also international commerce. It was a dual project <affirmative>, essentially this was a group of six ships and like 350 sailors who went around the world in order to discover new things, explore, but also make maps, make maps that would be used for international shipping commerce. And the reason it comes into this chapter is it so happened that the expedition returned the same year the Fiji mermaid went on exhibition and the exhibition or the expedition leader, Charles Wilkes, was being court marshaled right as the mermaid was going up and he was being court marshaled because he slaughtered something like 80 Fiji and Islanders. And he did that because he claimed that the Fijians tricked them, they deceived them during a trade. And I wonder if Barnum didn't pick Fiji for the name of the Fiji mermaid because it was in the newspaper at this time. And as an academic and as an author, the United States exploring Expedition became almost an anchor point for the chapter because it's about map making and it's about defining physical space, and it's about determining racial otherness by defining the Fiji as inherently tricky because they're indigenous people somewhere on the periphery. And that is one of the threads that I explore throughout this chapter.

Speaker 3 ([34:02](#)):



Okay. So with that, can you give us a brief overview of what your chapter in the forthcoming American examples volume is about?

Speaker 2 ([34:10](#)):

Okay, so this chapter is really about map making. It's about how people make maps that they use to navigate the world around them. But I'm not talking about physical maps, I'm not talking about spacial territory, right? I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about social maps, how they figure out what kinds of people they could trust, for example, or what kinds of people they consider like them and what kinds of people they consider different from them and how they categorize those people within their various hierarchies that they're building in their heads and in their guts. So I was curious about the Antebellum period and specifically like 18 30, 18 40, because there's so much changing at this time. This is a period called the market revolution in which the economic system has made a humongous shift from local economies, local small economies in which people are doing business with people they know. And a lot of things are done, for example, on credit to a broader, more anonymous marketplace in which goods are being shipped and sold in mass quantities. And you could be buying something or selling something to someone you don't know. And this is quite the shift in how people do business and conceive of buying and selling goods.

([35:41](#)):

At the same time, tensions between the north and south are ramping up this question of slavery is becoming increasingly difficult, making relations between these two regions increasingly difficult. And so I was kind of wondering how Americans navigated these various changes. How do you make sense of these changes? And my operating principle here behind this chapter is that we don't always navigate changes by thinking about them. We use instinct, we use our emotions to figure things out sometimes before we actually use our brains. And the reason that I have that operating principle guiding this chapter is because I was so focused on the mermaid incident that I just explained. Because the question that I kept asking myself was, What the hell? Why are these people so angry about a mermaid? As I dug into the rational explanations, the honor, the mesmerism thing, I wasn't buying it.

([36:49](#)):

I wasn't buying it because there didn't seem to account for the momentum and the intensity of this conflict. And so I thought this, there's something else going on here. And so as I put this chapter together, I was thinking, what else could it be? And I begun to reconsider the ways that our bodily reactions decide how we make maps in our guts, and then how our brains then create explanations for them. So that's what I'm exploring in this chapter, how people do that and how you can look at a political and economic context to better understand how people make maps in their bodies. And so I focus on two different case studies both from this market revolution period. One is a book called Humbugs of New York by David Meredith Reese. And in it he just goes through and he defines all the things that he thinks are the biggest humbugs or frauds or scams plaguing New York City.

([37:58](#)):

And so mesmerism is chapter one, he's just like, Oh man, f mesmerism. It is the worst thing that's ever happened. Here's why it's junk. And he just makes fun of it for 40 pages or something. He just goes on this long tirade. And what he does is he ridicules anyone who might possibly be into mesmerism, he exposes all mesmer's frauds. And he is like, Look at these idiots who believe it. We should all laugh at them seriously. That's what he says. We should laugh at them. And as I was reading this text, I was thinking, this wouldn't do, this wouldn't convince anybody who wasn't already convinced. You know what I mean? He's not gonna change anybody's mind. And again, I'm doing this, remember my own

context for writing this chapter. It was during the QAN movement, so it was during the height of the Q Andon movement.

[\(38:55\)](#):

And what I noticed is everyone who was arguing against Qan I in the media, or even just in casual conversations, nothing they said was gonna convince someone who was super into qan. Likewise, people who are super into qan trying to convince the skeptics that, Hey, Qan is legit, nothing's gonna convince them. So people who are decided, you're not changing their mind. And so I was thinking a lot about that and I was reading David Meredith Reese and thinking, Man, he's doing the same thing. He's preaching to the choir. I'm like, What is the point of this? So I started paying attention to the emotional language he used and I got really focused on the way he used ridicule and laughter and the way he mocked mesmerists. And what I began to think was he's trying to make bodily reactions happen in himself and his audience, he's, he's trying to render mesmerism laughable, because if you can make it ridiculous, then you make its practitioners less than, and that's actually an effective way to other them <affirmative>.

[\(40:05\)](#):

So he's not trying to convince anybody. What he's trying to do is he's trying to make a social map for himself and for his audience in which mesmerists are the stupid non-modern other, and his readers are the enlightened wise, modern people. From there, I went back to the mermaid stuff and I was reading that and I was thinking, man, this is the same kind of thing going on. The arguments here, when you read the actual primary sources, what these two guys are writing back and forth to each other and then what their various camps are writing back and forth to each other, it is so tedious because they're arguing over these little details in the mermaid, whether or not there's a seam, how you can tell if there's a seam who's qualified to say if it's really a sea or not. And you're just like, Man, these details are so dumb, and yet the people were so riled, there's something going on here.

[\(41:07\)](#):

And so I started to look at some of the other letters, things like what Rin Aus wrote, and Rin Aus is very sassy, he's very sassy, and he's mocking, he's using the same kind of ridicule to say, These mermaid supporters are just as stupid as the mesmerists and they're just as stupid as the millerites. And what I noticed is the language that they use to describe the rights and the mermaid supporters and all these, it's the same language they use to categorize people as racial others. So the language about at what they called NLAs at the time, mixed race people, the language about mixed race people started to mirror the way Eran ais, for example, talked about millerites as though they're inherently insane. So at the same time, he's writing about millerites, there's a little letter to the, there's a little article published in the Charleston Mercury from the Boston Journal of Medicine or something arguing that mixed race people are inherently insane.

[\(42:16\)](#):

And so what they're doing is they're looking at the millerites and they're saying, Well, they're just like mixed race people. Anyone who believes in this mermaid, they're just like mixed. They're leveraging other social maps maps about race to cast onto their new rivals and mock them. And so anyone who practiced mesmerism in a lot of these sassy letters, these opponents would bring in issues of race and say, Well, why are these mesmerists always using slaves to mesmerize? And they'd make some cruel joke. And their point there is to racialize what's going on to say, Well, they're all just nuts unlike us. Did that make sense?

Speaker 3 [\(43:09\)](#):

Yeah, yeah. Well, and I was gonna ask <laugh> cuz you have that quote in your chapter that says, How is authority conferred or revoked? And why was this particular battle for authority, so heated end? And I think that was particularly talking about the mermaid but I was just gonna use that to ask you what your chapter can teach us about boundary setting classification and labeling practices. Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([43:37](#)):

That's a good question. Forces me to of think what's the purpose of what we do? <laugh> writing about these things. I was attached, I was really fixated on the seam of the mermaid because this is what these people were arguing about who has the authority to determine if there's a seam there, a seam connecting fish in a monkey. And so I was thinking, I was thinking about that seam and why people were so angry and why they were trying to determine who had authority to say if the seam existed or not

Speaker 3 ([44:19](#)):

<affirmative>.

Speaker 2 ([44:20](#)):

And very quickly I thought, this is not really about the same in the same way that when a married couple fights about money, it's not really about money. Like the last thing that's about everything else. I was thinking they're not fighting about the scene, they're fighting about the nature of the authority in this situation, who's able to make a judgment based on the proper social map, <affirmative>, who's operating based on a social map that we can all accept. That's when I started to think about the patterns that I was noticing this argument between North and South, which is stitched together as it were by the Mason Dixon line, this invisible sea joining these two disparate halves of the country the exploring expedition going through to make maps and to determine what kinds of people lived where in deciding that the Fijians were inherently traitorous, right?

([45:24](#)):

Because they were on the periphery. This argument was about the proper categorization of our world and who was able to determine what that categorization is, what the proper boundaries are between things. And to me, the takeaway from this chapter, what I took away from thinking through this and writing about it, was these arguments that these arguments about boundaries between the reality of something. Is this really a mermaid? Is it not <affirmative>? Does this seem exist or not? Those arguments are about everything, but what the explicit arguments about we have to take into account all these other things that might resonate with it, that adds to the emotional weight of what's going on.

Speaker 3 ([46:17](#)):

Yeah, it's not really about whether or not the mermaid is fake or real. It's more about who gets to decide that

Speaker 2 ([46:25](#)):

And whose side are you on, man, are you on the side? So you're thinking about you're, you're John Bachman, you're this southern gentleman, you're tired of these Yankees coming in and ping their frauds. And then also insulting southern senators and insulting the institution of slavery. John Bachman's over here going, Whose side are you on, man? Are you on the side of the abolitionist Yankee scam artist, or are you on our side <affirmative>? Right? That's what it's about. The sea of the mermaid is just, that's just the tip of the iceberg, right? That's just the symbolic entry point to this broader argument.

Speaker 3 ([47:05](#)):

Were you studying mesmerism and ridicule before you started writing your American examples chapter?

Speaker 2 ([47:14](#)):

No. That's such a good question because the chapter beca, it was so much about ridicule and mesmerism that you might think, Yeah, this is what I do. But no, not at all. Actually, I came to this because I was trying to come up with a history of the new atheist movement, a history of the new atheist movement that made sense to me. So the new atheist movement's like 2008 and these cats were, they were just so angry and skeptical about religion, and they were so successful at turning that kind of angry skepticism into a popular movement that I was trying to figure out, well, what made them so successful? What component parts of this movement may have been already around that they successfully channeled into something that could stick? Because no one had ever made atheism popular before. And I was drawn to PT Barnum as part of an explanation because he was teaching Americans how to be skeptical of economic fraud.

([48:20](#)):

He was inviting you to come in and see if the mermaid was real or if you were being scammed, and he was making this part of American popular culture. So by the time Barnum died, when something strange happened, if it snowed in the middle of June or something people would say, Where's Barnum? Cuz they're like Barnum's around. He must be pulling a prank on us. He must be scamming us somehow. And so I was thinking there's a long tradition of skepticism that we're being taken advantage of by someone for our money, which is what the new atheist claimed religion was entirely. And I thought maybe barnum's an interesting window into how the practice of economic skepticism worked itself out. And American examples encouraged me to rethink this entirely to take a much more experimental approach. And so what I did was I went back to those sources and I thought about affect and emotion bodily reactions.

([49:22](#)):

In other words, instead of this vague of connection between economic skepticism with a new atheist, I just thought, Well, what's actually going? Let me rethink this whole incident and see what's happening, See how emotions are being used to make things happen in this moment. And then I discovered ridicule. I was like, this whole situation is full of ridicule. Everyone's ridiculing each other. Why are they doing that? And so I gravitated towards the sources that I did because that's what was being ridiculed the most. And then the connection between mesmerism and the mermaid was so clear. I mean, that earlier scholar who studied the event, he said he thinks the problem was the mermaid and the mesmerist came too close together. And my claim is very different. I think the problem is that the mermaid and the Mesmerists, they brought up the same kind of frustrations in the people of South Carolina, these Yankee peddlers coming through and scamming people and leaving.

Speaker 3 ([50:28](#)):

So the last question I'm gonna ask you, the most important question <laugh> God, is what's the takeaway? Why is it important to study the past and what do you hope that readers will take away from your chapter?

Speaker 2 ([50:46](#)):

It's never about the money. Whenever you're arguing with your spouse, it's not about the money, it's about every, No, I'm kidding, but I'm not, because that's really, that is sort of what I want the takeaway to be, just on a broader scale. Like I said, I was writing this during QAN on, and I was trying to think of what was like, we were just ripping each other apart over Q Andon, and I was watching these things go down, and I was thinking, Man, none of this makes any sense. None of this makes logical sense what's happening. I couldn't make logical sense of it, and I was witnessing, people try to make logical sense of that weird time in 2020 and 2021, and I was just wasn't convinced by it. I was like, No, none of these answers seem to offer some sort of satisfactory explanation for the Andon movement in general. And writing through this chapter helped me a lot because it foregrounds the way emotions make up our minds for us. So the logic of Qan on, for example, the logic of the conspiracy man, that's like step three, right? That's step three. Step one is what's happening in your gut

Speaker 3 ([52:06](#)):

<affirmative>

Speaker 2 ([52:06](#)):

And your reaction to the world around you later on, sometime later on after you've had those reactions, after you've, you've felt these ways and been with people who feel that way, then the explanations come. I think that for me is the takeaway as we look at the world around us and as we engage with people we don't understand or we witness things we don't understand, maybe we don't understand it because it's not inherently logical, and maybe the way that we ourselves have categorized the world is not entirely logical. I think this piece also calls for a little bit of humility in our own own lives. We take things for granted as sensible like, Oh yes, of course my worldview makes perfect rational sense. We may not consider that that rational sense is only, it's only sensible because we've already decided in our guts that it's sensible and we tell it to somebody else. It doesn't make any sense to them. So that's it.

Speaker 1 ([53:20](#)):

Examples is an American examples production in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama with funding from the Henry Loose Foundation. This episode was produced by Sierra Cort. Special thanks to Dr. Joshua Ric and Dr. Michael Altman. You can follow the Department of Religious Studies on Twitter and Instagram with the handle at Study Religion or on facebook@facebook.com slash r e l a. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast on SoundCloud, Spotify or Apple Podcast and give us a rating and review.