

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

[inaudible]

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

This is Keeping it 101: a Killjoys introduction to religion podcast. Hi, Hello I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, a scholar of religion, history and Islam, raiser of kill joys, razer of patriarchies and raiser of goblets of rosé. Cause it's summer!

Megan ([00:37](#)):

Hi, I'm Megan Goodman, a scholar of gender sex, sexuality, and American religions, public scholarship maven, and a fan of a bubbly drink or two, mostly two of these days.

Ilyse ([00:48](#)):

Sun's out smarts out shades on it's a Smart Grrl Summer! And in Smart Grrl Summer we're riffing on the punk movements of the seventies, eighties and nineties, of feminist women led bands. We were thinking Bikini Kill of course, but music as a place of resistance and sustenance and politics and community is where we're at. And good news nerds. We have a RIOTOUS treat for you all summer Smart Girl Summer is four freestanding episodes for you on religion and the big topics y'all sounded into. Let's get started with a lesson plan.

Bikini Kill's This is Not a Test ([01:30](#)):

[inaudible]

Ilyse ([01:30](#)):

Alright, nerds. It's summertime. The weather up here in Vermont is--it's brisk, of course, we're just in light sweater weather as opposed to wool sweater weather. We've got rosé all day and Coronas the beers, not the virus--inshallah--but just because we're off campus doesn't mean religion's slowing down. No!! It's fast and furious. And just like the blockbuster movie franchise, Smart Grrl Summer is a mini session summer session. And we're talking religion and pop culture, religion and sound, nationalism. And on today, cults in scare quotes.

DUN DUN DUN sound effect ([02:13](#)):

[inaudible]

Megan ([02:14](#)):

[Dun dun dun] So Smart Grrl Summer is really our Hobbes and Shaw is what I hear you saying.

Ilyse ([02:19](#)):

Oh yeah.

Megan ([02:20](#)):

Just getting so many Fast and Furious jokes now. I'm so happy. That's right. Nerds. We live our lives and teach about religion a quarter mile at a time. Today's topic is one that sets my hearts and brains a flame like NOS injected into a V8 engine: CULTS. Please know, dear listeners that when I yell about cults, I'm

not just doing it as a killjoy scholar of religion. I am doing it as the Wikipedia cited killjoy scholar of religion, who is minorly internet famous for insisting that most people just use cult to mean "religion I don't like," because it's true. It's also funnier than Reza Aslan's joke. Anyway, today, we're going to talk to you about why my loved ones don't say cult around me, unless they have 30 spare for impromptu lectures. And more importantly, where we draw the line between what's a religion and what's a cult. Totally predictable spoiler: What counts as religion or doesn't is totally political and has a lot to do with things like white supremacy and Christian imperialism, who gets to decide which practices and beliefs are just "too different," and if "too much" religious freedom can be dangerous.

Ilyse ([03:20](#)):

Keeping it 101 on today: The segment where we do some professor work! Here's the thing, Megan--aah, dear nerds--Megan yells about cults a lot like, like a lot. And for a woman who yells frequently on the internet, that this is the thing she yells about I'm going to say the most is saying something, which is why we wanted it to be our kickoff to Smart Grrl Summer. Why does our resident Americanist care so much that so many people get this word wrong?

Megan ([04:05](#)):

Because words mean things, ILYSE, that is why I care! Words mean things. And they do. Also, I feel I yelled the right amount about cults because people are very wrong about it all of the time, so..The end!

Megan ([04:20](#)):

In my Wikipedia certified expert opinion, people use cult to signal a few basic--and I do mean basic--things. First basic thing they mean when they say cult: "People who are not me are doing a weird thing that I think is stupid and possibly dangerous." Ilyse, what comes to mind when I say cults to you?

Ilyse ([04:39](#)):

Jonestown, the Moonies, the, uh, like that sneakers one from the nineties with that comet--

Megan ([04:46](#)):

Heaven's Gate.

Ilyse ([04:46](#)):

Waco, David Koresh. But I have to be totally honest when I hear the word cult. I actually think about the West Coast Video "cult" shelf that I discovered John Waters on.

Megan ([04:58](#)):

Well, that's amazing. And I want to have that conversation and the other time I love that. Okay. But with the exception of John Waters--

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

no, actually, with the inclusion of John Waters! I put that in on purpose. So say your next thing. And then we can talk about it.

Megan ([05:11](#)):

so all of these groups, including John Waters get called calls to signify that they're potentially dangerous, right?

Ilyse (05:18):

Yeah. I think that's correct. Keep going.

Megan (05:23):

And like some groups that get called cults are, in fact, dangerous. The Church of Scientology is notoriously vicious toward its members. And also for real, where is Shelly Miscavige, the wife--was the wife? unclear--of current leader of David Miscavige. So absolutely some of these groups that get called cults are dangerous. Please hear me say that some groups that get called cults absolutely do facilitate abuse, but also, so do some groups that get called the Roman Catholic Church or the Michigan State gymnastics team, or the U S army. Abuse is always bad and religion doesn't cause abuse. Again, when people say cult, usually what they're trying to signal is you're doing a weird thing that I don't like, I think it's stupid and it's possibly dangerous or exploitative.

Megan (05:58):

The second thing I think cult signals and it just made little cult scare quotes with my fingers, which is a sight gag that doesn't help. The second thing that cults signal is that people are only doing that weird and possibly dangerous thing because they have no choice: they've been tricked or forced or brainwashed into doing it. So Ilyse, I said, brainwash, what, what does that mean to you?

Ilyse (06:30):

Brainwashing? I think it means something like forced actions or beliefs or thoughts that there's some kind of compulsion there and absolutely a lack of power. So I think when you say brainwashing, I think about really visual brainwashing tropes famously good on an audio medium, like a podcast, but I'm hoping that these are common enough to signify something to our listeners, but like Clockwork Orange, Manchurian Candidate, those scenes in which someone has, you're watching someone's brain be rewired, programmed, and maybe having someone external to you control you as in, as in the case of the Manchurian Candidate really famously.

Megan (07:12):

Or like Zoolander, right? Kill the prime minister of Malaysia.

Ilyse (07:15):

Yeah. Yeah. When Frankie says relax.

Megan (07:20):

Exactly, exactly. So yes. All of that. When I hear brainwashing, I think people are doing a thing that they wouldn't do otherwise. And it's a thing that I, a rational normal human would never do. For me, the assumption there is that the beliefs or the behaviors of the people in the quote-unquote cult make no sense. So either cult members are stupid or they're being forced to do things financially, sexually, otherwise physical or the so-called cults have like fucked with their heads, right? No one would behave this--no rational person would behave this way. So clearly cult members must have been brainwashed. Deep breath. Okay. A couple of things about that assumption. As the groundbreaking scholar of new

religious movements, Eileen Barker famously writes, no one joins a cult. You join a group of likeminded people who see the world in a way that you find convincing and meaningful who offer you companionship and community that you can't find in other places. You don't sign up to join a cult. You join a group that makes you feel welcome and sees the world in a way that makes sense to you.

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

Also, importantly, please hear my all caps. Brainwashing is not a thing, not the way that most people use the word brainwashing. You know what is a thing though, peer pressure, especially when you're not eating properly and working too hard and not sleeping enough and not spending time with anybody, but folks who think and act the way that you do. So yeah, some groups that got called cults changed the way that people think and act. So do some groups that get called sororities or fraternities sports teams, if you've ever done a sports clinic or pledged a Greek organization, you know, that that kind of intense community building can dramatically shift how you think and act in a very short amount of time.

Ilyse ([09:06](#)):

I have a question, Megan.

Megan ([09:07](#)):

Yes.

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

So when you say that peer pressure is especially a thing when you're not eating properly and working too hard and not sleeping enough and not spending time with anyone but folks who think and act or whatever you said the way you do. Can you explain why those things are things you might mention when we're talking about cults in scare quotes?

Megan ([09:26](#)):

Sure. When I said cults early on, you said Jonestown, right?

Ilyse ([09:30](#)):

Yeah.

Megan ([09:31](#)):

Jonestown was a place. The group was People's Temple and People's Temple--Ugh, so much to be said there, but it gets started as this incredibly socially justice oriented communal movement geared toward anti-racist activism and truly mutual aid people coming together, pooling all of their resources, taking care of each other and showing up for each other in really remarkable ways. But also they're living away from mainstream California at this point. They are all eating in common. The expectation of the community is that you're just going to work as hard as you can for as long as you can. But people higher up are not sleeping very much, so the expectation is that you're not going to sleep very much. So you're just going, going, going all the time. You're maybe not taking care of your body. Like you can be. And this again, if you've, if you've ever studied for finals week, nerds, you know, that not sleeping and not eating enough and going, going, and going and working at your capacity makes you behave in some erratic ways--can make you make choices that you wouldn't make otherwise. So this can happen particularly in isolated communities.

Ilyse ([10:47](#)):

Yeah. I just wanted you to say a little bit more about it because I think as the Wikipedia-cited expert, you have a familiarity with, with some groups that come to be called cults or things that look like intentional communities or fraternities and sororities do, which is when you set up systems for, uh, bonding--like everybody's up at the same crazy hour in the middle of the night--not only are you messing with our brain, like messing with how your brain processes information, sleep, food, but you're also creating systems of commonality.

Megan ([11:23](#)):

Absolutely.

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

So they're bonding experiences. And I was just hoping you would say, a little bit more about that.

Megan ([11:28](#)):

We talked about Jonestown. We also see this at Mount Carmel with the Branch Davidians who followed David Koresh. We saw this with Heaven's Gate, although that's a little bit misunderstood because a lot of the members of that community were in and out there weren't nearly as isolated, but right: This kind of socialization and community bonding, we see it in a lot of groups that get called cults.

Ilyse ([11:47](#)):

So thank you for answering that first question. I have another question.

Megan ([11:51](#)):

Okay, great.

Ilyse ([11:52](#)):

So are you saying that what groups get back at called cults is doing, is just really intense and really purposeful socialization? Like how my camp is decidedly better than yours and my way of playing, uh, like Soup-Macaroni is better than yours and under no circumstances, shall we ever be nice to the kids from Ramapo--because we are Blue Rillians?! Wait a second, Megan. Megan, wait, am I, am I brainwashed?

Megan ([12:27](#)):

No. Ilyse, you're not because brainwashing is not a thing. You were just socialized into a really intense group.

Ilyse ([12:34](#)):

Oh, okay. Good. Just wanted to make sure I wasn't someone secret color war--like weapon. Like no, like when you start singing, like everywhere you go, people want to know who we are. And if I yell, Oh, the blue team, I'm not going to just bust out a really amazing kickball routine. I just want to who, okay. It's good to know that the world is safe from the big foot of me.

Megan ([13:08](#)):

For now. Right? So again, when we talk about cults, people talk about them as though the kinds of socialization that we see in these communities doesn't happen anywhere else, but it does. It happens at Blue Hill. I bet it even happens at Ramapo, but probably not as good.

Ilyse ([13:29](#)):

Definitely not. Screw you Ramapo. They're from the wrong side of the Lake.

Megan ([13:36](#)):

Disgusting! Anyway. So calling people's unconventional and possibly damaging or dangerous behaviors, brainwashing assumes that the people in these groups aren't making rational choices. You should eat, you should sleep regularly, but sometimes at camp or during pledge or while you're studying for finals or prepping for, I don't know, a sports meet of some kind, you make choices that you wouldn't make otherwise. It's intense socialization. It doesn't mean it's irrational just because other people don't do that. Also blaming potentially dangerous or destructive behaviors on brainwashing doesn't hold people accountable for the choices that they're making and the actions that they're doing. So for me, and this is where a lot of my Twitter yelling happens these days, folks complain that their conservative relatives have been brainwashed by outlets like Fox News into supporting truly some horrendous policies. But here's the thing, your dad, your grandpa, your racist ass uncle, they are adults. They are making choices about which information they want to consume. I think we should hold them accountable for those choices rather than saying, "Oh, they've been brainwashed. They don't know what they're doing."

Ilyse ([14:47](#)):

So, I guess what you're saying is that one of the things that's really problematic about brainwashing is that it doesn't--like as a concept--is that it doesn't give us the space to take agency seriously across religions, of course, but also time and people. And that what I want to see us do, and I think what I've heard you say to us over, you know, however many Keeping it 101 episodes now, is that we actually really want to imagine that folks have agency within the ability to find connection and meaning and the spaces they even choose to be in. So on the one hand you want to take agency, seriously, you are choosing to turn on Fox News. You have not been brainwashed. You are actively making that choice every time.

Megan ([15:32](#)):

Correct.

Ilyse ([15:33](#)):

And consistently you're not changing the channel. You're not, uh, whatever, right? So you're consistently and regularly making that choice. And then on the other hand, what I hear you saying is that we also want to take seriously how socialization and especially socialization in maybe intense circumstances works. And intense circumstances can be nights in the bunk, but it could also be things like being worried about our mortal souls. And so doing a ritual in a very particular way with particular rules and with particular clothing has a far more intense meaning than making sure I'm dressed appropriately for a wedding. So I hear you saying that we want both agency--my ability to show up and make choices consistently and regularly--but then also socialization the way in which I am able to make those choices, we need to think about at the same time, because socialization in this, like how we're taught to think to act, to perceive right wrong. All of this is learned. Am I following you?

Megan ([16:38](#)):

Yes you are. And those two things go together and hold hands. Oh yes. When we're thinking about things like new religious movements, what I want us to think about, dear nerds, is how religion is a space where we both negotiate agency and are socialized because religions are what people do. And this is a creative way that people think about how they can be in the world. So in religion, we talk about the study of new religious movements, which is the phrase that I usually encourage folks to use instead of cult. When we're talking about new religious movements, we're talking about groups that are trying to either correct existing traditions or to restore original traditions. So if we're looking at something like the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, more commonly known as the Mormons, the intention there is to restore Jesus's original message. If we look at a group like, I don't know, the Shakers, Mother Ann Lee receives testimony, has an intimate relationship with Jesus, and is trying to get people ready for the end of the world. So they don't come out of nowhere. They're building on existing traditions, but they radically re-imagine what religious spaces should look like, what religious practices should look like, what religious roles can look like. And this is one of the reasons that they make people nervous.

Ilyse ([18:14](#)):

So can I ask a question?

Megan ([18:15](#)):

Please!

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

It seems to me as an outsider to new religious movements, uh, scholarship, that new religious movements is trying to be a more neutral term--though we know that neutrality is not real--but a less judgemental term than cult. Even though that religious who might or might not be new! like there's a politic inherent in that, right? Like who's calling that new as opposed to who's calling that their tradition is probably up for debate also.

Megan ([18:47](#)):

Right, right. To be a hundred percent honest, I don't love the term new religious movements. You get judgements about who's actually new, how new you have to be to be a new religious movement. So in my work, I talk about American minority religions because I'm more interested in who's being marginalized, who has access to religious protections then, like, how new chronologically the group is. And also the newness piece of that is subjective both to the groups themselves and also new religious movements studies, for example, still talks about the Shakers who were founded in late 18th century, but there's very little new religious movement scholarship on LDS, even though LDS doesn't get started until the middle of the 19th century. So it's complicated.

Ilyse ([19:37](#)):

Yeah. Okay. So tell me more about why new religious movements, um, as I've heard you described them before are spaces of creativity

Megan ([19:45](#)):

They're--so this is why I got really excited about the scholarship. When I was a wee baby graduate student, new religious movements are incredibly creative. They let members see the world in new ways,

imagine different histories and futures for themselves, claim authority and insight that they've been denied elsewhere.

Megan ([20:03](#)):

The interesting thing about new religious movements is that often these are spaces where women, Black people, other minoritized groups actually get the space to say like, "wait, what if my experiences are valid? What if my way of being in the world is actually sacred and connects me to God and really important ways. What if the way that we've been doing it all along, isn't actually the right way. And there are different ways to be in the world. There are different ways to access the divine. There are better ways for us to do this religion thing."

Ilyse ([20:44](#)):

Yeah, that sounds appealing.

Megan ([20:45](#)):

That sounds nice. I feel like I am, for example, a queer lady who wants to find a connection to something bigger and something sacred. And I want my queerness and my woman nest, to be part of that I might be attracted to, I don't know, a new religious movement like paganism, for example, here's the thing though. The word cult gets used to shut down those groups. These groups get seen by folks who are really invested in maintaining current structures of hierarchy and oppression as TOO free. These new religious movements get told that they're using religion to do things that are dangerous and are going to upset society. So, when we call a new religious movement that wants to reimagine history, wants to give historically oppressed people a voice and religious authority--when we call that a cult, it's trying to shut all that down and remind people often historically oppressed people to shut their mouth and know their roles.

Riot Grrls ([21:54](#)):

[inaudible]

Megan ([21:55](#)):

Judith Weidenfeld, Ahmad Greene-Hayes, and Edward Curtis have all done, really great work on Twitter. And in Judith's case, she wrote an amazing book called *New World A-Coming* about how Black American religious innovation and African diasporic groups get labeled as cults. (And we'll give you those links in the show notes.) I've done a lot of writing about how religious groups that do sex in non-normative ways also get labeled as cults. At its root, this debate about what's a cult and what's not a cult is about defining religion who counts and who doesn't count as legitimately religious. This matters, and we've discussed this before, especially because counting as a religion, especially in America, gets you certain protections and certain privileges. So looking at groups like the Nation of Islam or Moorish Science Temple--both of which are movements that celebrate Blackness and make space for Black history outside legacies of oppression and violence and slavery--saying that those groups are cults is a way to say that they're not really religion, to publicly discredit them, to mark them as dangerous and thus as valid targets of state surveillance and violence. Sylvester Johnson's got some great work on this too in his FBI volume.

Ilyse ([22:59](#)):



Yeah. So I only really care about NRMs or new religious movements and cults because you told me I have to. And because if I want to follow you on Twitter and in life, I need to like, know why you're so angry.

Megan ([23:11](#)):

Like the Hulk I am always angry.

Ilyse ([23:13](#)):

Well, I mean like fair, but we are angry about different things. And so for me, it's like, okay, well, why is this thing making you so angry when I don't give a care about it really? But I think this, this place of surveillance, particularly around Islamic and Black movements in the United States is a place where our, our interests really do overlap. And, uh, in a class I taught a couple of years ago, we talked about this expressly and with Abra Clawson a former student of mine, we have an article that we need to actually finish writing where we're talking about "surviolence," violence of surveillance. We thought it was quite clever in class, but mostly we made it up because it felt like religious innovation always led to surveillance. And that surveillance was always violent, especially because the people being surveilled were brown and Black Muslims. And so that space of whose body whose thoughts, whose beliefs, are beyond the pale of what's considered acceptable by a dominant culture--that space for me, feels like, again, that question of what is a minority religion in the first place. So these religions that feel way too beyond the pale for enormity of Christianity, it's almost like you can hear the system say, well, you deserve our ire, and you deserve our surveillance, and you deserve our scrutiny. Because the thing that you're doing is weird.

Megan ([24:47](#)):

And the thing that you're doing is not religion, but you're claiming that it is religion, right? There's this, there's a slight of hand that happens here. Particularly again, I pay attention to the United States. So the United States, as an idea, as a concept says that it is dedicated to religious freedom. And then implicitly defines religion as certain kinds of Christianity, specifically certain kinds of white Christianity, so that they can then turn around and say, look, I know we said, we liked religious freedom, but it doesn't apply to you because what you are doing, Black people, brown people, women queers, even white Christians who are doing too much is not religion. You're pretending it's religion because you're trying to take advantage of us and our freedoms. But I'm really glad that you brought up the overlap about racialization of Islam and this conversation about cults, because the issues that we're raising about cults, don't just apply to new religious movements. That's why Judith Weisenfeld focuses on religio-racial movements in *\_New World\_*. And it's why I talk about American minority religions and abusing religion. We're more interested in who counts as religion and who doesn't, who gets protected as religious or not. Then when these movements get founded, because again, religion and getting counted as religious, is an explicitly political affair.

Ilyse ([26:08](#)):

Okay. So Megan, I'm going to do my best to sum up the things that make you grumpy about cults. And then you tell me if I did okay.

Megan ([26:21](#)):

I will. I bet you do.

Ilyse ([26:22](#)):

Okay. So the first thing that made you grumpy about cults, that people always say to you probably on the internet, because they did not know not to poke the bear is that cults are essentially, or cult gets thrown about bandied, about recklessly for literally anything that, that person doesn't like. So, uh, something that feels like a religion, looks like a religion, but it's definitely not religion because it's too weird, it's too dangerous, it's too beyond the pale. So it's point 1 of the things that make you grumpy, did I do it right?

Megan ([26:58](#)):

Yes. I would only add and stupid. Right? It's not just dangerous. It's also dumb.

Ilyse ([27:04](#)):

Yeah.

New Speaker ([27:05](#)):

There's a judgment about new religious movements or quote unquote cults that doesn't apply to other kinds of minority religions. So there are a lot of Americans, for example, who don't think Islam is a safe religion or a real religion, but the conversation isn't people are so stupid for being Muslim. It's that they're evil and want to destroy America. (Again, please hear all of the scare quotes. We on keeping it one on one, think Islam is a religion, because it is.) When we're talking about things,

Ilyse ([27:39](#)):

God, the shit we have to say. Anyway, keep going, sorry.

Megan ([27:42](#)):

But when you're talking about Scientology or when you're talking about, I don't know, fucking spin cycle, right. Or CrossFit a couple of years ago. It's stuff that people get excited about that is both like potentially dangerous or potentially tricking them or taking advantage of them. But it's also dumb. There's a moment--there's a piece of judgment there that like you are better than the people who would be involved in this activity because you're smarter and you know better.

Ilyse ([28:12](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Megan ([28:15](#)):

So yeah, cults equals religion. I don't like, because it's stupid and dangerous.

Ilyse ([28:22](#)):

The second thing you said that happens around cults, that you cannot stand and makes you grumpy is the language of being brainwashed. So what I heard you teach us was that being brainwashed is (a) not a thing.

Megan ([28:37](#)):

Nope.

Ilyse ([28:38](#)):

And (B) I guess, relates to point 1, which is like, it assumes a certain kind of dangerousness in, in this particular like new religious movement or group or cult in scare quotes. But it also assumes that the people involved in it are stupid because you allowed yourself to be, I don't know, like victimized, I guess, I guess the language there is victimization.

Megan ([29:04](#)):

Yeah. No, absolutely. So either you've been tricked cause you're dumb and gullible and the fact that a lot of women and a lot of people of color join or are members of new religious movements should make you pause and raise an eyebrow when the assumption is, "Oh, you're gullible. Oh, you're stupid." Or they're being forced. Right. Physically, financially exploited, stuff like that, or they've just been tricked.

Ilyse ([29:31](#)):

Gotcha. Okay. And the last thing I heard you talk about is the idea that, that academics anyway, have replaced the word "cult" with "new religious movements" and that new religious movements is broader than,--uh, I dunno some of the things we listed at the top--that it includes things like movements that aren't really that new, like shakers, like the LDS or, or Mormons. And I assume we could, we could branch that out around the world, but it's really about religious innovation.

Megan ([30:06](#)):

Yes. So when we're thinking about new religious movements, we're looking at radical religious innovation that both builds on existing ways of doing and being religious, but also is trying to either restore what they think of as an original intention or original message or to fix something, to address the world being not right.

Ilyse ([30:31](#)):

Awesome. Thanks.

Riot Grrls ([30:41](#)):

[inaudible]

Ilyse ([30:41](#)):

okay. You've heard from us, let's hear about us. It's primary sources.

Megan ([30:45](#)):

Primary sources!

Ilyse ([30:48](#)):

So I want to keep this short because nerds, you figured out I don't, I don't really care about cults that much. Um, and I think I want to talk about that. So I, you know, cults shows up to me as a South Asian list sometimes, but mostly it's in this way that like dead white, British folks talked about groups that were deemed unseemly to them. So like the, like the so-called cult of Kali, the fierce goddess, who's often depicted with her tongue lolling out of her mouth and blood and a necklace of skulls. So like, I understand why Victorian Brits, trying to rule a part of the world that was not theirs would find that to

be cultish and problematic, given what you've said. But other than that, it's like, this is strictly colonialized language.

Ilyse ([31:39](#)):

Like I don't care about this word. It's not a word that comes up a lot in South Asian studies on at least my neck of the woods in South Asian studies. So if you're a South Asianist, that's not your experience, let us know. But I do think that there's a good parallel around the, um, there's like a, like an old standing joke in South Asia that if you throw a saffron robe on and walk around long enough, you're a guru and you will find followers. And so I think that could be akin to this like quote unquote cult leader. And I'll recommend in the, in the homework, this is like, quote unquote, well, I guess it is a documentary, but it's on false premises. Anyway, it's the premise of this movie Kumaré, which is a documentary about Vikram Gandhi who made up a guru character and like started what he calls a "phony religion" and then made a documentary out of all the people that followed him.

Ilyse ([32:29](#)):

So like, while I watch your rants with glee, because they're amazing--and there is like, frankly, nothing better than when someone says the word cults. It's like a buzzer. It's like, you've been brainwashed. Just kidding. I'm just kidding. But I also feel really disconnected from it. It feels like one of those places where your work in the US and in American contexts just functions really differently from the way my work internationally and specifically in South Asia works. I don't hear scholars using cult to talk about divergent groups. So I guess my primary source is, like, I don't know, does this apply to my stuff? I mean, I like watching you rant about it, but like beyond that, I don't know what to do with this.

Megan ([33:19](#)):

two things. One, my rants about cults are always about Americans using that word. So it really just hits me in my things that I'm angriest about in the whole world, America, whiteness, Christianity, imperialism, racism, sexism, all of this stuff at the same time, I do want to say out loud that my approach to religious innovation is unconventional even within the Academy. So absolutely new religious movements does operate internationally. My friend, Emily McKendree Smith, for example, works on the Brahma Kumaris in Nepal and does that in the context of new religious movements. New religious movements is also a very active conversation for folks that work on Japanese religions. I just don't do any of that. So I don't feel about it, but you should read their work. It's real smart.

Megan ([34:09](#)):

In terms of my own primary sources here. Oh, listeners, you have probably gathered that. I have maybe too many for one primary sources section. I do know lots of people who follow me on Twitter, primarily as the lady who yells when somebody says cults strangers holler at me when new shows about cults come out. I dunno, I had a pretty public fight with a telegenic Iranian American sociologist who was using the term in a way I disagreed with on CNN. So if you search my Twitter handle and hashtag believer, there's, there's some quality squabbles, get it, get into it. Super quality.

Ilyse ([34:48](#)):

That was primary sources.

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

[inaudible]

Riot Grrls (34:58):

[inaudible]

Ilyse (34:58):

it's story, story, story time.

Megan (35:04):

It's time to kick back and unwind.

Ilyse (35:07):

It's time to kick back and unwind.

Megan (35:09):

Hey, I really wanted to assign, just the entirety of Judith Wise and folds and the world becoming, but we don't have that kind of time on the podcast. So we're going to keep it super simple for today nerds. Today's Storytime is our old friend JZ Smith. Again, the massacre at Jonestown where hundreds of people, most of whom were black women and as Judith and Sikivu Hutchinson have pointed out, Jonestown really shook people up, especially people who study religion.

Megan (35:35):

In Imagining Religion, JZ Smith says, quote: "One might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in the history of religions, for if we continue...to leave it ununderstandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy."

Megan (35:49):

This is, for me, so important. As you know, nerds, JZ is one of the foundational thinkers of religious studies. And here he is insisting that we can't just dismiss cults as stupid or unimportant, and that we need to understand why and how people make the choices they do about how to be religious in the world.

Ilyse (36:10):

Yeah, I'll, I'll admit, having read almost everything JZ has ever written, this is not one of the things that stood out to me until we started being in conversation, Megan. Because Jonestown isn't the most single important event in the history of religions for me as someone who does things beyond the last 50 years and things beyond like the U.S. And so I think it's taken me some time to really come around to what JZ's point was. And that is if we, as scholars of religion are going to be dismissive of things that are new, of things that don't make sense, of things that seem not like religion, of things that seem, um--if we are going to be dismissive as scholars, then we don't get to be scholars. That like our curiosity can't end where our empathetic thinking might. And so I think that, uh, stands out to me about this quote in Imagining Religion.

Ilyse (37:18):

And I think for those of us who don't do the last 50 years, who don't get to like pour over one event and write many books on one event, I think, um, I'm not trying to be obnoxious to Jonestown. I try to be obnoxious about Americanists. There's a way in which, um, I think this idea that leaving anything on

understandable, particularly things that feel beyond the pale is a space where we can actually recover and reclaim things that, ah, look divergent or different elsewhere in the world too. So I appreciate you selecting this.

Megan ([38:02](#)):

Okay. Thanks. Yeah. I want to echo and affirm everything you said. I think, right: If we claim this, this one moment in history in November, 1978, which was happening by the way, at the same time, the American Academy of Religion, the national meeting was happening that weekend as the most important thing in the history of religions, it's easy to look at that and go, Oh, fucking Americanists. They always make all of religion about their shit. Even though this technically happened in Guyana, but it happened mostly to Americans. So, but it's, I think the challenge here is bigger and the way I've understood it, the challenge is you cannot, you must not think about religion only in terms that make you comfortable, that make you safe, that feel familiar. We don't go into this saying this is religion because I recognize it, because it looks like the religion I've seen before. We have to look at the things that people call religion that freak us out, that confuse us, that maybe make us angry, because that's also what religion is because that's also what people are. And we're not understanding people, we're not understanding ourselves, and we're absolutely not understanding religion if we're not also grappling with the things that look like they don't make sense from the outside.

Ilyse ([39:15](#)):

Yeah. I'll, you know, I've been, I've been nudgy all all episode, but I think what I'll say nerds is that the thing I've learned from Megan's rants about cults and from reading books like Judith Weisenfeld's *New world A-coming*, and by reading Jay Z, is that the logic through which groups in the United States predominantly, but elsewhere, get labeled cults is the same logic--is similar logic its not the same logic, it is similar logic--that leads to groups that I care about and write about being written about in the way that they are--right Islam as inferior, Islam as dangerous, Islam as suspicious. It's a trope in all of the work that I do. I'm thinking about how groups come to be labeled in that way, cults in the study of cults and how not just the study, like not like study of groups that are named as cults, but study of how we use that word is actually directly related to the things I do around racialization & minoritization. I don't, I don't find the word itself, particularly beneficial or popular in my spaces. But if we are teaching you how to do thinking, dear nerds, one of the ways you might do that thinking is to see what else is being defined as beyond the pale and how are those labels problematic, um, and violent. So I think that's where I want to stop.

Megan ([40:45](#)):

Yeah, yes. To all of this. I mean that the basic politics of any of this is that no one gets oppressed or marginalized in isolation, right? The moves are similar. So there's a reason that the timeline I do in my class for cults and new religious movements starts with the Asian exclusion act and the Chinese exclusion act in the end of the 19th century. These--the thing, these things are connected. The end.

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

awesome. Don't pack up yet nerds. You've got homework.

Bikini Kill's *This is Not a Test* ([41:25](#)):

[inaudible]

Ilyse ([41:25](#)):

All right. We know, we know it's summer. This is Smart Grrls summer, but we figure you nerds are listening to a podcast, even though it's sunny out and supposedly it's warm outside of Vermont.

Ilyse ([41:39](#)):

We're going to give you a couple of recommendations. We promise that in smart girls summer, the recommendations will be more fun than heavy, but everything that Megan talked about and referenced will be in the show notes. And so will your homework. So what do you got Megan?

Megan ([41:56](#)):

Promise to keep this light? So I'm not assigning the article that David Chidester wrote about the bodies Jonestown, but I do have that link on my syllabus. I have taught a bunch of these classes. So I'm going to just throw you the link and if you get excited, check some stuff out and you can always hit me up for more reading. But fun, Smart Grrl Summer homework. I really think you should just watch the first season of *Kimmy Schmidt*. I don't love the rest of the series, but I think the first season is really interesting. And then you can read me yelling about it, both on *\_Religion Dispatches\_* and in article form for *\_Crosscurrents\_* and that--well also, maybe, maybe look at *Tiger King*. I, for real, like, I'm just gonna leave it there. Maybe look at *Tiger King* and then let's--let's chat. The end.

Ilyse ([42:44](#)):

All right. I already told you to watch this documentary *Kumaré* to get this double vantage point of like, how does one start a new religious movement and the inherent making fun of that's happening that Megan was talking about. But you know what nerds, since I've been telling you, I don't really care about cults that much. I'm going to do a call back to what I actually think of when I hear the word cult. Truly. The first thing I think of is Megan. And the second thing I think of is *West Coast Video* in the late nineties, where there was just a shelf and it just said, cult, it didn't say anything else. It just said cult. And that was my home, you guys, in the universe in which you rented movies. So go to your own cult shelf and watch something like, I don't know, *Rocky Horror* or *Pink Flamingos* or *Army of Darkness* or anything from *Monty Python* or *Heathers*.

Megan ([43:38](#)):

okay. I love that so much. And I think it really gets to the heart of what we're talking about here. People don't join cults because they're scary and weird and don't make any sense. People join marginal communities or stay in marginal communities because they're looking for a sense of home, of belonging, of like, not fitting anywhere else in the world, but like fucking *John Waters* gets it, man. Like this is a place where I feel seen.

Ilyse ([44:02](#)):

Yeah.

Megan ([44:02](#)):

Also I'm going to cheat and assign your Octavia Butler's *\_Parable of the Sower\_* and *\_Parable of the Talents\_*. Sorry.

Ilyse ([44:10](#)):

Oh yeah, no, that's fair.

Megan ([44:10](#)):

You can find Megan--that's me--on Twitter at M-P-G-P-h-D and Ilyse at P-R-O-F-I-R-M-F or the show at keeping it underscore 101. Find the website at [keepingit101.com](http://keepingit101.com)!

Ilyse ([44:24](#)):

Peace out nerds.

Megan ([44:25](#)):

Do your homework. It's on the syllabus. And wear sunblock if you're going outside!

Theme Song ([44:41](#)):

[inaudible]

Simpson's Cult Episode, Duh ([44:45](#)):

[inaudible] attention, everyone. Let's all give thanks to the leader for this glorious day. The leader is good. The leader is great, right?

Simpson's Cult Episode, Duh ([44:59](#)):

[inaudible]

Simpson's Cult Episode, Duh ([45:02](#)):

he's obviously the most powerful mind we've ever dealt with or na na na na na na leader, na na na na na leader, na na na na na na leader.

Simpson's Cult Episode, Duh ([45:11](#)):

BATMAN! I mean--LEADER! I LOVE THE LEADER!

Speaker 6 ([45:23](#)):

I love the leader.