

SO GLAD YOU ASKED about Why We Do This

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SPEAKERS

Ilyse, Megan

- I** Ilyse 00:17

This is keeping it 101, a killjoys introduction to religion podcast in 2022-2023. Our work is made possible through a UVM reach grant as well as a Luce AAR advancing public scholarship grant. We're grateful to live teach and record on the current ancestral and unseeded lands of the Abenaki Wabanaki and Auco Cisco peoples. As always, you can find material ways to support indigenous communities on our website.
- M** Megan 00:40

What's up nerds? Hello, I'm Meghan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions race, gender and politics.
- I** Ilyse 00:45

Hi, hello. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, a historian of religion, Islam, race and racialization, and South Asia.
- M** Megan 00:52

Welcome, nerds. Welcome to yet another so glad you asked episode. These are a collection of episodes where we answer your burning questions totally and completely in one episode, kind of...
- I** Ilyse 01:06

Goodwin we have a fantastic question today. And frankly, I think maybe it's it's like, sure, this one is specifically from friend of the pod Julie Maxwell, who asked a question we get a lot individually and as a dynamic duo. The question is how did we become obsessed with religion

so much, so to make all this our life?

M

Megan 01:31

So you're saying this episode is basically about moi? And I guess, uh nouse? I don't know. I took French for reading comprehension. So I don't know how the words were said anyway. So why we personally came to think that religion matters. Girl you know, you don't have to ask me twice. I will happily tell stories about myself on my own pod. Why I'm so glad you asked.

I

Ilyse 02:02

Alright, then Megan, tee up. How did you become obsessed with religion?

M

Megan 02:06

On honestly, possibly genetically, it's unclear. It's not my fault is the part that I know. So okay, there's there's two sides to this story. One is my dad's side, which is Irish Catholic, Irish Philly Catholic, that distinction matters, from way the hell back many, many generations. My dad still to this day divides the entire world into Catholics and publics. Yeah, amazing. Yeah. Because that's the school you go to

I

Ilyse 02:34

Oh, yeah, that's very specific, like tri-state thing.

M

Megan 02:38

Catholics and publics. So I truly, I don't think I knew that there were other kinds of Christianity, I knew in eighth grade, I'm not sure I knew before that. I just thought that was it, and it's like, it's not a thing you talk about. It's just truly almost everybody I knew was Catholic, except for my Jewish neighbors. And that was really like I knew about Jews because of the Bible. And that was about it. And then there's my mom's side of the family, right? So my mom is a German Irish Catholic, also from outside Philly, Broomall. If you know the area, she has a number of siblings I should know off the top of my head five, I think anyway. So of her five siblings, my aunt Elaine was a Sister of Mercy. Her two younger sisters are both different flavors of like nondenominational but let's call it charismatic evangelical. And then her brother Steve converted to American Baptist. So one, sister Martha, Marcy definitely Catholic, my mom finds different kinds of Jesus, like every couple of years, but definitely flirted with like a charismatic Christian charismatic Catholicism specifically, back before we knew to call it that and back before like an Amy Kony Barrett moment. And then my one aunt was Southern Baptist, weird, raised in Philly, but okay, and then the other one is just kind of free floating, scared about the end of the world. So like, there were pamphlets in bathrooms. And again, I need you to understand that I did not know that there were different kinds of Christianity. I just thought it

was all the one thing. So I would come back after spending time with my mom's family and going to Catholic school, right. So like, I would just be asking about like, so when is Satan coming back to planet earth? Because I'm told it's soon but like, how do I plan for this?

I Ilyse 04:34

In an excited way or just in a like, I'm trepidatious or just like, like, like, I want to know what

M Megan 04:42

the train schedule is. Like, what is the train schedule truly like, is this? Am I gonna go to college? For like a Satan back before that? Like where should I be setting my sights kind of thing? Or, you know, offering alternate readings of the Bible, which like it didn't even occur to me until well, until I accidentally a little bit went to evangelical bible camp. Up in eighth and then ninth grade that Catholics don't really read the Bible. So I was like, I can't find this anywhere. Where is any of this stuff? So that was a mess. I did 13 years of parochial school kindergarten through 12. By the end that had gotten very uncomfortable for the folks who were responsible for teaching me religion. Yeah, I derailed an entire class period being like, okay, but where is all of this? Like, anti gay stuff coming from it? I didn't even realize I was queer at this point. I just didn't make sense to me. And if you've ever been in the room when something doesn't make sense to me.

I Ilyse 05:32

Yeah, it's like a pitbull. It's really,

M Megan 05:36

You know, to leave the room. Yeah. Yeah. You know, you should just leave the room poor poor mister, his name honestly, with Gaydosh, that's not even nope, sorry, that was a Latin teacher. Anyway, keep moving. Ah, so Right. So 13 years of Catholic school, by the end of that I had realized that that was not working for me. I went to college and was like a, what else is out there? And also this witchy stuff is seeming like where I live. And then I think a lot of us have these origin stories right where you pick up. So for me, it was picking up Margo Adler's Drawing Down the Moon. This is a huge, comprehensive, like anthropological overview of the kinds of pagans there are mostly in what's now the United States. So one: it just gave me a sense of like, oh, no, actually, a bunch of people are doing this to Margot Adler was an NPR correspondent. So like, this isn't just the weird flaky stuff. I've been finding it the Barnes and Noble, like this might be legit, question mark. And three, a lot of the folks that she talked to, for this book just kept saying, like, Oh, I didn't realize my religion had a name or like, I don't feel like it converted to this, it just feels like the way I've always been. And now I know what to call it. So that was really, that was really powerful. And like, I did go to college in the late 90s. So cyber paganism was a thing that I really can't say with a straight face, but it really was. So I'm on like, listsserves with druids from around the world, talking about all sorts of everything, and trying to figure out if I need to learn to read Irish, which still has not manifested. But ya know, moving on and then I got to my senior of college realized that like print journalism was not

where it was at for me, even though that is still what my BS is in. And that I still really cared about religion, even though I didn't want to do it in a Jesus way anymore. So I like a ginormous nerd, talked six different professors into letting me just crash their class, because I was out of credits, like I had used them for requirements and things. So I couldn't afford to take any more classes. But also, I wanted to know, so I sait in on classes about like African diasporic religions, and Daoism and problem of evil and yeah, and I just was that kid. So I realized when I had finished college, oh, wow, this religious studies thing is more and bigger and more interesting than I even realized. And so yeah, I decided it was what I wanted to keep asking questions about. They weren't all good questions, I didn't know to ask about like, Hey, why are all of the pagans I know, white, for example, until I got to grad school at Drew and met Tracy West, and took her fantastic classes. And so I got to think more critically about like, religion and gender sure, but also about like race and white supremacy, and which kinds of religious expressions and communities might feel appealing to me and why those might not feel like welcoming why those might not be welcoming or inclusive spaces for everyone. So yeah, now I'm just a plain old Kitchen Witch, but also asking big questions about what religion and power have to do with one another, who gets included who gets left out and where those lines get drawn. So that is a broad overview of how I came to be. Let me tell you about my mother. Basically, it's just fried has just

I Ilyse 08:59

always happened. I guess that means it's my turn. It's your turn stories just as dramatic. And I'm sorry to say it the nerds, the nerds know, it's kind of about adoption in Judaism because the questions I had been asking ever since I was a child, or the reality of my body is that I could have been anything. Right? It is luck and finances and proximity that landed me with my parents. And that's not like a mystical thing that's like the state owned my body. And like the parents, I got successfully navigated the court system in order to take ownership and guardianship, over ownerships probably to use too hard but in these days of being a domestically supplied infant, I'm gonna say I'm going to be obnoxious about it. So I was always really aware, I'm gonna be like I can't. I was a commodity. And that's a separate issue for a different day and many therapy appointments. Don't worry about me nerds, but they're here I was in this religion where I could have been anything. But the religion that I'm in was also this matrilineal ethnic blood to find religion and Jews, we can argue about that till we're blue in the face. But the reality is, is that like questions about whether or not I was birthed properly, whether I needed a mikvah whether I could be accepted into the religious tradition of my parents, was like very much a part of the conversations my parents were having with their extended families before adopting me and also was part of the conversation of like, when I would out myself as an adoptee like religious Jews would ask those questions because Judaism is matrilineal ethnic and blood defined whether or not I like that. So here I am, this person with not matching blood being asked about my religious faith, which has always been a faith space. For me, I've always been an ethnic, religious, cultural identity. And so for me, I've been asking questions about like, well, hmm, what actually makes me a Jew, that and the Jews are telling me that there are lots of things on my person in history that don't really make me a Jew. And there are loads of Jews saying, Yeah, you're totally a Jew. And then there's loads of practices that I engage in, like, you know, having crispy bacon when I eat meat, which isn't often but exists. And we're like a love of shrimp, love me a shrimp. All of these decently weird spaces in my own life, that who am I really, and not like in a philosophical way, but in a like, I am an exception to quite a lot of religious rules, because of my origins. At the same time, I was brought up in this space of like Jewish activism, shtetl pronunciation, Yiddish or thinking socialist camps. Where like, I was being taught to think about religion as part of social justice

movements, and as part of being excluded from the jump. So those are like the early origin stories, but also, as I've said before, on the podcast, and I've said in other places, I was a first semester freshman at Colgate University in omit Sophie's class, literally on Tuesday, September 11 2001. We walked Oh, meat, and I from our 8:30am Tuesday class, to the coop, which was the stupid way we pronounce the coop to get a cup of tea because he was our freshman advisor. And so like he was rotating through a bunch of students to get to know them, right. And it was just it just happened to be my day on 911 to go get tea with Omid Safi. And we stood and could not figure out why any of the people at the coop were not at the registers, but the giant TV in the way that early 2000s, like student unions had like a giant like 12 foot TV, because you couldn't watch on your following. Everyone was watching the first tower had fallen, the second tower had not. When we were there, the second tower came down. And so all of a sudden, this second year Muslim professor who was one of like two Muslims on campus, and me, this activist Jew who's like there on a scholarship. And I'm like, literally, this is my second class at college like it is week two, all of a sudden, I was like, well, we have to learn some stuff about this. Like I was always interested in politics. That was my declared, I was a declared Political Science and History major when I got to Colgate. And on week, three a week after 911, I was a religion major, because it didn't make sense to think about politics or history without thinking about religion. I also in college was given this fantastic opportunity through my scholarship to study abroad anywhere that they had a study abroad program. And I really wanted to go to Scotland and then the professor was on leave, and he wasn't running the program. And so they shunted me to this other professor who was going to go to India, and I had to convince my nervous Jewish parents, that a kid who did not have a passport and had never left the country, even to go to Canada should get a passport and then go live in Chennai, and the rural environments of Tamalnod in South India, without speaking any thermal for six months. And everyone successfully convinced my parents that this was a good idea. I really hope I wasn't that study abroad white chick who came back and was like, definitely a neo Orientalist neo imperialist. Like this is my life now. But I think those were really formative spaces for me, right like this understanding innately that I couldn't separate who I was from both an internal debate about who I was allowed to be and an external debate of what I was racially, religiously, ethnically. And then the politics of that, all right. Whether that's an internal politics Have like you eat bacon. You're not a real Jew or like, when I was in high school, I did the SATs really well. So I had to go to DC for this like National Merit thing. And the girl they put me in a room with was from Texas. Her name was Lacey. Lacey said, I shit you not, and this is my best accent I could possibly muster because she deserves to be shamed to the tip of her toes. She said, I thought you'd have horns, and I thought she meant I heard Jews were horny. And I was like, I don't think we're more horny than other people I don't understand. And she said, I thought you'd have horns again, at which point I realized, Oh, you think I'm the devil? Yeah. And I wasn't allowed to switch rooms. And so instead, I dragged that bitch than the Holocaust Museum, because I need all of you. And anyway, I think now having all of those experiences as a young person, but really having been shaped by this understanding that like, my Judaism demanded that I understand that religious minorities were always at risk. And then having 911 happen were friends of mine who are Pakistani weren't able to visit their homes anymore, because they were worried that their visas would be rejected, or, like, all of the Islamophobic shit that started happening. I think I had this real sense that like I needed to know more so that I could do better and then I was just good at it. So I stuck. So I stayed in school, but I guess now it's religion is everything everywhere all at once. But people still don't get it, especially around those issues, right? Exclusion, inclusion, diversity and racism. So that's kind of where I come from, but why I'm still doing it is. Because if religions everything everywhere all at once, and people still don't get it, then we have an obligation to do that better. Yeah.

M Megan 16:45
Absolutely.

I Ilyse 16:46
So I guess in short, Meghan, for both of us, it's complaint, right..

M Megan 16:56
It is complaint. It's a lot of complaint. It's like, wait, I'm not getting the whole story. I need to know what else. Hey, that doesn't seem fair. What the hell? It's a lot of that.


I Ilyse 17:04
So Thanks, Julie. That's a great question. And now onto homework nerd origins. Homework. Why don't work?

M Megan 17:13
Yeah, we're not giving you like homework homework. We are giving you books that provide insight into how we started even doing this religion thing. Do you wanna go first?


I Ilyse 17:23
Yeah, we're not all right. I'll recommend again, Mel Brooks' autobiography that I recommended last last season. I just, it's good. And he sounds like my grandpa like the way he writes like, you can just be sam morgenstein. I love it. And I will recommend a picture book that is hilarious called Camp Camp. If you know you know, you're up Goodwin, what are the two origin stories that you might offer are nerds.

M Megan 17:46
Okay, so I think to get a sense of the very serious absurdity that is growing up Catholic, I want to recommend Patricia Lockwood's Priest, Daddy, you can thank me later. And then the other one and this is so silly, but I'm just gonna say it truly if there is an origin moment for me wanting to ask more questions about religion. It's the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,

I Ilyse 18:09
Which will never not crack me up.

 Megan 18:11


I know it's so stupid. But like, I was as as you were. And as many of our nerds are, I suspect a voracious reader as a child. And so I got really excited about the series, but also, like, my interest in witches goes way, way back. The witch in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe was described as Adam's first wife and I had a full on Eddie Izzard on Munchin betta what first wife so like, I'm busting out Bibles. And I'm not gonna lie. Like I was just gobsmacked that there was more to the story. And that folks, my teachers had not told me about it. And it felt like oh, they're keeping things from me. I'm gonna go to find this and I will get it. And instead, I've just spent the last 20, 30, 40 years asking more questions and still not getting it, but I feel like maybe I'm closer maybe I don't know. Anyway. Yeah, that's I'm a basic bitch and Clive Staples Lewis is responsible, in part in large part for my career in religious studies. You're welcome.

 Ilyse 19:18

All right, that's enough about us shout out to Evie Wolfe, Rachel Zieff and Juliana Finch, the KI 101 team whose work to make this pot accessible and therefore awesome, listenable and social media-able, among many other things for which we are grateful

 Megan 19:31


So many. You can find Meghan that's me on Twitter at mpg PhD and Ilyse @profirmf or the show at keepingit_101. Find the website at keepingit101.com Find us on Insta and now Tiktok drop us a rating or review in your pod catcher of choice and with that peace out nerds do your homework it's on the syllabus

 Ilyse 19:53

entirely too much us.

 Megan 19:54

They asked

 20:28

You ever great super superhero