

Theme Song!: [00:00](#) what's up nerds? Welcome to keeping it 101: a Killjoy's Introduction to religion.

Ilyse: [00:22](#) Hi. Hello. I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, I'm a professor at the University of Vermont where I write and teach about Islam, imperialism, racialization of Muslims, and the history of religion. I'm definitely a killjoy, which means I basically ruin the fun with feminist anti-racist critique. Just ask my kids.

Megan : [00:39](#) You make the fun better. Best. Hi. Hello. I'm Megan Goodwin. I'm the program director for Sacred Writes, a Luce-funded project that promotes public scholarship on religion. We're hosted by Northeastern University where I write and teach about gender, sexuality, white supremacy, minority religions, politics and America, and I think everything is about religion because it is on today's episode--The first episode y'all--we are going to talk about what religion is actually.

Ilyse: [01:03](#) so hold onto your butts, nerds, because class is in session, so it's time for the lesson plan! Every episode we'll lay out what we'll talk through so you know what to expect. Today's lesson plan is to talk about religion by talking through what people usually mean when they say religion, what gets left out of religion and why religion is what people do.

Megan : [01:24](#) Rad. Okay. So if I say the word religion to you, what comes to mind?

New Speaker: [01:30](#) Jews.

Megan : [01:33](#) Yes. Uh, when I say religion, I mean a bunch of things, but a lot of times when I say I work on religion to someone sitting next to me on an airplane for example, they immediately start to talk to me about their church. They want to talk about Christianity. Some people want to talk about Judaism, uh, like Ilyse. Some people want to talk about Islam also like Ilyse! or Buddhism or Hinduism and all of that is great. All of that, yes, is religion. And looking at that list tells me that you have some experience with like being in a world where religion is an actor or at least includes actors. So Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism. Yes. That is the study of religion. It has a nerdy history. It also has a problem. And we're going to talk about why the study of religion as major religions has a problem. Why some really important demographically significant religions get totally left out and why one word like Christianity can stand in for all denominations, sex, political uses, ways of reading, all of that messy complexity. That is actually what happens when people do religion.

- Ilyse: [02:39](#) So Megan, let me get this straight. Even though when I think religion, I think of specific religions, you're saying that that's really a problem.
- Megan : [02:49](#) I am saying it is indicative of a problem. You yourself are not a problem. You are delightful. But when we assume that religion is easy, when it fits into little categories, that's a problem. When we say religion and leave out billions of people, we are definitely missing something.
- Ilyse: [03:09](#) Well, so when I hear religion and when I talk about religion on airplanes, which is a major mistake for anyone who studies Islam, one of the things that always comes back at me are things like texts. So texts is usually synonymous with Holy books or Bible or scripture. And I think it's telling to me that when we say religion, that books or texts or Holy books or sacred books is the first thing people think. And if that is true, then congratulations: You've also learned or absorbed the study of religion without knowing it. For me, texts are a problem because (hashtag, not all religions), not all religions have a sacred text. Some religions have many, some religions have none. Some religious texts are actually oral traditions that no one would count as "texts" and some have sacred texts that are just not the most important part of how people actually engage in their religion or religious world or religious practice. We know that texts exist. We know that they're real. We know that sacred texts are real and people use them, but they're just not the most important thing or they're not. The only thing we want to think when we think about religion.
- Megan : [04:28](#) So I hear you say that religion is more than books. I also want to ask you, Ilyse, for religions that have important books for something like Islam or Judaism or Christianity, if the Holy book says it, does that mean that's exactly what everybody does?
- Ilyse: [04:45](#) Of course, Megan. So here's, here's the thing. If that were true, the world would be like a really confusing place, right? Because anyone who's read one of these Holy books knows that they kind of contradict themselves in the middle. They definitely say things that no longer makes sense. Most of these books are ancient, so I actually don't know. I don't know what a DRAM is and I don't, I don't have camels nearby. And
- Megan : [05:20](#) well point of order, you do actually have a camel nearby because there's that one on that highway on the way to Middlebury. But just [inaudible].

Ilyse: [05:25](#) That's true. There is--good call Vermont visitor!--There is not one a dromedary that lives off Shelburne Road slash route seven in Vermont. But like, I think that when we think that Holy texts are a one-to-one relationship with how people live their lives, it's really just a failure of imagination, right? Like we know religious people who have never read their text. We know religious people who, um, can quote part of their text but not all of it, and we know religious people who have never heard that "that" part of their texts exists until someone tells them about it. Because books do not inherently tell us anything about what people are doing with those books because of book requires--In order for a book to have a meeting, a book has to have someone reading it, interpreting it, applying it to their world. So because the world is changing, books are always changing.

Megan : [06:24](#) So it sounds to me like you're suggesting that books have meaning and relationship with the people who are reading them.

Ilyse: [06:31](#) Yeah,

Ilyse: [06:32](#) that is exactly what I'm saying.

Speaker 4: [06:35](#) Yeah.

Megan : [06:36](#) Interesting. I agree. Uh, I think we like Christianity. We assume that the Bible means one thing where there are hundreds if not thousands of translations. Uh, as I discovered when I went to an evangelical Bible study camp in high school, because that was what kind of teenager I was, it turns out Catholics and Protestants have different Bibles, like not all the way, but the 10 commandments happened in different orders and Catholics includes some books that brought us since don't. Um, so even the Bible is, is not a singular text to say nothing of Hinduism that has hundreds of texts that have important stories about how the divine works. And I'm going to let you talk about Hinduism because I'm actually out of my depth here.

Speaker 4: [06:36](#)

Ilyse: [07:26](#) well, Hinduism is just for me, one of those, those religions that has many texts and many ways of thinking of Texas sacred, but it would be really hard and in fact pretty historically inaccurate to point to one text and say, well, this is it. This is the sacred text. It's number one. And if we're going to rank them one through 10, this one's number one. Definitely. And all Hindus do this across all time. But just that's like not how it works

incorrect in correct. And so I think, um, I think for me while while thinking about major religions is problematic and troubling and has a long gross imperialist history that we're definitely gonna get to in a future episode, this question of texts as being, yup, that's what religion is. A religion is only a religion if it's got a Holy book and we know people are religious because they read that Holy book is similarly limited, historically inaccurate and frankly rooted in an understanding of religion as only a particular sort of Christianity.

- Megan : [08:33](#) And we're definitely gonna come back to that. I am also sensing that we need to do an episode on texts because now I want to talk about the church of all worlds deciding that a science fiction book by Robert Heinlein is a sacred text as well and building their lives around that. So blows the whole category up, but we are generally guess what? Guess what, what?
- Ilyse: [08:52](#) We're just getting started. We are just getting started. Like I said, hold onto your butts. We've got a lot in the pipeline.
- Speaker 5: [09:07](#) [inaudible].
- Megan : [09:08](#) All right. So now that you have your butts at firmly in hand, let's also talk about religion and belief. So I mentioned I work on public scholarship on religion. This means I have a lot of conversations with journalists and a thing that I have noticed about American journalists who write about religion, many of whom are very, very smart and know a ton about religion, tend to use religion and belief interchangeably. So one of the things that we want you to think about today, and frankly all day is, is our religion and belief the same thing. Spoilers. They are not. For some people, they are not for everybody. And belief isn't a thing that we can measure, right? Uh, not going to get too much into the Supreme court, but the Supreme court has specifically said that we do not measure, we cannot evaluate the sincerity of someone's belief. So what does belief tell us about people who identify as religious. Um, how do we make sense of folks who identify as spiritual but not religious or people who say they're a none and one people that say they have no religion but still pray, potentially believe in something. Question Mark. Lots to say there. We'll come back to it.
- Ilyse: [10:22](#) Okay. So in the ranking listeners, nerds, you, you might've noticed that we've put things in order of what makes us grumpy about what people assume is true about religion, right? So number one thing that makes us grumpy is "major religions" because that assumes minor religions that ensued. Some people stuff is unimportant and we're going to get to that in a second.

The second thing that makes us grumpy is "religion equals text." Because a book on a shelf doesn't tell us how people are reading that book. It doesn't account for nuance across readings. It doesn't account for people that just don't use text as part of their religious practice. But this bit on "belief" y'all is really frustrating as both a Jewish woman and as someone whose primary note of research is Islam. Because those two traditions focus on action, right? And so this question of belief is important.

Ilyse:

[11:21](#)

What do you believe? Do you hold there to be one God and only one God? Those are, those are important internal discussions about what Jews and Muslims believe. But Jews and Muslims also put a ton of emphasis on like, yeah, but what are you doing right? Like did you get up and pray this morning and, and, and to be glib, that checking of the box, yes I did or no, I did not, is at least as important if frankly, if not more important than yeah. Did you believe what you were doing in that moment? Some traditions allow for the person to be, uh, to use like mindfulness language less than intentional or less on the ball about it. You can question whether or not the point of this prayer is good or bad as long as you're doing it. And so belief doesn't really, for me it doesn't get at action. And there are loads of religion and loads of religious people for whom action is more important than belief. It's our secret.

Megan :

[12:27](#)

When we think about this as religious studies scholars, we often use categories like creedal and votive. So creedal religions are religions that prioritize belief that say, uh, you can practice in any number of ways. But the core thing about being this religion is you believe this. Christianity is a pretty good example of a creedal religion. Obviously Christianity also has practices. People practice Christianity and any number of ways. But the core thing to being a Christian is believing that Jesus Christ is at the center of your religious universe. Right? As opposed to votive religions that prioritize practice. The most important thing there is not, do you believe the same thing as everybody else? It is, did you do the right thing? Are you being in the world in the way that our community thinks is best? Um, and that's, that is a constant struggle. Not everyone gets it every time, but the important part is you are doing the thing right. I think most people would be surprised. Most people in the United States would be surprised to hear that most religions in the world are votive. Most religions in the world emphasize what you do, how you are and not what you believe. And obviously votive religions have or votive religions have beliefs. Muslims believe things, Jews believe things. They believe in one God, the same God. But

what really counts is did you do the right thing? Did you live in the way that the community has agreed is best?

- Speaker 6: [13:59](#) [Mr. Roger's Train Sound Effect]
- Ilyse: [14:05](#) professorial moment. Let's sum up!
- Megan : [14:07](#) yay.
- Sound Effect! : [14:07](#) Come on. What have we said is the most important thing?
- Megan : [14:11](#) So one of the things that gets left out when we limit religion to the categories of major religions and beliefs and texts is that we focus too much on the individual. We focus too much on texts. We think about how individual people interpret texts and make sense of being in the world. And for a lot of people in the world, that is not how religion works for a lot of folks in the world, it's about community, it's about taking care of each other. It's about getting through major stages of life together and figuring out what this means, not just for me, but for all of us.
- Ilyse: [14:44](#) Yeah, I mean I think it's really important to keep saying that like we exist in society and this is a silly thing to have to remind people because right now you exist in a society, but the idea that you as an individual don't just concoct your own meaning. Even if you personally find something meaningful is a really important aspect of the study of religion. So it doesn't mean that you as an individual show up at a prayer service, take out of it what you want and then you have your own religious view. Everything that you were able to do in that space is conditioned by the way in which you showed up in that space. How that space is structured, your childhood, your communities. So to ignore communities doesn't make a hell of a lot of sense. It does not. It is in fact silly.
- Ilyse: [15:32](#) So let's stop doing that. What else gets left out? If we focused on religion as text belief and major traditions, yo, I mean minor traditions like what does that even mean? How do we and who is the we that has decided that some people's religions are minor because like spoiler alert, I would venture to guess that if you are practicing a religion you probably don't think that's mine. It's probably important to you. Yeah. What bananas person said. Yay. Yeah. Your stuff, your stuff is minor. These are the major religions. What was it? White men. It was definitely white. Probably Protestant white men who are probably Protestant. Definitely cis hets. Ha, sorry to those men. But you kind of messed up the study of religion,

Megan : [16:30](#) sorry, not sorry to those men.

Ilyse: [16:34](#) So I care a lot about minority religious traditions. I care about them because they are often not minority traditions at all. Right? So a really good example here is Sikh or Sikhi traditions. That's S I K H. so some folks in America might pronounce that Sikh but the correct pronunciation is sick. So that's what we're going to say. Sikhs globally have are the fifth largest religion demographically in the world. They are routinely not part of the quote unquote major religions list. Whereas Judaism always is, and Jews are like one to 2% of the global world population depending on which metrics you use. So Jews are a minority but are considered a majority religion, a major religion, six are not. And all of that has a really racist, imperialist history. And so I really hate the model of major world religions because it leaves out, it leaves out people, it leaves out the way people think of themselves in the world. It does a violence to people by that their stuff is less important than our stuff for reasons. And those reasons aren't racist. Right? Okay. Everybody like the, the reasons are racism. The answer is always racism and colonialism. Let's just start there. I know you, but it also is a problem because,

Megan : [18:07](#) okay.

Ilyse: [18:07](#) It shows us the way that through racism and colonialism, religions have been made minor. So we have said that Sikhism or Sikhi traditions are minor compared to Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism. And that's a power imbalance. So when we're talking about major religions versus minor religions, we're always talking about power, which is why you like we got to name it as that. And then do better.

Megan : [18:38](#) Yes. Good. Let us know better and then do better. I like that. So we're going to talk more on our next episode about who's protected by the category of religion and how we use minority religions to define who counts and who doesn't particularly, but not exclusively in the United States. I'm a horrible Americanist. Sorry about it. I think one of the most important things for me when I'm trying to think about religion and religious studies is how our work is different than theologians. This is not to say that theologians are not smart or not doing important work, but what theologians are doing when they are at work is figuring out, here's what God wants. Here is how we are supposed to be in the world. Right? Theology is about picking aside saying, this is what the divine, what my community wants and needs from me. When we're talking about religion on this podcast though, we're thinking about it in terms of religious studies, which is to

say this is not one big Battle Royale winner take all. There's a right and a wrong answer here. We don't have right or wrong answers. Sorry. Um, there's probably a math podcast out there somewhere that does that. I don't know. But what we have is here's what people do and here's why it matters, right? So when we're talking about religious studies, we're looking at what people do when they say they're doing religion and we don't say, Hmm, that's doing Christianity wrong. That's doing Judaism wrong. That's doing sticky wrong, because that's not our job.

- Ilyse: [20:05](#) Yeah. So I guess I guess to put on our professorial voice again, we care a lot about the study of religion and doing it means being descriptive, talking about what folks are reading, interpreting, how their--how their histories have been structured, how their beliefs are structured, how their practices are structured versus prescriptive, which is telling folks what the right answer is, what they should do or what the real truth is.
- Megan : [20:36](#) So that sounds to me like a keyword alert! Prescriptive versus descriptive. We will add it to your glossary.
- Ilyse: [20:46](#) Well, we've been talking a lot about stuff, but now it's time to engage with ourselves. It's time for primary sources!
- Ilyse: [20:48](#) So it says in this section of the podcast, we're going to tell stories that center our own voices and experiences as either scholars of religion or as people in the world.
- Megan : [21:04](#) Yeah. And we're doing that, not because our experiences are universal, but you know, we don't assume that our experiences of religion are everybody's experiences about religion. And honestly, it would be great to hear from you all about how your experiences have been different. But one of the challenges of doing religious studies is understanding that everybody comes in with a history. Everybody comes in with assumptions. And knowing those and naming those is a big part of doing this work responsibly. Okay. So a thing that I suspect will come up a lot during this podcast is the fact that I was raised Catholic.
- Megan : [21:45](#) I am no longer Catholic. Uh, but even saying I was raised Catholic doesn't really, it doesn't give you the picture. So if you have not met me in person, uh, I am a large, loud ginger lady who is very clearly of Irish descent. And if you are a very well-tuned Erie, you'll know that I still have a little bit of Philly and my voice particularly, but not exclusively if I've been drinking, which I never do obviously. So I was raised by Philly Catholics and that very much inflects how I think about religion and what



religion is and what it does. So one of the reasons that I don't think it's enough to just talk about belief when we're talking about religion is because of the way I find Catholicism still just pervading my life. And some of that is good and some of it is frankly really not.

Megan :

[22:32](#)

But we wanted to ground this primary source exploration in personal pieces. So I will post a picture of this and if you're following us on Twitter, you've already seen it. But my primary source for that day is the mass card from my aunt Lane's funeral. So my aunt lane, sister Mary Elaine and Williams was a sister of mercy. Uh, she joined the sisters of mercy when she was 19 years old and she died, gosh, five, almost six years ago now. So when Catholics die, uh, and particularly when someone who served the church all their life dies. The community, uh, creates these prayer cards, these cards that fit in your wallet, that have the picture of your loved one on them, that have a prayer on the back that are basically supposed to keep you connected to them. I am not Catholic and my aunt lane was my mom's sister and I don't have a great relationship with my mom and I had to go to a mass to get this card, uh, and be in the presence of her dead body and also my mother and sit and deal with all that complicated stuff.

Megan :

[23:52](#)

And the reason that I'm telling you this story is because that mass card lives in my wallet. It is a thing that I carry every day and I didn't make a conscious decision to do it. It just feels right. It feels, yeah. Correct. In a way that I can't fully explain. And so for me, thinking about religion as messy as complicated really gets encapsulated in this little piece of cardboard. The picture of an aunt that I used to be really close to that I lost touch with who was a member of an order and a religion that I used to be really close to that I have deliberately distanced myself from that is still with me every single day. And that's my primary source.

Ilyse:

[24:34](#)

Thanks for sharing that Megan. So my primary source today is, is really about why religion feels like something that we have to think about all the time, but also why the way that we commonly know it as Americans as Anglophones often is imperfect. So, uh, I'm gonna talk about my family, but specifically my mom. So my mom's name is Flo. Hi, Flo! My mom, uh, was a primary caretaker for us for most of my early childhood and then returned to work as a, as a phys ed teacher afterwards. And my mom maintained a kitchen that had two sets of plates, which is common for Jews that keep kosher, but we did not keep kosher. So I described this as like a vestigial organ of kashrut that hangs out in our house. But my mom also

like really loves bacon cheeseburgers like bacon double cheeseburgers.

Ilyse: [25:33](#) It's like a thing that my mom and my memory of a child is that like we did not have bacon in our house. I think that has changed as my folks have gotten older and none of their kids really care, but as a kid we didn't have bacon in our house or if we did maybe like turkey bacon, but outside the house you could have a bacon double cheeseburger. Now for those of you who don't know anything about Jews, you may not have bacon. You may not mix milk and meat. So a bacon double cheeseburger is about as non-kosher as you can get unless you like put shrimp on the top and had a glass of milk, like it's gross. You're not supposed to have it and this not supposed to have it, but maintaining it outside of the house is this really interesting space of American religious Judaism, right?

Ilyse: [26:17](#) My mom has a sense of like double plates, which sounds like kosher. She has a sense of like at least when we were kids that this was not to be in the house. And so this idea of being a Jew in the house and a person or an American outside, which is like a citation of Mendelssohn goes a long way for us to think about how my mom is read and not read as Jewish, as American, as a woman, a particular age, as a woman from a particular location. What a Brooklyn as a person trying to navigate all of those things in all those identities and all those historical norms. Right. So like internally, would some Jews see my mom's eating a bacon double cheeseburgers as disqualifying her from the label of Jew? You betcha. You betcha. He is super in violation of kosher law. But if we did that as scholars of religion, so if we just looked at texts and said like, yup, Flo Morgenstein definitely violating texts, probably not a real Jew. We would lose an entire window of American Jews. Right? We'd just lose it.

Megan : [27:27](#) Yes, that would be so, I'm sorry, I'm so horrified at that thought of like having a little notebook being like, Hmm. No, particularly as someone outside Judaism, I'm like, it's my job to grade flow on her kashrut.

Ilyse: [27:41](#) That's what the study of religion used to do, man! And like still kind of does! but it also, if you wrote it off, you would also fully miss how my mom as like a post-Holocaust boomer whose name is Flo, right? Like that's a hell a white lady name on purpose. Like there's a way in which my mom and the family she comes from and the universe she was living in and trying real hard to both assimilate into and continue to pass as white in means that signaling that you're cool, cool, cool. To eat bacon outside the house means that you've somehow like, you know

what, I don't even want to get into what it means. If we lose that from the definition of what it is to be a Jew, we lose the history of American Jews experiencing antisemitism, trying to assimilate into a Christian-centric white America.

- Ilyse: [28:37](#) And the ways in which those kinds of, in the house out the house, where is this acceptable, when is this acceptable? Are actually a really complex set of negotiations with racialization of religion, religious practice, internal debates about what kind of Jew you're going to be, whether that's a reformed Jew, a conservative Jew, a reconstructionist Jew, an Orthodox Jew, a modern Orthodox Jew, a Hasidic Jew, a practicing a spiritual but not religious. All of those things are historically unique to women of my mom's age. And so not only just throwing it out, do a violence to my mother and like her own assertion that she is a Jewish woman. It also does a violence to the study of my mother, right? Like to thinking of my mom is part of a unique historical moment that this all became possible. And so for me, uh, you know, my mom, my mom's a funny lady and also a really great teaching tool because her own choices. And habits. Tell us about what it means to be an American Jew, navigating all of this stuff. Who also just happened to really like bacon.
- Megan : [29:44](#) Yeah, I mean, amen. Hey Ilyse, can you talk to me just for one second about why a Jewish woman of your mom's age would be given a like white coated American name and would want to be seen assimilating to quote unquote American culture? What's at stake there?
- Ilyse: [30:06](#) Oh boy. All right, well we can't do a history of antisemitism and the Holocaust quickly.
- Megan : [30:12](#) Right, but, but what if, what if you said the Holocaust?
- Ilyse: [30:16](#) yeah, I mean really it's the Holocaust, right? We're coming back to this because it's both like a point of my own research that I'd very much like to talk about, but it is also like really important to think how some people get to, and this comes back to our why is belief not a good measure. My mom could not be a practicing Jew, but if her name was like even Rivka Morgenstein, she might always be read as Jewish in a way that Florence is not that. And so that question of whether or not you get to be a practicing Jew and whether or not your belief in that matters has a real resonance in the post-Holocaust universe. And quite frankly, as we see antisemitism on an unprecedented rise as we, as we enter 2020 coding for not Jewish is a safety mechanism. And we can talk about, we can talk about whether

or not that's a successful safety mechanism, but it's a safety mechanism.

- Megan : [31:18](#) Absolutely. So as we said, we'll come back to who is protected by the category of religion and who is not protected in our next episode. But I, I want to close primary sources with thinking about what did we, what did we learn from this one? We learned that religion is more than belief. Religion happens not just in sacred texts and even as Elise and I have connections to quote unquote major religions, our connections are very different than here's what we believe. So here's what we do, or here's what this book says. So here's what we do. Yeah.
- Speaker 5: [31:53](#) [Mr Rogers Train Noises].
- Ilyse: [32:00](#) In the next section we're going to talk about sources that are really important to the study of religion. So listen up guys. It's story time! It's story time. In this segment, we'll walk you through an important text in the study of religion like nerds.
- Megan : [32:17](#) Okay. So today's nerd taxed is, uh, from Robert Bellah's habits of the heart. In his research for habits of the heart. Robert Bellah's team interviewed one young woman who has named her religion after herself. Sheila Larson, not her actual name, is a young nurse who describes her faith as Sheilaism. This suggests the logical possibility of more than two and 35 million American religions, one for each of us. I believe in God. Sheila says, I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheila. I'm just my own little voice. Sheila's faith has some tenants beyond belief in God though not many. And what in defining what she calls my own Sheila is, um, she says it's just trying to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other. How does this little section from habits at the heart help us think about what religion is and what religion is not, at least? What do you think?
- Ilyse: [33:15](#) Well, I think one of the key parts of this really crucial passage is that when Bellah suggests that this suggests the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions, that stands out to me as something that we want to perk our ears up when we hear that or underline, if we're reading along and say, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. Is that really what we mean? Is that really possible?
- Megan : [33:40](#) [Mmhmm.] You know where my ears perked up. I will tell you where, when this passage says she named her religion after

belief and then the very next sentence says she describes her faith as so even in this very important text that has been very influential in the study of religion, we see these tendencies to assume that when people are talking about religion, what they mean is here's what they believe. I find that interesting.

Ilyse: [34:10](#) So one of the things I hear when I read Bellah is that the individual is important on the individual, has a way of expressing complex systems, but she doesn't do it for me because there are not 235 million American religions or I think upwards now of what 360 million American religions each. For one of us, there are communities and systems and and even as you point out this, this slide between faith and beliefs and she ability to believe in God but did not do much else. It'd be kind of hard for Sheila to exist as a person outside of the United States that our location, our communities, our socialization, all of that matters. When we're talking about the study of religion, what's your takeaway?

Megan : [35:03](#) There are a lot of things going on in this teeny little passage, but for me, when I talk about this piece, when I think about this piece, I want to think about Sheila's assumption that religion and faith have the same thing that Sheila feels entitled to say this is religion even as just one person and that she's suggesting that her Sheila ism can happen in a number of different places. It doesn't have to live in church, so some of that as a scholar of religion, I'm really excited about. Right? I think religion happens anywhere, people

Ilyse: [35:38](#) do religion, but I think religion happens where people do religion because religion is people, but religion doesn't happen where a person does anyone thing. For me, religion first and foremost is about what people do, not what Apperson does. Yeah, so guess what nerds, we've hit the thesis TA DA, and that's the most important thing. Religion is what people, not one person. What people do. Yes, that matters. Megan, tell me why that, why you think that matters to you. Why is religion is what people do? The thesis of today's episode, religion is what people do. One, because religion is about more than just belief. Religion is about what happens out in the world, how people shape their lives based on communities of accountability and responsibility and belonging and meaning. Making all of those pieces are part of what makes up religion. And if we're not thinking about the action of religious people out in the world, we're missing frankly most of religion. How about you?

Ilyse: [36:52](#) Religion is what people do because everything else hinges on it, right? How we read our text, not the text itself, but how

communities of people are reading this text, teaching this text, thinking about this text, arguing about this text or texts. Yes. How communities show up both when the going is good and when the going is rough, right? And while an individual can have their own individual interpretations, those individual interpretations don't come from nowhere. They come from socialization, they come from communities and contexts, which means being an American might influence your religious practice, your read of text, your availability for what options are, what religious options are available to you in a way that being and uh, a Pakistani or an Australian would too. Right. But we might imagine not being an American Jew looks different than being an Australian Jew, which looks a little bit different than being an Israeli Jew, which looks significantly different than being like an Indian Jew and to like nation state, right? To say nothing of gender expression, sexuality, race, class, historical era. So religion people do because contexts influence how religion gets done.

- Megan : [38:16](#) Yup. I also want to point out weirdly because I am not our historian, that Sheila didn't come up with this idea of what religion is all on her own, right? There's a history here. Sheila didn't build that. Sheila isn't responding to a thing that just spontaneously showed up in her head. We have this long storied problematic racist ass history of what religion is and what religion isn't. So she's drawing on how other people have thought and acted and come together and built and imagined. All of that is influencing it. Even as she's saying it's just her one thing, which as we know is also a very American thing to do.
- Ilyse: [38:56](#) Yeah. So religion is what people do because community use socialization communities in their contexts. Individuals are just one part of community.
- Megan : [39:06](#) Hmm.
- Ilyse: [39:06](#) What's another kind of consequence of religion is what people do.
- Megan : [39:10](#) Again, as a horrible Americanist, I'm always thinking about religion as something that is treated as special, right? So we treat religious actions, religious communities, certain actions, certain communities as special because they're religious. So if you do religion in a way that is not necessarily recognized, not necessarily legible as religion, what happens? What don't you get? Where are places that you're unsafe? Who gets left out of being both really religious and really American.

- Ilyse: [39:47](#) And so that kind of, that kind of brings us to what we're going to talk about next time. If you're hanging out with us nerds. Next time we're going to talk about what are the consequences of religion being what people do and religion being a word that gets weaponized and defined and limited around certain groups.
- Megan : [40:09](#) Absolutely, but don't pack up your stuff yet. Nerds. You've got homework in this section. Every episode we tell you nerdy and also not so nerdy things to read, watch, or listen to related to what we've been chatting about. We're going to put the recommendations in our show notes alongside where to find some of the other references we've talked about. I will upload this picture of my aunt Lane's a prayer card and we've got some links to things you might want to read or watch or listen to. This is also where we're trying to live into our citation of politics. A shout out to Sarah med, obviously because citation of politics means showing how you know, what you know and giving credit where it's due.
- Ilyse: [40:48](#) All right, so class for today's homework. There's a lot of great books about studying religion. We're obviously not going to assign post them all, but we will in the show notes put more than we're saying here. I'm in charge of the nerdy homework today, so my nerdy homework to you is to go pick up a copy of Malory Nye's religion, the basics. It's a really great overview of what the study of religion is.
- Megan : [41:11](#) Okay,
- Ilyse: [41:11](#) and one of the reasons why I love it so much is that it's written in pretty plain, not so nerdy, not so academic prose, but also it's available in a lot of public and university libraries across the country. It's very expensive at your local bookstores and if that's not your jam, Mallory I's got a bunch of stuff online that he's posted there on purpose so that folks have access to what he's talking about, including a really worthwhile post called decolonizing religion, what decolonizing religion is. We'll get to soon enough to dear friends, but until then go check out Nye's work.
- Megan : [41:46](#) Yes. You can also follow Malory Nye on Twitter at at Malory, @ M a L O. R. Y. N. Y. E. I'm on his page right now. And the header image is Winnie the Pooh asking piglet, what day is it today? And piglet squeaks. It's the day we burned the white patriarchy to the ground. So if you're listening to this podcast, I suspect Malory Nye is on your team. I have less arguably nerdy, but still very important homework. Uh, I'm going to give you two pieces

of, uh, popular literature that can maybe help you think through what religion is and how people learn to think about it. So my first piece, uh, is recommending the novel, the color purple, which I'm going to hope that everybody's already read. But if you haven't, or if it's been awhile, go back and at least look at the places where Shug and Sealy start talking about God and how sugar starts thinking about God and bigger, more expansive, more nourishing, flourishing ways. That piece has been really important to me, and I think it's, it's smart and honestly offers a theory of religion that, um, a lot of religious studies scholars could really benefit from. The other novel that I'm going to recommend to you is life of PI. Uh, the author is Yann Martel. And, uh, I, I like this book a lot. Um, it's a fun adventure story, but it's also a story of a young kid who joins three religions at once. And ultimately it gets to the end of this fantastic tale saying that life is about stories and what stories we use to make sense of our experiences. And for me, that's a really good way to think about what religion does in the world.

Ilyse: [43:27](#)

so, all right, so until next time: peace out, Nerds.

Megan : [43:31](#)

Do your homework. It's on the syllabus.

Silly Sounds: [43:51](#)

is that going to be on the test? Yes and no. And there is no test. And you all failed it and you all got A's. Who cares? Goodbye.