

Sick of Not Knowing About Sikhi

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SPEAKERS

If You Don't Know, Now You Know, Megan Goodwin, Bonus Ending, Simpsons, Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, A Little Bit Leave It, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:17

This is Keeping It 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast. For 2021-2022, our work is made possible through a Public Humanities Fellowship from the University of Vermont's Humanities Center. We are grateful to live, teach, and record on the current, ancestral, and unceded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples. As always, you can find material ways to support indigenous communities on our website.



Megan Goodwin 00:42

What's up, nerds? Hi, hello! I am Megan Goodwin and I am a scholar of American religions, race, and gender.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:49

Hi, hello. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst. I'm a historian of religion, Islam, race and racialization, and South Asia.



Megan Goodwin 00:57

IRMF! I am so excited for our episode today! But, I mean like, I'm-I'm excited about all of our episodes, obviously, but I am excited by proxy for this one.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:09

Why? Why is this episode different from all other episodes?



Megan Goodwin 01:12

cackles I mean, that's one of the big questions, isn't it? *laughs* For two reasons. That's a Judaism joke, nerds, sorry. *laughs* First, because you get to do something in your wheelhouse! Finally! It's a South Asian religion! AND-- very exciting, so exciting!-- we have our first ever-- for the first time in Keeping It 101 history!-- we have a podcast allstar, our first ever returning guest, joining us!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:42

I know! It's "herstory" in the making.



Megan Goodwin 01:45

laughs



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:47

I'm excited in the reverse order, to be honest--that Dr. Simran Jeet Singh is coming on AGAIN is the literal best, and that he's coming on to talk Sikhi, the thing in which he is actually expert, is even better. Shall we introduce him now or later, though?



Megan Goodwin 02:04

Uh, no time like the present, I feel! Dr. Simran Jeet Singh is the brand new Executive Director of the Aspen Institute's Inclusive America Project, and you might remember him from such podcast episodes as episode 303: Simran Jeet Singh Keeps Going, in which he talked about public scholarship and his best-selling, award-winning children's book, "Fauja Singh Keeps Going." We'll recommend his work in our homework also, obviously, and he's going to introduce himself later on in the episode. He is one of the leading experts on Sikhi, and we are so honored that he wants to spend time with us again--or that he's spending time with us whether you wanted or not. I guess he did. He's too nice for us.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:43

He's just, he really is SO lovely. And I hope--I actually really hope we didn't bully him too hard to appear because I think we could be, shall we say, relentless?




Megan Goodwin 02:54


I think that's putting it kindly, yeah. But I think he totally wanted to come on and have a venue for SIKH dad jokes, so.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:01


Megan! Bad Megan! No, Megan! No!


 Megan Goodwin 03:06
laughs


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:08
Do not stoop to that level!


 Megan Goodwin 03:12
Okay, A) the problem with spending any time with Simran is that you immediately sink to dad joke level, and B) you wrote that joke! You did it! I learned it by watching you.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:20
Alright, fine. Sikh joke.

 Megan Goodwin 03:23
laughs

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:23
Let's move on and get into it. *instrumental music* I am your father's brother's nephew's cousin's former lesson plan!

 Megan Goodwin 03:38
laughs Y'all probably know what we're gonna say right now, but here goes! Today, we're talking about Sikhi, which some of you might better know as Sikhism, for two reasons: first, because like we've been telling y'all for ALL the episodes, religion is imperial. And second, because we think you can't call yourself religiously literate without actually knowing what these religions are, how they came about, and why they matter! Why they matter to scholars, why they matter to regular folks, and why they matter specifically to their practitioners. AND, like African Diasporic Religions and Indigenous religions, Sikhi often finds itself utterly, bewilderingly left out of world religions classes, textbooks, podcasts, and the general Western cultural imagination.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:24
Yeah, so second (or fourth) verse, same as the first. You may have noticed, nerds, that our thesis today-- the goal of our lesson plan-- is the same as it's been all season because, yeah, that's just what's happening this season. Deal with it.

this season. But with it.



Megan Goodwin 04:38

laughs Sikhi. You're gonna learn some stuff. Which brings us to the 101 on today, the section where we do professor work. So IRMF, it's my turn to ask seemingly simple questions that could be answered in entire whole books. Why Sikhi? Why is this part of our History of the World Religions Part I?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:58

Yeah, it is a whole year, man.



Megan Goodwin 05:01

Yeah it is.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:02

So, we said this a little already in a few episodes--



Megan Goodwin 05:07

Episode 102 and episode 303, in fact! There's always space for a callback.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:13

Of course, of course. So we've said this, but Sikhi is, for me, one of the most obvious places to see how absolutely trashed the world religions model is.



Megan Goodwin 05:23

Yeah, sure is, sure is. But wait! Wait wait wait wait. So we said this already about the trashiness of the world religions model that we're in, nevertheless, teaching in forever. With Indigenous religions, with African Diasporic Religions, is Sikhi the same? Does world religions, as a model, fail Sikhi in the same way it fails those vast traditions? Or is this a different kind of suckage?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:49

I'm so glad you asked, Goodwin. Frankly, I think it's different-- no less racist or problematic-- but different.



Megan Goodwin 05:55

Oh, I'm so glad you asked, I think it's different-- no less racist or problematic-- but different.

Oh good. Just changin' up our racisms today.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:58

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, flavors of racism.



Megan Goodwin 06:02

Oh, nooo.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:03

Here's why I think it's different--



Megan Goodwin 06:05

Sorry, I'm stuck with it being like "I got a boogey flavored one." Anyway.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:09

I mean, like, earwax? Probably? But like, whatevs. Gross. I like that you went for gross. Let's hope-- I mean, always, vomit is like the ever looming Bertie Botts many flavored beans or whatever.



Megan Goodwin 06:23

laughs EVERY Flavor Beans!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:24

sighs Thanks. Kay.




Megan Goodwin 06:26


You're welcome.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:27

Alright. Here's why I think Sikhi is different. With African Diasporic religions AND Indigenous religions, we saw the result of, obviously, imperialism, racism, colonialism, in the lumping together of all these diverse practices into-- and these are in quotes, but also in historical fact-- "lesser," "minor" categorizations. We also saw the formation of new, hybrid religions (despite my itchiness around that word)--


 Megan Goodwin 06:29
Okay. I was gonna say, are you okay?


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:54
I'm not. I'm not, but I'm gonna keep going.


 Megan Goodwin 06:54
Okay.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:56
-- due to those violent systems. But with Sikhi, we see something super related, and yet slightly different. With the religions we've covered so far, we saw a denial of their tenants because of the super hardcore racisms, like "they're heathens," or "they're idolaters," or "they're polytheists," or flatly, "they're just not Christians," and even if they were, they're the wrong race.

 Megan Goodwin 07:22
Mhm!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:22
With Sikhi, we see the denial of a religion that seems like it SHOULD fit beautifully into this model. It's monotheistic. It has a unique founder. It has a canonical, central text. It has a physical buildings, where people go to do rituals and prayers. Megan, that MUST sound like something else to you, right?

 Megan Goodwin 07:44
I mean, place you go to do rituals and prayers, plus central, sacred text, plus historical founder (who's also a dude, by the way), plus monotheism, equals... Christianity? Question mark? Judaism, also, question mark? Islam, also, question mark? So, uhhhhh, all of the like, so called Abrahamic religions? And also a little bit like Buddhism, minus the monotheism part... So like, yeah! This-this fits the bill!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:18
Yeah, precisely! So when we think about world religions and major religions, Sikhi isn't left out because it didn't fit a white Christian model of what legit religions are, in the way that we saw and see that denial with respects to loads of indigenous and African diasporic religions. And Sikhi isn't left out because it's too small. It's like, literally, demographically, the world's fifth largest religion.



Megan Goodwin 08:45

Okay, but... So what I-- what I hear you saying is that if a religion like Sikhi can't like, "get a place" in a world religions model, despite how well it fits all of those white European imperialist checkboxes, it... it fits! It does all the things!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:08

It does!



Megan Goodwin 09:09

This is yet more evidence that the world religions model is just racist and imperialist as all get out.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:17

Precisely that. Yes.



Megan Goodwin 09:20

Cool. Cool. Great. Well, now I'm mad. Yeah. Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:24

Fair!



Megan Goodwin 09:27

Cause it sounds like you're saying that these rules which we've already established, truly a million times over, these rules about what counts as religion, or what counts as a major religion, or like a religion important enough to pay attention to-- all of those rules are racist as fuck! Even-- they're not even, like, logically applied! That just-- that's... that's cheating!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:49

That is indeed what I'm saying. The rules are made up and the points don't matter.



Megan Goodwin 09:52

sighs Well I don't-- I don't care for that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:58

Nor should you.



Megan Goodwin 09:59

But I will respond to it. Let's move into what Sikhi is. MoFu, can you-- can you tell me some of the basics that we want our nerds to know about Sikhi, apparently the world's fifth largest religion, except that nobody knows about it?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:14

I mean, aside, aside from everything?



Megan Goodwin 10:16

Yes, please tell me everything, right now.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:18

laughs



Megan Goodwin 10:20

No. Keep it in your intellectual pants, kid.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:22

Alright, alright. Well, let's start at the top. Sikhi is a South Asian religion, meaning that it began and is rooted-- geographically, linguistically, historically-- in South Asia. Even more specifically in Punjab, which, like, we can have two seconds, okay-- it's not THE Punjab, it's just Punjab. We don't say THE New York--



Megan Goodwin 10:44

laughs I didn't know! My mind is colonized. I have totally been saying "the Punjab" for years! Thank you for helping.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:51

It's okay! It's okay. THE Punjab is a weird British relic-- and I apologize to our British and English listeners. Punjab is also not that hideously racist turbaned servant in the musical Annie, which I'm directing at you, you ginger theatrical nerd. *laughs*



Megan Goodwin 11:10

Okay. If you really knew me, you would know that Annie is a particular sore spot because by the time my local theatre company--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:16

You did not get the lead.



Megan Goodwin 11:18

It's not JUST that I didn't get the lead, I was too tall! I was too tall! By the time they finally put it on, I was in seventh grade and I was too tall for Annie! But thank you for putting lemon juice in my theatrical soul and the papercut thereof. Anyway.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:34

Well regardless, while your papercut for Annie is both valid and I hear your concerns, the character in that show that wears a turban and is magic?? And his literal name is Punjab?! is a fucking problem.



Megan Goodwin 11:49

That-that's a racism that's worse than my papercut.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:50

That's a racism.



Megan Goodwin 11:51

It's much worse, yes.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:53

It's... it's, it's not just a flesh wound. It is a whole problem. It is a region. Punjab is a region-- literally "punjab" means five rivers--



Megan Goodwin 12:04

Oh!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:05

--and it's a region that now exists in the nation-states of Pakistan and India. Punjabi is a language tied to region, like most South Asian languages, as well as an ethnicity. Punjabi is the language of most Sikhs (though of course not all), and for many Sikhs, also not necessarily just the primary or first language they learn, and Punjabi is the main but not singular language of the Sikh holy textual tradition.



Megan Goodwin 12:36

Okay, okay. So Sikhi originates in South Asia, specifically the region known as Punjab (no "the"), and Punjabi is a language that many but not all Sikhs speak, as well as the main (but not only? Question mark? We'll talk more about that in a minute) language of Sikh holy scripture.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:52

You got it. I want to back up just a little bit because I got excited about regionality, as is my catnip. Sikhi traces itself to Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 of the Common Era, and is the first of 10 Gurus, or "guroos,"-- *Secret Word of the Day* --a lineage of spiritual masters, teachers, saints, you name it.



Megan Goodwin 12:59

Mhm, mhm, mhm. Mhm!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:02

Guru Nanak's teachings, which comprise parts of the Sikh holy book-- *Secret Word of the Day* --the Guru Granth Sahib, center around refining the mind, heart, soul to seek connection to the divine. There's lots to say here, but for me, I think three simple teachings that show up across Sikh ritual and practice and texts are-- and I'm gonna number them out-- Number one, sharing with others, helping those who are in need, so like, eating together, in particular; number two, earning an honest living without exploitation or fraud; and number three, meditating on the name of God, so as to feel His-- and here it is masculine, at least traditionally speaking-- to feel their presence and control the five thieves of human personality, which are my favorite translations.



Megan Goodwin 14:13


Yeah, that's good! I like that.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:14

And those five thieves are lust, wrath, greed, attachment, and pride. And for those of you who do South Asian stuff, and are gonna come at me with like, wrath and lust and greed sounding a lot like deadly sins and like an overwhelmingly Christian-- yes, and those are the easiest translations for a frickin podcast


medium. If you were in my class, I would put up the words and we would talk about multiple other definitions, but for now, I'm gonna stop right there. I just love the idea of live thieves--


 Megan Goodwin 14:43
I love that so much!


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:43
-- like that's so much better than like sins? It's like, no, no, these things are actors. They are trying to get you.

 Megan Goodwin 14:49
Well I also really-- like, in my Catholic programmed brain, it's the exact opposite of a sin, because it's not a thing that's in you because you're horrible and disgusting, like spiritual garbage, it's stuff that comes from the outside to fuck you up. So like, there's space to reject it. I like that.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:06
Yeah.

 Megan Goodwin 15:06
I'm into it.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:07
There's a lot of agency here.

 Megan Goodwin 15:08
I like that a lot! I mean, I like-- anyway. I like Sikhi a lot. I think it's a really gorgeous way to be in the world. Anyway! I also know that a major thing that Sikhs are known for around the world is langar, or this community kitchen that feeds anyone-- Sikhs or not. *laughs* My favorite-- my favorite part of Sikhi day in World Religions is we watch clips from this BBC documentary that I'll give you a link to in the show notes. But Sonia Deol, who's the BBC presenter, talks about the bar where the gudwara makes lunch every day. And everyone comes in-- EVEN the Irish builders. And then I giggle because, even the Irish are welcome to eat at the gudwara is just some British colonial just...

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:53
I mean I was gonna say, in parts of the UK, that's a question mark, so like... *laughs*



Megan Goodwin 15:59

I know! 100%! I just appreciate the hospitality. Thank you for accepting us *laughs* even though we're Irish. *snorts* Anyway. In the US, which, as you know, is my easiest set of references, we've seen Sikh communities really support folks in need, especially during the pandemic. I mean, they're doing this all the time, but I think they got more attention for how much work they were doing in the community during the pandemic, which I assume is related to sharing with others and eating together.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:30

Yeah! You bet. Absolutely.



Megan Goodwin 16:31

I love that. I just, I love a snack. It's great. What's not to like about Sikhi? Anyway, so I've heard about Sikhi, and I have taught about it often (even if I did say the Punjab, all the time, until about 10 minutes ago). Often, I hear about the five Ks. Can we talk about those? *Secret Word of the Day*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:50

Sure, but why don't-- why don't you take this one? I just did a numbered list, your turn.



Megan Goodwin 16:51

Sure. I'll do a numbered list! Number one: kesh! Uncut hair, which is usually kept covered by a dastÄr, known as a turban; kara, an iron or steel bracelet; kirpan, a dagger-like sword tucked into a...?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:11

A strap, a belt. Yeah. Sorry, I put in ALL of the Punjabi words.



Megan Goodwin 17:16

I don't-- *laughs* I don't even test on this stuff because I very specifically don't make them memorize like factoids because it bugs me. Uhhh-- kirpan, so it's a dagger-like sword tucked into, basically, a belt; kachera, which is a cotton undergarment; and kanga, a small wooden comb. I think it is probably clear for many of our nerds that Sikhs are most recognizable by men who wear turbans, although not just men-- not just Sikh men wear turbans. Sikh women also wear turbans sometimes, and also lots of Sikhs don't wear turbans at all. We're going to talk about discrimination in a minute, and we will definitely return to turbans. And listen, I really don't care about summarizing all of Sikhi with these, like, bodily daily practices for many, but not all Sikhs. But I'm DEFINITELY interested in those bodily practices and how they have affected Sikhs in public, to be honest. The right to be in public being visibly, religiously different. So like,

wearing a turban, carrying a ceremonial knife, has been deeply and legally disputed in many places that Sikhs now live, including what's now the United States and the United Kingdom. As you might imagine, being allowed to do anything from playing sports wearing a turban to serving in the military has been extensively litigated because god forbid we just let people be humans while they're serving military states. Anyway! The right to carry ceremonial blades also has been controversial, especially because of racism and frankly, Islamophobia. Megan, yeah,



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:43

Uh, Megan?



Megan Goodwin 18:44

Yeah?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:45

This is an episode about Sikhi. So, why did you just say Islamophobia?



Megan Goodwin 18:50

Ummm? Racism. Yeah. I know we talked about this a little bit before already, but we said on Episode 106, and Episode 204, that Islamophobia doesn't just affect Muslims. Sikhs, and especially Sikh men who choose to have uncut hair, including beards, and who wear turbans, are often mistaken for Muslims. Ehh, yeah. And in a post-911 context, globally, this is meant racialized-- and that's meant that they've been racialized and harassed as, quote unquote, "terrorists." In fact, on September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a turban-wearing, bearded Sikh was murdered in the first-- but certainly not the last-- hate crime understood as a retaliatory attack on-- please hear all the scare quotes, again-- those "terrorists" responsible for 911. So Sikhs' ability to practice their religion, which for many includes beards, and turbans, small ceremonial lives, ehh, this has been deeply, outrageously impacted by, yeah! Islamophobia. And more specifically, the racialization of religion and religious hatred. So, we will link to a really funny Daily Show bit with Hasan Minaj, and our guest expert, Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, today (among a group of other people-- other people were also there, but we love Simran the best), and they talk about being mistaken for Muslims and how they don't pawn that off or let that slide, or, as Simran says-- as Dr. Simran Jeet Singh says, "Sikhs don't throw Muslims under the bus." It's great.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:25

Yeah. I loooove, I love that clip. It's really good.



Megan Goodwin 20:29

Yeah, it's super good.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:30

So in the US, we see real religio-racial profiling around Sikh folks, sometimes in ways that's specific, like, "I see a turban, I racialize you," and mostly in ways that are general-- "Those foreigners, they don't belong." So, so far, we touched on Guru Nanak, the five Ks--



Megan Goodwin 20:49

Mhm. Yep.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:51

What else should I hit in our all-too-brief Sikhi episode?



Megan Goodwin 20:56

YOU said that we were gonna come back to text, which usually, I am against, but you are not, given how many languages you read. So very many. What do you want to say about texts?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:06

Oh, right. Duh. We don't do text that often on this pod!



Megan Goodwin 21:10

We don't!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:11

Well, I mean, text is famously not an audio medium, so it's rare. But okay! So when I teach about Sikhi, my students are usually FLOORED to learn that the Guru Granth Sahib, again, the main Sikh holy scripture, is not just one thing, actually, it's a collection of writings and teachings which are poetic and often set to music. And it is thought of as the living soul of the Guru, right? So, Guru Nanak, 10 gurus after him, and the text is, is this 10th guru. Usually--



Megan Goodwin 21:47


They all-- they all share the same soul, right? I've been doing that one right? Like, the soul of Guru Nanak passes into the next guru, and then that collective soul winds up in the book. Yes?




Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:57


Y-yeah


I year.


 M Megan Goodwin 21:58
Okay. I was just checking.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:59
Yeah.


 M Megan Goodwin 22:00
What else have I been wrong about?


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:01
laughs That's a different podcast.

 M Megan Goodwin 22:05
cackles Megan's Wrong About-- coming soon to your podcatcher of choice!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:12
I mean, like, there are different interpretations of that, but I'm gonna give you a blanket. Yeah, that's more or less correct.

 M Megan Goodwin 22:18
Alright! That's what the textbook told me. Okay. Go ahead.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:20
Yeah! And the textbook's not wrong! Oversimplified, but like, let's stay in why I care about learning about this text.

 M Megan Goodwin 22:26
Okay.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:26



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 22:26

And I think, I usually want students to hear that this text is primarily in Punjabi-- again, this language that's tied to Punjab as a region-- but that it also contains verses in multiple dialects of Hindi-- that's right, nerds! There's more than just one Hindi!-- Persian, and Sanskrit. Okay? So, as a scholar of North India myself, the things I want folks to hear is how composite, complex, plural this region has always been. There is not one language, one ethnicity, nor one religion, and the Guru Granth Sahib is a really fabulous example of that, given its diversity even within the text, even within linguistic presentation in the one singular text. The second thing I want to say about this text is that it's treated with reverence. This is not, um, this is not just like, a book on the shelf. In gurdwaras-- *Secret Word of the Day*-- or, sick houses of worship, the Granth is the central feature and is usually raised, like, it's usually, like, on a raised platform. So if you walk into a gurdwara, there'll be like a raised platform, a stage, and in the middle of that place will be the holy text, the Granth. There are rituals for people to make sure that they're in a state to touch the text itself-- like washed hands, and many Sikhs will put the book on top of their head to show deference, right, like the book is above my physical body. There's also rituals to make sure that the text itself is honored and comfortable, covering it with cloths and some gurdwaras usually use-- sorry-- using traditional Indic symbols of royalty, like a canopy over it to protect it from the elements I suppose, and just to show respect. So the book here as this final guru is treated with reverence in the way that you might honor a living creature, or a living soul, or a living person. The last thing I want to say about text is that I guess the content? Sikh teachings center on justice, equality, mercy, and love.



Megan Goodwin 22:50

I like love! That sounds nice. And this feels like as good a place as any to let Dr. Singh, who is among the nicest humans I think I've ever met in my whole life, and certainly, probably the nicest human to continue talking to me after he's met me.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:53

laughs I mean, I don't want to say can confirm, because that is throwing YOU under the bus--



Megan Goodwin 25:00

Mm, I'll throw myself under the bus here.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 25:02

--but I'm not NOT going to say it.



Megan Goodwin 25:02

laughs Yeah. Uh, I want to say again, I still can't believe he's friends with us. But, I'm glad that he is! And let's let him introduce himself and give us some expertise on Sikhi!



Dr. Simran Jeet Singh 25:12

Hi, my name is Simran Jeet Singh, and I'm an expert on religion, race, identity, and justice. And I'm especially interested in how these issues show up in the United States, where I live currently, and in South Asia, where my family hails from. My research primarily focuses on the early Sikh tradition, which I also practice, and I also teach undergraduate and graduate courses on Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism too. I care that people, students, scholars, listeners to this podcast-- I care that they know about what I study because, as I discuss in my forthcoming book, I think Sikhi has some powerful insights to help us all deal with some of the most fundamental challenges that we're facing today. I often wish that people knew just one thing about Sikhi, anything at all, really. This morning, someone biked past me and my girls in New York City, and said, "Sat Sri Akaal," a common Sikh reading, and it made my day! Not because it was impressive that someone demonstrated some deep knowledge about my tradition, but because he actually knew one thing, which most people don't. There's so many things that I wish people knew about Sikhi. If I had to pick one, I would focus on its primary tenant, Ik Onkar, which refers to the fundamental oneness of the world. It's the first thing we learned as Sikhs, it's the first thing I learned from my parents, it's the first thing I taught my daughters about Sikhi, and it's essentially this teaching that all of creation is interconnected, and that the Creator, a divine force, pervades all of these spaces of our world. And to understand this core teaching, I think, is to understand what Sikhs are about, because it informs our theological commitment to overcoming the dualities of our lives and the disease of ego, so it's spiritual; it informs our ethics, our commitment to nondiscrimination and justice, so it's ethical; the Ik Onkar even informs our daily living, how we aim to live with integrity, and with love, and in service to the people all around us. Like every other religious tradition that I've encountered to date, Sikhi has incredible diversity in how it's interpreted and practiced by those who follow it. There's a lot of consistency too, and in fact, that consistency is something I found fascinating. Let me share some examples of its internal diversity, because I think that's an important perspective that helps us overcome our monolithic understandings of groups we don't know very well. So one really obvious example that comes up for me is around how Sikhs think about the boundaries of their religious identities. Some see the identity as extremely fluid. They might consider it possible to have hybrid identities like Sikh and Hindu, or Sikh and Christian, or Sikh and Jewish. Some see no problem with participating in rituals and practices of other traditions, like Buddhist mindfulness, for example. But on the other hand, some have more fixed understandings of Sikh identity, believing that it's not possible to cross such lines, like they might worry about interfaith marriages, or intermixing ideologies, for example. And while those two, like the fixed perspective, and the fluid perspective, right, while those are two examples of different perspectives of identity that fall on opposite ends of the spectrum, there are a lot of people who fall somewhere in between, who have opinions on how appropriate or inappropriate it might be to have coarse boundaries. And sometimes, as we often see with religious practice, their outlooks might have logical inconsistencies. And yet they hold on to those perspectives anyways. And isn't that the kind of complexity of our humanity, not just of religion (but of religion too!), but our humanity, right? The complexity that makes studying all of it and looking at it so fascinating. You know, based on my own readings, and my own studies, Sikhi teaches that divinity is equally present in every moment of time. Right? If we go back to this teaching of Ik Onkar, it means that there's no such thing as an auspicious time or a holy day. Holiday! Right? And I love this reading of Sikhi because, to me, it reinforces the teaching of oneness. I do believe it's important to commemorate historical occasions, and to have opportunities for us to connect as a community. Right? And that has social significance, it has psychological significance, but at the same time, I don't believe there's a particular time that contains more divinity than any other moment of time. But at the same time (pun intended), there are plenty of Sikhs who believe differently than me, who believe certain times are more significant than others. Some see this on the basis of days related to the lives of the Gurus, what we call gurburbs, right? Days of birth, death, martyrdom or other occasions that we celebrate. Some see auspicious time on the basis of celebrations common in South Asia. Others on the basis of lunar cycles, for example, right? There all types of perspectives on how we think about the nature of time, and what it means to us. Sikhi hasn't really BEEN classified within the world religions model, right? For the most part, it's been overlooked. In oversight, that's telling given that when you account for its sheer magnitude, right-- it's the world's fifth largest religion with nearly 30 million followers worldwide, right?-- that's an oversight.

There's something interesting going on there. And it's also fascinating because Sikhi has all the, quote unquote, "elements" that one would expect in the category of a, quote unquote, "world religion." Right, it has a unique founder, a unique scriptural canon, a unique disciplinary practice, a unique worldview, unique rituals and ceremonies, unique places for God worship and gathering. Right? If the world religions model was truly a neutral system of classifying what was out there in the world, and what we observed... if that was true, then it makes no sense that Sikhi has been overlooked. Now, I first started noticing this in high school, when I'd come across descriptions of Eastern traditions that would either overlook Sikhi, or at best describe it as a blend of Hinduism and Islam. And so then I started looking forward to college where there would be more nuanced attention. But there too, Sikhi was folded into other traditions or ignored entirely. Right? Including in the seminal book by Huston Smith, "The World's Religions," which was the first that I read in a religion class in college and was like, "Oh, wait... wait, where's the chapter on Sikhism?" There isn't one. It's an addendum to the chapter on Hinduism. It was so bizarre to me. Let me just share one example of the implications here. After college, I go to Harvard Divinity School to study Sikhi, and I was told there that even Harvard, even the most resourced university in the world, didn't have the resources to teach on Sikhi. I was advised to study South Asian religions more broadly, instead. So I guess the point is, Sikhi has been marginalized by the world religions model, and it continues to remain outside the archive, both in the scholarly and in the mainstream realms. Most of my expertise these days revolves around keeping kids entertained during a pandemic. So anyone who wants stories on that, I have plenty of entertaining ones to offer. In terms of my work, I'd say one of the most telling moments came when I started to look for a topic to write about for my PhD. I was looking for something obscure, which is what I thought a good dissertation is supposed to be-- obscure-- and I mentioned that to my advisor, some ideas that I had that were relatively obscure, and he asked, "Well, don't you want to focus on something more central? Something more relevant?" And I did, of course, because I always saw my scholarship as being in service to people. But I didn't actually know how to do that. And in talking to him, in talking to my advisor, I realized through our conversation something that I already knew, intellectually, but hadn't really registered fully, I realized that no Western scholar has written a major academic work on Guru Nanak, on the founder of Sikhi, in more than 50 years. Again, I knew that intellectually, I'd read those, uh, those books about Guru Nanak from decades before, but... I hadn't connected the dots, right? Like, think about how many books come out every year about Jesus, about the Prophet Muhammad, about the Buddha. Right? And this realization, to me, revealed something important about how underrepresented Sikhi actually is. And in recognizing how astonishing this was, I also saw an opportunity to fill a critical gap. And this has been a driving force in my own efforts to build awareness, to create equity, and to share my knowledge with the world of Guru Nanak, of Sikhi, and of the wisdom that I've drawn from the tradition. As I've come to expect with your podcast, you didn't miss much at all. The one glaring omission here, though, is that you didn't give me much chance to be funny, which, I know you want to hog that for yourselves so that you look cool. That's fine. You two will sound like the fun ones, I'll be the boring one. That's fine. I am the dad here. But I guess the loss really for your listeners is that they'll never get to hear the incredible Sikh puns that I had prepared just for our conversation. So now they're, now they're lost to the universe and all of us lose out. So thanks a lot, Megan and Ilyse, for nothing.

M

Megan Goodwin 35:31

As per usual, I learn from our friend Simran all the time. What I hear Dr. Singh saying is twofold here, I think. First, I hear him REALLY calling attention to the inequity and really obvious systemic exclusion of Sikhi in every corner of how people think about religion, even in rich institutions. And second, I hear him saying that his work-- and especially his upcoming book, "The Light We Give" on Guru Nanak and Sikh teachings-- is specifically trying to change that and make it better.



Ilyse Mergenstein Everett 36:00



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:00

I agree completely. I think it's really telling when a scholar of Sikhism-- and a Sikh himself!-- has to convince people that a project on Sikhi is worthwhile. It's not like Dr. Singh is an old man. Like, think about the intellectual landscape of like 40, 50, 60 years ago. This is a guy in his mid-30s, who had to convince senior scholars, Ivy League institutions, almost all of them still working, PLURAL, that his own expertise, his own experience, his own community, is worthwhile. And Megan, forgive me, but I'm gonna shit on Americanists for a hot second--



Megan Goodwin 36:40

Yeah, sure.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:40

--because when it's "normal" to be the 900th fuckin' person to study American Protestantism, or allowed to think about hippy culture as religious and be given a full ride PhD sponsorship to an elite institution, but it is challenging to study the world's fifth largest religion, even at Ivy League institutions that supposedly have limitless resources?? We have a motherfucking problem, Houston. Big time.



Megan Goodwin 37:10

It's not great, Bob. It's not great.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:12

Not even a little.



Megan Goodwin 37:15

But you know what is a little... A Little Bit Leave It!



A Little Bit Leave It 37:21

A Little Bit Leave It



Megan Goodwin 37:22

Where we're letting you know what we think the most important, most interesting, or most challenging part of the topic is-- It's a little bit to leave you with! And today, my little bit leave it is, I want us to pay attention to where the world religions model and its BFF/partner in crime, white European Christian imperialism, just move the fucking goalposts (and I want you to hear that as a Bend It Like Beckham reference-- you are welcome).



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:50

I love it when you know about footy.



Megan Goodwin 37:55

Only because it was a stealth lesbian film. I will put it in the homework.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:58

I-I know.



Megan Goodwin 37:59

I know how you know. As we said, Sikhi checks all the boxes on the imaginary but, like, also real forms that those dudes with the clipboards and the pens fill out when they're looking for real religion: historical male founder, central sacred texts, central sacred site, Arimitsar (I know like one thing about Sikhism, and that's it!), monotheism-- but Sikhi still doesn't make the list most of the time. WT actual F. Except we know what the actual F is, don't we, nerds. The actual F here is an I for imperialism.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:31

It really is.



Megan Goodwin 38:33

And it's poop.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:34

It's SO poop. I guess my little bit leave it is that I want to underline some of the nerdy history that Dr. Singh laid out for us and quickly tie it back to some of our previous episodes. Dr. Singh said that classic works in religion omitted Sikhi, or folded it in, like cheese, to Hinduism or Islam. As you know, my whole brain is 19th century imperialism of South Asia, and one of my favorite facts--



Megan Goodwin 39:01

Oh, I want to confirm that before we move on. Your whole brain is, in fact, 19th century imperial India. Please continue.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:08

Yeah. no. like. I mean... that's at LEAST 98%.



Megan Goodwin 39:12

chuckles



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:13

At least.



Megan Goodwin 39:14

That and then football. Sorry, fold it in like the cheese. Fold it in.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:17

Fold it in! I'mma fold it in.



Megan Goodwin 39:18

Fold it IN.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:20

This is, this is a true fact, too. I'm not gonna be able to get it without laughing or without cursing, so nerds... I don't know, this is me on my regular bullshit so, bear with me.



Megan Goodwin 39:28

laughs



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:28

One of my favorite facts is that the first translator of like-- English translator... well, not English in this case-- anyway, the first translator of the Guru Granth Sahib into an European language-- I shit you not, his name is Ernest Trumpp, double "p," okay? Double "p"--



Megan Goodwin 39:45

chuckles



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:45

--who was German, but published in London-- which is a whole other story of like, imperial bedfellows-- anyway, this particular Trumpp literally wrote (and this is as close to a quote as I can get without pulling up my qualifying exam bibliographies) that "Sikhism would die out." He called it a, quote, "waning" religion, if memory serves. So we've seen this, right? This idea that a "minor" religion is one that would perish, and we've seen these shitty white Protestant imperial scholars study these religions precisely to save them for history.



Megan Goodwin 40:21

Woof.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:22

Is there a direct line from this particular Trumpp, double "p," to why Sikhi is absent, EVEN in universities? Of course not. That's bad history. But I'll be honest, there is an indirect line, which is our whole point this season. That's what I'm leaving you with. The historical systems of oppression, and racialization, and religious categorization that connects that imperial 19th century to the ones that we have today. Which I guess brings us to... if you don't know, now you know--



I If You Don't Know, Now You Know 40:54

If You Don't Know, Now You Know



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:56

--the segment where we get one factoid each. Alright, Megan, I've talked a lot this episode, I got excited about South Asia. Why don't... why don't you actually take our whole Biggie segment?



Megan Goodwin 41:04

I love it! Okay! One of my favorite facts about Sikhi is its emphasis on gender equality (no surprise there). The Guru Granth teaches us that the divine equally values all people of all genders, that the Divine is genderless, and that whatever way your body is, that's the right way for you to be. God, like Mr. Rogers, literally likes you just the way you are. And one of the ways this shows up in pop culture is through the modeling work of Harnaam Kaur, a gorgeous Sikh influencer, who also happens to be a woman with facial hair. She is stunning, and you should check out her insta.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 41:40

It's a really good insta.



I ... 41:40



Megan Goodwin 41:42

It is! She's gorgeous. And, if you don't know, now you know! *If You Don't Know, Now You Know*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 41:47

Well, in that case, don't pick up yet, nerds! It's time for homework!



Simpsons 41:51

Homework



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 41:52

As always, we've got citation, references, and other goodies-- especially transcripts!-- stashed at keepingit101.com for every. single. episode. Check it out! Alright, I'm gonna, I'm gonna take the lead here--



Megan Goodwin 42:06

Just get in there. You're so excited. You're so happy to be outside the US and I'm so happy for you!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:11

I mean, listen. As a South Asianist, who also does like, global intellectual history, the amount of crap I have to know while you Americans get to know like, Atlanta, Georgia, 1930 and 1945 just-- No, no. That's too early for me. You know it that I don't like to work before the 1980s. *laughs* *blows raspberry* I try not to do murders, but... fine! Just leave the rest of the world to us. Anyway, first and foremost, read EVERYTHING, nerds, that Simran Jeet Singh has ever written. And we cited an inordinate amount of his work on Episode 303, where he was also a star-- and I'll copy and paste some of those recs into this week's show notes-- but I'm not going to list them all. I'm going to give you all new sources. So. This forthcoming book that he's got going is going to be incredible. Straight up, keep your eyes peeled! "The Light We Give: The Power of Sikh Wisdom to Transform Your Life" is coming out in just a few months in 2022. A fan favorite in my home is "Fauja Singh Keeps Going: The True Story of the Oldest Person to Ever Run a Marathon," which is a book for little kids, uh, and it's fabulous. Arvind Pal Singh Mandair has a really good primer, called "Sikhism: a Guide for the Perplexed," which is pretty recent and introductory. Harjot Oberoi, that has this fabulous book, "The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition." So if you're interested in things like orthodoxy, how religions become religion, and what folks do to craft their own religious tradition, that's a book to pick up.



Megan Goodwin 43:45

That sounds good!





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:45

I would be remiss not to mention Anna Bigelow's book, "Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India." It's not just about Muslim north India, it's a good one about overlapping traditions and peace movements at a very particular site in north India. I also love Nirinjan Khalsa's work, but-- she's got a lot-- but I'll recommend "Engendering the female voice and Sikh devotional music: Locating equality in pedagogy and praxis." She's an ethnomusicologist. Then there's Deepa Iyers "We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future." So that is ACTUALLY about the US and it's not just about Sikhi-- I was gonna say, I like that one. I have THAT one. *snickers* It's accessible, and it's, yeah. It's there. And I'll link to some podcast interviews on that. And I'll be honest, I can't not cite a history--



Megan Goodwin 44:43

God forbid.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:44

--Kim, Kim Wagner has a book on Amritsar, called "Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre." It traces the truly horrific British massacre of Sikhs at their holiest site in 1919, as the title suggests, and I'll link to a couple of podcasts for that, too. Alright, I'll stop there. Otherwise, I'll just keep going forEVER.



Megan Goodwin 45:07

giggles I would like that! For once, I'm not the one giving the most homework. I love that so much. I get to give fun homework! So, as I mentioned, I have this-- sorry-- BBC documentary about the events in 1984 in Punjab, in and around Sikh armed uprising in attempts to claim a homeland. It's really important and... it is a space that I truly would not probably know about if I hadn't had been forced to teach a world religions class. So, it's a really well done documentary by a Sikh BBC presenter herself. Highly recommended, will link to.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:45

Yeah, I teach that too. It really does teach very, very well, for all of our nerd friends.



Megan Goodwin 45:51

It really does. I like it a lot. I want to echo your suggestion that they just read, truly, everything that Simran writes, but he also writes a whole really lot, so if you want a good place to start, just go ahead and check out what he's been reading for Religion News Service in his article of faith-- articles of faith column. I also want to direct your attention to the piece that he wrote in February about the farmers protests in India and the way that they grew out of Sikh experiences. So that's in time, and really important, and we should pay attention to, I don't know, the largest protest happening in human history possibly. I feel like... it's a thing that we should pay attention to. And then all the other stuff is, is a little bit fluffy! So you--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:35

No! It's not fluffy, it's pop culture. Which is good. It's a good balance.



Megan Goodwin 46:38

That's true. We have made an argument, too, for the scholarly import and weight of popular culture. So I'll just stand in that and say with my whole chest, I want you to watch Comedy Central, and the segment on confused Islamophobes, that we already suggested that you look out for Dr. Simran Jeet Singh and also a number of other Sikh folks. I made an offhanded Bend It Like Beckham piece, but I think Bend It Like Beckham does a really good job of making Sikh characters complex, interesting, not monolithic, not cardboard cutout characters. And, uh, I love that! Also, there's football involved! Also, another joke about the Irish (such trash, but it's in there). So that's a fun one. And then my other recent/possible favorite? is a novel called "Jane Steele," which was advertised as a misandrist, murder mystery, queer retelling of Jane Eyre, which you would not expect to be at ALL about Sikhi, but surprise! It actually is. So much so that when I recommended it to Ilyse a couple summers ago, she was like, "Oh my god, this is almost homework!" Um--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:49

It's a great book. Honestly. I've read it-- I've like, reread it, because it's that good--



Megan Goodwin 47:53

Oh yeah!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:53

--and I never reread fiction. And this was like, I rere-- but when you recommended it, I was like, "Hold up, hold UP--"



Megan Goodwin 48:00

laughs Uh huh!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 48:02

"--there is a Sikhi and South Asian subplot, and I am here for it."



Megan Goodwin 48:06

And I feel like you would be in a better position to know than I would, but it felt really well researched to me? Which I enjoyed!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 48:12

Yeah. No, it was good.



Megan Goodwin 48:12

So, high recommend "Jane Steele" by Lindsay Faye. Big thanks to those of you writing down reviews on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon, and Google. It really helps. So our Nerds of the Week-- those few we want to shout out today and send some love to directly-- are... *drumroll* A-plus, top-notch foley work, as per usual, thank you-- Anna and Jon Kara Shields, Confused Old Woman (this is... their handle, swear to God), and MHale85.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 48:46

Yay, nerds!



Megan Goodwin 48:48

Yay, nerds. We appreciate you.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 48:50

Join us next time for more HISTORY OF THE WORLD, RELIGIONS, PART I, when we chat about Hindu traditions and are helped out by our guest, Dr. Arun Brahmbhatt.



Megan Goodwin 49:00

Hazzah! Shout out to our research assistant Alex Castellano, whose transcription work makes this pod accessible and therefore awesome. Need more religion nerderie? You know you do, and you know where to find us. Twitter. The answer is Twitter.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 49:14

You can find Megan on Twitter @mpgPhD, and Ilyse-- that's me!-- @ProfIRMF, or the show @keepingit_101. Find the website at keepingit101.com. Peep the insta. Definitely drop us a rating or review in your podcaster of choice and become nerd royalty. And with that... peace out, nerds!



Megan Goodwin 49:38

Do your homework! It's on the syllabus.



Bonus Ending 49:39

Bend It Like Beckham But I guess you wouldn't understand what that feels like, would you? Jess... I'm Irish. Of COURSE I'd understand what that feels like!