

Religion & Future Humans Show Notes & Audience Questions

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On this episode of Religion &, we have invited three scholars to engage in a wide-ranging conversation with Prof. Sylvester A. Johnson, a leading thinker and theorist in the field of American religion. Dr. Johnson is not only known for his contributions as a historian and theorist, but he is highly regarded as an innovator and boundary breaker who disrupts disciplines and creates spaces for emerging themes and questions amongst scholars of religion. As the director of the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities and the Luce-funded “Future Humans, Human Futures” project, Dr. Johnson explores the intersection of religion, technology, and ethics to tackle what it means to be human in this current moment. We have invited Phillip Goff, Andrea Jain, and Leonard McKinnis to interrogate and theorize alongside Dr. Johnson the futures of the humanities, surveillance, and AI and how they are all deeply impacted by religion. Join us for a conversation with Dr. Sylvester A. Johnson that promises to push boundaries, imagine new possibilities, and unpack emerging theories as we think about the future of religion and the humans that are shaped by them.

Featured Panelist: Sylvester A. Johnson

Panelists: Phillip Goff, Andrea Jain, Leonard C. McKinnis, II

1. Phillip: The arch of your career. You keep blazing new paths, from the myth of Ham to surveillance and empire and now to technology and humanity. What ties your studies together, what is the throughline that brings them together?

Sylvester: At the highest level for me it is trying to understand this interest at stake in asymmetries of power and influence that shape our world. I wanted to understand how these systems of power and culture operate in our society, that is a common thread in my research. Technology as a system of power, the people and institutions that get to create, shape, program and commercialize and regulate this technology have a lot of power and influence over society.

2. Leonard: Think through how you see the future of this field, specifically religion and black studies. As you talk about the powers and structures, I wonder if our political climate renders the field different or where you would like to see it go in our given context.

Sylvester: If we look at the history of how these fields of study have emerged religion has been particularly important. But when we look at these Africana study programs, we see religion is sometimes missing. I think that is partially due to the time period when these departments emerged which was starting in the 1960s and 1970s when there was some skepticism towards

religion. I hope there will be more cross conversation between the study of religion and the Africana studies fields. I also hope these disciplines create more transdisciplinary; I realize there are many constraints to how that can happen.

“Problems do not come in a disciplinary box, they come organically. The more we can prepare students for solving problems organically, the better outcome we can have for our society.”

3. Andrea: Talk a little about your work on technology and humanity, what kind of questions that has created around our relationship to the environment.

Sylvester: There are some contemporary and classic questions that have gotten a lot of attention, and one is the category of the human as an analytic and how someone views the world versus being human. When we are thinking about what is at stake with technology, and that is everything from renewable resources to create technology, to how we think, program and design. I think we need to be more cautious and understand that everything influences the environment.

“Do natural resources have rights? Do only humans have rights, and what does that mean for how we manage our technology and identity?”

Andrea: We need to consider how our technology impacts us but also the environment, then how those environmental changes impact other things living besides us humans or other human groups.

4. Andrea: I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about how technology gets tied into that, what do you see as some of the most critical questions surrounding tech and environmental justice?

Sylvester: given the rise generative AI and the gargantuan level of investing going into AI. There are a lot of things happening that are a culmination of something with many benefits to things like medicine and there are also a lot of things at risk. I have a very nuanced approach when trying to understand these things. One of the most crucial investments is energy, creating and maintaining enough energy to operate these data centers. That has a significant impact on the environment, from water resources to people who need electricity. This also impacts how we deal with agriculture. We already have a lot of food insecurity, and it is set to become even more severe in just 25 years if we do not globally significantly increase the level of food we are providing for the world's population.

5. Leonard: might you see a relationship between colonial categorizations of the human and who constitutes as such. The relationship between those things and then between religion and surveillance. Who is under surveillance, and because of the who, think about the communities.

Sylvester: the surveillance of certain populations who have been seen as a threat to national security has been continually targeted. Muslims become a large part of these groups. The FBI has continually engaged with Muslim populations as they are a threat in the eye of the FBI and subjected them to surveillance for such a long time and it continues today.

6. Phillip: I wanted to ask you about a lot of angst in the academy, a lot of attention is going to stem. Your recent shift shows the importance that humanities can play. In your experience thus far, how has your formal training (in the humanities) helped you? Also, what are the joys, challenges, and pitfalls that you think are there for those trained in the humanities that want to have more of a voice in the world and where we are going?

Sylvester: I was trained in theological seminary school, which did not have a particular language, or nation, I was not trained in a specific time period or anything, so it included a lot of readings. It helped me to easily extend my curiosity about the world into lots of spaces. I focused on the humanities and technology intersection, so there needs to be both sides, we cannot understand the impacts on humans if we do not understand humans.

7. From Audience: How do you see AI and the concept of race interacting in the future? Do you see AI as further intrenching those kinds of racialization?

Sylvester: It is possible (for AI to further racialization). AI has been recently talked about as an “everything” technology, like electricity, does not matter where you are or who you are, most people are using some form of electricity. AI is data input and then an outcome, if we are always using it and do not take extraordinary measures the outputs will reflect the culture. Will we create technology that answers those questions and solves those problems, or will we create AI that keeps perpetuating those problems? We as a society have the opportunity to make that decision and answer those questions.

8. Andrea: I wonder about the extent to which you have thought about the regulation of AI for the sake of democracy. We see there is a lot of resistance to regulation within American culture. Can you speak on the importance or dangers of regulating?

Sylvester: The trend line right now is moving towards less regulations so that they can keep it moving and get ahead of places like China. I think it will be hard to regulate at a federal level. On the state level, it is already happening in different states where they are regulating technology and AI. The EU and China are making great strides to regulations, and many companies will need to deal with that.

Questions from audience

1. Much has been made by scholars on the use of government surveillance and technological innovation in the aftermath of 9/11, as well as more recently in the United

States connection to Israel and its colonization of Palestine. How do we think about these intersections between technology, surveillance, and the racialization of religion in the current moment of genocide in Gaza?

2. On this theme of STEM and humanities - In my institutional context (a STEM-heavy school with dwindling humanities enrollments) I would like to build these interdisciplinary bridges without a) doing it on STEM terms or b) merely being critical of STEM. You have started to answer this already, but how have you done this programmatically?
3. Can Dr. Johnson offer thoughts on how humanities scholars can think about the level of extraction that comes from AI technology and how we think about teaching and writing about other events that occurred in the past? I'm thinking about the scale of devastation that happens at several levels (environmental, material, human life) during something like the Gold Rush. Is there a way for us to think about the future of humans and AI in how we discuss and write about historical events?