Podcast Transcript

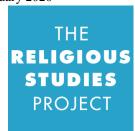## Media and the Study of Religion

Podcast with **Vivian Asimos, Tim Hutchings and Suzanne Owen**

(20 January 2020).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/media-and-the-study-of-religion/

Christopher Cotter (**CC**): *Welcome, Listeners, to a special roundtable episode of the Religious Studies Project. We had hoped that this would happen at the [BASR 2019 Conference](#) at Leeds Trinity, but everyone was too busy, too tired, over-podcasted. And so we thought we would reconvene later on, online. And we're talking about media and the study of religion. We've had a few podcasts touching on this topic before. You know, we've had one that [Tim](#) – who you'll be hearing from in a moment – was involved in about [religion and the news](#), and we had [Teemu Taira](#) talking about [religion and the media](#). But today we're going be taking a much broader approach, I think, to the notion of media and the study of religion so: mediation, and the various media in which that can occur. So I'm just going allow the speakers to introduce themselves, and say a little bit about how media crops up in their work. So for those who don't know, I'm Chris Cotter, I'm one of the co-founders of the Religious Studies Project. And I'm going to let other people speak first, before I scrabble around to try and think about how media comes up in my work. But, [Vivian](#) – you're first on my list here – who are you, and what's media for you?*

Vivian Asimos (**VA**): (Laughs) Quite a big question, regarding my work! So I'm Vivian Asimos, I recently got my PhD at Durham university, which is currently where I'm still acting at teaching assistant on several kinds of course. And I study virtual story-telling, primarily looking at the internet and video games. So lots of media that I'm looking at, and different types. Sometimes looking at it historically – how things used to be, historically-speaking, for the internet. Obviously not quite the breadth of history as maybe some other people are used to looking at! But seeing how things change over time, and also how this impacts our ideas of supernatural or communication of religion. Those kinds of things. Yes.

Podcast Transcript   Version 1.1, 18 January 2020

CC: *Excellent. You are well-qualified to be at this table – this virtual table. And this podcast that's being mediated to the Listeners' ears, and we're recording it via the internet. So it's already a case study in that. And then we've got* [Suzanne Owen]*.*

Suzanne Owen (**SO**): Yes, and I'm reader in Religious Studies at Leeds Trinity University. And I'll just say that the four of us are in four different locations. So that's possible because of media – digital media. And my research . . . I've not focussed on media *per se*, but it has come in different forms. So in my work with research in Newfoundland I've been looking at . . . not digital media, but I guess you might call it hard media? I'm not sure: art work, museum exhibitions and how representations of particular indigenous groups are portrayed, and the discourse in the text that surrounds it. And what they're emphasising or what they're hiding. But, I guess, more directly with digital media with the [project] that Teemu Tiara and I did with the druid network on the registration as a charity for the advancement of religion. There was quite a lot of media discourse that we included in our study, to show the different responses to that registration.

CC: *Excellent. And then, I guess, sort-of the driving force behind this podcast is Tim Hutchings*.

Tim Hutchings (**TH**): Hi. I am the Assistant Professor in Religious Ethics at the University of Nottingham. But I'm mostly a sociologist of digital religion. For ten or fifteen years I've been studying, you could say, the opposite of the kind of approach that Vivian takes. So my research began by looking at what particularly Christian institutions were trying to do with digital media. So very formalised, institutionalised, traditional versions of religion, trying to produce forms of online community or online ritual that they could recognise as proper Christian church. (**5:00**) And from there I've been fascinated by that ongoing struggle in some ways, maybe, of institutions that are quite slow and ponderous sometimes, to get to grips with a fast-moving medium, or a whole set of media. One of the things I particularly enjoyed studying around that field is seeing the number of projects that don't quite work out. And the study of religion and media is often the study of disasters and failures and things that are quietly forgotten as quickly as possible! But I've looked at projects like attempts to encourage people to read the Bible through digital media, attempts to create online communities, attempts to produce religious mobile apps, and some kind-of emerging conversations online around death and grief. And at the moment I'm looking at a video game. But it's a video game produced, again, by a Christian organisation to try and teach children about the Bible, more or less. So those are the kinds of things that I'm interested in.

CC: *Excellent. And Tim, you've also got a journal as well that we should probably mention?*

TH: Yes. Thank you. I'm the editor-in-chief of the journal, _Religion, Media and Digital Culture_, which is published by Brill in collaboration with the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture.

CC: _Excellent. And we'll try and link to that from the podcast page. And, as I said, I would let other people speak before trying to come up with something on this end. So my research . . . I work broadly looking at non-religion – so, basically anything that could be conceptualised as a relational "other" to religion. Primarily, my work has been interview-based and ethnographic. But an interesting way in which, I guess, using mediation comes in is: I've done a good bit of work looking at the built environment and how particularly – my field site for my PhD was Edinburgh's Southside – but how this Southside was felt. And how people's non-religious lives were sort-of impacted upon by the Christian hegemony of the spaces, and all the sort of conversions and things like that. So a little bit on how space can be seen as media in discourse. But then also, of course, especially when you're looking at atheism etc., there's so much stuff online you've got to pay attention to. So a bit of that. And then of course there's also the production of media which we'll probably be talking about as well. There's the Religious Studies Project, here, which you're listening to I suppose. And Vivian, you've also got a podcast?_

VA: I do. I have the Religion in Popular Culture podcast, where I interview different people in the field of the study of religion and popular culture. Unfortunately, Tim and I keep missing dates on being recorded for it! But I've gotten quite a few people that approach things from a variety of different perspectives. And I use popular culture quite broadly, I think, to encapsulate all sorts of different medias and media types and even just the things that we take for granted as being around us every day. So check it out, if you like podcasts and religion!

CC: _Well, presumably people who are listening have at least some sort of passing interest in podcasts and religion!_

VA: (Laughs.)

CC: _OK. I thought we could kick off a little bit. . . . Because, as I say, we meant to try and record at the BASR 2019 conference, which Suzanne organised. And one of the words in the title was media (Laughs). So maybe, Suzanne, you could just tell us a little bit about what the conference theme was and anything that came out of it for you. And then as we were all there we might have some stuff to offer._

Podcast Transcript

SO: Yes, when I was asked to organise the conference, I immediately thought of my colleagues in media, film and culture to help co-organise it. Because I'm the only person in Religious Studies at my institution. And that turned out to be really great collaboration, particularly with [Stefano Odorico](#) who is a documentary film maker. And he's really interested in developing new digital skills among students, and also in research with interactive documentary film making in particular. And one of the things, when we were discussing various titles, we didn't want to make religion too prominent because he thought that it would be off-putting to people from his side. And so we came up with "Visualising Cultures: media, technology and religion". In the end it really was a BASR conference, as most of the participants were BASR people (**10:00**). But I think it was also trying to emphasise that religion is not a rarefied thing, I suppose. Just part of a bundle, in this title. And also to try to emphasise the kind-of collaborative projects that might be happening, or interdisciplinary projects – which, I guess, Religious Studies is by nature, for the most part. But in the way that we might be using different disciplinary skills in the study of religion in order to do our research. And so visualising cultures seemed to capture everything that we wanted to bring to the conference, and to allow people to come that might not ordinarily come to a BASR. And we did get a few participants in that group; they came because of the theme. And most of them did do a study of religion of some kind, but not all of them. So that was really good to see.

CC: *Excellent. Yes I mean I saw papers to do with... well it [James Kapalo](#) talking about archival work, Vivian, and [Jonathan](#), and few others presenting about virtual worlds .And I remember* [Michael Dudeck](#) *– it was quite an innovative paper – was developing a sort-of virtual constructed religion. He called it the Temple of Artifice. And so his presentation was very interactive, and very on the nose. And I guess sort-of pushed us to think a little bit about what we're doing in the Study of Religion. Can we be constructing things in that sort of way? It was excellent.*

SO: Yes, it's interesting that Michael Dudeck's project – where he's deliberately creating a religion that's digitally available to participate in – in some ways we're doing the same thing. But we think we're doing it for real, I guess. And it's really good to see that actually, what we're doing is just as constructed and fictionalised.

VA: (Laughs). I mean, I would probably argue that what I'm doing isn't for real, and yet it is at the same time. (Laughs). So, yeah. Because what I tend to look at is constructed fictional narratives that people are engaging with. So these are ones that nobody is working at it from say the perspective of like "We're trying to form this into something." Very seldom does that happen. And yet it tends to take off in that direction. And so, very often, it's that sense of real-but-it's-not, simultaneously. And I think

Podcast Transcript

it kind-of reveals a lot about how we actually do see the world as not always being these strict dichotomies between fiction and reality, but that they can be blurred and they often are. And that the internet, and the way that the online story-telling really works, ends up actually revealing that to us.

SO: Yes. And what Dudeck produced was actually real as well. And that word reality and real was used quite a lot in the conference by participants, I noticed.

VA: Yes. It's a bit of a pet peeve of mine!

CC: *Do you want to say a bit more about that Vivian? You've got the air-time!*

VA: Yes, sure. You see it a lot even outside of the academic circle, of the "real world" versus the "online world", or the "virtual world", or the "digital world". And essentially what that's doing is painting this virtual world as being completely not real, and therefore all communities formed, all relationships had, all experiences are therefore painted as not real. Because it's being put up against the physical world, which is the real world. So I pick "physical world" rather than real, to distinguish. Because I don't want to take away from the experiences that are actually being had, that are very really felt by participants, by painting them as not real.

CC: *Exactly. I mean what is qualitatively different from the experience that someone is supposedly having, whether its mediated through sound,or in a particular building, or through radio waves, or though the telephone, or the television, or online, or in a field, or whatever? These are all just different media that are being utilised. There is definitely a current bias towards the online world as being, in some way, not as authentic. Yet, as I'm sure we would all agree, for many it can be more – quote –"authentic" than the physical world (**15:00**).*

SO: Yes. It's interesting, because this distinction in fantasy fiction is similar where they have primary and secondary world. And the primary world is meant to be the real world. But there is no real world in fiction, or any kind of representation. And also it's creating a false boundary, really.

TH: So I struggled with this a lot when I was doing my research about online churches. To try and work out what would be the "other" thing that I was distinguishing this from. And I started off thinking, "Well, it's online churches versus offline churches". But that doesn't make sense. Because lots of those offline churches have websites, or some sort of online presence that maybe you communicate with the pastor of the church by email, or something like this. They're not digital-free spaces. But they're mediated differently in some way. And "physical", to me, didn't quite work either.

Because we use physical technologies, of course, to connect with digital communications as well as anything else. So I ended up talking about "the online" and "the local": trying to catch that sense of a thing that is defined by the place when it happens, rather than the media through which we . . . or the digital media through which we communicate it. But it's still not quite right.

SO: Yes, kind-of acknowledging . . .

TH: The other point that I wanted to catch, there, is: one of the moves that is often made in the conversations I hear is to say, "Well, the online and the offline are no longer distinct at all. And we need to abandon this binary." Which also doesn't quite work for the groups I'm looking at. Because the value of the online space is partly that it is not the face-to-face. It is – so, as Vivian was saying – it's real, but it's sort-of not-quite-real at the same time. Which gives you the freedom to be more playful. So the Centre for Media, Religion and Culture in Colorado, at the University of Boulder, has been talking about digital as a third space – which is helpful, I think. They've been writing about this for years and years. Trying to focus on the as-if-ness of a place that is sometimes treated as if it is real, and sometimes treated as if it is just a game, and used as a space to reflect on what happens elsewhere. Because one of the things that I've found, in the very kind-of clearly bounded online spaces I was looking at, where people would say, "This website is my church" – or whatever it might be – they would use those to then reflect on everything that was happening elsewhere in the world. But that would include face-to0face, and Facebook, and the rest of internet culture, and the email conversations that participants had with their parents. So, everything that happened outside the boundary. So there was a really important distinction between what happens inside the boundary and outside the boundary, but it wasn't drawn in the same place as the online and offline distinction. And it wasn't quite in the same place as the real and virtual distinction. But it was important to people that this was different from a serious real place and a little playful.

CC: *I think actually, if I'm correct in remembering, Vivian, it came up in your paper at the BASR, how there's often this notion that, I guess, "We can't trust what people say online". Or, you know . . . Actually, what can happen is that people's online expressions can, in some ways, be maybe less filtered and more – quote – "real" than they might be in face-to-face social interactions. Am I remembering correctly?*

VA: Yes. And it obviously is going to depend on individuals. But what I found was that, at least when talking with academics who have a bit of a bias against virtual worlds – to kind-of paint something more broadly there – they tend to say that because things can be anonymised, therefore you can't trust

Podcast Transcript

anything. What I found during my fieldwork, as well as just from my own personal experience of living in various online spaces at various points in my life, is that there was still an identity that is tied to the username (**20:00**). And often users can feel more empowered to act in the way that they might not be able to. So, for example, if I'm on, say, even just an academic forum and I'm using a username, I might feel more compelled to be more strict in my opinions, because I'm not going to feel like I'm going to be questioned for being a woman. Like I might, if I'm in a physical space, where people can look at me and see that I'm a woman. So I might feel more willing to express myself when people can't tell how young I am, how female I am. And I see this play out even on line as well. And, interestingly, I had strange responses, when I was conducting fieldwork, where I had people reaching out to me to discuss their experience on these forums. But they would use throwaway accounts, which essentially means they would create a new account solely for the purpose of our communication and then immediately get rid of it. And this was because they didn't want what they said to be tied to their identities. So they were anonymising themselves, through what other people see as an anonymous username. Because it's not an anonymous username. It's tied to their identity there. It's tied to their experiences, and lingo, and neighbourhoods that they trawl. And experiences and relationships are all tied to that name in the same way that, you know, those same exact things are tied to my Vivian Asimos name.

CC: *Yes. Excellent. So it's interesting that, although we're trying to have this broad discussion around media and the state of religion, our focus is quite naturally being drawn to, I guess, online, digital, virtual and so on. And I guess that might be because it's the latest medium of our times. I guess if we were having this discussion around the time of the printing press or the telephone or the television and stuff, you know, our conversation might be differently inflected. So maybe . . . . Because, Suzanne, you mentioned working with sort-of more, we could call it, traditional forms of media. Do you have any thoughts on your work there?*

SO: Yes. And in some ways it is the same kind of research, because I'd interview artists about their artwork. And, of course, some artists portray their art in a kind-of non-conscious way, but I was still able to elicit some kind of discussion about the themes that they're interested in. Because they were all depicting an extinct indigenous group in their artwork. And I thought there was a way that they could show their relationship to that subject in a non-verbal way, which offered an interesting insight that was different from the way that written texts or museum exhibits represent that group. And I did, I got a really different kind of perspective. So I think different kinds of media can bring out different kinds of insights, for sure, in research. It also reminds me a little bit of when I used to do theatre: there was one time, just for ourselves among the group that were doing the play, we did an experiment with

masks where we were wearing different masks. It was just reminding me of what Vivian was saying with online identities, and how the mask then becomes the focus of your interaction. And they're no longer the person behind the mask, but the mask could be sort-of male, female, androgynous, animal, human, alien. And our relationship, then, just completely changed. And I think that's the beauty of different kinds of media, that you get really different kinds of responses and interactions.

CC: *Time is, bizarrely, moving on as it tends to do. And I do want to get to the idea of how media can be utilised in the teaching of the study of religion. But I couldn't resist getting a compliment in here about how . . . . I'd be interested in your thoughts. Much of the work that I encounter that seems to be taking a media approach – or looking at media in relation to religion – a lot of it tends to trip up on that sort of critical problem of, "there is something there, that is being mediated" (25:00). I guess, in a lot of this work, there is the assumption that there is religion, or there is, I guess, a deity that is being mediated through things. Rather than, perhaps, talking about a social constructivist approach. I wonder if anyone has any thoughts on that?*

SO: Yes. As we were saying before we started recording: sometimes researchers think there is religion out there, and that is being mediated throughout various things like news or digital spaces, whereas we should really look at stuff that's out there that gets mediated as something. Maybe as religion and discourse –a discourse analysis kind-of approach. Where the contesting . . . that there is something that exists prior to the discourse about it. You know, that religion is not *a priori* in that sense.

CC: *Yes. And I guess you know, Tim, you've been talking about working with churches and churches in online space. How did you . . . ? Did you wrestle with that? I'm just allowing the group to define what it is, and then I'm looking for that being mediated online. How did you go about setting your boundaries?*

TH: Yes, so around this question of reality – thinking back to my early research in online churches – on the outside of those online communities, one of the big conversations about them was whether this was considered real church or not. Which, from a kind-of sociological perspective is not a very useful category for me! Because, of course, for me there are a lot of different Christian traditions. They all define what a real church is differently. People from those traditions mix up together in online communities. So if you actually push the question, you'll quite quickly find that people may agree or disagree about whether what they're doing is real within the same group – and just politely don't mention it very often. So I tried to allow groups to define themselves and just said, "If you're calling what you do church, then I'm interested in finding out what it is." But while keeping in mind that

Podcast Transcript

ambivalence, I guess, about who gets to decide whether this group calls itself church, or not? In some cases, the person who set up the thing decided, "Let's call this the church of such and such". But actually, if you had conversations with people who had been participating here for ten years every day, multiple hours a day, they'd say "Oh, of course it's not really church." So it was an inherently undefined word. And when people did want to claim that word, they often didn't want to do it in ways that traditional Christian authorities would respect, shall we say? So they might want to say, "OK. So traditionally, my group has said that church has got to do these particular rituals, and you've got to have this particular authority structure. I don't really care about that. What I care about is that I've made really important friendships here. It means a lot to me that this is a space where I have very important relationships and real emotional commitment. And so I call it church. And how dare you question whether this is church for me? Are you saying my friendships aren't real?" Which is fascinating. Because that is not . . . that is . . . I don't know if it's a new way of thinking about church. But it's a way of thinking about what is real that is different from the institutional tradition, perhaps. So – in line with this question about "Is there a previous, pre-mediated thing?" – there are conversations in the study of religion, media and culture for many years now that I've found really helpful, trying to reconceive religion itself as a kind of mediation. So people like [Jeremy Stolow](#), and [Birgit Meyer](#), and others, have argued that any study of religion and media that frames it as religion and media, as though there are two separate things, is not catching the really interesting part of the study of the . . . not the really interesting part of the field. Which is that religion itself is always mediated: religion itself can be understood as a kind of media, or a set of practices of mediation. Certain things that are permissible or forbidden, or expected within a certain group, that make connections between the human and the non-human (**30:00**). And I found that really helpful as a way of positioning what I'm interested in, in this very current study of digital religion, as part of the same kind of thing that all of my colleagues do in their studies of religion across centuries.

CC: *I considered trying to get mediating or mediatising into the title of the podcast. I might make it "Mediation and the study of religion" or something, just to emphasise that. Vivian, I know that you sometimes use the lens of myth in what you're studying, as well. So, again, how do you decide when it's religion that's being mediated and things like that?*

VA: (Laughs) I tend to not be too bothered about the word religion. Which might be a bit strange to say, as somebody who is a religion scholar, and in a religion department. But that's how I see myself, because I don't think anyone really knows precisely what religion is. And, therefore, how do you try to go about finding it, if you don't know precisely what it is? So myth, to me, is a much more useful word than religion – although it probably has just as many problematic definitions throughout its history as

religion does! But I see myth as being essentially defined by the individual or the community, which means that it's not up to me – like what Tim was saying about leaving the community to kind-of define for themselves what matters and what doesn't matter, and what words matter, and what words don't matter. And seeing how they connect to a narrative in a very meaningful way. So I tend to focus more on myth than on religion, because of that. So I'm a mythographer as well as a religion scholar. And it has gotten me into trouble in the past. And that's interesting in itself to think about how we, as scholars, are mediating our own understanding of religion onto our own discipline. So, my first year review board, I was asked why I was in a religion department, if I'm not looking at religion? Which I felt like I both was, and wasn't. So it's interesting to be told, time and time again, that you're not studying religion when you feel like you are, but in a slightly different way. Because, essentially, we're ascribing our own understandings onto our own disciplines, and mediating that through our own podcasts, as well as in books.

SO: I think the problem is everyone *does* know what religion is, or says that, or thinks that they do. And that's why there's so many ideas about religion, because everybody is so sure that they know what it is. Whereas, I think that there isn't something there anyway. Like with any kind of thing, any kind of abstract subject, it is obviously mediated and created; born out of relationship and dialogue and discussion; and what people portray, or what they define as . . . . So comparing definitions is one of the first things I do with students in first year. It's to show that there are many definitions of religion, and there are some essential differences between these definitions, and what does that say about it? What are they emphasising, and what they selecting and excluding, to create this thing called religion that they've defined? It's an ongoing sort of disagreement I had with my own supervisor about whether or not you should define what you're researching. And of course I'm seeing it more as: those that I'm researching are defining terms.

TH: Yes. So, in response to what Suzanne was saying a moment ago about the discourse approach, or discourse analysis approach to religion: an advantage, or disadvantage – depending on how you look at it – of that kind-of approach, I think, is that actually the word religion is very rarely used by the people I'm interested in. Unless they're trying to step back from their engaged experience and be more analytical about it, and say "Well, maybe this is the kind of religion. . . ." In Christian contexts it's quite common for people to say, "Well, this is not religion. Religion is that bad thing . . . . We are better than religion, because we are spiritual", or something like that. Religion, as a term, is mostly imposed by academics onto the field in things like department meetings! (**35:00**)

SO: Yes.

VA: (Laughs).

TH: "Religion is a real thing because we study this". But then, reflecting on what Vivian was saying, I had similar experiences myself. And that's maybe a useful pointer for people listening to this podcast, particularly if you're just starting out in an academic career. If you're studying something unusual and exciting to do with pop culture, at some point somebody will say, "Yes – but is it religion?"

CC: *Exactly.*

TH: And even if that is a made-up word that doesn't really exist, religion departments *do* exist. Those are definitely real. And it's a question that it's worth, you know . . . It will come up at some point. It's worth having an answer to it. When people asked me that question, I was left slightly taken aback. So it's worth anticipating it, before it arrives.

CC: *Absolutely. So that brings us quite nicely, I suppose, to our final question. And we're a little over time, but we're going to run with it. Because we've been talking, there, about students, and about supervisors, and how the subject of the study of religion – whether that's religious studies, or sociology of religion, or anthropology, etc. – how we mediate the very topic. But I wonder . . . Tim was mentioning, before we started, how institutions are now increasingly wanting us to incorporate media in various forms. And I wonder if anyone's got any thought about that, or any useful stories or useful failures, and things like that? (Laughs).*

VA: This is actually something that more recently I've been engaging with, but not using things like the internet or podcasts so much as using the kind-of more traditional media, primarily with pictures, with my students. Normally, as a teaching assistant you tend to not get quite as much creativity allowed to you when it comes to teaching. But I've been able to play with it a bit this year, because there's a new first year module where we've kind-of shifted study of religion to being a worldviews approach by [Douglas Davies](). And the whole conversation on how he's structured this, and whether or not it's successful, could probably be an entire podcast episode in and of itself. So I'll kind-of skip over that. But because it's a bit more experimental it allows us, as teaching assistants, to be more experimental in our seminars. And one of the things that myself and Danny Riley – who's a PhD student at Durham University, as well – have decided to do, was to do [photo-elicitation]() – but as a teaching useful tool, rather than as an anthropological interviewing tool. So one of the ideal types that

Douglas has set out was a natural worldview. So I asked students to take a picture of what they think embodies a natural worldview. And then we sat around and we chatted about all of the pictures that we had in a variety of formats, asking them very solid questions like, "Which picture makes you feel uncomfortable?" And then we'd sit around, and talk about why we had picked the picture that they had, and ended up revealing a lot more about how people see the world differently from one another – which was always difficult to get to, especially at Durham where most of our undergraduates are all from very similar socio economic, racial and geographical background. So, to be able to pull out their inner thoughts through the images, actually was incredibly useful.

CC: *Excellent.*

SO: I had a really good experiment with our first year students in Intro Week. They're just coming in and being inducted. I had them take a photograph of what they think is the heart of the university – to represent it with taking a photo on their mobile phones – and then to send me the photo, and then we can look at the different images. And I got a really nice spread, from obvious choices like the chapel or the bar, or the coffee place. But also some more creative ones, like there was an image they took of themselves to show that the students were the heart of the university. And those were the ones that came to mind. So I'm interested in getting students to produce media and hopefully, in the future, to actually make more sort-of media. We've already had them doing little documentaries, or podcasts, or digital things. But maybe to even make something more . . . interactive documentary film making in the future – which is what our university specialises in (**40:00**).

CC: *I think there's a lot of scope now that everyone's got a sort of portable – most people, I should say – at a typical UK university will have sort of portable media studio in their pocket, producing video content and audio content. And just one thing to throw in there . . . I always have these great intentions of doing a lot of innovative things that I never quite have time . . . . But what I've started to try and do . . . I was getting a bit fed up constantly typing up comments in the student's essays – and I noticed that in our sort of marking suite it would give you the option to record audio. And I thought that this might . . . because you can get a lot more over in the tone of your voice. The nuance might not come through in text. So I've started to try, where I can, to offer audio comments on essays. And I've also offered audio feedback on my dissertation submissions, and things like that. I think it's a way to . . . . You can really emphasise what's actually important. And they can also tell from the tone of your voice if you actually do like something. And you can be a lot more reassuring. Things can come across maybe quite harsh in text forms. So that's a way, I guess, of trying to incorporate more innovative*

things in the teaching on the assessment side. How about you two?

TH: Well, from my point of view, having been in this field of research now for ten or fifteen years, I've gone through quite a journey of trying to persuade universities that what I do is a really significant thing that is worth having in their department. Because, to start with, people would say, "Well digital seems a bit niche." So I'd try and present media as a lens onto studying "what really matters" – whatever that might be. Or perhaps considering media, as we've been discussing before, as a way of thinking about religion itself, and how religions, worldviews, experiences and practices really work. What's actually taken me a bit by surprise, over the last year or so, is to realise that actually the research I've been doing – as I slightly pejoratively introduced it, way back at the beginning of this podcast – is basically about big clumsy traditional institutions, struggling to adapt and catch up to a media world that they don't quite understand, but they're pretty sure that the young people are really into nowadays. That's basically the story of what I've been doing for my whole career. And suddenly I've discovered that, joining a university department, that *that's* the institution I've joined. That's exactly what they're doing! The same conversations that I used to study from the Pope writing in 2002, I've now got the Vice-Chancellor of my university saying in 2018 – almost word for word, repeating the same arguments. And the digital has gone from being a niche topic that a few people study, to an imposed agenda for our teaching programmes. It is necessary to ensure that students are learning digital skills for the workplace as well as traditional Humanities essay-writing and examination skills. And so, very suddenly, I've found that I'm required to attend a hundred and five different committees, and think-tanks, and organisations, all of which will plaintively say, "Well, we feel like we should be doing something digital." And that's going to be a rapidly changing environment, which is very interesting to watch. But we're starting to have university-wide conversations, which are ongoing, about how we ensure that every lecture is recorded, and how we then ensure that everybody watched the videos. And do we then have any data to suggest that watching videos of lectures actually helps students learn? And how do we replace essays with new forms of assessment that might teach some digital skills? And, in that case, is there any way that we could actually teach some digital skills to the teachers? Which is a bit of a problem that is emerging, I think. It's very easy to say, "All students need to do a video assignment". But, apart from Suzanne who has a huge advantage from her colleagues at Leeds Trinity, those of us in traditional Theology and Religious Studies departments probably don't have a colleague who does a lot of video (**45:00**). So there's a hope that sometimes comes up in some of those meetings, that "Of course, our students nowadays will have all of these digital skills. So maybe the students could teach some of those digital skills to the lecturers, in order to have them

14

Podcast Transcript   Version 1.1, 18 January 2020

taught back again for assessment?" So there's not exactly a solution to that at the moment. It's also a programme that, by its nature, seems to be essentially evolving. Once you've decided that your institution will invest heavily in technology, you then need to upgrade all the technology next year – forever. And once you have taught everybody how to use one system, you need to then give them a refresher course on the next system. So in my own teaching, I'm introducing a new assignment that will require students to produce videos or podcasts and reflect on that experience. But there are a lot of technical challenges to doing that. It turns out when everybody in your class has their own video-making device but none of those devices are compatible with the other devices, you can actually spend weeks trying to work out how you actually upload all of those things into the university systems so that they can be stored properly, and assessed through an online marking system, that was not set up to do any of this! There are probably not enough technical support people in the university for every class to have somebody who is full time just reminding the students which cables they need to use to plug their phones into things. So it's interesting to see . . . It's nice to study disasters sometimes, as I said at the start. It's very important.

CC: *Yes. You often find that by the time academics are paying attention to something it's already out of fashion*. (Laughs). *Right. We've talked a lot longer than I intended, but it's been an excellent discussion. But we're going to have to wrap it up, for that sake of our poor Listeners and poor transcriber! Thank you all so much for joining me on the Religious Studies Project.*

TH: Thank you very much for inviting us.

VA: Thank you.

SO: Thanks for listening!

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcription, or know of any sources of funding for the broader transcription project, please get in touch. Thanks for reading.