

Theme Music ([00:00](#)):

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

Welcome to Keeping it 101: a Killjoys introduction to religion podcast.

Megan ([00:21](#)):

What's up, nerds?

Ilyse ([00:22](#)):

Hi. Hello. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, one half of the killjoys on this here podcast. I'm the one that talks about Islam, imperialism, racialization of Muslims, and the history of religion.

Megan ([00:32](#)):

Hi. Hello. I'm Megan Goodwin. The other half of the Killjoys in your ears. I'm the one that focuses on gender, sexuality, white supremacy, minority religions, politics, and America. On today...

Ilyse ([00:42](#)):

On today's episode, we're asking "major religions, minor religions, must we?" In truth, this is part one of two episodes where we dive into how we talk about study and think about religion as it impacts how people do religion. This time we're talking about the historical theory, the damage the system of major and minor religions does. Next time we're going to talk about specific case studies.

Ilyse ([01:04](#)):

Turn to page 394 because it's time for the lesson plan.

Megan ([01:13](#)):

Okay, so we've been talking about religion, why we care about how religion gets defined, and one of the big reasons we care about how religion gets defined is these so-called major religions, right? What counts as a major religion. So we're going to talk about what major religions are, how they came to be identified as a major, and who gets erased when certain folks are major religions and other folks are not. So we're going to take down bookstore shelves, textbooks, college curricula, and what you think, you know, Killjoys at the ready.

Ilyse ([01:47](#)):

Okay. So here's the major segment of this episode. It's keeping it 101: our evidence and thesis. So, Megan, can you tell me again what our major religions?

Megan ([01:58](#)):

I can tell you Ilyse, and I will tell you, so, all right. If I say religions or major religions, what comes to mind? So you probably go to the big ones, right? And even the big ones, me and me and things like Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. Yeah. So if those are the religions that you're thinking about, those are the traditions that you're thinking about. Even if you've never taken a religious studies

course or done interfaith work, you have already internalized this major religions idea. -So what we want to think about today is who gets left out and why do we care?

Ilyse ([02:30](#)):

Uh, this happens to be fellow nerds, one of my areas of expertise. And so my job today is to be to lay out what's going on with evidence and, and our thesis and Megan job is going to be to make sure that I don't talk your your ears off too, too terribly. So I would like to tell you all a little story about how we got to the world's religions because spoiler alert, it is 100% imperialism. Cue horrible, uh, like sound effect here.

Megan ([03:06](#)):

Hey Ilyse, can you tell me what we're talking about when we're talking about imperialism?

Ilyse ([03:10](#)):

So imperialism is, imperialism can mean a few things, but predominantly when I talk about imperialism, I mean the ways in which European empires set up shop around the world usually to extract goods and resources, which for many moments in Imperial expansion included people and not just natural resources or people were included amongst natural resources and used the use those far fields, locations to bolster economies back home. So we often talk about, you know, like for me imperialize India versus London at home, right? So lots of things are taken from India, like the hope diamond that all of you know about and other sorts of things and sent back to London, sort of stripping that bear from India and increasing the Crown's wealth, uh, at home.

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

Cool. When we talk about this in my classes are very short definition of imperialism is trying to expand the influence of a country beyond that country's borders. And it's related to colonialism, i.e., Showing up and taking other people's stuff. We don't actually say stuff, but you know, it's a PG podcast. So we think about these as holding horrible hands going across the world, taking other people's resources, humans, accumulated wealth and bringing them back and using them for the good of this country that is trying to become an empire. Is that fair?

Ilyse ([04:43](#)):

Yeah, that's totally fair. I think the only thing I would add is that for me the difference between colonial and Imperial is when that region becomes formally recognized in some way by the home state. So the difference between colonial India and Imperial India is literally when queen Victoria names herself, the Empress of India. And then starts to administer that space, um, in a fundamentally different way. Now, functionally, I don't know that there's a big difference. And I have, I have written way too much about this and talk too much about it. Functionally, I don't think it works that different. I don't think the dudes on the ground as part of like the East India trading company militias are functioning differently between like one day to the next, but legally they usually, um, and not in all places and not in all times, but legally there's usually a slight difference between a colony and an Imperial settlement.

Megan ([05:39](#)):

I love it. I learned something today. Thanks friend.

Ilyse ([05:41](#)):

You're welcome.

Ilyse ([05:52](#)):

So let me illustrate that with an example because what that sounded like was a lot of, uh, how shall we say heady word vomit. Uh, I like to tell this story, but it's about box checking. So on a census in say, by, I don't know, colonial India something some of us know a little bit about, uh, listeners, that's a joke. That's what I've done all of my research and writing on. So bear with me as I make bad jokes that you don't get.

Megan ([06:17](#)):

I know a little bit about it because I read your book.

Ilyse ([06:20](#)):

It's true. So in colonial India, a lot of the British Imperial and colonial forces would they want to know what they're working with, right? They show up as Eddie Izzard tells us, they have conquered the world through the cutting use of flags. It's a bad imperialism joke, friends. And in doing so they then need to know how to govern and the British fancy themselves, I dunno, "Civilized." And so they think governing means knowing a little bit about the people that they're working with and then making rules that both accommodate those things and then also force them to continue to fulfill those ideas. So one of the ways that we see this is in census data. Just the very act of checking a box that says, are you Hindu? Are you Muslim? Are you Sikh? Are you, are you Jain? Are you a Christian? And then on the early 1800 ones it would have things like "animism," which everyone feel free to unpack in your own time, but is kind of baloney and all sorts of other religions--but you couldn't pick two. So there loses the space of saying, I don't know, maybe I don't identify as a Hindu. Maybe identified specifically as a Sufi Shivite, so a particular sort of Islam and a particular sort of Hinduism. That would be my personal identification, but this year's form says, I need to check one box. Now, if checking the boxes doesn't sound like it's that big of a deal--if it just sounds like, yeah, yeah, yeah--That's what we do on college applications, who the hell cares? Well, like, what does that box checking mean when there are state by state or region by region, quotas on who can be hired for, in some places, the only well paying jobs. What does it matter when there are different legal systems set up for people who are Muslim as opposed to Hindu under colonial law and the and the category of Muslim personal law which govern things like how you can get married if you can get divorced, what kinds of inheritance and tax law apply to you and your progeny? Right. So this box checking is not a small deal, but it also means that you as a person have to start identifying with that box in order to make sense in a in a set of social situations.

Ilyse ([08:33](#)):

So it's not just about lying to the state, right? Cause like I think everyone likes to imagine that they would be the James Bond of their story. That you could check all the boxes you want, show up in public, continue to name yourself in one particular way and then go home and be like, right, right, right. So they think I'm a Hindu, but really I'm this other thing that I have a special name for. And that's cute. And I'm sure some people did that, but that's not how social--like that's not how sociality works. When you are constantly labeling yourself in very particular ways and having that reinforced, rewarded or reinforced and punished when you then grow up in systems where you can't imagine not having used this label, then suddenly as a, as Foucault would say, your conditions of possibility are limited. So this has generational effect and it fundamentally changes the way people think, which is why people like Frantz Fanon used the, the language of colonization of the mind. That it's not just about the ideas out there

that you have to confront in the street. It's about the way it seeps into your very ability to think, not just about the worlds you live in, but about yourself and your place in that world.

Megan ([09:42](#)):

So if you have to fit yourself into government lists, it's not just filling out forms, it's teaching you who you can and can't be in the world.

Ilyse ([09:50](#)):

Totally. And we see this in a lot of different communities, right? Jews often call themselves Jews, but that's not, that's not the original names that Jews had for themselves. That was a label somebody else put on them. That doesn't mean that my use of that term is any less valid or somehow inauthentic or like that. I've appropriated my own group name from somebody else and it doesn't mean I've reclaimed that name. Right. But it also doesn't change the history of that name. That's a slur label that someone else put on me that at some point my community said, I guess that's our name. And it's not as simple as one person or one group of people saying, yep, that's us. We except that name. It's about slow shifts in the way that we see naming work. And there are arguments that say that that's how Hindu as a, as a title has worked and so on and so forth. And so this isn't a small deal. It's even just in the very way we name these so-called major religions has a tie to these definitional systems that are rooted in power.

Megan ([10:54](#)):

Mmm. So it sounds like when we're talking about religion and what gets defined as religion, we are also talking about power.

Ilyse ([11:03](#)):

Yeah, I mean, and this is the spoiler alert of spoiler alert. Dear nerds, everything is about power.

Megan ([11:10](#)):

It's true.

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

And that's not just cause like that's a hammer in our theoretical toolbox. And therefore what we see everything as a nail. That's because power really matters, right? We know that Edward side was afraid of the guys with pens because they had the power to write the history, the facts, the truths about everything they saw. And if you don't have that kind of backing, if you don't have that kind of wherewithal, then falsehoods become truths pretty quickly.

Megan ([11:43](#)):

Hmm. What's the Orwell quote? Who controls the present controls the past, who controls the past controls the future and welcome to our paranoid podcast. Yeah.

Ilyse ([11:53](#)):

So I want to tell you a little story about world's religions. And the spoiler for this story is that we have categories of world religions, the so called big or major religions because of imperialism. One of the ways we know this is because an Edward Said, a really famous theorist who's best known for his work on Orientalism, told this story about how two types of people got off the boats when the British showed up

to colonize places. The first were the guys with the guns and the second were the guys with the pens and in his estimation in cultural and cultural and imperialism, the guys with the pens were scarier. These are the guys that are walking around, they're setting up policies, they're setting up laws. They are actually changing what happens locally based on what happens far away and what those expectations of what should happen locally get rewritten.

Megan ([12:42](#)):

So can I ask a question?

Ilyse ([12:44](#)):

Of course, Megan.

Megan ([12:45](#)):

Thanks Ilyse! So if I'm hearing you correctly, Said's concerned about not just showing up with guns, which is bad, like we are against that on Keeping It 101, like let's just come out against showing up with guns. But he's saying that folks who show up with pens to try to categorize and organize and basically tidy up categories of people might do a different kind of violence to people being colonized possibly because it's not just forcing certain bodies to act in certain ways, but it actually forces people to think about themselves in new and uncomfortable and possibly damaging ways. Question Mark.

Ilyse ([13:24](#)):

That's exactly right. Exclamation point.

Megan ([13:27](#)):

Good job me!

Ilyse ([13:27](#)):

Yeah, so when we talk about imperialism and violence, we talk about physical violence, like the violence of guns, the violence of incarceration, the violence of bodies being physically restricted in some way, and we can talk about this at a future moment, but that includes things like defining gender as binary, right? Like restrictions on local sets of practices and knowledges that have physical manifestation is a physical violence with me. Yes. Awesome. Nerds like us often talk about other kinds of violences, like the violence of systems and ideas. Sometimes we talk about that as epistemological violence. Sometimes we talk about that as structural violence, but those are the ways in which you would have to come to understand yourself differently. And that could be individual or it more likely in community so that you become visible, legible, comprehensible

Megan ([14:27](#)):

So teaching us to think about ourselves in ways that don't necessarily come from within our own communities in ways that might not recognize all of the ways that we're complicated, messy human beings. That's a kind of violence to a kind of violence we might call structural or epistemic violence?

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

Yes. Indeedy.

Megan ([14:48](#)):

keyword alert!

Ilyse ([14:52](#)):

So the reason why we care about major and minor religions and imperialism is that, and here's your history for the day. Nerds in the 18th and 19th century, Europeans, white Europeans, predominantly white Christian Europeans and to boot white Protestant Europeans showed up and through the cunning use of flags and also guns and famine and genocidal practices and rape, set up world domination and as part of that defined who was legitimate and who wasn't. Some of this is based in scientific race theory. Some of this is based in colorism. A lot of this is based in enslavement and some of this still is based in what are now the modern disciplines of anthropology, sociology, study of religion, comp lit, psychology. So you're welcome. I'm coming for all of the humanities and most of the social sciences.

Megan ([15:43](#)):

Wait, so you're telling me that even how we learn to learn about things is embedded in power structures?

Ilyse ([15:49](#)):

Oh you betcha. In part because that's when the university gets started. That's when disciplines found. But mostly because this is when we create those knowledges. So world religions is developed as a theory. It is developed as a bunch of eggheads scholars saying, okay, we know what Christians are, we are them, but we have some Christians we don't like are they Christians? Question Mark and then depending on the author they'll, they'll debate that. We all know what Jews are cause we super hate them because again, white Christian Protestants from Europe, they're not into us. They know what Muslims are because Christianity versus Islam is an argument that's kicking around at the time and they get confused when they show up in places like India and they see Muslims doing things that don't look like the Islam that they're used to from their leather arm chairs and Cambridge. But a bunch of dudes basically got together and independently and together wrote books that said what was an important religion and what was not an important religion? What are universal religions? What religions appeal to a universal spirit of mankind? And I use the gendered term here on purpose because they did and which religions were ethnic, racial, local, which were evolutionarily superior and which were not. I want you to hear that soup of 19th century scientific racism and science happening alongside the development of these categories because that is exactly what happened. So we start inventing categories like race at the same time that we start inventing categories like major religions. We sure do. Gross. Yeah, it's really problematic and I think that where it gets complicated is again, it's not as if Islam is not a salient category. It is a salient category, but its borders are maybe not so hard up and reified with brick as these kinds of check one box and we know exactly what that means. Kinds of categories would, would have us believe

Mr Roger's Train Sounds ([17:56](#)):

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Ilyse ([18:01](#)):

so, okay. Can I recap what we've said about world religion so far?

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

I wish you would!

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

Major religions are often some of these big name categories that we've heard just by existing in the world like Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism. They were developed in a moment where empires were ex European empires were expanding and people were trying to figure out what that expansion meant. What were the groups of people that were now coming under colonial and Imperial rule. And at the same time that these categories of religion were being developed. So too were definitions of race, ethnicity, and gender. So we care about major religions because it encodes a certain secret history of imperialism and power. And we also care about world's religions and major religions because some people just plum were never included from the jump, which I'm hoping you'll say a little bit about.

Megan ([19:01](#)):

I would love to. So when we talk about major and minor religions, uh, we make faces first and foremost. We, we get uncomfortable. We shift in our seats, we make weird noises, and then we start talking about how this works in the world. So folks that get left out of major religions are folks like Native people, Indigenous people. There are also folks who create new ways of being religious in the world. We call it these new religious movements. So when we think about who gets identified as a religion, we are always thinking about power because we're thinking often about white European Protestants showing up in a place like India, telling them they have a thing called religion and it's not Christianity, but it'll do, if you can show us your books. Hinduism is visible, is legible as a religion because it's close enough to white Protestantism to count.

Megan ([19:53](#)):

Places that don't count are things like, people like, communities like, Native folks in the United States who are told that they do not have a religion but they ought to. And that religion gets to be Christianity now. And I think we talk about this often in classes or in public like, okay, well that happened and that sucks. Colonialism's bad, m'kay? Don't do that. But it's still happening. When we're thinking about who gets left out of counting as religious, we're still having these arguments in courts, in prisons, in places where legal definitions of religion operate. So who gets to practice safely in public, who can just go to their place of doing a religion because they have one specific place that they do it and not expect the cops to show up as opposed to practitioners of indigenous religions, diasporic religions, particularly African and Afro Caribbean religions who do religion in ways that are less familiar to people who expect religion to look like white Protestantism, which is when we start having court cases all the way up to the Supreme court about whether or not peyote can count as a sacrament, whether or not animal sacrifice can be a legitimate legal part of religious practice.

Megan ([21:08](#)):

We're going to talk about this a little bit more next week, but also minor religions privileges certain ways of even being that one tradition. So we talked a little bit already about the fact that like traditions are not uniform even in and of themselves. There's not one way to be Muslim. There's not one way to be Buddhist. I have complicated feelings, but I come back to this book called salvation on sand mountain a lot where it looks at snake handling and Appalachia snake handling and Appalachian as a Christian practice. But, uh, it is not the sort of Christian practice you're likely to see in town squares or on television unless you're watching a program that is asking you to look at how weird these people are. So,

eh, getting categorized as a minor religion can leave people out. Does leave people out, can make your practices dangerous because law enforcement doesn't recognize them as protected by the first amendment can make them dangerous. Because if you're in a state that thinks peyote should be a controlled substance and you use it as part of your religious practice, they can fire you. So yeah, not just in a global perspective than in a very local perspective. What counts and what doesn't as an okay as a major, as an acceptable religion has real world consequences for people.

Ilyse ([22:27](#)):

Can you talk to me, Megan, a little bit more about this idea of being minoritized within your own tradition? Because if we're saying, if we're claiming in this podcast and dear listeners, we have been that there are many ways to do any number of religions or or traditional practices, then what does it, what does it mean to be minoritized?

Megan ([22:52](#)):

So I think it's an important term. It might even be a keyword! Talking about something like a major or a minor tradition or way of doing things suggest that there's like a real way to do it. And then there are all these other weirdo ways of doing it, which are like cute. And I guess we like religious liberties so fine I guess. But it's not the real way to do it. Right? So the idea of a, something like let's say Islam, if you're explaining to people what's most important about Islam and you say, well Muslims pray five times a day and they eat hello food and they speak Arabic. You have said that certain kinds of certain ways of being Muslim for example, are the real ways. And when other people do Islam in different ways, like that's fine, but it's not the essential, it's the most important, it's not the most valuable way of doing that religious tradition. Is that fair?

Ilyse ([23:50](#)):

Yeah. And so why are we so grumpy about that?

Megan ([23:53](#)):

Well, cause it sucks. There's [laughter]--in a space in spaces where we're supposed to value religious freedom. So again, Americanist, right? So the United States says that it values religious freedom. That means you have to value all the religions and all the way that people do religions and all the ways that people are religious. You don't get to say that's a real religion and that's like a cute, weird thing that you do. Or that's a real religion and like, Oh this is too weird to be allowed. It matters because people get valued in societies, get ranked, get employed, get paid, getting incarcerated or not based on whether or not what they're doing looks like religion the way that we expect religion to look.

Ilyse ([24:46](#)):

Okay, so I hear you saying that we expect religion to look a certain way and then we expect so-called major religions to look a certain way, which both excludes people who do not belong to that particular religion, but also excludes people who do not present the way that we expect them to. So for example, if you like, like almost 80% of the world's global Muslim population are not ethnically Arab or Arabic speaking, you somehow are seen as maybe like derivative or lesser than despite being the global majority.

Megan ([25:29](#)):

That is correct.

Ilyse ([25:30](#)):

So it sounds like we're really mad about this world's and major and minor religions model in part because it does a lot of violence and in part because it's covering up a history of violence, it just flat wrong. It's just like incorrect.

Megan ([25:49](#)):

It is incorrect. Yes. Vanessa Hidary, a spoken word poet, has a piece called the Hebrew Mamita where she talks about growing up in Brooklyn and being told that she doesn't look Jewish, she doesn't act Jewish, and how she kind of came to terms with originally receiving that as a compliment. And the piece ends by saying that don't let people tell you you don't look or act like your people. You are your people. So what you do, what you act like, how you look is your people. It's wrong. It's incorrect. Stop doing that.

Ilyse ([26:19](#)):

All right, nerds, it sounds like we've arrived at our thesis.

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

Yay.

Ilyse ([26:24](#)):

So the so-called major and world's religions are a set of labels that have an Imperial history. That is to say they have a history of a relationship with power and it is always inadequate as we think about religion broadly and religions specifically. So major, minor, and world's religions as a model--even if we use it every day--ignore plurality across religions and also within them.

Megan ([26:51](#)):

Yeah, that is correct. People--religions are more complicated than that. And when we're talking about different religions, we're not talking about just like flavors, right? If Christianity gets to be vanilla leaving that one alone, uh, Islam doesn't get to be like chocolate. And then Judaism is strawberry, right? The, it's not a case of benign difference. Vanilla gets privileges in the United States that chocolate and strawberry do not access to safety, to resources to higher ability to representation and government. All of these things have connections to religion. So when we're defining what our major religions, we are saying some religions have power and privilege that other religions don't.

Ilyse ([27:35](#)):

Yeah. And we're going to tease out, but in the future, in a future episode, we will talk about what like what that hierarchy has looked like and why it's so dangerous. It's great. I can't wait. Awesome. Hey Megan, can I ask you a question?

Megan ([27:50](#)):

Always.

Ilyse ([27:51](#)):

How do you see the world religions model or this major and minor? How do you see these labels showing up in your everyday life?

Megan ([28:00](#)):

Oh, so many places. So many places make me cranky. I'm glad that you asked me this question because I love to talk about things that make me cranky, so I see it in the fact that we're still teaching world religions classes all the time. Even though most religious studies scholars will make faces. When you talk about world religious class and world religions classes,

Ilyse ([28:17](#)):

yeah, we can't, we can't see you nerds, but you can put your hand up if you've ever taken a world religions class or if you thought this was a world religions podcast, we won't judge.

Megan ([28:27](#)):

Spoilers: it is not. So world religion classes are out there. Every time I go to a bookstore, one of the things that I look for is who gets categorized under religion and then who's philosophy or spirituality or particularly the Eastern and Western religions piece makes me crazy because they want to put Islam under Eastern religions and what does that even mean? The United States has always had Muslims in it. Why is Islam and Eastern religion, boo. And then finally the coexist bumper sticker, which this is a particularly cranky moment listeners because the COEXIST bumper sticker is one of those things that looks like it's nice except that it has specific religions. It'll will represent in that sticker and then there are a bunch that are left out and it makes it seem like we're all on an equal playing field, right, that it's all on us to just get along when in fact minoritized religions in the United States like Judaism or Islam or Sikhi don't have an option about whether or not they want to coexist with Christianity. Christianity gets an option about whether or not it wants to coexist with the other traditions and that again is why major and minor religions is about power. The end.

Ilyse ([29:30](#)):

totally. Thanks.

Megan ([29:30](#)):

Thank you.

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

Sit back and relax. It's time for professor story time.

Krusty the Clown ([29:36](#)):

Hey kids, it's story time.

Megan ([29:39](#)):

In this segment, we'll walk you through an important text in the study of religion like nerds.

Ilyse ([29:43](#)):

Okay, everybody, since this was my assignment, I am assigning the classic Jonathan Z. Smith. Religion is not a native category excerpt from religion, religions, religious. We will post a link to it on our show notes and I'm going to do a little bit of reading. It is not the whole thing. It's just a little bit and then Megan and I will chat about it. Yeah, we will. So one, he says religion in quotes is not a native category. It is not a first person term of self characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside on some

aspect of native culture. It is the other in these instances colonialists who are solely responsible for the content of the term to even in these early formulations, there is an implicit universality. Religion is thought to be a ubiquitous human phenomenon. Therefore both these dudes that he citing before find it's a Legend's absence noteworthy three and construction and constructing the second order generic category religion its characteristics are those that appear natural to the order. So in these quotations there's a familiarity signaled by the phrases, quote, knowledge of God or religion as we understand it. And for religion is an anthropological, not a theological category, which means and as he continues on below, it describes human thought and action most frequently in terms of belief and norms of behavior. Okay, so it's a lot of things, but when we talk about this in my classes and when I ask people to think about this, I like this one, two, three, four because it builds on itself. Megan, what do you hear when I read JZ out loud?

Megan ([31:19](#)):

What I hear is that religion isn't a thing that people do because there's something innate to humanity that is religious that people didn't start calling marking seasons and trying to get right with their community and trying to get right with whatever else might be out there as a separate, specific, discreet category of human behavior called religion. For a long time, this was just who we are, how we are we Mark seasons, we Mark stages of life. We Mark human and beyond human relationships as important but also in our everyday life. We don't just say this is religion. What I hear him saying is at one point we decided certain human behaviors, certain ways of being together were a thing we called religion and then we went looking for it.

Ilyse ([32:09](#)):

I think that's awesome. I really like that he's playing or I hear him playing. I don't know what JZ would have thought. He's not my friend, may he rest. I also, um, I also should say to our listeners who are, who are not religion nerds, a lot of us do refer to him as Jay Z as if we know him and think that we're making like a really good Hova joke but we're not, but I'm going to keep calling him Jay Z. So I like when Jay Z says religion is not a native category, it is a sticker that I have printed on my door and my office bonus points to UVM students if they come and take a selfie with it is part of my syllabus because religion is not a native category. Helps me as someone who studies not the United States and not Europe. Think about playing with who gets to term what and when. So religion is not a word that exists in any of the languages that I use as part of my primary source research. And I use a lot of them. We have created sorts of cognates with all sorts of problems because they're not actually cognates, which means it's not a one-to-one relationship. And so when we say religion is not a native category, it like hides and that little clever sentence that it has been imposed upon. People imposed upon systems imposed upon history imposed upon the way we think. And it shows us in the way that when we are Anglophones we don't always hear that our language is not the only language in the world. There are other ways of thinking and ordering the universe. And so this is like our local term. This is like our little, our little cute word for a thing. This phenomena that we're describing and that's taken us quite a long time to describe. So I really like, religion is not a native category because it shows us that it has, it has its own history and part of that history is Imperial and about power. And part of that history is about exactly what we're doing. It's about studying someone else, which is not the same thing as doing religion.

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

Right. Exactly. So when I think about this piece, and I think about it a lot, I think one, when we're talking about religion, we're always talking about power too. I think we had to be taught that certain ways of being in the world are religious, that certain ways of doing things our religion as opposed to culture or

history or government. So looking at certain spaces, certain people, certain texts maybe as this thing that we're calling religion doesn't come from within the system. So it comes from outside. And not only do we have to be taught to call something religious to identify something people as religion that a lot of times the identifying of certain people, certain behaviors as religion is all tied up with also telling them why we need to be in charge of them. Yes. Because their religion is fine, but like it's, it's not ours and that's how we know

Ilyse ([35:10](#)):

Or their religion is not fine. It's deeply, it's deeply inferior and we need to save your souls.

Megan ([35:15](#)):

and take your tea.

Ilyse ([35:16](#)):

So we've spent a couple of minutes with JZ Smith and what is an arguably one of the most important recent kinds of theoretical texts in the study of religion. And that brings us to another iteration of our thesis. Defining religion does work on people. It does real work on communities that make possible or restrict practices that shape identities legally and practically, which is what we're only gesturing at here, but we'll get into a lot in the next episode.

Megan ([35:44](#)):

Yep.

Ilyse ([35:45](#)):

So historically that limitation means whole groups being denied first amendment rights because they're not seen as religion. As Megan said, it means say in India where I locate most of my research that some people are defined as Hindu and thus are quote unquote native as opposed to Muslim and thus foreign, which if you're reading the news about India in the last, in 2020 you are watching in real time the risks of those kinds of arguments.

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

Absolutely. It also means that people learn to identify what they're doing as religion. Practically this means particularly in an American context, that in order to be recognized as a religion, you have to look, act, be a certain way, and because America overwhelmingly thinks of itself in these white Christian, mainstream Protestantism, the closer you look to white mainstream Protestantism, the more likely our courts, our law enforcement, our representative governments are to say, yes, you are a religion, which means yes, you are protected by the first amendment. Yes, you do have certain rights because we've said religion as special, so we'll talk on the next episode about how some groups have learned to call themselves religious as a way to gain some recognition and some protection within an American governmental system.

Megan ([37:09](#)):

Don't pack up your stuff yet. Nerds, you've got homework.

Megan ([37:13](#)):

Don't forget that all of this and more will be in the show notes or you can find it on Twitter. We'll thread up a link when we dropped this episode for today's homework class. There's lots of great books about thinking through how definitions and religions have material consequences on people. One shorter piece that you could look at is an article that I wrote for religion news service about a man, a Muslim man, Dominique Ray, who was executed by the state of Alabama. He could not have an imam present at his execution because all clergy present at executions in Alabama have to be employed by the state, and the state of Alabama only employs Christian clergy. So this is frankly tragic example of where the state has valued certain religions, has identified certain religions as worth investing in, worth legitimizing, and who suffers because they're not seen as part of a major, worthwhile, legible religion.

Ilyse ([38:11](#)):

All right, nerds, I've got homework for you too. I've personally written a few pieces I'd like to share with you on this. All of them are links and most of them deal with who gets to name religions, what definitions of religion matter and why certain definitions and like cough, cough, British Imperial definitions have lasted while others cough, cough, Muslim Indian definitions have not. But for an academic book, I can't recommend highly enough Tomoko Masuzawa's *The invention of World Religions*. I think it is still the straight up best on thinking about this problem of major, minor and world's religions and you can get it through the University of Chicago or through your local independent bookseller.

Megan ([38:52](#)):

Shout out to Print in Portland, Maine. I recently discovered that if you order books through them and they're for class, they give you a discount, which I love. Local booksellers changing the world. Love it. Okay, so next time we're going to look at case studies in major/minor world religions. We want to see this framework and action. Spoilers: We are going to talk about Native religion in the United States that's Native with a capital N in conversation with these at Wenger's work, *We Have a Religion*, so stay tuned for that.

Ilyse ([39:21](#)):

You can follow Megan at m-p-g-p-h-d and me, Ilyse, at p-r-o-f-i-r-m-f, in our natural habitat on twitter. Or you can follow the show itself at keeping it underscore 1-0-1. Find our website at keepingit101.com. Rate and download us wherever you get podcasts. And with that peace out nerds.

Megan ([39:45](#)):

Do your homework. It's on the syllabus.

Bonus Brooklyn 99 Shout ([40:04](#)):

most people want to become actual doctors. That's ridiculous. It's not like we're college professors calling ourselves doctors. It's not the same thing, My friend. Sure it is! When someone has a heart attack on a plane, do they yell out Yo, does anybody here have an art history PhD? A pH D is a doctorATE. It's literally describing a doctor. Maybe let's refocus. Now the problem here is that medical practitioners have co-opted the word doctor. I know we live in a world where anything can mean anything and nobody even cares about etymology. Apparently that's a trigger for me. Yeah. Apparently.