

Theme Song ([00:16](#)):

[inaudible].

Ilyse ([00:17](#)):

This is Keeping it 1-0-1, a Killjoy's Introduction to Religion podcast. Get ready to get schooled.

Ilyse ([00:23](#)):

What's up, nerds?

Ilyse ([00:24](#)):

Hi. Hello. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, one half of the Killjoys on this here podcast. I'm recording from the traditional and ancestral lands of the Abenaki people where I'm grateful to live as well as teach and research about Islam, imperialism, racialization of Muslims, and the history of religion.

Megan ([00:41](#)):

Hi. Hello. I'm Megan Goodwin, the other half of the Killjoys in your ears. I'm the one who focuses on gender or sexuality, white supremacy, minority religions, politics and America. Today I am coming at you from the land of the Wabanaki Confederacy, Abenaki, and the Aucocisco Peoples. Knowing this is part of why we do this podcast, why we teach about native religions, and why we vote.

Ilyse ([01:02](#)):

Will this be on the exam? It's time for the lesson plan.

Megan ([01:08](#)):

In the last two episodes we talked about the problems of defining religion, its imperialist history, the racist ways it's been deployed in the real world. And in episode four we talked through Native (capital-N) religions in the U S and the ways religion as a category, shapes, law, practice, and modes of agency. But today we're shifting a little bit. What does it mean to be religious? To get at this question, we'll talk about ritual--specifically in Islamic pilgrimage--as a way people both do religion as individuals and as communities and also have proper religious practices defined for them.

Ilyse ([01:42](#)):

keeping it 1-0-1 on today, the segment where we do some professor work. So if we don't really have a clear definition of what religion is, beyond that "religion is what people do," how do we know who's religious?

Megan ([01:56](#)):

So this is an answer that makes people nuts, but I always start with who says they're religious, who says religion matters to them, and how do those commitments shape their lives? I am also really interested in people who say they're not religious, not because I think they're lying or because I think they're dumb. But because a lot of times people don't realize how religion shapes the world around them. Even if practicing a specific religion isn't important to those folks. We've already talked to you about the way religion, most of Christianity shapes or calendars, our healthcare system and our bookstores. Spoilers. We're going to keep talking about this and especially on the next episode. Finally, I'm really curious about how folks identify a practice or a group of people or a place as religious. There's a ton of legal

history in the U S about negotiating sacred space about where you can do religion (and a shout out here to the Jehovah's Witnesses for their unflagging commitment to free exercise in the public square. They have done so much work in front of the U S Supreme court!). I want to think about what symbols count as religious or as not religious. These kinds of negotiations are public. They're often fraught. They negotiate what religion is, who should do it and where and which kinds of religious practice are important enough to be allowed to happen in public.

Ilyse ([03:02](#)):

Yeah, so I'm thinking about one of the most public performances of religion, which I think most people would associate with the word religious, and that is Hajj. That's a keyword alert. Hajj is one of the quote unquote mandatory religious duties for Muslims. And I say quote unquote not because it is not mandatory, but because the way mandatory sounds when you say it next to the word Islam is in every stereotypical way, right? Like it's do or die. It's met with grotesque punishment if you don't do it and obscene reward if you do, but really mandatory means if you can, and Islam has all sorts of ways of negotiating--Muslims have all sorts of ways of negotiating what can means. But anyway, Hajj is a mandatory religious duty for Muslims and it entails visiting a number of Holy sites in and around Mecca, which is a city in Saudi Arabia that takes place over about five to six days in the last month of the Islamic calendar. This year, that corresponds with roughly July 28th through August 2nd of the Gregorian calendar. Hajj takes a number of steps. It's not like you just get off the plane in Mecca, do a little selfie outside the airport and then by the Kaaba which is that black box, which is a familiar image to many Americans and call it a day. That's your Hajj. Go buy some jareesh or some harissa and say, peace out. I did my Hajj. I'm a good Muslim.

Ilyse ([04:35](#)):

Shocking to you Megan. I know, but there are rules and processes that Muslims have to follow!

Megan ([04:40](#)):

Wait, so--timeout. It sounds like Islam is a big system that understands that people have a bunch of different stuff that is going on in their life, so mandatory is less, "I will destroy you if you don't do this," and more "You're a human. Can you figure out a way to do this important thing and there might be right ways to do this important religious duty?"

Ilyse ([05:05](#)):

Yes.

Megan ([05:06](#)):

Wow.

Ilyse ([05:07](#)):

Would it shock you to know that the right ways to do this important duty are are numerous?

Megan ([05:13](#)):

It would not shock me. I grew up Catholic. We love a spectacle.

Ilyse ([05:18](#)):

So, one of the things I like talking about when I talk about Hajj is just how many specific rituals there are within this big ritual or this big pilgrimage known as Hajj. So I am going to do this thing that I call in my classes, which is a big joke and I'm trying to play on terrorism, but y'all don't know me very well yet, so that's probably not going to read it as great as it does in my class, but I can call it the "shock and awe." So you wish you were in my classes?

Megan ([05:46](#)):

I do. I do. Let's definitely start with terrorism jokes. Let's start there and work backwards.

Ilyse ([05:51](#)):

Sure. Well, I like to do the "shock and awe" in class because I think that a lot of times all of us who don't know something, and I assume that my students are hardworking people who want to know something about a thing that they don't know about, which is frankly how I imagine this audience.

Ilyse ([06:04](#)):

So if you're someone who doesn't know something about something and you're coming to find out about it, it's really easy to be like, I know what Hajj, it's a pilgrimage to Mecca and my entire pedagogy here folks is to say, Nope. Shock and awe! There's quite a lot going on. It's far more complex than, like I said, getting off the plane, being like, "yup, I'm in Mecca. Did it! Check the box! Next." So here's to be really brief and utterly incomplete about it. There are roughly seven stages of hedge and before you even get to those seven stages of hedge, you need to be in a state of essentially what's ritual purity or ritual readiness. A state of like to put it in maybe Americanized terms, I'm mindful intentionality and that's called ihram. That is also the name of the garment that men in particular were on Hajj.

Ilyse ([06:50](#)):

So you have to be in this state of ritual readiness and then there are seven stages to the Hajj itself. So here's my shock and awe. You have to circumambulate the Kaaba. That's that black box seven times. Then you go to all day prayer at Mount Arafat. Then you spend a night in a small little pilgrimage village called Muzdalifah where pilgrims then collect all these pebbles. Then the next thing you do is you throw pebbles at pillars that are meant to represent the devil and symbolize Abraham fighting off the devil. Then you have to run between the Hills, Safa and Marwah, which is my favorite piece of this as a total outsider who will never complete Hajj, I love this part because pilgrims are assuming the role of Hagar. Then you stone the devil again, cause fuck that guy. Oh no, I cursed on podcast again. Okay.

Megan ([07:31](#)):

Yeah, it's okay.

Ilyse ([07:33](#)):

It's okay. Okay. Then you go on your final circumambulation, which is called taawaf of the Kaaba, so you will hear friends, nerds, using for the first time in this podcast, quite a lot of specific place names, quite a lot of specific terminology, because that is part of the "shock and awe." Each one of these stages has rules and goals and most of these stages re-enact a sacred journey. Whether that's the prayers of Muhammed at the Mount Arafat part, the stoning of the devil by Abraham or Ibrahim or reenacting Hagar's fear and hope and faith as she scuttles between the amounts of sofa and Marwan searching for water for her and her baby.

Megan ([08:09](#)):

Who's her baby, Ilyse?

Ilyse ([08:10](#)):

Her baby is Ismail or Ishmael in the Anglophone tradition.

Mr Roger's Trains ([08:22](#)):

[inaudible]

Megan ([08:22](#)):

how come there's a lady in this pilgrimage? I thought Muslims hated women. Oh, I didn't actually think that. I promise.

Ilyse ([08:29](#)):

I know you didn't think that I wasn't prepared for such roleplay!

Megan ([08:34](#)):

Sorry. Sorry. That's not good. Consent practices. All right. I'm putting on my, I don't know anything about Islam hat, but the Muzlims, Ilyse, they oppress women! Why would there be a woman in this incredibly important sacred rite?

Ilyse ([08:49](#)):

Well, funny, funny you should say that Megan! Muslims don't oppress women. The patriarchy oppresses women, and as many folks have pointed out, patriarchal systems exist across cultures, communities, religions, and races. But Hagar is a really important part of the Hajj journey because the hagiography of Hagar, so hagiography, is sort of like a saint's biography or a history of a saint or a prophet, her hagiography is the thing that connects most Muslims to having a rootedness in Mecca and its surrounding area. So a lot of the Hajj is about rooting Islamic practices and Islamic traditions in this very particular geography. And one of the ways we get at that is with Hagar and Hagar's story here is heroic. And many Muslims hold this up as a story of women having real faith. Whereas men--maybe Abraham--have blind faith because here Hagar, so she's the concubine, which is a fancy euphemism for enslaved sexual servant of Abraham.

Ilyse ([09:51](#)):

In some stories, Sarah gets pregnant, so she encourages Abraham to banish Hagar and Abe, having communion with God, is like, "yeah, she'll be fine." In other stories, God comes to Abraham in a dream and is like, "you should, you should get this lady out of here with her baby, your baby and go send her to the desert with only enough food and water for two days." And Hagar in some stories is irate and angry and it is only through the faith, not in Abraham, but in God that God would not abandon her. Abraham, yes, he's a dude and he did some wrong, but God would not. Other versions of this narrative say Hagar had faith that Abraham would only act this way if he was instructed to by God. And so her faith in both her, I want to say slaver but both her partner and God is unshaken.

Ilyse ([10:40](#)):

The important thing here is that Hagar is out of water, out of food. She runs between the Hills of Safa and Marwah and she's desperate, right? Like the desperation that I know my nursing mama friends in the audience can identify with. You have a screaming baby and you are the nursing mom and what do you do? And as she runs back and forth hoping and praying that God will not forsake her, doesn't the angel Gabriel or Jibreel show her where water is. And the water springs forth--this water, which in Muslim tradition is called Zamzam water, which literally means something like stop flowing because it comes out of the ground so fast that she can't quite get a basin or a well together fast enough and she does want to lose the water. This water and this not blind faith, but faith in the moment of peril is a central part of Hajj. And so pilgrims on Hajj re-enact her walking through the desert quickly in desperation through fear but also hope and resilience. Does that clarify the story?

Megan ([11:35](#)):

It does. And also I learned something today because again, I did not actually think that Muslim say women, I know a number of Muslims, some of them are themselves women, but I did not know that this was part of Hajj. Any it, it gives me a feeling in my women's studies master's degree holding soul to know that every Pilgrim who's making Hajj puts themselves in the role, in the place of this woman who has lost everything except her faith in God. That's wow, that's, that's a lot.

Ilyse ([12:07](#)):

It is a lot. The other thing I love about this and my students know because this is one of my favorite things to teach and actually shout out to our colleague from grad school, Zahra Ayubi, who helped me fix and edit this lesson plan a number of years ago when I had first started teaching. The best part about it is that Hajjar is not named or Hagar is not named in the Qur'an. So this is a text adjacent kind of story. So it is a story that is textually absent and yet ritually important, which is why I love it as both a teaching tool and as a way of imagining how religion functions.

Megan ([12:41](#)):

Oh wait. So pause. Are you saying that like ritual doesn't only pull on sacred texts and sometimes the stories that shape how we do religion aren't even in a central sacred text?

Ilyse ([12:52](#)):

Indeed. I am, Megan.

Megan ([12:54](#)):

I am learning so much today.

Mind Blown Noises ([12:58](#)):

Ooh. [inaudible] [inaudible]

Ilyse ([13:07](#)):

So the reason that I want to shock and awe with all of this data and I hope, nerds, that you've learned a thing, is because each stage of this pilgrimage is placing pilgrims in the feet of prophets, plural, not just men, but also women or a woman. And it's supposedly allowing you to bridge your normal everyday life with these miraculous events of multiple holy narratives. But I'm also obsessed with Hajj as a good example of how you show you're religious because, uh, showing up and doing pilgrimage and feeling

religious and feeling in commune with God and profits and ancestors and kin, that's not all that Hajj is. And as folks who know me know, I'm obsessed with logistics, I think they're fascinating. And also they're like the seedy underbelly that no one ever wants to think about until it's your job to think about it.

Ilyse ([13:55](#)):

So on Hajj, something like 2 to 3 million people show up. Okay? So for five to six days, 2 to 3 million people show up in one place and they all need to do the same activities in multiple sites at virtually the same time. They speak different languages. There are different levels of ability and disability. There are radically differing financial means. There are different accesses to medical care, food, you name it. But all these people have to do the same thing at the same time. And how do you get this done in an orderly, safe, procedural way with no children left behind?

Megan ([14:33](#)):

Hi. Hi. Oh, it's so much. It's so much.

Ilyse ([14:37](#)):

So how does that, dear Megan, my cost playing student for the moment. How does all of that logistical stuff--like 2 million people who need to use the potty--how does that complicate what we think of as a religious ritual, where religion and sacred and religious all are sort of--I think in a popular imagination--apart from things like mess halls and tents and buses and bandaid stations and potties?

Megan ([15:10](#)):

I don't even begin to know how this is possible. And yet I hear you saying that two to 3 million people do this in the same place every year. How? Why, how, why? How? Help me think about this. I am so, okay. I live in Maine, which has half the national population density of the United States. I do not do crowds well. And I am just trying to think of how much organization and planning and thought and like truly public toilets--because I have a very small bladder and that is, that is a real thing--must go into making this possible. So like help me understand why--I get religious obligation, right? Like God tells you to do a lot of things. So I get that this is important, but like why would people Hajj now, how does this help us think about how people are religious? Why would they want to do this if, why would they want to do this? Help me, help me think about this.

Ilyse ([16:11](#)):

Obviously I'm not speaking in the first person and as we'll talk about in both the homework assignments and in the show notes, I'm citing a lot of sources and I'm abbreviating here, but I think people want to do this, not just because like God said, it's a good thing, but, but Hajj for many Muslims across centuries has been a real rite of passage. And I mean, rite in the way that we talk about ritual, this is a space where when you're finished with Hajj you get a special title. So for men it's Hajji and for women it's Hajja and you are marked literally in your name, marked or in your honorific marked as having done this thing that is physically grueling and not comfortable, but you've done it to both be closer to your faith as a person of faith but also to be closer to your community.

Ilyse ([16:59](#)):

So I think there are loads of reasons that people do it. You see people talk about it as obligation. Like, my mom made me go." You see people talk about it as fear: "I approached the end of my life and was quite worried that had I not done this, God would be mad at me." You see people say, "I want to see

what all the fuss is about." So there's like quite a lot of range of expression. But I would say for the most part across time and space to generalize grotesquely, Muslims do this because it is a ritual of great import both locally, regionally, internationally and as an individual. There are rituals throughout the Hajj that are meant to focus your mind, body, soul, and experience around things that most Muslims hold very dear.

Megan ([17:44](#)):

This sounds amazing. I, okay. So I think I have a sense of why this is so important to folks and why you would risk for so many people international flights and uh, what are sure to be massive crushing crowds to do this thing that helps you come closer to your community, come closer to God, understands your place in the world. All of that is making sense to me. But like okay, once I've decided that Hajj is, well if I were Muslim, once I've decided that Hajj is a thing that I want to do or I need to do, how do I get to do that?

Ilyse ([18:16](#)):

Awesome. And I'm so glad Megan that you just said, "if I were Muslim," because what do you know about Hodge that our listeners might not,

Megan ([18:23](#)):

I can't go to it and neither can you because neither of us are Muslim.

Ilyse ([18:26](#)):

That's right. So before you go gettin' your panties in a twist, O, American listeners, and O, non-Muslim listeners, but especially all Americans because we as Americans have a general sense of like what? What do you mean I can't go stop limiting my freedoms?

Megan ([18:41](#)):

I mean bold of you to assume that I'm wearing panties. But yes they would be in a twist. How dare you limit my freedoms.

Ilyse ([18:44](#)):

The reality is is that non-Muslims are not allowed on Hajj and they're not allowed on hajj for a number of reasons, though that is a relatively recent phenomena. The short answer is imperialism and the long answer is stop trying to steal our Holy sites comma you colonizers.

Megan ([19:03](#)):

Yeah...

Ilyse ([19:03](#)):

So I've got sources on that if you're interested. But more to the point, the way Muslims get to go on Hajj is that you can't just roll up. This is not as simple as like buying a ticket to London and booking a hotel. There are modernity and nation-state issues here, right? So the Saudi government issues visas allowing for international travel and entry into their sovereign nation and they have to determine, first, who is Muslim. So you can't just say you're Muslim if you're from certain places--and this gets complicated really quickly because there are other kinds of diplomatic relationships at play here. But let's take for a

second our state because that makes sense for us. As Americans, you can't just say you're Muslim, you can't just be like, Hey Saudi government, I'd like a visa for travel. I'm a tourist. You get a special visa. It's a Hajj visa or a pilgrimage visa. And according to the, the Saudi embassy in the U S applicants for a Hajj visa need to be able to prove that they're Muslim, which typically means a declaration of Islam that's notarized--which means that our nation state and its processes of verifying things legally affects how you can then go prove to another nation state that you are a legitimate person.

Ilyse ([20:12](#)):

So let me just say this again. You as a Muslim in the U S have to go get a piece of paper notarized that says you are a Muslim. The way you do that is that there are Saudi delineated rules for that. Your imam can write that letter if you're a convert. The person under whom you took Shahada or the rites of conversion would verify that if you're part of a community et cetera, you need to provide your Muslim name, all sorts of things like that. Then you have to verify on this form that you would follow the Saudi delineated rules for proper Islamic practice, which means--I think upsetting many, many Americans in particular these rules bother people. For example, women under the age of 45 need to have a Microm or a guardian. Women over the age of 45 needs to be part of a travel group and then also produce a document that says her husband or son has no objections to her going.

Ilyse ([20:57](#)):

All of this requirement stuff is mediated here by a nation state's implementation of a very particular, very conservative, very sunny gloss on secret sources of Islam, which is then supported by other nation States, bureaucratic systems like embassies, notary publics, the post office. Does that all make sense?

Megan ([21:16](#)):

I just, I have questions first. Do you all Muslims in the world practice Islam like Saudi practices Islam?

Ilyse ([21:23](#)):

No, they do not. Excellent question. The short answer is no, they do not. The long answer is Saudi Arabia is known for a particularly conservative gloss on Sunni Islam, which is one denomination for lack of a better term within Islam. That accounts for roughly 80% of Muslims globally.

Megan ([21:41](#)):

But like even all Sunnis don't practice Islam the way that Saudi does.

Ilyse ([21:44](#)):

No, and also Sunnis, that's not a uniform term. That's like saying all Protestants. We know what Protestantism is, but we also know that Baptists, Methodists--keep going--like the UCC all of these folks, we could name them all as Protestants, but they all have their own individual glosses, reads, traditions, approaches, styles, Sunni Islam is the same way. And yeah.

Megan ([22:06](#)):

Okay, so let's, I'm going to put on my, my role playing hat again. I am a progressive Muslim woman who is in her mid forties and I'm living in the U S and let's say I'm attending weekly services in my women Muslim led masjid in California. Are you telling me that even though all of the Muslims that I practice

with think that I am an equal adult member of my religious community to make this important religious pilgrimage, I still have to follow the Saudi government's rules about how I need to do Islam.

Ilyse ([22:41](#)):

You got it.

Megan ([22:42](#)):

Bummer.

Ilyse ([22:43](#)):

And that's that place where nation state really impacts the rest of it. Because this is not like when you show up and a group of Muslims are then deciding whether or not you're religious enough in some like bizarre Monty Python and the Holy Grail like you have to answer these three questions, right? Like "what is your name?" Right? It's not that there's not some like imam on the other end of that asking like, "and what does the Qur'an"--right like there's no litmus test there for your Muslimness. But Saudi Arabia is a sovereign nation state that can admit whoever it wants to its nation in the way that it sees fit. Now, I don't know that I agree with that, but I also am a bit of an anarchist. That said if what they say you need to do for a Hajj visa is X, then you either have the choice of fulfilling X or not being issued a visa.

Megan ([23:30](#)):

Whoa, okay. So much to take in here. It sounds to me like being religious is blowing my little American mind. Being religious isn't just about like my personal choices or my personal commitments or like my beliefs or like even how I practice. Being religious is tangled up in like institutions and national and international politics. People you'll never meet that you'll never even see and who maybe don't even do your religion in the same way that you do get to decide if you're religious enough to do your religion in the way that you want or need to do it.

Ilyse ([24:02](#)):

You got it. A plus.

Megan ([24:03](#)):

Whoa. Religion is so many things man.

Mr Roger's Trains ([24:11](#)):

[inaudible]

Ilyse ([24:11](#)):

okay, I'm going to wrap it up because we've done a very big shock and awe here.

Megan ([24:15](#)):

I am both shocked and awed.

Ilyse ([24:18](#)):

I think what all of this has to do with being religious is exactly what you just said because it shows it being religious--so therefore like going on Hajj--isn't as simple as it seems. It's media data, power networks, which can include in this example things like States, religious authority, gender systems or the patriarchy. Those power networks aren't outside the experience of pilgrimage. It's not like pilgrimage is over here as some sacred, untouchable thing. Those power networks are integral parts of what Muslims have to navigate in order to figure out who counts, what is good practice, what isn't, and what's even possible. And then on top of that you've got this overlay of global politics with the Hajj in particular because it is not for most Muslims in the world, a local practice. Most Muslims in the world do not live in Saudi Arabia and therefore for most Muslims in the world you also--to fulfill this very real major requirement-,you have to navigate international diplomacy, public health policies and logistical stuff like passports, visas, immunization, money changing, following the laws of the country you're in, whether or not those laws reflect your own religious or cultural values.

Megan ([25:24](#)):

Whew, being religious is complicated.

Ilyse ([25:27](#)):

You've heard from us, now it's time to hear about us. It's primary sources!

Megan ([25:31](#)):

primary sources--never gets old. We're going to pivot a little bit because I, I don't have any primary sources about being Muslim because I am not Muslim and I have never been Muslim. I have been Catholic. I am no longer, but I was raised Catholic and I have already talked to y'all about how that has shaped me as a person in the world. My primary source for today needs a little bit of background. I just wrote a book and it's called Abusing Religion. It is out July 17th, 2020 and it's about sex abuse in American minority religious communities. I talked about my research on a panel last year with two of the guys who were on the Spotlight team. You might have seen them portrayed in an award and Academy award winning film. So we're on this panel about the crisis of sex abuse in the Catholic church.

Megan ([26:15](#)):

I was invited honestly last minute because, and I quote, "they needed a lady."

Ilyse ([26:20](#)):

I'm sorry. I know I'm supposed to be quiet, but, no, no, no, no, no,

Megan ([26:23](#)):

No, it's true. I was invited the day before the panel.

Ilyse ([26:26](#)):

Oh, I remember.

Megan ([26:27](#)):

I know, I know. I know. Uh, because they needed a lady. Anyway, so it just so happens that my five years of research on sex abuse and religion in the United States dovetailed with the topic of the panel. So I found myself as one does sitting on a panel with Walter Robinson and Matt Carroll from the spotlight

team and we are talking about sex abuse in the Catholic church and religious sex abuse more broadly. Matt and Robbie and I had a moment where we all said, yeah, we had been raised Catholic and we're talking about whether or not Catholic belonging has declined in the last 20 years since these scandals started braking.

Megan ([27:09](#)):

Robbie brought this up and Matt and I had similar moments where he said, you know, no, I am not Catholic. I haven't been Catholic in years, but I'm also pretty sure that the diocese that baptized me still has me on their rolls. Right? They're still counting me as Catholic and there's not really anything that we can do about that. All of us have left the church, but the church is still holding onto us which pool that that makes me feel a lot of things, but most importantly for the podcast, I think it reminds me that even though I'm not Catholic anymore, American Catholics are a part of my community of accountability. I feel I owe it to them to make sure my work represents them in their complexity and to keep calling the Church to account when it doesn't serve the people. Because ultimately the church is or is supposed to be the people, which is about as theological as I will ever get on the podcast. You are welcome, the end. Thanks. Drive by discussion of sex abuse. It's cool. This is my life.

Ilyse ([28:06](#)):

No, but everyone should go buy your book abusing religion available in July.

Megan ([28:10](#)):

July 17th, 2020. Check your local bookstores.

Ilyse ([28:14](#)):

I'm going to pivot to you also as a non Muslim who has never been Muslim and who has therefore never been on Hajj. But I think my story actually reflects--my primary source today is about obviously being Jewish. I've talked about it on every episode, which is as Jewish as I ever get is on this podcast.

Megan ([28:28](#)):

You're, you're Jewish?

Ilyse ([28:31](#)):

And uh, but I think it reflects the Hajj story a little bit in that being religious is often mediated through institutions and identities and the way you are read and papers. Okay. So it's a little weird and it's definitely very personal. So I am an adopted person and that means that I have like zero information about my bio parents. And as a kid I used to concoct all sorts of graspable identities so that I could be religious. Because Jews are, for lack of a better, they're matrilineal--you have to either be mikva'd in, you gotta be bathed in or you have to be born in. So I used to concoct all of these identities so that I would actually be legitimate. The short story of this is is that my bonkers New York state birth certificate, which if you've ever seen, looks fake. I've been accused in not one but three DMVs for having fake documents, which is not scary at all in Trump's America. And the very racist information on this bizarre birth certificate, the very racist information that my parents got in addition to this bonkers birth certificate are three sentences on legal letterhead. And I'm paraphrasing here that said she has short and dark parents. One document says Spanish, but not as in like from Spain as in like hello problematic ways we talked about Hispanic and Latinx people in the, in the early 80s. All this is important, right?

Ilyse ([29:50](#)):

Cause in like third grade we had all these Hebrew school crap about the ways quote unquote real Jews do pass over and everyone in class is like white, white Ashkenazi Jews and we have like the strictest rules around Passover apparently. And my memory of this Hebrew school class was that there was like this box in this textbook there was like, but what about, Sephardic Jews--Sephardic Jews roughly from the Mediterranean, often from Spain, this cliques, right? Cause Spanish and I decide there, then in there, in this class, Mrs. Beers, third grade Hebrew school class at temple Beth El that um, I was decidedly not Ashkenazi. That I was Sephardic. And I made this story up. I shit you not because it meant that I could eat rice during Passover because of religious law and, and I did. My parents, God bless them, they were on board with me expressing the ways in which I was adopted.

Ilyse ([30:38](#)):

So I have this memory of making like really crappy uncle Ben's microwave minute rice in like fifth grade during Passover because I could literally say stuff like "I'm religious but I'm not Ashkenazi." And I would like wave this around my siblings face and be like, LOL, I get to eat this, but you have to eat crappy matzah. And I did this really because I was following a set of rules as they applied to me. A self proclaimed Sephardim with literally zero understanding of kashrut, little daily investment of it or any proof at all that this was real cause. Let me reiterate, I made this up. But here's where I think that this relates to stuff: as a very small, very curly haired, Brown eyed kind of olive skin, Brown haired little girl with, I'm the only person in my family with Brown eyes. My dad is like six two and has blue eyes. I look different than my family. We could talk about my racialization as a child. All you want. It's creepy and upsetting, but I knew that I didn't fit into my family. Right? So I stuck out like a sore thumb and I stuck out like a sore thumb in my very white, very Ashkenazi synagogue. But I also wanted to claim part of this group identity while still marking myself as legitimate. So this claim of Sephardic, of like Sephardim background and the freedom that that gave me to be like, yeah, "I'm different but bite me. That means rice! Did all of this work."

Ilyse ([32:03](#)):

And so I guess my primary source to like reground us a little bit is, is that we conflate religious with following the rules and that those rules are made up by things that are about religions in the distinctive or diverse way you practice them even within religions, but they're also about these broader communities and issues like where you're from, how you're racialized, how your little institution locally deems who is real and who is not, and how then you prove that you're real to the communities around you that might treat you as they did me as a little bit suspect.

Megan ([32:35](#)):

I'm just having a moment about you waving like a bowl of shitty rice under Karly's Celiac nose during past.

Megan ([32:40](#)):

That's,

Ilyse ([32:41](#)):

yeah, that's not cute.

Megan ([32:42](#)):

Sounds delicious though.

Ilyse ([32:45](#)):

It's on brand, but it's not cute.

Megan ([32:47](#)):

Primary sources.

Megan ([32:52](#)):

All right. Settle in. Nerds. It's story to 'em.

Krusty the Clown ([32:54](#)):

Hey kids, it's story time.

Ilyse ([32:58](#)):

We have been talking about ritual specifically pilgrimage as a way to get at what doing religion or being religious might mean to people in groups or, as we just talked about in primary sources, as individuals. So my Storytime reading for the day is a simple short line from ritual studies heavyweight Catherine Bell, to oversimplify her indispensable book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell argues that ritual is rooted in social and cultural practice, that it ties the individual to the group and that it mediates power, the body, and in many cases, histories or traditions. Here's a little excerpt I think does some work for us. Quote "Ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting off some activities from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' and for ascribing to such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the power of human actors," end quote. All right, Megan, I know you like Catherine Bell, so talk to me about what this quote means to you.

Megan ([33:56](#)):

I love Catherine Bell. Rest in peace. For me, this quote and Catherine Bell's work more broadly always reminds me that ritual is more than what it might look like to an outside observer ritual mar's space it marks time and marks people as special as sacred ritual changes us. It makes change possible, and this is where I always come back to Catherine Bell, it shapes belief and ways of being in the world. A lot of times I think people assume that we do ritual because we believe certain things and what Catherine Bell helps us realize--what hajj helps us think about--is that doing things with your body shapes how you think about the world, your relationship with the divine. It shapes belief. So yeah, I'm just, I'm really grateful for her careful thinking about how what we do with our bodies can shape how we think and who we are in the world.

Ilyse ([34:52](#)):

Yeah, you said that beautifully. So if you don't mind, I think I'm going to jump right into the thesis.

Megan ([34:57](#)):

I love a thesis.

Ilyse ([35:03](#)):

Here's my attempt. You ready it? If religion is what people do, then being religious is how we see what people do. For many, this means practices of some kind, whether that's big picture rituals like Hajj, holidays, other kinds of observances, and the negotiations of those practices in their particular locations, whether that's geographic location or historical location. So for me, Hajj is just one example that shows us how one's individual religiousness has to be mediated through groups, institutions, nation States, and it's never just what one person does, it's what people do and what they do together.

Megan ([35:42](#)):

Right! Call back to episode one where we talked about why Sheila ism isn't religion because it's just what Sheila is doing. It matters that all of these practices and beliefs and commitments and ways of being in the world get mediated through larger institutions and communities.

Ilyse ([35:58](#)):

Spot on.

Megan ([35:59](#)):

Love it. Next, we'll talk about how all y'all are saying, "who cares about this? I'm not religious. I hate religion. This isn't about me religions, not important anymore." You are--we love you--but you're missing the boat because even if you think you're done with religion, religion is not done with you. But don't pack up your stuff yet. Nerds, you've got homework.

Megan ([36:22](#)):

Don't forget all of this and more will be in the show notes or find it on Twitter. We often put together threads so that you can link directly to some of these sources. For today's homework class, there's lots of great books. Thinking through how definitions of religions have material consequences on people and how doing religion, being religious gets filtered through shaped by changed by institutions, nations, political, global dynamics.

Ilyse ([36:47](#)):

Okay, so here's my homework assignments and there's quite a number of them because we did a lot of heavy Islamic studies lifting today, friends, so I cited Catherine Bell and we will link to that book. But again, I think some good Islamic studies options are in order. Sophia Rose Arjana has a really lovely book called *Pilgrimage in Islam* about Muslim pilgrimage that includes but is not limited to the most famous one, which is Hajj. Michael Wolfe's book *One Thousand Roads to Mecca* is a set of primary source accounts in translation of Hajj from about 1050 of the common era to 1990, so almost a thousand years of Hajj, all in translation in English for us to read. There are fewer accounts from women than I would like to see in this book, but it is comprehensive and comprehensible. And in that book there is an excerpt from Malcolm X's autobiography, specifically the chapter of his autobiography that deals with his pilgrimage, and when I teach Hajj, this is the chapter I teach. I think it's exquisite and interesting and both a part of Islamic histories and American histories. If books are not your thing, that's cool. PBS did a series on pilgrimage a few years ago with Bruce Feiler. Some episodes are better than others. It's called *Sacred Journeys*, but the hajj episode is pretty solid. Even though I need you to hear me say that, I have thoughts about the ways in which he is alone in a sandy craggy desert with an oud or a flute playing because he can't get into Mecca--It's a little bit of an Orientalism wet dream, but besides that it's actually a very delightful episode on Hajj. I will also post a few links to fellow podcasters about Hajj, the Saudi embassy's rules about hajj available in English. Just to show you some of the regulations in real

time and because this is breaking news, the COVID-19 or Corona virus affected the ways in which governments around the world are admitting and issuing visas and allowing for travel. Saudi Arabia is no different, and as of February 27th, 2020 they have closed down Mecca and Medina for the time being. Whether or not that will impact Hajj in late July and early August, we have yet to see, but right now folks trying to do a pilgrimage on the off season which is called [umrah] are banned from doing that based on global health concerns.

Megan ([39:02](#)):

Also on behalf of all of us here at Keeping it 101, please wash your hands, wash your hands. Okay. In addition to this very practical wash your hands homework, I want to echo the shout out to Sophia's books. Sophia Arjana is a friend of the pod. I also want to say that Malcolm X Hajj narrative is gorgeous and nuanced and complex. And I would also like to think that Malik El-Shabazz would be a friend of the podcast. I would hope... I also wanna acknowledge though that a lot of times folks will read autobiography of Malcolm X like in high school and teachers and professors love to talk about this Hodge moment as the moment where like Malcolm X realized that Islam is bigger than race or it's bigger than just Black Nationalism. And while he definitely writes about that moment as shifting the way that he thinks about race, it is a mistake to think that Malcolm X or Malik El Shabazz ever stopped fighting for his people or ever stopped fighting to dismantle white supremacy.

Megan ([40:00](#)):

So this is a place where historical and geographical location really matter for how we're reading that. I also want to recommend Michael Muhammad Knight's *Blue Eyed Devil*, which is Mike's account of a different sort of Muslim pilgrimage that happens right here in the U S there is a description of him stopping to pray in a burger King drive through that I think about every time I talk about ritual, I want to offer a content note on this next resource and the content note is for description of sexual assault, but I want to strongly suggest that folks who are interested in Hajj also read Mona Eltahawy's accounts of what making hajj was like for her because she describes it as a deeply religiously significant but also violent experience because she was assaulted while she was making hajj. She talks about uh strange men groping her while she's circling the Kaaba and it's disturbing as it should be and helps me think about the ways that the bodies that we occupy complicate our access to in our our understanding of being religious.

Megan ([41:00](#)):

Finally, if this is all new to you or you're not clear on why you need to know a thing about global politics in order to think about religion, I really like what Hassan Minhaj is doing on his Netflix show *Patriot Act*. And now she is a Muslim who's also been very critical of Saudi Arabia. And I think he has done a great job of publicly thinking through the complexities of making Hajj as a Muslim who cares deeply about global justice. You can follow Megan, that's me at MPG PhD on Twitter and Ilyse at P, R O F, I, R, M F, or the show @ keeping it_101 You can find us on our website at keepingit101.com. That is where we keep all of our show notes and bonus content. Please rate and download us wherever you get your podcasts. And uh, thanks for listening.

Ilyse ([41:47](#)):

Peace out, nerds!

Megan ([41:49](#)):

Do your homework. It's on the syllabus.

Megan & Ilyse Sing ([41:51](#)):

do do do. [inaudible]

Theme Song ([42:07](#)):

[inaudible] [inaudible].