

islam-is-more-than-you-think-it-is

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SPEAKERS

Megan Goodwin, Krusty the Clown, Simpsons, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, Hasan Minhaj, Detox



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:17

This is Keeping it 101: a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast. This season our work is made possible in part through a generous grant from the New England Humanities Consortium, and with additional support from the University of Vermont's Humanities Center. We are grateful to live, teach, and record on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples.



Megan Goodwin 00:39

I am going to go off script here for one second because I just listened to an amazing interview with Abel Gomez, who is a scholar of indigenous religions and also a Sacred Writes trainee. And he challenged us to point out not just that these are the ancestral and unceded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and the Aucocisco peoples, but they are the today lands of these native folks- that these people are still here, and that we are in community with them, or it's our responsibility to be in community with them. So that's just really stuck with me. Anyway, what's up nerds? Hi, hello, I'm Megan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions, race, and gender.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:18

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

and South Asia. You nerds know the drill by now, this is the last unit of the season for God's sakes.



Megan Goodwin 01:31

Halleluh! Sorry.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:34

We mixed it up this go-round pairing quick and dirty introductions to topics we're not exactly experts in, with interviews with folks who are experts in those very topics. Today's episode is a little different since I can and do talk Islam every day of the week.



Megan Goodwin 01:49

Yes, ma'am. You do. So today we are focused we- and by we, I mean mostly Ilyse because this is her moment in the sun- we are giving you the rundown on how and why Islam is more than you think it is.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:06

I ain't afraid of no LESSON PLAN.



Megan Goodwin 02:12


So happy about this. The thesis today is kind of simple. Islam is more than what you see in the movies or read in the headlines. But those big blaring stereotypes are so persistent, and often so racialized, just flat out incorrect, and just friggin- they're racist and damaging. And we spend so much time running damage control that we often don't get to talk about the fun, interesting, dare I say messy parts of Islam. And we're going to get at all of this messy, complicated, interesting, fun, scary, even, stuff about Islam by thinking about jinn. That's with a "j" not with a "g." Right, IRMF?





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:52


I mean, you know I love both gin with a "G" and a "J," so I can see how that would be confusing but in this moment, yes, we are talking jinn and rarer still, djinn, "jinn." But anyway, yes, Megan, the thing is that as a fairly well established Islamic Studies person at


this point in my career, I can see-


 M Megan Goodwin 03:17
She's tenured, y'all! Sorry.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:20
I could tell you what I feel obligated to teach in my intro level Islam courses, and it is rarely the fun, more messy stuff, sometimes the jinn among them, that makes the syllabus. In part because of the contours of my own expertise, and really in part because if I'm teaching so called "one and done" students who show up in singular religion class to fulfill a literal "diversity requirement," then I feel a political imperative to unteach the lifetime of misinformation that students show up with.

 M Megan Goodwin 03:54
And like, the stuff that they're going to continue to encounter for the rest of their freakin' lives.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:59
Yeah.

 M Megan Goodwin 03:59
Just- you- they need the vocabulary, they need, like, the glasses that let them see how pernicious and just persistent all of this misinformation is.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:09
Yeah, absolutely. And like, don't get it twisted, 9/11 was 20 years ago, which means it is older than most of our intro students. So when I say their whole lifetime, I'm not exaggerating.

 M Megan Goodwin 04:21
Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 04:22

But okay, what that means is that there is so much more Islam, so much more Muslim culture that goes unexplored. And of course, listen, no intro class can do at all. And I stand by making sure that students know the role of Muhammad and the impacts of colonialism on religious practice, over and above say, jinn, in most semesters, but jinn are freakin' awesome, and they are absolutely part of the Islam that we don't typically learn about, because it isn't good headlines.



Megan Goodwin 04:55

Honestly, I learned most of what I know about all that frickin' awesome stuff from our next episode's guest, Dr. Ali Olomi. Dr. Olomi is king of Wednesdays, because every week he teaches us, and the whole dang internet about the cool, weird, funky parts of Islam. And we want that funk. Give us the funk. But before we can funk it up with Dr. Olomi, we have to lay down some basics right?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:18

Of course, right.



Megan Goodwin 05:22

Literal yenta line, you're welcome. The 101 ON TODAY, the section where we do some professor-work. So, as we do, let's start at the very beginning, which is, as always, a very good place to start. MoFu, can you start us off with the basics of Islam so we can hurry up and get to the beyond basics? I really want our nerds to hear about the creepy ghost stories.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:43

Hard same. So like, I got to be clear, I cannot and will not do all of the things at once. But I think some texts, some key people, and what a jinn is, what were medieval Islamic scholars thinking about and concerned about when they're thinking about jinn, will help our nerds out for next time. But don't worry, I will sneak in the imperialism, too, y'all.



Megan Goodwin 06:07

Of course you will, of course you are, and we love you for it. Okay, I will try to jump in

when I know a thing. But this is definitely your rodeo, so, um, giddy up.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:18

I can't believe you wrote this 'yeehaw m'nerds.'



Megan Goodwin 06:22

You're welcome.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:24

We're covering three super basic points to show that Islam is more than you think it is. Are you ready?



Megan Goodwin 06:32

So ready. My whole body is ready for this.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:35

Alright, number one. Islam is what Muslims do.



Megan Goodwin 06:38

What?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:39

And importantly, Muslims don't just do "what the Qur'an says," please hear my scare quotes and general derision. Two, "Shariah" probably doesn't mean what you think it means. And three, the Qur'an has some pretty cool stories you never get to hear because Muslims are constantly having to defend their basic humanity in this dumb country, and in most European countries, and in many spaces within international fora.



Megan Goodwin 07:12

Yeah, yeah. Okay, cool. Cool. Cool. Cool. Cool. Let's do this.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:16

Alright, so let me start with the thing that we do in class and anytime I speak to a public audience. Islam is a religion, practiced by Muslims. A Muslim who practices Islam is not Islamic, they are Muslim.



Megan Goodwin 07:31

Yeah- I didn't learn that until grad school.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:33

And that's why I feel like we need to start this basic. The holy text of Islam is the Qur'an (Not the "Koran," please don't do that to me, "Qur'an,") which is read and recited in Arabic, and famously remains kind of like the Torah for Jews: untranslated in ritual and cultural spaces. Even though many Muslims, like many Jews, do not read or speak Arabic, or for Jews, Hebrew, as a primary language. So why I give this comparison is just like I can pray in Hebrew and have memorized some things and can phonetically sing or chant in Hebrew, and I'll be honest, though, it is rusty, crusty now, I was taught to sound out Hebrew so that I could chant the Torah, which isn't reading at all. It's literally like phonetically sounding out the letters. I literally do not know Hebrew, same as for Arabic, the Qur'an, and many, though not all, Muslims.



Megan Goodwin 08:39

You know, this, darling nerds. But, just because a sacred text says something doesn't mean that all members of that religion do exactly what the book says. So just like Christianity is way more than what the Bible says, and hopefully you remember Dr. Patel telling us last time that the Bible says oh, so many things, Islam is way, way, way, way, way more than what the Qur'an says. Just because the Qur'an says something doesn't mean Muslims do it, right? Muslims are not robots who get programmed by the Qur'an. They are also not vampires but with bacon instead of garlic, so please also knock that shit off.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:19

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 09:21

Welcome to the dumb things we have to say because elected officials in the US don't take religious studies classes, or listen to the pod. So they pull ridiculous stunts, like "well, the Qur'an says" (because they read a thing on the internet or whatever boilerplate ALEC gave them to read) and then try to pass bullshit, frequently racist as fuck, anti-muslim legislation, which is trash.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:41

It is trash. The Qur'an is a hard text, beautiful, but hard. Unlike the Jewish or Christian Bible, you don't- you don't, like, pick it up, start on page one and then learn the history of the universe, or your people, or revelation, in chronological order. The Qur'an sort of jumps around as you read it in- in terms of stories and order. It assumes some familiarity with other Abrahamic stories and ideas. And it's really, super poetic. Qur'an means recitation.



Detox 10:17

It's our secret word of the day.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:20

And many scholars gloss this in two ways. First, that Muhammad received the Word of God from the angel Gabriel or Jabreel, so the Qur'an is, like, literally Muhammad's recitation of that revelation. And second, that the Qur'an is meant to be recited, which is to say that saying the Qur'an is really important for Muslim cultures, and some people even memorize the whole thing. And folks who memorize it get a special name: hafez-e-quran.



Megan Goodwin 10:53

That's cool. When we talk about it in my classes, I point out that if the Qur'an is the recitation of the Word of God, that means that if it's in the Qur'an, God literally said that through Jabreel to Muhammad, there's also, like, big 'Book of Mormon' vibes here, by the way, but that's a that's a whole 'nother conversation. Short version, the Qur'an is not the "Muslim Bible." It's its own thing. And also only respecting another religion because it's like Christianity is, wait for it, Christian imperialism.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:24

Yep, you got that, right. The Qur'an is not the "Muslim Bible." It's- it's honestly a very different kind of text than the Christian Bible. And it's also not the only text or set of teaching that guides Muslim thought and practice. Muslims have a rich history of exegesis.



Detox 11:42

It's our secret word of the day,



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:45

Which is, ways to use other sacred and vital sources and traditions to make sense of the Qur'an, to ensure that they're living ethically in their everyday lives. So for the nerds following along, I'm here referring to hadith and sunna.



Detox 12:00

It's our secret word of the day.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:02

Sayings and actions of Muhammad.



Megan Goodwin 12:05

So the hadith are the sayings, and the sunna are the actions of the Prophet Muhammad.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:09

More or less.



Megan Goodwin 12:10

Okay.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:10

You got that.



Megan Goodwin 12:11

Cool. Cool, cool, cool. Okay, so point one, Islam is what Muslims do. And Muslims don't just do what the Qur'an says. What's next?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:21

Shariah. I'm going to do my best, like, Inigo Montoya moment, but like, you keep using that word, and I do not think it means what you think it means. And also, you do not know what it means. In fact, I know that you don't know what it means because I'm an expert in Islam, and I hear it all the time. You don't know. So let's talk about it. What is Shariah anyway? I have to admit, I have a love-hate relationship with this word, not what it represents, but this word much like hijab. So many Westerners and Americans though, like, I see you too, Brits and Frenchies-



Megan Goodwin 13:00

Fuckin' French, man.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:01

For real. I see y'all, and so many of y'all think that- think Islam, and hear Shariah, which is to say, law.



Detox 13:12

It's our secret word of the day.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:15

As if that means one thing. It is not. As if it is set in stone, LOL, nope. And as if all Muslims in all places, in all times agree on things, all of them. Like come the fuck on. So Shariah, which we can call law, and its sibling term fiqh, which means jurisprudence, rely on the Qur'an, Hadith, Sunna, as well as cultural norms, analogy, big picture themes, history, and yes, science.



Megan Goodwin 13:52

Wow, it sounds like Shariah is maybe really complicated. Hmm.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:57

Just like a little.



Megan Goodwin 13:59

My students always, always, always have questions about Shariah even if they don't know that word. So like Americans seem very concerned about being told they can't do stuff. You might have noticed this if you've spent some time in the United States, or what's now the United States. Americans don't like being told that the United States wasn't always the United States for starters. Anyway. So like lots of people know that Islam forbids alcohol. But it seems like they assume alcohol isn't allowed because Muslims, like, I don't know hate fun and also freedom. Spoilers, nerds. Muslims love fun, because Muslims are human beings. But Islam, like many other religions doesn't want folks to drink because alcohol (this will surprise you) gets you drunk.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:42

No!



Megan Goodwin 14:43

No, it's true. Uh, and it's hard to focus on living the kind of life God wants you to lead, if you're hammered. Just- it's harder. But okay, okay. Does this mean that all substances that mess with your brain are haram, forbidden, to Muslims? The answer is: it's complicated. Because of course it is. Because religion is messy, and people are messy. Islam has a really rich history of legal thought and philosophy so there's a lot of arguing about how to interpret the alcohol substances ban in real world contexts. Shariah isn't rules for the sake of rules, it's careful, nuanced, thinking about how to be who God wants you to be, while you're living in the real, messy world. So okay, mind altering substances not allowed. But what happens if you go in for surgery and you're prescribed narcotics for pain and anesthesia for the procedure? Is that also prohibited? Because of the premise of being unable to focus up on the big guy? And yeah, like, the divine is grammatically male here, or grammatically masculine anyway. No, no, it is not forbidden to have anesthesia. It's not forbidden to have narcotics for pain. Human life is sacred, we should help each other. We should protect and preserve life. Islamic clerics and scholars interpret the Qur'an, Hadith and Sunna all to support this line of thinking. If you need drugs, to manage pain, to have surgery, God is fine with that because God wants you to live. God does not want you to get crunk, but God definitely would rather you have anesthesia, then, like, let your appendix burst. That's- that's just not a good plan. So okay, and last thing, because

I've been talking a lot, because I got excited because I knew a thing. Muslims, as you might remember, are people. And people, as you might also remember, are messy. So, like, some Muslims drink, some Muslims eat pork, people do stuff, and it's complicated. Don't assume that you know, everything there is to know about a person because you know they're Muslim. And hey, also, don't assume that drinking or eating pork or doing other shit Americans like, makes someone a "good Muslim," as opposed to the more observant folks. Shit isn't better because Americans encourage you to do it. In fact, quite the opposite a lot of the time.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:51

Ugh, exactly. Like my mom's bacon double cheeseburger doesn't make her a better American and a worse Jew. It means her Judaism is complicated. Samesies for Muslims who also like a bacon, or loves booze. So again, point number two, Shariah probably doesn't mean what you think it means, and also Americans are not role models. Sorted.



Megan Goodwin 17:18

Americans are not role models. Okay, okay. Okay. Do we get to talk about the cool stories in the Qur'an now? The ones we never get to hear because Muslims are constantly having to defend their basic humanity in this damn country, fucking finally?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:30

Yes, at long last.



Megan Goodwin 17:32

Huzzuh!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:33

People always hear about "no alcohol is in the Qur'an" and "jihad is in the Qur'an," and I actually want to spend some time talking about the shit that people never hear about, because that's really fun, and interesting, and complicated, and overlooked precisely because white Christian cultures have vilified Islam so thoroughly and so consistently, that we assume there is nothing fun or interesting or complicated in Islam, which is to say, it's time to talk jinn.



Megan Goodwin 18:01

Yes. You know, I love a mythical and sometimes scary story. Please, please, please, let's do this.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:08

Okay.



Megan Goodwin 18:08

Talk to me about jinn.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:09

You got it. So jinn, "JINN," are most famous in the English language as genies like Robin William's really horrible, racist, genie in Aladin. May he rest, but may that character rot.



Megan Goodwin 18:26

Yeah, yeah. People are messy and complicated-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:28

They are. I do not like that movie.



Megan Goodwin 18:29

But that movie is a fucking problem. No, it's a fucking problem.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:32

Racist from top- tip to tail.



Megan Goodwin 18:35

Remember when Sajida tried to get me to sing "A Whole New World" and I refused to do a hate crime to her? Yes. Anyway, sorry.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:40

That- well- that's a story for a different day. But anyway, we see this in genies, right? That's the way that this word jinn shows up in the English language. It's not a translation. It's like- that is how it shows up in English. It's the same thing we're talking about. But, like, actual jinn, not these caricatures that show up in Anglophone stories, actual jinn are shape-shifting spirits made of fire and air with origins in pre-Islamic Arabia. They are absolutely mentioned in the Qur'an, so these aren't adjacent to Islamic scriptures, or Islamic texts, or Islamic communities. They are right there in the holy book. And they are a major presence in legends, stories, fairy tales; daily lives of Muslims around the world.



Megan Goodwin 19:30

So wait, can I ask a question?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:32

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 19:32

How did we get from spirits made of fire and air to Robin Williams? Is it- Is it colonialism?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:41

It's like a little bit colonialism. It's also like, really- Yeah, it's colonialism. Why don't I just say that. It's like imperial ways of translating the "One Thousand and One Nights." And for more of that you should- you should really go check out Rachel Schine's work. She does really amazing work on Arabic literature and pre-modern definitions of race.



Megan Goodwin 19:58

Cool. I love her on the Twitters.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:00

Yeah. Okay, but folks always ask when we're talking about jinn, not just like how did those guys get in bottles, but also- or like lamps or whatever. And like your ears should perk up, nerds, right? Like when it's a thing that you wouldn't say in English, but sounds like

something that's been preserved in stories. Like your ears should perk up as like, "hmm, sounds like an Orientalism. Is this an Orientalism?" Yeah. The answer is yes, right? Just like the only people who ever "grant boons" are Hindu deities, like that word exists in English only so that we can talk about in Hindu Gods, anyway.



Megan Goodwin 20:36

And Robin Hood! Sorry.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:38

That's true. It's true, but same era.



Megan Goodwin 20:40

Yeah, it's not not about the Crusades. Oh, look, Orientalism again, anyway.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:45

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. But when we talk about jinn, folks always ask, like, what do we mean that the shapeshifters are in the Qur'an? Like, that just sounds like a ghost story. What do you mean that there's ghost stories in the Qur'an? And listen, even though we think of genies as like, somewhat demonic or problematic or like really bad, like, bar jokes- like really bad bar jokes, but the thing is, is that jinn are neither good nor bad. And there are verses of the Qur'an, the sacred text, that talk about them, and I think it's something like 28 or 30 times they show up in the Qur'an as named. These mentions vary, but include things like how they were created, from smoking fire, or from smokeless fire, and I'm not enough of a Qur'aniscist to know where it says what. How they recant their beliefs and false gods and instead venerate Muhammad for his monotheism when he brings the revelation to the jinn. And they show up in the Qur'an as part of Solomon's deal, right? So like in the Qur'an, Solomon is there and part of his deal is he can talk with animals and also the jinn. So not just in the Qur'an, though, jinn also show up in other spaces of sacred literature, specifically in Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. And then of course, because they're in the Qur'an and in the Hadith, they also show up in all of these exegetical works. Works that are trying to figure out what a pithy and often complicated and hard to read texts are- are trying to say. So, jinn are really present. They are textually and culturally present, even if they are fully absent from what often white definitely non-Muslims know, or think they know, about Islam. And they're important, even if and when Western cultures again, often white and definitely non-Muslim, appropriate

and fetishize genies.



Megan Goodwin 22:47

So, like, in Aladin we already talked about. But also in the original Oz stories, that episode of the Magicians, Neil Gaiman's "American Gods," and actually, as I learned from Dr. Olomi, a bunch of stories about American military personnel coming back from occupying Muslim majority territories. And I'm thinking here of like Matt Ruff's "Mirage," which I did not love, and Maria Headley's "The Mere Wife," which I definitely did love.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:12

Yeah, yeah, these show up in a lot of places. And if I think about it, we'll give some more readings on appropriation later on. For many Muslims, jinn are just, like, legitimately a present part of life. And I want you to hear this sometimes as "superstition" or "old wives tales." And I put that in quotes, because as religion scholars, we know that religion is what people do. So like, it's not our job to call things superstitious. And I certainly don't like "old wives tale," but-



Megan Goodwin 23:38

I was gonna say, like, "oh, older women do this. So it must have no value" is- uh, don't-don't love that. Don't love that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:46

That's exactly right. But wearing or hanging nazar, that big blue eye popular in Turkey, and now available as an emoji on most phones. And it's really popular in Turkey in particular, but it's also present throughout North Africa, the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and more. That symbol is about keeping the evil eye out of your house or off of your person. And part of that evil eye can be about tempting the jinn. But that said, jinn aren't actually good or bad. They're duplicitous, which is part of their appeal and allure, I think, in folktales, and popular imagination. They can take the form of other things, they're literally shapeshifters. And that's where that like smokin' air thing comes in. Sometimes they're used narratively to teach a lesson about trust or fidelity. Other times they show up and they just trick you, right? Like there's all sorts of purposes to the jinn. Jinn live in this realm, the realm that you and I live in, but they also live in realms that are invisible. They're part of the world of the invisible. Things like angels and devils are in this world, and those parts of the world are real. And they're part of scriptural and cultural traditions, alike. So I want

everyone to hear that these aren't 'just folktales.' These aren't just things you tell around the campfire that have some cultural resonance, but we can, like, trace their origin to a specific, like Edgar Allan Poe story or something. They're not goofy ghost stories. They're real within religious frameworks, just like as I just said, demons or angels. And so, because they're so present in the text and in culture and in literature, you better believe that pre-modern and medieval Islamic scholars wrote about them. And not just, like, in fables, or in stories, if this realm of the invisible this realm of things that we can't see, but we know are there. That sounds a little bit like science to me. So in texts like- in like astronomical, astrological, mathematical, philosophical texts, jinn show up in all of these scientific glosses of the pre-modern and medieval scholar, and it's just an incredibly rich and deep literature.



Megan Goodwin 26:11

So I think I am hearing you say that jinn are all over Islamic philosophy, and science, and teachings, and storytellings, and culture, so how comes I never get to hear any stories about them? And I am learning all of this after I'm 40? Is it- Is it imperialism?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 26:39

I mean, yeah, the answer is Imperialism.



Megan Goodwin 26:42

Fuckers.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 26:44

I guess we put in the like "womp womp" sound effect here. And the answer is imperialism in part, because the narrative about Islam, which, like, let's be real, was never glowing in Europe before modernity, or before modern imperialism. But the shift in modernity and the shift in the Imperial moment was radical, and it was important.



Megan Goodwin 27:10

Can you remind me where that shift is happening in history? Date-wise?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 27:15

Yeah, so we often put modernity and imperialism much later for the parts of the world were- that were Muslim majority. But I want everyone to know that it starts like in the 1500s, when Columbus sails the ocean blue and the slave trade, right? So all of that process of imperializing the "new world" is part of that history. But often when we talk about Africa, Asia, what we now call the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, we date it closer to 1700, or 1750.



Megan Goodwin 27:50

Okay.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 27:51

So that moment of conquest. And before that, you had a European understanding of Islam as something like "This is heretical. This is inferior, this is blasphemous religion. And all of 'Christendom' should be against (one of my favorite historical words) Islamdom." But that shifts in modernity and under imperialism, to, and I want you to hear the difference, nerds, "these dark, dusky, black, Oriental heathens are racially inferior, and intellectually inferior and we know that because of their inferior texts, and languages and cultures, and we also know because we've been reading their book that their religion, like, allegedly, commands them to kill us, so we should rule them with an iron fist, treat them as suspicious and traitorous, even if they convert, we should be wary."



Megan Goodwin 28:44

This sounds familiar somehow? Did you write a whole book about this?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 28:50

I did. I did, indeed. But this global racialization and vilification of Muslims is in a very large part a product of modern colonialism and imperialism, which scholar Nauman Naqvi recently called "apartheid modernity," and I really need us to co-opt and use and cite him forever for using this phrase.



Megan Goodwin 29:10

Yeah, I'm gonna need that one. Yes, yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 29:13

So part of that is- part of that is the imperialism, right? It's the conquering, it's the conquest, it's the shift, it's the racialization. But also part of the imperialism and how it shows up and why we don't learn about the stuff we don't- we've never heard of, is how Muslims (and I'm grossly oversimplifying here) responded to this vilification and racialization. Many Muslims set out to prove that their religion, culture, texts, were actually not inferior, and they certainly were not incompatible with modernity. And part of that looked like getting right with Western modern science. So poof, there go the rituals, traditions, practices that look like, frankly, anything that doesn't or didn't line up with Protestant white norms. So like, bye bye Sufism, which is like Islamic mysticism, bye bye rituals of dancing and singing and chanting and ecstasy, bye bye thinking about miracles in public, see ya later jinn. Cuz the logic, Megan, is something like, how will the scientific colonizers take us seriously if we're out here talking about 'the realm of the invisible?' How can we prove- because, like, in some cases, our lives and livelihoods literally depend on it. But we're not really being literal, when we cast off the evil eye when we recite Qur'anic verses as protection, when we seek Baraka, or blessings or eat dates, because they're related to keeping the jinn off of you, or hang nazar, those evil- those big eyes that are popular in Turkey. I'm not saying I love this logic, I want to be really clear, I do not think you can convince oppressors and colonizers and racists of your inherent goodness, intellect or worthiness, by playing into their rules, and changing or reforming or modifying your, your practices or cultures or religion to fit into those frameworks. But I have to admit, in my historical work, I do see this logic at play.



Megan Goodwin 31:15

Yeah, well, and this isn't unique to Islam, either. The- the, like, whitening up, the civilization of indigenous native religions of African diasporic religions absolutely is happening around this modernity shift as well, right? So shifts away from practices that are ecstatic, that are communal, that are magic.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:39

I mean, really, people are calling it reformation.



Megan Goodwin 31:42

Yeah, yeah. And what's been interesting, because, you know, I teach the witches class. What's been interesting is seeing folks start to reclaim some of those practices as a way of resisting white supremacy and Euro- European imperialism. Okay, so so, so much stuff

happening here. For starters, it sounds like Islam is way more than a lot of folks think it is. It sounds like Islam is what Muslims do. And that Muslims don't just do what the Qur'an says. It sounds like Shariah isn't just a list of rules, but a thoughtful, nuanced way of negotiating your duty to God and your community while living in a messy, complicated world. It also sounds like there are some super cool stories in the Qur'an that I didn't even know existed, because I'm so busy walking dumb Bunnies on the internet through bad faith arguments about gender and frickin' jihad. I didn't know jinn were in the sacred texts, but they are, and now I demand to know more.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 32:42

Well, good news. Ali Olomi is coming next time for just that purpose.



Megan Goodwin 32:47

Huzzah! Listen! You smell something? It's STORY TIME.



Krusty the Clown 32:59

Hey kids, it's story time!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 33:04

Okay. I've been talking a lot. So this storytime is short and I have to admit a little dizzying, but I hope sweet. So Shahab Ahmed, the late historian of Islam and author whose verbose 609 page tome, "What is Islam" talked about, in part, the stuff we've been talking about. How Islam is central and unknown, all at once. So, he wrote, "A meaningful conceptualization of 'Islam' as theoretical object and analytical category must come to terms with- indeed be coherent with- the capaciousness, complexity, and, often, outright contraction that obtains within the historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality of Divine Communication to Muhammad, the Messenger of God. It is precisely this correspondence and coherence between Islam as theoretical object or analytical category and Islam as real historical phenomenon that is considerably and crucially lacking in the prevalent conceptualizations of the term 'Islam/Islamic'" (Ahmed 6). Goodwin, what do you make of that?



Megan Goodwin 34:20

Woof. Okay. Okay. So it sounds to me, uh, on a super basic level, like, Dr. Ahmed is saying

Islam is complicated, and changes over time, and is what Muslims do- all of what Muslims do, not just the parts that fit into our assumptions about who Muslims are, or what Islam is. But the other thing that really struck me when you're reading this is, alright, this is this is maybe a little in the weeds, so forgive me, but I think a lot of folks assume that Islamic Studies doesn't do, like, theory of religion, and looking at even this short chunk of what I suspect is a very dense text, like, these two sentences are saying to me, we both need to take Divine Presence seriously, we need to take contact with the divine seriously, the history of Islam, and the complexity of Muslim lives, all of that should inform how we're thinking, not just about Islam, but how we think about religion. This seems like it could be a really important theoretical intervention that I would love folks who don't study Islam to think about.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:34

Yeah, yes, yes. I mean, I have to admit, I had the- I had the pleasure of studying with Shahab Ahmed before he passed. And he really talked like this, so like,



Megan Goodwin 35:45

Woof.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:45

I think some people, I mean like,



Megan Goodwin 35:47

Woof.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:47

That class was really hard. But I think he wrote and spoke in sometimes dizzying prose, like, literally dizzying prose. But the prose itself, actually, to me, stands to demonstrate the complexity of definition and definitional clarity. So throughout this whole book, "What is Islam" which, you know, for the nerd nerds among us, like- like, if you've done your theory reading, I recommend this book, if you are my dad, Hey, Dad, this is not for you, like, Lloyd, this one's not for you, I promise. But in our book, he parsed how current definitional frameworks for Islam or Islamic fail for so many reasons, because they're too limiting, too expansive, too centered on one set of texts, too dismissive of seemingly irregular practices.

And I honestly- I have mixed feelings about the book because it's sometimes genuinely bewildering, to the point of, like, almost incomprehensibility. But then other times, I think, man, this dude, may he rest has somehow adequately and performatively shown the bewildering amount of history, interpretation, texts, contexts, in which Islam has been defined, deployed and utilized by both Muslims and non-Muslims. So like, of course, I'm bewildered. No other term that I can think of is forced to be one thing and only one thing, despite 1800 years of history on every continent, in every language, to say nothing of imperialist studies of it. And so I think what I wanted to get out by highlighting this recent theoretical text about Islam and Islamic Studies, is that Islam is always more than we think it is. Even for those of us with literal PhDs in the subject.



Megan Goodwin 37:26

Yeah. Well, and that trying to define Islam is an ongoing theoretical project within Islamic Studies and not just, like, "oh, sorted it, we wrote the book, moving on," like, this is this is a live theoretical conversation as well as an ethnographic, anthropological, textual one.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:48

That's exactly right. You've heard from us, now hear about us! It's PRIMARY SOURCES.



Megan Goodwin 38:00

[singing] Primary sources! Uh, wow, we did a lot of talking today. So I will keep this super short. I think if I- if memory serves, I think we talked to Dr. Olomi about how I learned that if you have Muslim friends, those Muslim friends definitely have jinn stories, which I was not prepared for. But yeah-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 38:21

Yeah, no, like this is a real thing.



Megan Goodwin 38:24

Yeah. The, like, "no no, no, like, I'm gonna tell you about this one thing that happened and it definitely happened and you should just know about this just so you know." Um, but I- this- this conversation took me back to (so far back)- to one of the last classes I took at Boston University (go Terriers), which was supposed to be two classes. It was supposed to be a Sufism class and a Christian mysticism class and I guess enrollments got messed up

or something or just they didn't enroll properly. So the dude who's teaching both of them was like, "surprise! It's one class now." So I did not sign up for a class on Sufism. But what I got was this comparative class about Muslim and Christian mysticism, and growing up as a Catholic where you know, the the devil is a real material actor in the world. It was so interesting to hear stories about, like, Iblis, who, if- if memory serves (and correct me if I'm wrong here)- serves a kind of devil, but not adversary position so much as, like, Iblis was closest to God, loved God best and when God created monkeys with anxiety, ie humans, Iblis is like, "the hell, my dude? Like, these- these folks can't love you like I love you."



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:54

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 39:54

And, like, peaced out. And that was so- like, it was so poignant and beautiful. And, ah, that story still kills me. And it was so far afield from anything that I knew about Islam, which was nothing, it was pre-9/11. So most of us Catholic girls knew nothing about Islam. But also just, I was someone who did a lot of reading in the mythos of the demonic. Cuz I was definitely that kid.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:25

Yeah, you're still that kid.



Megan Goodwin 40:27

I know, I know. But my reading list got better. And like, this was never a perspective that I had seen or heard of before and I was really excited about it. And it made me want to learn more about Islam and- and religion in general. So it was just a cool experience, and I'm grateful for it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:44

I really like that. I really like that.



Megan Goodwin 40:46

Thanks.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:48

I guess my primary source is that, um, so we would use different words for these, but I want to hear everybody- So like, I love nazars, I have them all over my home. I have one on my body at this point. Um, and I love these big eyes, and hamsas. So for many Jews, we say "hamsa," and they can go up or down; the fingers- that's a five finger with an eye in the middle, often. And for some Muslims, it's the hand of Fatima. But one of these symbols that- I love these symbols precisely because they are specific, and they are not. So there's this way in which they are culturally specific to various regions. And so whether you are a Jew or a Muslim, or some Christians, and some Zoroastrians, and the other kinds of monotheism that hang out in the vague category of the Middle East and Southwest Asia, and North Africa, these are like shared symbologies, even though they are also incredibly and deeply specific within those communities, right? So there's this cultural sharing, and then there are these really specific, like, logics around why they work and how they work. So I love that, for me, jinn and nazar, to use the, like, islamicate words here, but also like hamsas and eyes, are- they're not just Islamic, but like they're not not Islamic. And I love what that tells us about stories. I love what that tells us about how we oversimplify relationships between religious people, right? Like, that's not to say, like, at one point, it was all Kumbaya and now, it's not. I think that there's always been conflict and continuity, I think there has always been places that have shared symbology, cultural norms, local traditions, and contestations of those very things. But I think for me, jinn and nazar, and this understanding that there's this realm of the invisible, and it's super believable, and it could be good, but it could be bad, right? Like, you could be being watched, is a thing that, like, I know I grew up with, and like, that wasn't always a bad thing. It was just like, don't tempt the evil eye. Like, spit on the floor, someone might be here. But also, if you say something really positive, like- like, spit on that, too, man. Because like, you don't want to do that labor. And so I think that those stories really highlight for me- They're just another way in to what you think you know about religion, but you're not allowed to talk about, or what you're never taught about religion, because we've so reified these, like, religioracial differences between groups of people. That somehow Turkish Jews would have been so radically different from their Turkish Muslim neighbors, that when we see the exact same symbol popping up in their homes and on their bodies, that we, like, rationalize them as fundamentally different when, like, actually, that history is more complicated. And so I love these symbols. And like I said, I have hamsas, I don't know, you've been to my home-



Megan Goodwin 44:02

I have.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:02

I've got what 15, 20? hanging all over the place.



Megan Goodwin 44:05

That'd be a fun scavenger hunt, like how many hamsas does-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:09

Well, then there's the ones that I haven't hung up because like, either they're enormous and I don't know what to do with them or like they need a frame, like, I- like, this is a thing that I have a lot of. And I love that it's one of those places that feels uniquely Jewish, like, this feels like mine, but I know that it's not just mine. And what that makes me ask about religion, and history, and culture, and what we're not allowed to learn, what we're- what we purposely obscure, and what we don't. So I- I like all that stuff.



Megan Goodwin 44:39

Yeah, yeah. Well, it's- it's also just like a beautiful image. I have one in my house. No- I don't think I would have ever felt comfortable buying it for myself being neither Jewish nor Muslim. But Dr. Juliane Hammer gave John and I one when we got married, and I hung it because I think it is- it is always good to to have reminders of the folks that you love wanting to look out for you and, you know, hopefully sharing some of their- their good relationship and energy with you, and you know, I don't need any jinn in my house. Things are chaotic enough. So I appreciate you, Juliane.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:18

Well, like, cover all the bases.



Megan Goodwin 45:20

Yeah, just, like please and thank you.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:23

But hey, Goodwin, what does all this history, and stuff, and primary sources have to do with our next episode featuring Dr. Ali Olomi?



Megan Goodwin 45:34

History and stuff, one of the discarded names for the podcast. Yes, Dr. Ali Olomi is a historian of the Middle East and Islam, who researches about how Muslims imagined the "Islamic World" through the intersection of religion, science, and empire. Oh, no wonder you like him so much. He also writes about the Muslim imagination of the monstrous through the jinn, which is why I like him so much. The early history of astronomy and its role in empire building, and Islamic apocalypticism and cosmology. All of this awesome he ties to nationalism, the histories of science and rationality, Islamism, gender and sexuality, and the tension between global religious community and local identity.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:17

So basically, he's the coolest, and we wish we were as cool as him.



Megan Goodwin 46:20

We definitely wish that, for sure. And now our nerds are ready to hear him talk to us more about jinn. But, don't pack up your stuff yet, nerds. You've got HOMEWORK.



Simpsons 46:31

Homework? What homework?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:33

Remember, you can find everything we're assigning here and a whole lot more in the show notes for this episode. Links, citations, non-paywalled options for stuff you need a university login to get to, and occasionally silly pictures of us. All that and transcripts because accessibility isn't just good pedagogy, it's mandatory.



Megan Goodwin 46:51

Yup.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:52

I did so much talking today. But you know I have more. This is actually literally in my wheelhouse. So what I'm going to do is- Megan, I know I probably alarmed you with how many things I've listed here.



Megan Goodwin 47:04

It's so many things.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:05

I'm not going to say them all actually, I'm going to say a few of them but nerds, I am putting a shit ton of stuff in the show notes. So I'm going to give you one thing from the category of basics on Islam.



Megan Goodwin 47:17

Category is-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:18

Category is basics on Islam, and I have to say my go to here is still my mentor Carl Ernst's "Following Muhammad." It's easy to teach with, it's easy to read, and it does a very good job of doing the basics about Islam in the context of the study of religion. So that's my go to, but I will give you more in the show notes so go check that out.



Megan Goodwin 47:39

Also Carl is a literal wizard so it's on theme for today.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:43

It is. And now since we talked about jinn I actually want to like cite some sources. So I can't lie so much of what you'll find out there, like, don't go googling or even using your library website to find, like, jinn, because frankly so much of the research is medical professionals and public health scholars being semi-racist in the, like "LOL these Muslims think that jinn are real? What are the- what are these women talking about needing a like- an exorcism for? Euhh", so, like, look out for that. These are pre-approved sources.

First, I've got Amira El-Zein's "Islam, Arabs and the Intelligent World of the Jinn," which is from 2009 really great overview kind of thing, and like how folks are using the jinn and what realm the jinn live in. Then Celia Rothenburg has a- has a series of things on jinn, but the thing I like the most is "Islam on the Internet: the Jinn and the Objectification of Islam." And then, a book that's near and dear to my heart because it's about the city of jinn, aka Delhi, is "Jinnealogy" get it? Like genealogy. "Jinnealogy: Everyday Life and Islamic Theology in post-Partition Delhi," by Anand Vivek Taneja. And there's a, um- Taneja has a piece that's, like, a companion piece to that book that I'll post that's digitally available, but the book is really good, too. And then I'll link up to a Vice explainer on what are the jinn. It's fine, it's serviceable, and obviously go follow Ali Olomi. I'll link to some of his epic threads but just go follow the scholar and tune into his Wednesday- what I've been calling magic Wednesdays.



Megan Goodwin 49:29

It is kind of magic. I love it. He just did one, I think- what day is today? I- this week's thread is about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and I am super excited about it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 49:37

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 49:38

So yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 49:39

Super good.



Megan Goodwin 49:41

I do not have a ton of sources here. But, when I do teach Islam, it's always in the context of race and gender in what's now the United States. So my foundational texts are things like, Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?," amina wadud's "Gender Jihad," Mahmood's "Politics of Piety," stuff like that. I also must, must, must plug the volume edited by Tina Howe, "The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender," which came out last year, and has so much good stuff in it, including articles by your co-hosts, me and Ilyse. But if you're not in the mood for egghead stuff, your homework for me is to spend

some time checking out different depictions of Muslims in popular culture. Like, obviously, we would love it if you went back and listened to the episode that we did about pop culture and the trash that is "Not Without My Daughter." But also, where do we see folks approving of Muslims in American pop culture? Is it, for example, when they skip prayers like in "The Big Sick" or eat pork like in "Master of None," or, I don't know, cover their heads with the literal American flag like in Shepard Fairey's, "We the People Are Greater than Fear" protest image? Why are those the Muslims on screen that we are encouraged to be sympathetic to, I wonder? The answer is imperialism. It is always imperialism. I also want us to look for where we get to see Muslims be the complicated, messy people that they are. I personally really liked the depiction of Malcolm X in "One Night in Miami," for example. But if you- but see if you can find some other examples, too. I want to believe that they're out there. I haven't seen "Ramy" yet, but maybe that's one to check out. That's my homework for me.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 51:25

Join us next time for our APPLIED LEARNING conversation with Dr. Ali Olomi who's going to talk to us about jinn, astrology, and historical necromancy. It is a can't miss I promise!



Megan Goodwin 51:38

I forgot about the necromancy. I'm so excited. Shout out, as always, to our amazing research assistant, Katherine Brennan, who's transcription work makes this pod accessible and therefore awesome. Katherine also just got into grad school, right? So we are super proud of her yay, Katherine! And if you need more religion nerderie you know where to find us! It is Twitter. The answer is always Twitter.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 52:01

You can find Megan, that's you, on Twitter @mpgphd, and Ilyse, that's me, @profirmf or the show @keepingit_101 . Find the website at keepingit101.com Peep the Insta if you feel like it, drop us a rating or review in your pod catcher of choice and with that, peace out, nerds.



Megan Goodwin 52:23

And do your homework! It's on the syllabus.



Hasan Minhaj 52:43

Now I know some of you are wondering, Hasan, How do you know so much about Fox News? Well, as a Muslim, I like to watch Fox News for the same reason I like to play Call of Duty. Sometimes, I like to turn my brain off and watch strangers insult my family and heritage.