

so-glad-you-asked-if-religion-is-dangerous

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SPEAKERS

Megan, Ilyse

M Megan 00:18

So we're gonna start today's episode off with a content note that we'll be discussing briefly but frankly, child sex abuse in today's conversation, that section of the pod is marked. It's chapter marking so you can skip it if you want to, and we encourage you to manage your listing however feels best to you.

I Ilyse 00:36

That said, this is keeping it one to one a killjoys introduction to religion podcast in 2022-2023 our work is made possible through a UVM reach grant, as well as the Luce AAR advancing public scholarship grant. We're grateful to live teach and record on the current ancestral and unseeded lands of the Abenaki Wabanaki and Aucocisco peoples. As always, you can find material ways to support indigenous communities on our website.

M Megan 00:59

What's up nerds? Hello, I'm Megan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions race, gender and politics.

I Ilyse 01:05

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

M Megan 01:13

Yeah, I'm just gonna let's just yeah, let's just do it. This episode is a classic Megan P Goodwin Stone Cold bumper. Go home and eat your feelings, John. Yeah, yeah. **On today.** Okay. We're

answering a question that we got a lot of different versions of, is religion inherently good? Is it actually bad? Deep down? Is religion, violent? Would getting rid of religion mean no more work, all of which we have distilled into one question to rule them all. Is religion dangerous?

I Ilyse 01:43
Well, is it?

M Megan 01:45
No, thanks for asking. Good talk. What do you have for lunch today?

I Ilyse 01:50
How you still manage to punk me after all of these episodes is beyond me. Goodwin, "no, good talk" is not a good podcast. Could you please to expand?

M Megan 02:00
Yeah, fine, fine, fine. Fine. Yeah, the very short version is that religion isn't dangerous. Just like religion isn't good or bad or violent or peaceful or sleepy? Religion is say it with me Blanche, what people do! That is correct. Which means that religion isn't essentially anything it is a tool. A hammer can help people to help or destroy your thumb depending on how you use it. Not that I'm speaking from personal experience. Religion is like that.

I Ilyse 02:29
Yeah, we've we've been saying religion is what people do for God all of the time. And if you added the years we've been saying it in the class, it's it's a long time. We never are not saying this. So I then have a question that sounds obnoxious, because we asked our dear nerds to tell us what they wanted us to talk about. And we're so glad you asked.

M Megan 02:56
We are so glad you're nerds, so glad. [Why I'm so glad you asked!](#)

I Ilyse 03:06
but am I so glad that they're asking us to keep answering whether or not religion is what people do? Because I I am curious why so many of our delightful nerds when sat when prompted to ask us a question asked us if we thought religion was dangerous when they know that we just think it's what people do.

M Megan 03:24

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I'm two things. One, I think they're probably asking on behalf of students and I think they are sharing our frustration that they have to answer this question so often, because so many particularly undergrads, but not only, come in assuming that religion is violent, religion causes war. So I assumed that they're just they're soft balling us a question the way that you often softball one to me, but also I feel like

I Ilyse 03:51

what am I am I play acting my grump for a thing that we selected to do?

M Megan 03:57

No, only not How dare you? Cinema Varite. But also, I feel like I yeah, I have a theory about this question, actually.

I Ilyse 04:07

You don't say

M Megan 04:09

I do dare say. Allow me if you will, to lay this theory upon you.

I Ilyse 04:14

All right. Do it rock Capella.

M Megan 04:15

This question, "is religion dangerous?" is to my mind, ultimately, a question about religious freedom. And to be quite honest, anxieties about religious freedom or as Daniel Lavery might put it, "What if religion, but too much?"

I Ilyse 04:28

Hmm. Yeah, I hadn't actually thought about this question in that way. So please do continue.

M Megan 04:34

Okay. Okay. This may shock, though, not discredit you. But I'm gonna give you an example from what's now the United States.

I Ilyse 04:41

I am neither shocked nor discredited. Please continue. Yes.

M Megan 04:45

So I might have mentioned that I published a book a few years back once or twice, a few times, a couple. Whatever. I'm very chill about it. The central question of that book is does religion cause abuse? Which is just another way of asking Is religion dangerous? And my argument in the book is my argument on this pod. No religion doesn't cause abuse because people cause abuse. For example, a big chunk of my book focuses on FLDS, Mormon fundamentalist group that practices polygyny. That's the plural marriage of one man to multiple wives. And they do this for religious reasons. In 2004, a big chunk of that group including their current profit, Warren Jeffs who, I don't think there should be jails but while we have them, I think he should be under one. Anyway, Warren Jeffs moved a big chunk of FLDS to a ranch outside Eldorado, Texas in 2004. And I'm not going to go into all the details though, I will link you all to the piece that I wrote about this case study for the revealer. But the short version is that Texas freaked the fuck out. They were encouraged to do so by folks from Arizona and Colorado, Utah, up to an including one John Krakauer. My nemesis, multiple members of the Texas House of Representatives lamented that this group had come to Texas to and this is a quote, "take advantage of their freedoms" that FLDS was calling itself religion, but was really exploiting Texas and its freedoms to manipulate local elections, evade taxes and abuse women and children members. They vowed to quote, "get FLDS" and in 2008, they executed the largest single custodial seizure of children in American history on the grounds that this group practiced polygyny, because religion. And the practice of polygyny made their religion by its very nature, abusive. This is one of a bunch of examples in which legislators and law enforcement people publicly worry if we haven't taken this whole religious freedom thing too far. It's a way of chilling religious difference. It's also a way of showing everyone else what happens if you get too carried away with that whole first amendment dealy.

I Ilyse 06:46

Hmm. I have concerns...

M Megan 06:50

as you should. Yeah, yeah. So here's the thing. Abuse did happen at yearning for Zion, and I don't want to in any way, dismiss or downplay that, because any abuse is too much. At the same time, abuse didn't happen at the yearning for Zion ranch because its members practice polygyny, abuse happened to yearning for Zion, because abuse happens everywhere. And at the same time, Warren Jeffs, and a number of his followers used religion to convince many community members that whatever the Prophet did or allowed to happen, couldn't be abuse. [Religious worldviews, commitments, and communities can and do often make it harder to](#)

recognize abuse as abuse, can and do create cover for abusers can and do make it harder to leave abusive situations. But this isn't religion causing abuse. It's abusers using religion to hurt vulnerable people, which works because we live in a country in a world that makes it very, very easy to get away with hurting vulnerable people. Abuse happens because we let it happen.

I Ilyse 08:02

Okay, so I hear a couple things in what you just said. The first is this big takeaway. Religion isn't dangerous in and of itself. But people do use religion in dangerous ways. Yes, because people are dangerous as fuck,

M Megan 08:20

yes, that is correct.

I Ilyse 08:22

The second thing that I think is worth underlining in your soliloquy here is that Warren Jeffs and a number of his followers are using in this example, religion to convince community members, that whatever is happening under this divine leadership, could not be abuse, that there are some people who are doing dastardly deeds, who could not possibly therefore be dastardly because they are in self prophets, or special. Yeah. So I want us I want to, because we're talking about whether or not religion is dangerous. I want us to like highlight that dimension. Because I think where Megan is an outsider to this conversation, I'm just someone who reads everything you write everything, but yes, literally multiple times per read. But I think that there's something really interesting about the way regular folk want to locate religious abuse as different or special or abuse that happens in religious settings, I should say, as different or special, in part because of the vulnerability placed on religious practitioners within or underneath a charismatic leader, but also because you're utilizing this notion of the Divine, to then truly make like an invisibility cloak or like a Get Out of Jail Free card.

M Megan 09:42

Sometimes both, or like get promoted in another place card, Roman Catholic Church, I'm looking at you.

I Ilyse 09:48

well, like it's this double thing, right? It's like I have religious authority over you and I'm going to use these threats of hellfire and salvation and whatever to coerce. convince, cajole, hide, erase horrific abuse.

M Megan 10:04

Yeah.

I Ilyse 10:04

But it's also this idea that you can create a socialization through which an abuser cannot definitionally be located as an abuser, because what they do is beyond reproach. Right. And I think that is a dimension not only of religion abuse that happens within religious settings, but it is one that is maybe percentage wise, more likely to happen in that case, because religion as a system is set up to have these kinds of special, protected, charismatic kinds of leadership positions.

M Megan 10:40

Yeah, it's, it's tricky. I am going to "Yes, and" that right, because as we said, a number of times on this pod and elsewhere, religion is special specifically in the US because it is constitutionally protected as something potentially unique about human experience. I don't agree with that. But I was not invited to help write the Constitution. So sadly, sadly, not invited. Can you imagine....

I Ilyse 11:03

No, you would squash James Madison, like a bug so hard, keep going

M Megan 11:07

fucking Jimmy. So right, religion is special religion is constitutionally protected, it is also a space where people often come together as community, allow themselves to be vulnerable. It's where they turn when they're hurting or scared, or they don't know what to do. So it's already a space of vulnerability. So when I say that, "religion doesn't cause abuse, people cause abuse", this is not to say that there's not something particularly if not uniquely damaging about abuse that happens in religious spaces, I don't ever want to dismiss that. And I think holding up particular traditions as prone to abuse can be important to survivors, even as it is theoretically problematic. So I don't get to tell anybody how to talk about their abuse. That's not what I'm doing here. I am saying in a zoom out thinking about American religions way, it's not the religion doing the abuse, it's the people doing it. At the same time, religious spaces are not the only places we see leaders, people in authority being held up as as though they cannot, as though they cannot be abusers. Right? We see this in military spaces. We see this in sports places. I mean, gymnastics is not unique. But it is one place where Americans are now trained to think about children being particularly vulnerable. So this kind of dynamic isn't unique to religion. But I do think that there are added elements when we're thinking about it in a religious context.

I Ilyse 12:43

Yeah, I think I think that's exactly where I wanted us to get to, right. Like when we're thinking about abuse and coaching, we're thinking about people who can use their power and authority

about abuse and coaching, we're thinking about people who can use their power and authority to shield themselves from repercussions or to wield consequences against their victims,

M Megan 12:59
and for whom systems work to protect...

I Ilyse 13:01
That's exactly right,

M Megan 13:02
the abusers and to perpetuate the abuse. Sorry, sorry, sorry, no,

I Ilyse 13:05
you're good. You're good. Let's tag team it. But I think that in the in a religious context, you have that added layer of not just the system will protect you. But like, anything I do can't be bad, because God has for like, foreseen and authorized it. So there's also this like secret appeal to a power that I think for many people when they're imagining it is harder to navigate than systems outside of that. Now, I don't know that I believe that. But I think that's why when people talk about religious abuse, it feels so different than when they talk about abuse in places that are more, not to us, but more obviously, human made, maybe even manmade, because men tend to be the proppers up of the system, and women tend to be its defenders, or white women tend to be its defenders. Sure. Yeah. But I think it's obvious in a different way. Like, I think that idea that like, you can be really confused, right? Like if you are putting your trust in something that's invisible, divine, beyond human perception, but this person you're trusting as a spokesperson for that is telling you X, Y and Z, that becomes really confusing to parse toxic shit from non-toxic shit, in the same way that like authorities, in any situation makes it hard to parse. But this has that extra layer that I think, again, I don't think is unique to religion. I think people make up religion, and therefore it's a person made system. But I think when we talk with people in the public, or where I see people responding to you and your work, people tend to get really freaked out. Because if we assume that God is real, and some people do have a close connection to God, then if God says that what they're doing is good. What do we then do with abusers? That's a different kind of question or it has different like mayonnaise on it, than when we talk about coaching or our military or teachers or other boogie men that we blame for sexual abuse. But the point remains, people do this across the board and people create the systems that protect abusers. And that shames, shun, silence and excommunicate victims.

M Megan 15:18
All of that is true. The one thing that I want to add there is that, again, if we're thinking about it in the context of the United States, it is not just that religion is protected, it's that the more powerful the more mainstream a religious institution is, because of the way that religion is

protected. Those institutions are, in some ways, frankly, allowed to operate outside the law. Yep, and this is not to pick on Roman Catholicism. **But as Katherine Loftin has pointed out, Roman Catholicism has become the face of religious sex abuse, and most now the United States. The Roman Catholic Church has faced no lasting legal repercussions for allowing truly centuries of religious sex abuse. They have paid civil fines, individual priests, and even some bishops have faced individual consequences. But if we look at the case of FLDS, the state of Texas sent in what I'm told were armored personnel carriers because they had no cannons on them. But if it shows up in my front yard, it looks like a tank. They sent in tanks, they seized over 400 children, and every single member of that community had to register as a sex offender for letting their children live there. Whether or not there was proof of abuse in that individual child's case. The one family that refused to do that never got their kid back. No one is sending tanks into the parking lots of Catholic churches on Sundays. No one is forcing Catholic parents to register as sex offenders for sending their kids to Catholic school or letting them go to confession. This is not me arguing that we should send tanks against Catholics it is me proposing,**

I

Ilyse 16:57

I'm like imagining a tank on your dad's lawn.

M

Megan 17:01

Honestly, he'd probably be really happy. It's been like prepping for this his whole life Rambo fantasies episode. My dad, oh, man, we should totally do a Father's Day episode on coming back to this one, religion and dad's. All of this is just to say that I want us to think about which religion gets held responsible. And when folks get to be complicated actors, because the heroes of like Spotlight and Doubt, are also Catholics, they get the kind of complexity that like stories about Mormon fundamentalism, or stories about I don't know, Islam in what's now the United States do not get to be complex. **And if we're thinking about abuse that happens in already marginalized communities, folks who are surviving abuse then have to deal with, "Even if I am recognizing this as abusive, do I want to make my community as a whole more vulnerable by feeding into what people already think about us?"** And this is exactly how abuse kept happening at FLDS is they dismissed it as what people have said about Mormon fundamental assault, right.

I

Ilyse 18:09

So I hear that we have now unlocked another power ring. So there's the ring of power that an abuser would create, because it's always about power. And it's always about systems of power that both allow abuse to flourish and allow it to go un, uh untouched, right? So unpunished on whatever. But then there's also this system of religions as valued maybe in this world religions model, maybe in a racialized way, maybe both at the same time. Cuz those are never independent of each other, where we then need to think about public perception and who will inevitably be more persecuted, prosecuted, and held accountable versus who will never. And then we're also talking about fucking capitalism, because the Roman Catholic Church is a great example of like, you can just pay those, you can just pay those penalties. You can pay for top

tippity top lawyers, you can have representation on the Supreme Court. So like there is a space in which you have a level of power, prestige, a name recognition that allows for us to say, well, it was those individuals, even though the paper trail is this is a whole system of cover up.

M Megan 19:21

Yep. You can even receive over a billion dollars in taxpayer funds as part of COVID bailout, even though you're a diocese, who is facing financial trouble, not because of COVID, but because of payouts to clergy sex abuse survivors.

I Ilyse 19:34

So what I hear you saying is that religion is what people do.

M Megan 19:38

I do say that

I Ilyse 19:40

Abuse is what people do Sure is. So religion in itself is not dangerous, but systems in and around religion systems are always dangerous, because they're comprised of people.

M Megan 19:50

Correct. And people are not great to each other historically or currently. Yeah, that is what I am saying.

I Ilyse 19:57

Can I make one note? Yeah, please. Obviously, nerds, we can answer this question is religious dangerous? Or how does religion foster or process abuse outside of the United States? Yes. So, Goodwin, this is her expertise so we let her do the example she's good at. But I could name many other examples not just of religious abuse or abuse that happens within religious settings, but of whether or not we think religion is dangerous, right. So I'm thinking of like, anti caste, anti Sikh, anti Muslim violence that's happening right now in India, all of which is religion. I'm rooted in, to use a an Americanism, sincerely held belief. I'm thinking about the anti Shia violence in lots of places, but specifically in Arizona in August of 2022. Yeah, I'm thinking of colleagues of ours, Megan, who had talked about spiritual abuse, named their abusers and then still watch those abusers receive academic and religious honors both. So abuse happens because we let it to steal your famous phrase here. No one religion owns that propensity, nor does religion alone commit violence, it is always about people.

M Megan 21:11

That's correct. Yes. And thank you for sticking with us nerds, you know, this is heavy, but it's also important to name so

I Ilyse 21:19

before you leave, we've got some [homework...](#) Homework! What homework?

M Megan 21:24

we do I am going to shorthand the homework today because as you might imagine, I've done quite a bit of writing on this topic. So I'm going to give you some public facing pieces that will link you to scholarship from a lot of folks who are not me, but I'm going to cheat and just assign you the stuff that I've written and then you can track down my footnotes. So I have a piece for sojourners, called "abuse happens because we let it" I did a piece for the reveler specifically about FLDS and polygyny. I have an entire page for the course that I taught on cults and sects, the tagline of which was, Is religion dangerous? So there's a lot there that I think will interest our nerds. And then I, just a couple weeks ago, actually it was honored and delighted to be asked to give remarks at Notre Dame courtesy of Mount Ansari center. And I am uploading those to my colts incorporated medium page as well so you can track down those citations.

I Ilyse 22:16

Shout out to Evie Wolfe, Rachel's Zief and Juliana Finch the KI 101 team whose work makes this pod accessible and therefore awesome listenable with social-media-able among other things for which we are very grateful.

M Megan 22:26

Me sure are. You can find Meghan that's me on Twitter @mpgphd and Ilyse @profirmf or the show @keepingit_101 Find the website at keepingit101.com You can find us on Insta and now tick tock drop us a rating or review in your pod catcher of choice and with that, peace out nerds do your homework. It's on the syllabus