

Theme Song (00:12):

[inaudible] [inaudible] [inaudible]

Megan (00:17):

what's up nerds?

Ilyse (00:18):

Hi and welcome. This is Keeping it 101: a Killjoy's Introduction to religion podcast. We don't take attendance, but class is definitely in session. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, one half of the Killjoys on this here podcast. I'm recording from the traditional and ancestral lands of the Abenaki people where I'm grateful to live, as well as teach and research about Islam, imperialism, racialization of Muslims, and the history of religion.

Megan (00:43):

Hi. Hello. I'm Megan Goodwin, the other half of the Killjoys in your ears. Today. I am coming at you from the land of the Wabanaki Confederacy, the Abenaki and the Aucocisco peoples. Knowing this is part of why we're doing the podcast today, and I am grateful to live teach and research about gender, sexuality, white supremacy, minority religions, politics in America on these lands. All right, ears open thinking caps on hold onto your butts. It's time for the lesson plan.

Ilyse (01:10):

This is where I tell you what's on deck for today's episode and as you know or as you might know, we spent all of last episode telling you how truly messed up the world's religions, major religions model is for thinking about religion and I got to tell you, we were not lying. It's messed up, but today we're going to talk about how and why people within religions use this model to think about themselves and each other because even though it's a bonkers imperialist model, it's also what we've inherited so it exists. It's doing real things out there in the world. We're going to talk about the work it does to organize and group people to erase minoritized religious groups, but also how minorities groups use religion to make themselves legible and fight for rights and recognition

Megan (01:55):

on today. We are keeping it 1-0-1, which is the segment in which we do some professor work.

Ilyse (02:02):

Okay, Megan, before we jump in with this world religions things, we are assuming that everyone was present and accounted for and we just said we don't take attendance. Can you tell me one more time? What are these major religions of which we speak?

Megan (02:14):

Oh, major religions. Okay. Okay. What I think major religions, I think things like Christianity and Judaism and Buddhism and Hinduism and Islam, religions that like show up on a coexist bumper sticker maybe. Cool. Great. So again, we want to think about who's not on that list and what making that list might mean to them. And also being on the list doesn't mean that all of these traditions are equal, right? They don't get treated equally. They don't have the same access to legal protections. They don't have the

same kind of cultural acceptance or recognition. So once again, from the top major religions, this model is a problem.

Ilyse ([02:52](#)):

Yeah. So one of the things that I'm thinking about still as we think about major religions and as we move today into how people are using these categories is that being part of the list is a position of power and a position of privilege. So our goal in telling you that the list is, is bologna is not to say like down with the list, destroy the list, it's about, it's really more about thinking about what works, the list does in the world. So here I'm thinking about, as I said, way back on the first episode Sikhi or Sikhism and how that major, if we're thinking about demographics, world's religion, the fifth largest religion in the world is often left out of the major world religions list. So obviously we know this list sucks, right? Like if it leaves out this major religion claims that it's not a major religion, the list is backward, right?

Megan ([03:49](#)):

Yes. Can confirm.

Ilyse ([03:50](#)):

At the same time. What work would it do for Sikhs to be included in this kind of list? We know that sticky traditions are consistently marginalized. They're folks who are Sikh, are experiencing hate and discrimination and oppression, kind of the global verb, but especially in a Euro American context. And so even though the world's religion model is dumb for excluding Sikhs, there are movements among Sikh to be added to that model to be included in textbooks in high school. Survey classes of the world's religions on school district calendars within college curriculum. And one of the things I research is job ads in the Academy, which sounds really boring. Nerds. I'm, I'm aware, I'm aware how boring that sounds. But if you search, say the American Academy of Religion, the largest organization in the world, first for nerds like Megan and I who study religion annually, there are maybe one, but usually zero jobs in the world focused on Sikhi traditions. And so not being part of the world's religions model is absolutely a power play and a power experience. But you can imagine why Sikhs would want to be part of the world's religions model. Count us, too--not destroy the list: please add us to the list because this might do work for us.

Megan ([05:17](#)):

So being recognized as a religion is useful, even if religion is not a native category and we're calling back here to JZ Smith. So not everyone through all time and all space would have called what they're doing religion. But because we live in spaces, particularly if we're thinking about the United States, although we're never just thinking about the United States, if we're living in the U S we treat religion like it's special. So being recognized as a religion is useful even if religion is still a category we made up and apply to other people. Okay. Keyword alert and also a point of clarification. One of our keywords for today is, Native or Indigenous religions. When Jay Z, you remember him from last episode, says that religion is not a native category. He's saying that we have to be taught to call this kind of human behavior. Religious, that native is small.

Megan ([06:10](#)):

And when we're talking about native or indigenous people or native or indigenous religion, we're using capital N for Native, and we're talking about people who are connected to you and responsible for the land they come from. So when the Lakota say that they're from the Black Hills, they don't just mean they

were born there or they lived there for awhile. They are from and of that earth. It protects them and nourishes them and they have to do the same. So religion isn't a way that native folks in what's now the United States would have called how they take care of the earth, how they govern their people, heal themselves or maintain their community. They were forcibly converted as part of what European Christian imperialist expansion. So religion isn't a capital N Native category either, but Native folks have learned to use that category to argue for rights and recognition.

Megan ([06:58](#)):

One of the examples that comes to mind when I'm thinking about folks who would not have originally used the term religion to describe how they are in the world but have since started using that category. I'm thinking of things like the coming together of people to protest the Dakota access pipeline and the attempts to protect the water at standing rock. The category of Native religion, capital N, or something like an American Indian movement doesn't really emerge until the late 20th century. But then you have all of these different groups from different tribes and nations and peoples gathering together, praying together, resisting state sanction, ecoterrorism together and practicing not as individual people, but as folks who recognize similarities, important similarities between the way they take care of themselves. They take care of their people, they take care of the earth, so they learn to call what they're doing, religion, but also by calling it religion, by saying in protecting the water, they're protecting the sacred.

Megan ([08:02](#)):

They also made themselves legible to folks who are not native. So again, when water protectors came together at standing rock, they also had groups like American veterans come out and say, we're going to stand between these water protectors and law enforcement because law enforcement is being violent toward these water protectors. And they're treating them like they're violent protesters. But these water protectors are not protesting. They're praying. And that's a direct quote. So being legible is religion does work within groups that might not have originally seen themselves as religious or as doing religion, but it also makes them legible to folks outside those groups. In this, they're not protesting, they're praying sort of way.

Ilyse ([08:46](#)):

So would you say in that case, Megan, since this is a really salient example of how religion is not a native-lowercase and Native upper case term, religion is not a n/Native term. It seems like what you're suggesting is that it's still functioning though we are still using religion as a way to organize and I guess create empathy.

Megan ([09:13](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So I mean this is a major concept when we talk about any sort of category of identity, right? And this isn't to say that something like gender or race is equivalent to religion or that race and gender are equivalent to each other. But race, gender, class, religion, all of these are what we call social constructs. Another keyword alert.

Megan ([09:39](#)):

We made them up. People learned to categorize each other and themselves in specific ways. The fact that we made those categories up doesn't mean they don't do real work in the world. It matters that someone gets identified as a certain religion or a certain race or a certain gender. It matters both to them and to the people around them because it teaches us how to treat each other.

Ilyse ([10:01](#)):

And it seems like it also matters because we as a, as as United States, as a government and as a citizenry and I, and I mean citizenry, right, so like all of the people who have historically been allowed to be citizens in the fullest sense, not just folks who live here. So settler, colonial, white folk. I want to just, I want to highlight this moment of the American vets getting prayer as a thing that the American constitution not just protect, but as like a fundamental Americanism. That idea that protesting might be questionable, right? Like they're not protesting. Like if they had been protesting this like horrific violation of all sorts of things, we might feel iffy about it, but they're not protesting. They're praying and that is some sort of American universal.

Megan ([10:53](#)):

Yeah. Which as scholars of religion might, I won't speak for all scholars of religion. I will just own this myself. As someone who cares a lot about minority religions, that moment of this makes sense to me in a Christian framework. Gives me pause, makes me a little bit grumpy, but I'm not gonna lie to you. I read that I, every time I read that I get weepy because it's this moment of we said that this is what we care about as a country. We said we care about religion, we want to protect it. If what they're doing is religion, then we need to protect them.

Ilyse ([11:26](#)):

Yeah. So being seen, not necessarily in your own terms, but in terms that the normative and empowered group of folk understand has real benefits, but also real connotations of safety unacceptability yes, absolutely. So if I could sum up please. I think that what we've been saying is that we know religion gets defined often by outsiders, but we also know that being understood by outsiders is sometimes a matter in life of life and death. And so one of the ways I've been thinking about this is that religious literacy, being able to understand a multiplicity of religious practice is a social justice issue because it can be a matter of survival. Then this really shitty, imperialist, racist world's religions model, major religions model actually becomes a way for minorities religions to be understood and in some circumstances be protected. Even if it's the exact model that leaves them vulnerable in the first place.

Megan ([12:40](#)):

Yeah, or that did real violence to them at the first [place]. Right. This is, this is another keyword that I want to hold up, particularly as we're talking about native folks and it's our secret agency, the ability to act. We are not wrong when we're talking about the world religions model as imperialist, as violent, as something that has done real harm in the world, but it's also really important to remember that people who face this kind of violence, colonialism, imperialism, impression, aren't ever just being acted upon, right? They are also acting. They also have agency, so it's not just that native folks in what's now the U S got stamped with this religion stamp. It's also, they looked at it, said, Oh huh, the U S government does certain things because of this stamp, this religion. How can we use this to stay alive and to, to keep connections with our people and our history and our land.

Ilyse ([13:43](#)):

Absolutely.

Mr Roger's Train Noise ([13:51](#)):

[inaudible]

Ilyse ([13:52](#)):

all right. You've heard from us. Now let's hear about us. It's time for primary sources.

Megan ([13:59](#)):

Primary sources. I'm not sorry.

Ilyse ([14:01](#)):

I know you're not. This is the segment of the podcast where we talk in the "I statement" about who we are, how we see religion in our lives and how we're thinking about the theoretical stuff we just talked about in real life.

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

Yeah. Cause it turns out that we're not brains on sticks. Um, we live in the world and so definitions of religion also shape our lives. Today. My primary source is the fact that, uh, when I am in spaces that encourage people to talk about their own religious belonging or their own religious commitments, I pause and I do a quick evaluation of like, is this a safe place for me to say like, hello, I am pagan. You probably have seen us on your TV. It's more complicated than that.

Ilyse ([14:59](#)):

You mean you're not one of the charmed sisters?

Megan ([15:02](#)):

I am, alas, not one of the term sisters, although shout out to the reboot of term two because all of those witches are Latina women, one of them is queer. The mom was a gender studies professor and the very first episode definitely starts with, you know what, it is a witch hunt. I am a witch and I'm hunting you another shout out to Lindy West. So yeah. Uh, as someone who identifies as a witch going to do that on the podcast. Hello. I identify religiously as a witch that is something that has been true of me for at least 20 years. That is something that is challenging to share in professional spaces because, well, there are not a lot of us in the Academy. There are not a lot of us out in the world and what people think they know about, which is usually has more to do with fairy tales and Charmed and like Sabrina the teenage witch or her chilling adventures, whatever's happening with her now. Then the way that I conduct myself as a religious person in the world. So yeah, we actually weirdly do show up on that coexist bumper sticker. But I don't think it's because the bumper sticker makers think that paganism or Wicca or any of that is a significant religion so much as the star is eye catching. So yeah, primary sources over!

Ilyse ([16:24](#)):

All right. So I guess what I'm thinking about today in primary sources is that--so just before I talked about like why Sikh traditions or Sikh folk might want to be included in a world religions model so that they might be part of curriculum or dropdown menus or the Academy as like a, like a professorship. So that has me thinking about not just who gets erased, but who is always there, who is always present and who always demands attention. And I'm sorry folks, but that's Christians. And to be honest with you, I'm not that sorry. And uh, to sympathetic Christians listening, y'all need to hear this too. So my primary source is that as a minority religion, a member of a minoritized religion, and a professor of both of a minoritized religion and like a truly beleaguered, persecuted, oppressed set of groups of people, I am so grossed out by how I am supposed to always know about Christianity.

Ilyse ([17:25](#)):

And this shows up in really public ways for me, most tellingly, it was a moment years and years ago, I was a student at Harvard Divinity School. I was going to my husband, well my then, I don't know, I was going to my partner's graduation.

In Unison ([17:39](#)):

Hi Kevin.

Ilyse ([17:40](#)):

I was going to my partner's graduation and I said, yeah, I'm a, I'm a master student at Harvard Divinity School. They had just finished up at the Harvard Ed school and everybody's asking me all these weird questions and the, and the question that everybody always asks is like, Oh, you're going to be a insert religious leader, except most people assume pastor priest, Reverend, because Christianity's the default. And in those moments you then have to say, okay, am I going to out myself as a Jew? And then more than that, am I going to say no, no, no, no. Actually I study Islam? Cause like we're really just in robes. Like we're just in wizard outfits and I'm just supposed to be celebrating that, like, my partner is graduating and I don't really feel like getting into a like "who do you think is responsible for 9/11" or like "can you tell me what jihad is?" moment.

Ilyse ([18:26](#)):

So I say that I'm a Jew and this well-meaning but ultimately horrible exchange is, "okay, well what do you think about Jesus?" And every bone in my body wants to be like, "Guess what, Random Christian, I don't think about Jesus because I am a Jewish person and your God is not my God. And I do not give a care about Jesus." But I have learned as a minoritized religion that that is a stupid thing to do in public. And not only stupid but it's dangerous. And so instead I have learned the party line, which is Jews think Jesus is an important prophet but not ours. And he's a prophet and not, he's not the Messiah, but also he's not really a major part of Judaism. So thank you so much for your question. Is there a cake, a bathroom, a brownie, a way I can get out of this? And so I think that question of like, I have to have an opinion on Jesus, but y'all don't know what Yom Kippur is or I have to dance around this one word that you think you know about Muslims, but you don't know what Ramadan is. That question of how do you get to know and who gets to be dominant is the space of real privilege for me. And I think, I think it gets me quite honestly like riled up about, about Christians and Christianity to the extent that like I kind of refused as a PhD, as a, as an undergrad, a master's student, a PhD student I refused to take classes on Christianity on principle because my sense was: I could get by on what I knew. And the truth is I, I do, I have three degrees in religion. I've never taken a class on Christianity, and I still know more than most because that kind of hierarchy and had Gemini is one of the only places that trickle down actually makes sense.

Megan ([20:07](#)):

Yeah. I also want to point out that it is 100% possible to get a PhD in religious studies, having only taken classes that are tradition specific and Christianity and never having to take a class in Judaism or Islam or any of these other major.

Ilyse ([20:22](#)):

Yeah, you're right. So I just did it to myself, didn't I? I assumed that I was doing the wrong thing because I am supposed to know all about everybody else's religions, but the availability of only Islam classes to

me was a not possible, and B, maybe not even preferable. Maybe to be an expert in Islam, it would be okay to only do that work and that, dear nerds, is what internalized violent colonial systems look like. This is a deep primary sources. Can you save us the jingle again?

Megan ([20:52](#)):

Primary sources.

Ilyse ([20:53](#)):

I think with that we should move on.

Megan ([20:56](#)):

I think we should. Okay. Thanks for sharing. Ilyse.

Ilyse ([20:59](#)):

You too, Megan.

Megan ([20:59](#)):

You're welcome.

Megan ([21:02](#)):

All right, nerds pull up a comfy chair. It is story time.

Krusty the Clown ([21:05](#)):

Hey kids, it's story time.

Megan ([21:09](#)):

Story time is the segment in which we look at some of the most important, most formative sources in our scholarly thinking about religion. Today I'm going to look at Tisa Wenger's article, "We are guaranteed freedom." She builds this article out in her book, *We have a religion*, that looks at the way that the Pueblo people have internalized religion as a category, as a way to argue for rights, for recognition, for protection under the U S government. So the article that we're talking about looks at the way that the Pueblo specifically wanted to preserve this practice of public dances that they had done every year for centuries and in the early 20th century. There was some real pushback about trying to do these dances in public and they, the Pueblo folks said, okay, well this is part of our culture and the local white people did not care.

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

And they said, okay, well this is actually really great for the local economy and the local white people did not care. And they said, well it's part of our history. It is a way that we express ourselves. It's an artistic form. None of this worked. What did work was saying. These dances are part of our religious practice. We need to do them so that we can do religion and that worked in the early 20th century, not so much in the later 20th century. That's another conversation for another time. Here's the quote: "Public leaders of the 19 20th successfully employed the American discourse on religion to legitimize and defend Pueblo identity and ways of life in the process. They subtly changed the ways in which they talked about their traditional practices, but defining themselves as defenders of Pueblo religion and using the tools of the

American legal system. Pueblo leaders in the 1920s shaped a new traditionalism based partly on American categories of religion and religious freedom."

New Speaker ([22:56](#)):

The reason we're looking at this piece and we'll encourage you to look at the whole article or Hey, pickup Tisa Wenger's book is because again, trying to make themselves legible, visible, understandable as doing religion helped the Pueblo get to keep doing these dances to maintain that practice. But it also shifted the way that they thought about what they were doing internally. So they are both using the category of religion to act, but that category is acting on them as well. Agency.

Ilyse ([23:29](#)):

I really like this piece and I, you know, as I've said many times that I'm not an Americanist I work on, I work on other things, but I think with this as well, this stands out to me. So if you're not someone who is familiar with a Pueblo religion or Pueblo, uh, traditions at all, I think that the, I think that the takeaway here is still that folks are in a system presented with a system violently subjected to a system, but then they still maintain their ability to think, act, create and forte. Right? So by making subtle changes as as um, one girl says you can continue to exist, you can continue to resist. But I also want to point out what this, what this piece makes me think of. And when I teach colonialism, albeit in different settings here at UVM, I teach this as well.

Ilyse ([24:27](#)):

I always think of Audre Lorde's famous line: The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. So as much as there is agency here, I'm not sure the goal of these playbill leaders or of anti-colonial anti-racist activists is necessarily to use those tools to dismantle the house, but rather to create some space within that house for them. I don't want us to get it twisted. This little excerpt is not telling us that Pueblo leader's successfully redefine how the American government is thinking about religion. They do not successfully redefine how the American government thinks about or treats Native peoples, but it does successfully create a space where they can actually exist and do the thing they want to do. In this case, a particular set of dances without necessarily being just do what they want to do without necessarily experiencing a physical violence in that moment.

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

Yeah, no, I think, I think that's really important to note. So this is like a Shirley Chisholm. If they don't have a seat at the table for you, you bring a folding chair moment. It is not a table flipping moment. It's also important to note that like this worked once when the folks at the Dakota access pipeline are arguing that they're doing religion that does not keep the Dakota access pipeline from going in. When native Hawaiians at Mauna Kea are saying, you can't put a telescope on our sacred mountain. Ah, they keep losing that fight. So far the big telescope hasn't gone up yet, but it's not a given that they're going to win that. So yes, we are absolutely saying that claiming, trying to be legible as religion does important political work in the world, but getting recognized, getting a seat at the table isn't enough to mitigate this kind of colonial violence. And it's really important that you hear us acknowledge that we know America is also a colonial space. Okay?

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

Yeah. This isn't a fight that you win once and call it done. You don't get to say you are the super bowl champion and carry that home with you. This is in some cases a battle that gets reopened, revisited

either a new, so you have to keep fighting the same battle or you have to keep fighting similar battles with different kinds of settings. That seems like it should have been settled, but it wasn't and that's for us the reality, the multiplicities of what the work of religion is doing as both a definitional category and a legal category within a system of settler colonial violence and racial settler colonial and racial violence. Yeah, and this is part of a longer conversation, but I also want to acknowledge that part of the violence that gets done here is watching groups that are not marginalized in the same way, make arguments that they need to be protected because religion and watching that work for them claiming something is religious and needs to be protected, works for white mainstream. Usually Christian groups in a way that it has not worked for minoritized religious groups, but despite the success rate, despite the systemic sets of violences and oppressions, we like this passage from winger precisely because it shows you what minoritized religious groups are doing with the category of religion to make possible their cultural, ethnic, uh, local, artistic, historical, you name it. Sets of practices. Yes, yes to all of that.

Mr Roger's Train Noise ([28:13](#)):

[inaudible]

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

So if I could sum up a little bit, I think our, our think our thesis for today's episode is that despite its imperialist, racist and troubling history and overtones and employment, defining religion does work on people, real work on communities that both makes possible and restricts practice. So we can't just toss it out. It's doing stuff. It's here and it's being used by all sorts of systems, groups and people both limits and creates avenues for agency.

Megan ([28:50](#)):

Yeah. Great sum up!

Ilyse ([28:52](#)):

Thanks Megan.

Megan ([28:53](#)):

Welcome, Ilyse! Next time we're going to talk about what it might mean to be religious. So stay tuned for that. But don't pack up your stuff yet. You got homework.

Ilyse ([29:06](#)):

Don't forget that all of this and more will be in the show notes or find it on Twitter. We're likely to give you a big thread of what we talked about today, but for a homework class there's lots of great books about thinking through how definitions of religions have material consequences on people. I want to shout out Roxanne Dunbar -Ortiz *_Indigenous people's history of the United States_*. I also want to mention the book version of the article that Megan cited above Tisa Wenger's *_We have a Religion_*. I also want to give a big props shout out to Brandi Denison's *_Ute Land Religion in the American West 1870 to 2009_* and we'll put links to all of those and ways to get those at your local bookstores in the show notes.

Megan ([29:47](#)):

Yes. Shout out to Brandi, friend of the pod. Less nerdy possibly, but still important homework. One more nerdy homework actually! Courtney Lewis just released a book called sovereign entrepreneurs about Cherokee small businesses and the way that they're resisting economic downturn, so worth checking out, but in easier, less reading intensive homework. I want to encourage you to just Google and look for videos of protests at Mauna Kea or at Standing Rock and just look at the way that folks are using religious terms like sacred, like prayer, like religion, to identify what they're doing in those spaces and how that's part of their attempts to protect the earth. I want to recommend Thomas King's the truth about stories. He's a an American Canadian author who's written a lot about first nations and I want to encourage you to find out whose land you're on. We'll post a link for you to be able to look that up on our website, but it's also important to note that just knowing that you're on stolen land isn't enough. I want to cite Debbie Reese here who wrote a great statement about if you're planning to do land acknowledgement statements, what else goes with that? What else do you have to do? So can you donate? Can you research? Can you volunteer? Can you in some way be of service to the living people whose land you're on? We're also going to make some recommendations about Native scholars and activists. She might want to check out on Twitter. And if you all have suggestions of native folks on Twitter or other social media, I assume there is other social media that can help us better understand native rights and native activism in the United States or around the world. Let us know.

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

You can follow Megan at M P G P, H D and Ilyse. That's me at P R, O, F I, R, M, F or the show at keeping it underscore 1-0-1 in our natural habitat of Twitter. Find us on our website at keepingit101.com. Rate and download us wherever you get podcasts. And until next time, peace out, nerds!

Megan ([31:54](#)):

Do your homework: it's on the syllabus !

Speaker 1 ([32:08](#)):

[inaudible] [inaudible] [inaudible].