

Zoroastrianism > Freddie Mercury

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SPEAKERS

If You Don't Know, Now You Know, Megan Goodwin, Bonus Ending, Simpsons, A Little Bit Leave It, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, Kainaz Amaria



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:17

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Megan Goodwin 00:40

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



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:46

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



Megan Goodwin 00:52

Oh my god. I'm so sorry. I wrote the rest of the episode, and I didn't do the top... so I just--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:01

You wrote "banter." So this is a part where we banter!

—



Megan Goodwin 01:05

wheezing It just says "banter!" That was a place holder!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:11

No! No, there's a reason that I drive the bus-- and this is why. *giggles* No, it's okay! We're gonna keep this--



Megan Goodwin 01:18

I'm so sorry! Yeah, but this is what we get-- no, this is what happens what I do writing at midnight, on a Saturd-- *wheezing*



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:27

Mhm, mhm. No! Sane, planning, sensible tomorrow is NOT yours. It's my bag.



Megan Goodwin 01:34

It is... for you to have. *laughing* So, well--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:37

Mhm, mhm. So, in the banter, what if I start off and say "Hey, Megan. How's it going?"



Megan Goodwin 01:45

snorts I-I'm great. *laughing* I'm super, super great! I KNEW I forgot something. How are you?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:51

I'm good! Also, I just-- for the record-- left it there, because I wanted you to see what would happen.



Megan Goodwin 01:56

laughing OH NO!!!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:59



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:59

Yeah! Fuck around and find out! We're doing great.



Megan Goodwin 02:04

Okay, well, this is an auspicious start to the podcast. Hello! We are.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:07

How 'bout this one, you ready?



Megan Goodwin 02:11

Okay, yeah. Sure.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:19

AAAAAAAAAAAYO.



Megan Goodwin 02:20

cackles Ooooookay! Good Freddie Mercury! So, I hear you setting the tone for our episode about Zoroastrianism! Good job.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:27

Indeed, I am. And I even did, like, a note? Which is unheard of in the Ilyse lexico of talking. I do not sing.



Megan Goodwin 02:36

laughs But you did! And I love it, and I know somewhere, Freddie is proud of you. Anyway, you want to do a lesson plan?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:45

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You go that way. I'll go this way, and I'll walk around in a circle to the lesson plan. We are almost through, Megan, our HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1, extravaganza, mega-season. So surely, our nerds know the drill by-- by now? One would hope? Banter?



Megan Goodwin 03:11

BANTER. You tell them anyway, Mary, because repetition is what?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:14

Repetition is GOOD pedagogy, and fundamental, I guess is the joke. Okay. Alright, fine. Let's, uh, let's shake off this beginning and jump into this episode's religious tradition, because it is-- Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is what Zoroastrians do, and we're gonna give our nerds a tiny wee insight into how Zoroastrianism got started, how folks are doing Zoroastrianism these days, and why you and I think this tradition matters, or at least, matters enough to get a slot on the coveted HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1 Keeping It 101 syllabus.



Megan Goodwin 03:27

Mhm! Very excited. Our thesis should also sound very familiar if you've been listening along the season, but we are nearing the end of the season-- thank goodness, because clearly, I cannot keep it together-- and I hear repetition is good pedagogy! So, let's review! Religion-- it's Imperial! We started calling the cluster of things we now call religion (like rituals, and sacred texts, and holy spaces, and ways of marking time and stages of life is special, and ways of knowing, and explanations for how things got to be the way they are, et cetera!)-- we started calling this cluster "religion" precisely as we started having things like nation-states, and those nation-states started using this cluster to explain why they could and should and would take over the territory and resources and humans of other regions.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:38

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And when we're thinking about Zoroastrianism, we can absolutely see imperialism in action. Members of this community didn't start out calling themselves Zoroastrians. No sirree Zarathustra. *laughs*



Megan Goodwin 04:50

Mhm! *snickers* It's a stupid joke. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did that to you.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:01

It's okay, I said it with tone because WOOF. I'm kidding. But! But you are right-- no sirree Zarathustra. Colonizers showed up with their pens and their clipboards, asked questions about the founder, and started referring to the community by the name-- and the anglicized name to that-- of its founder. And we'll, we'll come back to this in a minute!



Megan Goodwin 05:26

Definitely. Okay, so we're sticking to the thesis. You can tell I wrote this episode, because it's already broken up. A.) as we've been saying, for what feels like forever, religion is imperial. And B.) Zoroastrianism is one of the ways people do religion in the world, so, learning more about Zoroastrianism makes you more religiously literate! This is a small tradition compared to, say, Buddhism, but it's still internally diverse and wicked interesting. And we're delighted to have this episode's guest expert, Kainaz Asmara, joining us to share her experiences as a Fulbright scholar documenting the Zoroastrian community in India. Kainaz is Vox's Visual Editor, formerly an editor for NPR's Visual Team, and before that, she was a freelance photographer in Mumbai for outlets like the New York Times, Vogue India, and Reuters. We'll hear more about her work in a minute. For now, let's get into the 101 on today! *clicks tongue* The section where we do professor work. Uhhh, hey Ilyse! You--



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:23

Hi.



Megan Goodwin 06:23

Hi! Hi, hello. *giggles* You are an expert in many things about India. What do you know about Zoroastrianism? And Zoroastrians?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:31

Alright. I'm like rubbing my hands in anticipation.



Megan Goodwin 06:34

Ooooooh!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:37

Okay! Well, for starters, thank you for lobbing me a slow pitch, because you know I love to crush a ball, or something.



Megan Goodwin 06:45

cackles No comment.




Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:48

We're gonna let that slide. I meant, like, in a home-run scenario, but that sounded icky. Anyway! I know most of the world's Zoroastrians live in India and also Iran. I know Zoroastrians in India call themselves Parsis. *Secret Word of the Day!* I know Zoroastrianism is an ancient


Persian monotheistic religion and is possibly (though probably) the world's oldest monotheism. In fact, in India, they call themselves (and are called) Parsis BECAUSE they're Persian. So, Parsi basically means Persian, and Pars (or Fars, depending on where and how your pronunciation works) is a region of Iran today, which is where Persepolis is-- a super ancient part of the world, and it is the region from which Parsis derive their name. Literally, it just means Persian, right? Like, it's an ethnic marker, as well as a religious marker, in those languages.

 M Megan Goodwin 07:43


Ohhh! I did not know that. I learned something today!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:46

Well, good! I'm so glad that years of studying Indo-European languages, which include ALL of this cluster of stuff, is paying off in some minor way.

 M Megan Goodwin 07:55

For me, personally. Good!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:57

Yeah! I mean, listen. 15 years of study should be JUST for you.

 M Megan Goodwin 08:02

laughs Yeah, that sounds right.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:04

So, as I said, practitioners of this tradition did not start out calling themselves Zoroastrians, okay? I know the tradition was founded by a man named Zoroaster, I guess-- or, frankly, in Persian, Zartosht.


 M Megan Goodwin 08:24


Okay.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:26


And I know-- surprise, surprise-- that when European colonizers showed up in India, they asked about founders and holy books and so then they started calling this community after the name


about founders and holy books, and so then they started calling this community after the name of its founder, thus, the very anglicized: Zoroastrianism.

 Megan Goodwin 08:40
Yeaaahh, yeah.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:41
Like, that I-A-N plus I-S-M... It is like... it is like a... it's like a, it's like a clusterfuck of anglicization.

 Megan Goodwin 08:51
laughs It's just... imperial, religious mess. Yes. See also: Confucianism! Hmm. As I suspected, you know a lot. You especially kn-- I knew that. You especially know that colonizers gonna colonize, and they love to colonize existing traditions by taking a (usually male) founder's name and slapping an -ism on the end. Yeah. Did you also know that early practitioners originally called it something like, "the good tradition" or "the good way?"

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:18
Indeed, I did, you ginger quizster. I know that many practitioners NOW call themselves Zoroastrians, and plenty of Parsis called themselves, well, Parsis, but the word functions, as I said, ethnically and maybe without a mandate on religious practice, but-- as we're always saying, language is fluid and contested. Religiously speaking, since I suppose this is a podcast about religion and not just colonialism-- though, as we keep saying, you cannot have one without the other-- I know that striving for good is at the center of the tradition we now know as Zoroastrianism, and as earliest practitioners knew themselves.


 Megan Goodwin 09:59
Mhm! It sure is. So, Zoroastrians strive for good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. This effort is reflected in a symbol called the faravahar. *Secret Word of the Day* This example obviously works really well in an audio medium. Yeah. But, picture a big bearded dude with huge three tiered wings, facing to the left. The three tears on his left-hand wings represent good thoughts, good words and good deeds. The tears on his right-hand wings, that he's facing away from, represent bad thoughts, bad words, and bad deeds. Zoroastrians are supposed to turn toward the good and away from the bad, and some Zoroastrians wear the faravahar as a reminder for them to do just that.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:34
Yeah! And we also mentioned up top that Zoroastrianism is monotheistic. So, in Avestan, Zoroastrian sacred language, the name for God is Ahura Mazda. *Secret Word of the Day*

Ahura Mazda is "the wise lord," singular, who created the world in which good will eventually prevail.

 Megan Goodwin 10:56

True story! This is why practitioners historically also call themselves Mazda-worshipping people. And in the Zoroastrian worldview, Ahura Mazda is the source of all light, goodness, truth, and life. He is infinite and infinitely good. Zoroastrians often use fire to represent Ahura Mazda in rituals and sacred spaces, which are also known as fire temples! But they're not worshipping the fire itself (no matter what gross colonialist accounts say).

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:20


Yes. *chuckles* IMPORTANT.

 Megan Goodwin 11:22

Yeah, yeah. AND, Ahura Mazda is opposed by Angra Mainyu, the spirit of destruction-- but ultimately, good wins out and everybody winds up in the Good Place, eventually.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:34

Hmm. I'm curious, if we might spy here, a rejection of samsara, a concept that we've talked about in the last couple of episodes-- this endless cycle of death and rebirth, experienced as both fact and hardship-- which is shared by many religions, especially those that originated in South Asia, like Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism. I'm not going to get into it, but let me tell you how many hours in my life I have spent with Sanskrit and Avestan experts talking about linguistic similarities between South Asian religions as a cluster, and particularly those that trace their linguistic heritage to Sanskrit, as well as Zoroastrian and Avestan speaking people. So, therefore they're somehow philosophically, socially, or culturally linked-- but anyway, I'm already too far down that rabbit hole and you can tell that grad school scarred me deeply.

 Megan Goodwin 12:20

Yeah, a lil bit. Lil bit, lil bit. It's okay, you're safe. It's not your fault. It's not your fault.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:25

Well, I will never get over someone, like, a classicist in UVM casually-- I'm, like, on the job three days-- they casually walk into my office and they're like, "We heard you do Sanskrit!" and I was like, "Indeed, I do do Sanskrit" and they were like, "Could you teach Avestan?" and I was like, "I don't understand how to answer that question. Like, you need to leave my office... now."



Megan Goodwin 12:43

Woof.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:43

Anyway, keep going! *laughs*



Megan Goodwin 12:45

Woof. ANYWAY! In Zoroastrianism, and, as Marshall Mathers warns us, you only get ONE shot.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:52

Mom's spaghetti.



Megan Goodwin 12:53

laughs But, as you pointed out, even folks whose bad thoughts, bad words, and bad deeds merit punishment in the afterlife eventually wind up in the Good Place. What else do our nerds need to know, IRMF?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:07

So... even though it's comparatively small, I want to insist that Zoroastrianism is a global religion. There are Zoroastrians all over the world! And Zoroastrianism is shaped by its global spread, sometimes under explicit religious persecution, right? So, like, moving from one place to the other under duress.



Megan Goodwin 13:15


Yes. Yeah, do it!





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:26


Other times, it's based on broader, European imperialist... let us say, distaste, for all of their colonized subjects. So, for example, when we see British colonizers and imperialists-- I'm putting this in big quotes-- "offering" South Asians the "opportunity," in quotes, to move to settlements in Africa, right? Like, this is not really about persecution outwardly, but it's not NOT about persecution. It's about the movement of bodies under imperialism. So, that's option number two. And other times, frankly, it's just like how people move about! Like, Indian Ocean trade, for example. We already said that most Zoroastrians live in India and Iran, but there are


also Zoroastrian communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, UK, Australia, New Zealand, also Zanzibar and Kenya have sizable populations, and of course, the United States.


 Megan Goodwin 14:21
Yes. And Canada!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:23
Oh, and Canada. Yep. So, in short, small religion by population-- something like 150,000 to 200,000 people worldwide-- but not small by global spread. And some of that "we live everywhere!" thing is about-- you guessed it-- colonialism.

 Megan Goodwin 14:40
Yeah, yeah. I suspect it IS about colonialism. Yeah.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:45
Is there anything else that we think we should say?

 Megan Goodwin 14:47
So, the aspect of Zoroastrianism that always inspires the most student questions in my Global Religions class is that historically, you have to be born Zoroastrian. American students don't like to be told that they can't just have something. Kind of a... running issue with imperialism. Anyway. So, yeah. You historically have had to be born a Zoroastrian. You can't convert, and specifically, your dad has to be Zoroastrian. Your mom's religion is not really an issue, traditionally, which, you know... mm. But as more Zoroastrian women are getting married later, having fewer or no children, and/or are marrying outside their religious community, they're facing a lot of pressure and blame for letting the religion, quote unquote, "die out."

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:30
sighs Yeah. But not all Zoroastrians subscribe to the more conservative understanding of their religious identity. So, we're going to link to an article about this in the show notes, but Zoroastrianism is actually on the rise in North America, in large part because Zoroastrian communities in the US and Canada recognize and include children from so-called "mixed marriages" of Zoroastrian women to non-Zoroastrian men.

 Megan Goodwin 15:54

Yep! And this isn't unique to the US or Canada, either. These conversations are happening everywhere there are Zoroastrians, but the population of Zoroastrians is on the rise in North America right now. The issue of who counts or who doesn't as part of a religious community is sooooo complicated, and of course, is in no way unique to Zoroastrianism. Lots of religious communities tacitly or explicitly encourage members to marry within their own community.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:17

Yeah. And like, historically and legally speaking, there's been a lot of comparisons between Jews and Zoroastrians, or Jews and Parsis in particular within the British imperial unit-- because that's when I know the best-- specifically along these lines. So, Jews (as you may know, Megan, but probably our listeners may not) is considered to be a matrilineal legacy. So, if your mom's not Jewish, you got problems. Which, a rabbi, when I was a kid, very fancifully and disgustingly referred to as "The Rape Clause."



Megan Goodwin 16:50

Ew!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:50

So, that's great. Anyway!



Megan Goodwin 16:53

Ewww!!!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:54

I mean, it stuck with me, so I guess it was good teaching? But also, what if we teach without trauma? Anyway! So, there's lots of comparisons between these small communities that have global reach, that influence the way we think about monotheism, and how these communities both encourage marriage within their own communities for practical reasons, like tradition and passing on community, but also for prosecutorial reasons. If you are ghettoized, chances of you being able to marry outside of your religion are slim to none, because religions are racialized.



Megan Goodwin 17:32

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:32

So, there's a lot of comparison to be done here. And if I think about it, I did not put it in

homework, but I can throw it on the show notes when I make the web-- the webpage.



Megan Goodwin 17:41

Okay, great! All of this is to say that religious belonging is complicated and that Zoroastrianism, like all religions, is internally diverse. Not everybody agrees on who counts, much like Flo and her bacon cheeseburgers.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:53

Mhm!



Megan Goodwin 17:53

And on that note, let's hear from our guest expert, Kainaz Amaria, about what makes this tradition unique and how contemporary Zoroastrians are... doing it? Zoroastrianism, that is.



Kainaz Amaria 18:06

Hi, everyone. Thanks for having me! I'm Kainaz. I am a Visuals Editor at vox.com, and my background is in photojournalism. I studied photojournalism and now run a team, a small team of visual people for a news site. So, that's just a little bit about me and what I do now. It's relevant because, for the longest time, becoming a journalist meant that I was telling other people's stories, and that's what I loved. I loved walking into places and asking people questions, and understanding where they find belonging. And then I realized, for a long time, I didn't quite understand where I belonged, and that's when I went to India to do a project on the Parsi community because I was born into the community in Bombay. My mother and father are both Parsis. My mother belongs to a priest family, so her father was a prominent priest in India. And so, I wanted to go to Bombay and to, you know, to places in Gujarat, where my parents grew up, and learn about this side of me that I just never really quite reconciled with, my sort of American experience, if you will. Through the language of journalism and visual journalism, I got to spend time with the Parsi community for a couple of years and learn much more about the faith, and the practice, and the ritual, and the politics. So, the one thing that I think I wished people knew about Zoroastrian traditions is less about, you know, what they look like and more about out what they mean. These traditions and rituals are thousands of years old, and what I think is so wonderful about them is that they really take in different aspects of philosophy, you know, the religion, the environment, being ecologically friendly and sound, and trying to not only impact good towards people, but also good towards the place, and the earth, and the space that you inhabit. I think that location plays a big part of how you can practice and express your Zoroastrian identity. Being in Bombay and visiting places that were really dense, dense Parsi populations, you really felt the expression of Zoroastrianism. You felt-- you smelled the food, you know, you saw people wearing faravahars around their neck-- around their necks, you saw people going in and out of the fire temples, and I think that, you know, that epicenter, you know, you can't-- I mean, in Bombay, you have Parsi cafes, you know. I don't have that in DC, and so, it's much harder to practice and actually, like, outwardly show my Zoroastrian identity being away from India. And that was, that was the same growing up in California. We

obviously had things at home that were Zoroastrian, but once I stepped out of the home, there was no expression of that Zoroastrian identity that I took with me. So, I think one festival-- well, not really festival... So, one experience that really impacted me and my relationship with my Parsi identity is my grandfather is a priest at one of our most treasured fire temples, or Atash Behrams. It's in a small town called Udvada, which is where, uh, kind of near where the Parsis came after they left Persia, and it's called the Iranshah. And, so every day, five times a day, the priests do what's called a boi ceremony, which is when they pray in front of the flame that is continuously lit and just keep the fire going. And it's a really beautiful ceremony. It doesn't take more than five to 10 minutes, and there was one time that the boi happened at midnight. And so, the Iranshah is this beautiful fire temple. It's constructed-- inside, it has all this beautiful wood finishings, and it's really quiet at midnight, it's lit by candlelight, you hear the priest ring the bell, and then start praying in this very, sort of, deep, deep sort of voice and praying in the Avestan language. And it is probably the closest I've ever felt to, to my ancestors, to the people that came before me. And you just sort of sit and listen to the priest, and you can pray along in your head. And it was, it was beautiful, and it was very peaceful, and it's one of the experiences that I treasure most from being able to spend time in India. So, I think most Westerners don't know about Zoroastrianism for a couple of reasons. One, when we came from Persia to India, we agreed to not proselytize our faith. So that's when we stopped allowing people to convert into the religion. So, our numbers started dwindling off the bat. I would say the other reason is that, you know, I mean, other faiths around us started, you know, colonizing and conquering and proselytizing, and so, just in that one dynamic, millions of Zoroastrians cease to exist and then other religions started cropping up. And I think now, because we don't have many texts-- source material-- I think it's very difficult for people to access the faith because they're not studying scripture, or there's not enough-- as much scripture to study. And again, I am not a scholar. I'm not a Parsi scholar or Zoroastrian scholars, so I bet a scholar could answer this question much better than I could, but that's just me sort of speculating. I do wish that there was an opportunity that the faith could have a resurgence, at least in popular culture, mostly because we are the, you know, first faith to consider good versus evil and light versus darkness, which really, this dichotomy is wrapped up into pretty much all of our narratives, and in our values and our worldviews, and that is pretty unique to our faith, I'd say. If you see my graduate film, you'll get a sense of this that I struggled with when I was in India was the politics. A lot of the problems in our faith are not based on scripture or the faith, but more of the politics and around being a Parsi, around who has power. Believe it or not, it's a lot about real estate, because in Bombay, some of the real estate that Parsis have is pretty remarkable, and I'm pretty sure that people are salivating to get their hands on some of the housing that the Parsis have right now. And so, that means trusts, people are on boards and trusts, become very powerful, and they get to sway a lot of priests! And they get to have a lot of outsized influence on how the religion is practiced because of this. And they're not elec-- uh, they are elected, but they're not, you know, they're not priests, they're not scholars of the faith. They are largely people that are popular, with a lot of money. I found that quite interesting when I went to India. I thought, because I was a Parsi Zoroastrian, I would be welcomed with open arms.-- and for the most part, I was, but there were people that were very skeptical, because they do sometimes see-- the diasporas may be more liberal, and want to paint, sort of, the Bombay Parsis or the Indian Parsis as sort of backward. I guess the other thing that I wanted to add is that that becomes complicated when you're a woman, and you grew up in the Bay Area, and you did go and get your degrees, and you married later, and you married outside of the faith, and you are sort of seen as an example of why the faith is dwindling. And that's really hard to reconcile with, that's something that I tried to pick apart in the film, but I think, personally, the diaspora is thriving and alive, and as you all mentioned, is sort of increasing in population. We're such a small faith, we probably shouldn't have different sects or sectors or, you know, denominations. I did find that very-- it is very difficult to reconcile such a beautiful

faith with such great rituals, and themes, and values towards the Earth, towards, you know, the environment, towards you know, good thoughts, good words, good deeds, towards, you know, searching your own righteous path, towards, you know, trying to to make a positive impact and then, you know, telling-- and then having, sort of, like, priests, or people that are big influencers in the religion-- whether it be because they're rich, or they just have a lot of political capital-- say that, you know, I'm an example of the reason why the faith is dwindling, as opposed to them not evolving and the faith not evolving for the times that we live in. I really love being Zoroastrian. I love how I grew up, and I love when we first came to the US. Of course, we didn't have a fire temple and the parents would cobble together "Sunday School" at different people's houses, and we'd do potlucks, and we'd sit on the floor and someone would tell us about, you know, the stories. I do, I do appreciate that I grew up in that environment, and then I did also appreciate my time in Bombay when I could go back and sort of learn about the faith on my own terms, and take what I wanted to take that worked for my life, and that's what I'm going to hopefully pass on to my son!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 29:55

It's been so great to learn from all these smart folks who've shared their expertise with us this season. I know a lot about religion/religions in India, but I'm NOT an expert in Parsis or Zoroastrianism. So I really appreciate Kainaz's insights into this vibrant community, and I'll add that I think it's really fun to have someone whose expertise is media-driven and not necessarily, like, linguistic-- because my own background and doorways into Zoroastrianism is through language and manuscripts, as opposed to, like, contemporary communities or documentaries or something. So, that's fun for me.



Megan Goodwin 30:36

Yay! I like it too! Extremely same! I have learned SO much about Zoroastrianism from Kainaz over the last-- yikes!-- two decades, and I've especially appreciated the way her photography allows us a window into religious spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible to non-Zoroastrian folks. We'll link to her great short film, "Being Zoroastrian," in the shownotes. But now, it's time for... A Little Bit, Leave It!



A Little Bit Leave It 30:59

It's A Little Bit Leave It!



Megan Goodwin 31:05


It's a little bit to leave you with! Namely, the little bit we think is the most interesting, most important, or most challenging aspect about this episode's topic.




Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:14


Alright, so I'm going to-- I'm going to A Little Bit Leave you with something I A Little Bit already said, which is that Parsis, and Zoroastrians more broadly, not just the group of folks that live in


said, which is that Parsis, and Zoroastrians more broadly-- not just the group of folks that live in India or its diasporas-- really do, for me, embody what we're talking about when we're talking about religion being imperial, and also, religion being inherently global based on people's political spaces, right?

 Megan Goodwin 31:42
Mhm!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:43
So, we start off in this region in Iran, Pars, or Fars, we move from that region through the Gulf and through the Indian Ocean, to Mumbai or Bombay-- which, if you can't picture the map in your head, dear nerds, we are talking about the west coast of the Indian peninsula-- and then we've got both movement from India to East Africa, especially, like, Zanzibar and Kenya, through Indian Ocean trade before colonialism, and then AFTER colonialism as, like... both like a "get out of dodge" with the British-- there were, like, these complicated, FUCKED up schemes about, like, paying back your, like, taxes and, like, essentially, like, poor man's jail, right? Like, all of those ways that you would be indebted to the state, and so you move to other places to get out of debt and then didn't. But then you've got persecution that happens in those spaces, right? So what does it mean to be born in Africa, but to not be Black in a moment of white supremacist imperialism. Then, if you're a British subject, do you then move to London? Right? So like, you could trace the movement of Parsis based on ALL sorts of political, social, colonial, imperial definitions. You start to see these definitions be ethnic. So, all that is just to say, religion is imperial, duh, but also, your religious identity may or may not have anything to do with what you practice. It might have EVERYTHING to do with your racialized, ethnicized identity. And that's why religion is complicated. So that's my TOO long Little Bit Leave It.

 Megan Goodwin 33:17
Yeah! *giggles* That was a LOT of Little Bit Leave It, but it was great! I love it. My Little Bit Leave It is just that Zoroastrians are still Zoroastrian-ing. Zoroastrianing? Yeah, they're just-- they're still doing it! When this community makes the news, the story is usually about the people and the religion supposedly dying out. There are also a lot of really gross, kind of, exoticizing pieces about the way that Zoroastrian folks mourn their dead and treat dead bodies, which I'm not even going to get into. But! Zoroastrianism is NOT dying out, it's just changing! Because the communities who do Zoroastrianism are changing. So, we have more resources on how they're changing in the shownotes!

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 34:07
Well, if you don't know, now you know!

 If You Don't Know, Now You Know 34:09
If You Don't Know, Now You Know



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 34:11

The segment where we get one factoid each. Megan, I'm gonna go first, because I started with an AAAAAAAAYO, and didn't even talk about it! So, my factoid is that when I have EVER mentioned Parsis, like, in, like, a glance in a South Asian religions class, or... I always start my classes with music, and so, sometimes I'd put on random people and then they have to figure out, like, why that's being played. Freddie Mercury is everybody's favorite Parsi, I think. Or, for a certain generation, because I don't know what the youths know anymore. But, Freddie Mercury hide a lot of stuff, but also, his ethnic and religious identities. But-- he was born to a Indian Parsi family in Zanzibar, and then moves to the UK famously, of course, and then becomes Freddie Mercury. And I think that people often are like, "that's the one famous person" like, "oh, you know a Zoroastrian! It's Freddie Mercury." So, that's a fucking cool guy to represent you, man! I wish-- I mean, that's the coolest! Anyway. Anyway! That's my factoid. Freddie Mercury. Go ahead.



Megan Goodwin 34:21

I know! That's a good factoid. I love it! I love it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:22

I guess, sure.



Megan Goodwin 35:23

I'm gonna cheat, as I guess I almost always do in this section and sneak in double factoids. One is ridiculous, and personally mortifying, as is my way. The other is about journalism and contemporary global politics. I mean, they're, they're both political. Everything is political. But, let's start with the most recent bit first. So, a thing that I've learned while seeking out current news items on the Zoroastrian community for my Global Religions class is that Parsis often get held up as model minorities in India, especially but not exclusively since Modi became Prime Minister. This is not a coincidence. There's a significant Parsi population in Gujarat, the state Modi governed before becoming Prime Minister, and that Parsi community includes some fairly affluent business people. So, there's a lot more to be said about well-off Parsis supporting Modi. But A.) that support is not universal, #NotAllParsis. And B.) and more importantly-- I am fully out of my depth here-- I will simply mention that the Wall Street Journal, of all places, runs more stories about Zoroastrians and Zoroastrianism than you might expect a U.S. based newspaper to, especially one that usually does very little religion reporting. So, I will link you to an example in the shownotes!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:37

Alright, what's your second snuck-in factoid, you rule breaker?



Megan Goodwin 36:40

I am a rule breaker. See, when... I write the episode, it's complete chaos. Just... ANYWAY. Second factoid/truly mortifying confession (because internal-- internalized cultural Catholicism, like Goonies, never says die): I met today's guest expert at Boston University. We were roommates for a semester! And while Kainaz was introducing herself, she mentioned that she was Parsi. And I was just reading about Parsis! I declared, like the absolute dork I have always been. And Kay said, "What?" Quite rightly. And then... oh, nerds. It pains me to tell you this, you know, but better out than in-- I showed her the book that I was reading? That book... was Rudyard Kipling's "Just So Stories--"



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:29

Oh my god, no. Megan!



Megan Goodwin 37:30

I know. I know, I know, I know, I know. The Parsi I had been reading about was illustrated in this version.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:37

No!!!!



Megan Goodwin 37:38

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was very dark, he was practically nekkid, he was sitting in a tree, he had a big hat on, that was about it. This is A) maybe another story about how I/everybody should maybe have realized much earlier than we did that I'm autistic, but it is ALSO the story of how I accidentally did a hate crime to the first Parsi I ever met. Kainaz is still talking to me, which, I think, is very kind of her, but I remind-- remain deeply embarrassed and ashamed of the incident. Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to read colonizers. Although, my dad is really the one who got me into Kipling. ANYWAY.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:15

Yeah, that's a big... that's a big anyway, I'm just gonna...



Megan Goodwin 38:19

Yeah. Yeah, yeah yeah. Just pivot. Just pivot. Yup! Yup.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:26

Don't pack up yet, nerds. It's time for homework!



Simpsons 38:30

Homework!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:30

She says, disastrously. As always, we've got citations, references, and other goodies, as well as transcripts, stashed at keepingit101.com for every single episode! So check it out, especially if you're writing lesson plans. It's really helpful.



Megan Goodwin 38:45

It IS really helpful.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:46

Alright, Goodwin. Why don't you redeem yourself with some good homework?



Megan Goodwin 38:49

Yes, please. Jesus. You can check out lots of Kainaz's work on the website for Vox, where she is the Visual Editor. She has done some really striking photography-driven political reporting, and I have especially appreciated her voice and her insights on how racism and exploitative images of human suffering inform reporting on people of color, particularly in times of crisis. We'll link to her Vox page in the shownotes, obviously, but listeners might be especially interested in the piece she did with Sigal Samuel, who was formerly the religion editor at The Atlantic. She's now senior reporter at Vox, and they did a co-written piece on the 45th's president praise for India as a bastion of religious freedom while anti-Muslim violence was erupting in February 2020. Kainaz also curated a fascinating and deeply upsetting gallery of images from the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem in 2018. But the piece of casework that I return to most frequently is the short film she produced as a Fulbright scholar in Mumbai in 2010. It's called "Being Zoroastrian," it runs about 10 minutes, and it provides complex personal and community insights into contemporary Parsi belonging. It's on Vimeo, it's free-- high recommend. As I have said, I am WAY out of my depth here, so I do NOT have any scholarly sources to offer y'all aside from the, like, meh world religions textbook that I used to use for this class. But I HAVE taught a number of news articles as part of Zoroastrianism day in Global Religions. A few of my favs include a piece from Middle East Eye about Zoroastrian priestesses in Iran. You know how I love a priestess. I also like to juxtapose the piece Shaun Walker wrote for The Guardian called "The Last of the Zoroastrians" with Amy dePaul's "Zoroastrianism Rises in North America" for The Wall Street Journal, because I am a jerk like that. I did a big lecture thread on Zoroastrianism while I was teaching Global Religions remotely, so I will share that link

in the shownotes as well. And then, while prepping for this episode, I found a cool item about ancient Zoroastrian texts being found in China, written by Ursula Sims-Williams, who is Curator of Iranian languages at the British Library, and thus, I assume, knows whereof she writes. And then, lastly, and perhaps most randomly, Dave Malloy's "Moby Dick: A Musical Reckoning" (which I saw back at the ART when live theater felt less like taking my life in my own hands), and it includes a fourth-wall break moment where a character does a real quick compare and contrast between Zoroastrianism and Islam, because reasons? I don't know. You're welcome. End of homework. What you got, lady?!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 41:14

I have a number of books. I'll... let me just jump in.



Megan Goodwin 41:17

Okay!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 41:18

So, Mahnaz Moazami's book called "Zoroastrianism: A Collection of Articles from the Encyclopedia Iranica" is a collection of articles from the Encyclopedia Iranica. So, if your university doesn't have access to the Encyclopedia Iranica, it is basically an English language tertiary source of all things that you could possibly want. But, she compiled all these, and it's pretty good. I think it's expensive, so if you are part of a university, get it through there, and if not, you can ILL it, even at your public libraries. Anyway, it's a good, like, bunch of articles that are all introductory, so, really useful.



Megan Goodwin 41:59

Nice!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:01

My favorite, more recent book on Zoroastrians is Mitra Sharafi's book called "Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772-1947." She's a JD PhD, so her stuff is inherently legal history, but really good and I have an interview on a podcast with new books that work on that, too, if that's interesting to you. Jenny Rose, who's at Claremont, has some really great stuff on Zoroastrianism. She actually has two intros, one of which is more academic and the other for more mass audiences. The academic one is called "Zoroastrianism: An Introduction," and the more broad, broad, mass-media one is called "Zoroastrianism: A Guide for the Perplexed." Both are pretty good, and relatively affordable. I think you'll find "Zoroastrianism: A Guide for the Perplexed" in more public libraries, Barnes and Noble-type places.



Megan Goodwin 42:54



Megan Goodwin 42:54

That sounds... yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 42:54

But the piece of Jenny Rose's work that I like a lot is called "The Image of Zoroaster: The Persian Mage Through European Eyes," because it actually shows you how Zoroastrianism and Zoroaster himself gets shaped through colonialism.



Megan Goodwin 43:13

Cool! And you know I love a mage!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:15

I know! Alright, so moving into something else-- for young adult fiction, with a dash of angst about belonging, queerness, and the background noise of being Zoroastrian, I high recommend "Darius the Great Is Not Okay" by Adib Khorram and its sequel, "Darius the Great Deserves Better." Super queer, super fun, all about identity. High recommend. You'll-- listeners, you'll probably read it in, like, a day.



Megan Goodwin 43:39

Yeah, but it's lovely.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:41

And, uh, as I've said many a time, my favorite Parsi remains Freddie Mercury, aka Farrokh Bulsara, whose own life of Parsi-Indian descent born in Zanzibar, who later anglicized his name for all the reasons-- look, it's great! It shows the colonialism and violence inherent in a system. So you should go listen to Queen wherever you get music! And since no one consumes albums as holes anymore, I say as some sort of elder millennial, you could just listen on Spotify. But if you do listen to albums, my personal favorites are "Queen," "Jazz," and "A Night at the Opera."



Megan Goodwin 44:13

Nice!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:14

BUT! Anyway, like we said, nerds, this is not necessarily either of our hardcore wheelhouse. So, if you are listening and want to tell us on Twitter or Instagram what else we should be reading, please do! This is exactly what we want and we'll add it to the shownotes.



Megan Goodwin 44:28

Yes. Please and thank you. Big thanks to those of you writing reviews on iTunes, Amazon and Google it really helps. And if you want to be Nerd of the Week, write us a review. That's how we see your silly handle, you sillies! Thanks to former guest, Dheepa Sundaram, who reviewed us, as well as Flo M., Ilyse's mom, reviewing us across all platforms. Way to saturate the market, Flo. Thank you!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:49

Join us next time for more HISTORY OF THE WORLD (RELIGIONS) PART 1, when we spend a night at the museum for applied learning fun with our bestie and consulting scholar at the National Museum of American History, Dr. Andrew Aghapour. Shoutout to research assistant Alex Castellano, whose transcription work makes this pod accessible and therefore awesome. If you need more religion nerderie, find us where you know we live-- Twitter. That's where we are.



Megan Goodwin 45:15

Twitterton. That's correct. You can find me on Twitter @mpgPhD, and Ilyse @ProfIRMF, or the show @keepingit_101. Find the website at keepingit101.com. Peep the Insta, if you wanna, and with that...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:32

Peace out, nerds!



Megan Goodwin 45:34

Do your homework! It's on the syllabus.



Bonus Ending 46:22

Freddie Mercury, "Alright!"