

E503: SGYA, Religion and Food

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SPEAKERS

Megan Goodwin, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:18

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Megan Goodwin 00:42

What's up nerds? Hello, I am Meghan Goodman, a scholar of American religions race, gender and politics.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:49

Hi, hello, I'm Ilyse Morgenstein-Fuerst, a historian of religion, Islam race and racialization in South Asia. But guess what, nerds? Welcome to our first so glad you asked episode. These are the collection of episodes where we answer your burning questions completely incompletely in one episode. So we're starting out with a big one. We've gotten a lot of requests for this one so many that I can't cite just one nerd who asked this question, but we're here to answer: Religion and food. What's that all about?



Megan Goodwin 01:22

Why I'm so glad you asked. So, Ilyse, Yes, that's me. I'm told that many humans feel and process hunger, this is not a thing that my body does particularly well, particularly when I'm on brain meds. But then they satiate that hunger with food, like multiple times a day. I am also told that food cultures can be called cuisines. And I know damn well that region time history,

finances and global trade have a lot to do with what folks eat and how cuisines and cultures develop. But what does religion have to do with food? Are our listeners just hungry? So many of them want us to talk about food and religion?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:19

I mean, great set of questions. But I assume that if religion is what people do, and if people need to eat, and since folks generally like to eat, then we can expect that religion has a lot of food and food has a lot of religion. Which is to say that there's a lot to say on this topic. So maybe let's talk today about I don't know food based rituals, let's talk about how religion navigates food rules like; cleanliness or what's allowed or not, and holiday specific food and I don't know, let's also talk about the politics of food how groups mark themselves as groups with cuisine, culture and dietary practices.



Megan Goodwin 02:58

Sure, okay. Yeah, let's let's do that. Yep. So when I think about religion and food, honestly, I immediately get frustrated because I'm always frustrated thinking about food, food is not I like to eat tasty things. I don't like the fact that my body is made of meat and needs, like constant sustenance and also my body's not great about knowing that it's hungry so I don't usually feel hunger I feel tired and cranky or like fuzzy headed, so just naming often taught that this is not a question I would have picked to answer but a lot of you wanted to talk about it. So here we are.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 03:41

Don't think the nerds were trying to traumatize you, I think they were just curious about the foods



Megan Goodwin 03:47

it's it's totally fair. I love I'd love curious nerd curious nerds and my favorite people. I just also like want to name off the top that like food is not a happy squishy place for everybody. So I but also religion is not a happy squishy place for everybody. So there might be that too other things I think about religion and food I immediately think of my friend Dr. Shane Seinfeld's Chala because when I nannied for her a million years ago, it was my favorite part of being there on Fridays. I love that. I also think of things like Christmas cookies. Trauma, because my mother, who is not well, is a an inveterate Baker, particularly around Christmas. She used to have nightmares in July that she had forgotten to start the Christmas cookies and she would make like truly I think 1000s of them and they were a very big deal that I was both encouraged to and then deeply did not want to help with because I was not doing them right so apparently this is just trauma for me. Except for Seamus kala which is great and I love it makes me feel warm and squishy inside. You're welcome starting off strong this is supposed to be light episode. This is my truth. Your turn.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:01

When I think about religion and food, I don't think about any of that.



Megan Goodwin 05:05

Good. Good.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:06

I obviously immediately think of things like Kosher and Halal. Both because I'm you know, a good Jewish girl and diligent scholar of Islam. So I guess I think not just about religious dietary laws, which some of which when you get into it, like they feel arbitrary and others feel in that like weird, like, yeah, we're smarter than you socially, historically smart like maybe don't, don't eat the rotten parts of meat, you stupid goy and others still feel like modern, litigiousness for the sake of it, which like, okay, whatever. But I always think about law, like whether it's religious law or nation state law, because religious minorities have to navigate things like in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration. Yep. In order to access religiously appropriate food or to not be like poisoned with religiously inappropriate food, because the government doesn't care about your religious freedom. Yeah, and I really think about how like really stupid goy think that pork like as it exists is a threat. So when the throwing of bacon at mosques or temples? Yeah, like as if any of us will, like, I don't know, like, what will we do will be wilt at the site of a bacon.



Megan Goodwin 06:21

It always looks like a vampire moment for me like do you think it's garlic and they're going to recoil in the presence of pig flesh? Unclear.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:31

I also like as a person who grew up where like, you don't waste food. I don't understand. Like as a hate crime. If you're gonna do a hate crime, I understand the hate crimes that are like we smeared dog shit on the side of your mosque. You're disgusting. You're disgusting trash person needed to disgusting trash thing. But like you throwing food that you would have eaten on me where I'm not going to eat it. And now it's sat outside all night. This is just wasteful. Like you went to the Piggly Wiggly and bought that shit. And now it's just.... Not the Piggly Wiggly and wasted it Well also because it's like cannibalistic right, like you bought bacon at the Piggly Wiggly anyway, these are the things I think about around food. I'll also say I think about like this extremism around food a lot. Not just because I think we get into these habits of like thinking about disordered eating or our complex relationship with food. But also like it's not just folks throwing pork at Jews and Muslims spaces but also like Hindu vegetarianism as a specter of Hindutva or religion or Hindu extremist violence, even though vegetarianism and Hinduism is like, frankly, just one of many options and definitely has a castist and modern history. Or I think about the extremism and kosher kitchening. So like, like a lot of very observant Jews will have a kosher kitchen that includes things like a separate oven, like so you'll have two ovens or two

refrigerators or two sinks to like, keep your milk and your dairy, your dairy and your meat separate. But like this feels like crazy ass extremism to me because our people were poor. They did not have two ovens. They didn't have one oven. On what planet are you citing this as like religiously valuable or religiously mandated when like my own grandmother was like, Yeah, we have like a charcoal stove thing going on. I'm also thinking about the extremism of like how Jews and Muslims working to get pork removed from school menus, have incited like irrate parents as if there are no other options besides bacon or as if like turkey bacon will turn you into some sort of pumpkin at midnight Yeah, yeah.



Megan Goodwin 08:59

A couple other things that occurred to me I was recently on a website, don't worry about which one, where it was asking for data about who you are as a person. And there was a religion option which included Sikh, not Sikhi or Sikhism but Jain was only a dietary option it wasn't like a religious option and I'm still thinking about that



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:24

Jain was listed not as religion but as like, I'm pescatarian, I keep kosher I....



Megan Goodwin 09:31

Not Halal, Jain, just Jain. No. Yeah. So that was fascinating. I'm still thinking about that. I am always and I think I talked about this on our Sikhi episode. I'm gonna say it again. I am always thinking not only of the fact that Sikhs will feed anybody that shows up at the Gurdwara, but also that that BBC documentary that I like to show in class talks about them feeding everyone, even the Irish builders, which is never not funny to me. And then the last thing I think I want to say about religion and food while we're just like, brainstorming is thinking about my wedding, which was in North Carolina. And while I was in grad school, so we had folks from all sorts of religious backgrounds, dietary backgrounds, got Jews, we've got Muslims, we got vegans, we got vegetarians, just folks all over the place. And the waiters for my wedding didn't show up. So we got married on a farm, and the farmer's sons who were like 15, and 12, wound up being fill-in waiters, and they were serving all the food and everyone kept asking, like, hey, what's in this? And they kept telling everyone, everything was vegetarian, including the pork sliders. So like...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 10:48

Yeah, there weren't any disasters that day..



Megan Goodwin 10:51

Very many disasters up to and including my broken foot. But I think if we want to put a positive spin on it, I think about religion and food as a space of welcoming and hospitality for a lot of folks. And being a way of creating community identity. So yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:16

That is as good a transition as ever to our next segment. "You must remember this" In this segment, nerds, we're going to talk about big picture issues around religion food, because keep in mind, we are so glad you asked about it. This is a one-off episode, we are clearly not going to cover anything. You need depth, we are going to give you a forgive the motif. A little taste, little bites.



Megan Goodwin 11:49

An amuse-bouche, you know what, actually it is? What it is, it's if you've ever been to a Korean restaurant, that big plate of pickles, where you just get like tiny little cups of like 15 Different pickles. That's what's up for today.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:06

So I think that the thing that I'm thinking about for this are how we're doing food and gathering and people and how that all works with religious rituals. And I'm going to count in that the absence of food, so like fasting rituals?



Megan Goodwin 12:22

Yeah, yeah, food is also tied to people's nation, race, class, and gender. So sure, food is a space where people express religious commitments, but also your religious commitments are shaped by where and when you are.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 12:39

And obviously, like, the big thesis statement is that food and religion go hand in hand ya' dummies, because both, both because food is necessary, we have to eat to live, as Megan said, which bothers her. So also, when we're thinking about food, we're also thinking about, like treatment of animals and plants and land, so farming cultures, hosting cultures, how we exist in a space where everyone actually does need food to live and that is not just about inputting food into our gullets, but about how we cultivate that food, tend that food, dispose of that food, and religion and food go hand in hand, because of its persistent presence. So again, even though you hate it as like a daily multiple times a day thing. Because it happens daily and multiple times a day, it is a really great place where people who are thinking religiously, or are trying not to think religiously, would have multiple occasions in a day to do that.



Megan Goodwin 13:43

And a space where folks have to negotiate, which kind of life matters and which kind of life is consumable, and what creating consumable life does to the planet. So this is a space where we're thinking about who is valued, what is valued, and also what we are willing, frankly, to do

we're thinking about who is valued, what is valued, and also what we are willing, frankly, to do to our planet and to each other. If we want to think about labor justice and United Farm Workers, as I always am, in order to live, and maintain the way that we want to live. So yeah, there's a lot going on here.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:20

There's a lot going on. And we could go on and on. But because this is a small bites, short, tiny, we're going to take it slow. And also, you know, zip through all the things at once.



Megan Goodwin 14:33

A slow zipping, yes. Good.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 14:37

Megan, what the hell are we talking about?



Megan Goodwin 14:42

We are talking about religion and food. Other people might have lots of thoughts about what counts or what we should talk about. We hear from y'all all the time. And we love that we could talk about those monks who make beer or the process that communion wafers get made through or how kosher beef becomes Kosher beef, or like Buddhist temple food. But instead we're going to talk big picture, Homework is for specifics, so you know, stay tuned for that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:12

Right and again, like we just said, food isn't just eating, we are thinking about foodways, which also includes planting, harvesting, notions about land and its sanctity, ideas about animal sanctity, or sacrifice or consumption. Which animals are dirty, which are clean the disposal of food and waste. But frankly, I think we'll focus on eating since most of us have the opportunity to eat daily, and many of us quite enjoy the eating. But also that's one place where we can visibly see religion hanging out in obvious ways.



Megan Goodwin 15:45

Okay, so we have four categories of thinking about food and religion on today's episode. We're thinking about dietary laws. We're thinking about customs, we're thinking about cultures, and we're thinking about cuisines.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 16:01

I'm really disappointed that I couldn't get dietary laws to also be a C sound. It bothered my

I'm really disappointed that I couldn't get dietary laws to also be a C sound. It bothered my alliteration, so I apologize nerds, I also hear it. But let's start with dietary laws since it's the odd man out and because it is the thing most people think about when they think about religion and food. So what I'm gonna define dietary laws are, "things that are explicitly part of religious traditions, whether that's textual, or interpreted," like later traditions that claim or don't claim to be original. So for example, some Hindu and Buddhist vegetarianism: right, there's textual evidence that we should eat vegetables, and only vegetables, I know plant product, but there's also textual evidence that people ate meat and did meat sacrifices, and so the cultures of vegetarianism that grow out are both new and old. We're thinking about Jain Ahimsa practices, so non-harming practices, as well as vegetarianism, so it's like vegetarianism one step further where no living organism can be harmed. I know Megan, you might be thinking about like New Religious Movements and vegetarianism or veganism,



Megan Goodwin 17:08

I'm thinking about bean pies if I'm being honest, I'm thinking about the Nation of Islam, and it's Bean Pies.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:13

And I'm always thinking about Jews and Muslims and Kosher and Halal laws that get codified as state law, because you need those little labels that say, is it Kosher or is it Halal, and that's all adjudicated through the courts. So dietary laws are the explicit rules of a tradition, sometimes they're textual, other times they're interpreted. That's tick box number one. What's tick box number two Goodwin?



Megan Goodwin 17:35

Food customs. So things like Catholics mostly eating fish on Fridays, although fish gets interpreted in some interesting ways, historically, up to an including I think it was Brazil might have been Argentina that didn't have access to a lot of fish, but had the pope declare the giant rats, fish technically, so you could eat them on Fridays during lent. You're welcome. Other food systems include things like wine blessings, dates before breaking Ramadan fast, saying prayers before eating. I had been to Osetrar, our ceremonies these Norse, pagan ceremonies where there's sharing things. You start the ceremony by sharing a big horn of mead kind of thing. This is a pre COVID practice. I don't know anybody's doing that right now. Anyway. What's next?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 18:20

Food cultures. So I'm thinking here like temple food for Buddhists. So, many practicing Buddhists would eat whatever they want. But if they enter a temple, either for a period of austerity or to become initiated, as Tom Borchert told us on one of our episodes, in season four, the temple food is often incredibly simple, often vegetarian, really simplistic, but so that's separate from outside of the monastery custom. I'm thinking about things like purifying foods, and that's in quotes y'all in Hindu Ayurvedic practices. Or even just surrounding issues around foods and cultures like access to spices, salts, types of grains, the dairy consumption in your region, et cetera.



Megan Goodwin 19:04

Next one, cuisines! They are regional and not necessarily religious, but they also dictate and shape how religious people do stuff. So like conversations about what you should definitely have for Christmas dinner is a turkey? Is it ham? Is it Kethum? I don't know that one. What is that?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:22

It's an Armenian Christian dish. That's like pretty popular that I used to eat all the time at my BFF from elementary school who happened to be Armenian.



Megan Goodwin 19:31

Wait, is this the raw beef thing? John's family does that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 19:34

I don't, I don't know. I don't eat meat. So, I don't remember clearly what my fourth grade dinner with Harag was.



Megan Goodwin 19:43

That's not helpful to me personally. Or like, what's the Seven Fishes that Italian families do that kind of thing? Or like the right sweets for Ramadan, proper food offerings to Hindu deities, bagel and lox are expressly Jewish, obviously. And they're also not Israeli or British or Australian. And so what do Jews eat in those places? Are bagels their thing too? Is this a Yiddish or New York thing? Only? Where does religion end and food begin?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:09

Yeah. Yeah, so let's put all that together Goodwin. Religion assumes food. Food assumes religion, because religion is what people do. And boy, oh boy do people love to eat, or at the very least, people have to eat.



Megan Goodwin 20:28

Lots of people love to eat even those of us who do not love to eat, except on special occasions, have to do it as you keep reminding me every day, which I appreciate you. Yeah, so the specifics of the relationship between food and religion are intense. This is a place again, where we see lines get drawn around, whose commitments whose personhood is allowed, honorable. So food laws in what's now the United States help dictate belonging and relation to things like

religious freedom. And not to bring it back to laws and jails again, but again, the kind of food you can access while you were incarcerated, the prison industrial complex in what's now the United States might have been forced legally to accommodate some folks who keep kosher. Some folks who keep halal. Certainly not all of them, and certainly not in all places. I don't know that they're set up to accommodate like a Jain diet. And I think it would be very hard to push, push that through.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:37

Right, right. But also like, that's pushed through under the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, no cruel and unusual punishment, right? So it comes through, not just in a religious freedom way, but it comes through in the laws around incarceration, and it was hard fought. So like you first had to arrest a bunch of Jews who were willing to say, "if you feed me pork, this is this is not just impinging on my religious freedom, it is a cruel and unusual punishment". Right. And it was only through those lawsuits, that then the prison system, because you were forced to eat there, was forced in turn, to provide options and what those options are historically has been, again, because we're talking about a carceral system. That is disgusting. We're like, here's a hamburger bun. If you don't want to eat the food that we're making you, fuck off. You disgusting Jew, have a hamburger bun. So the lawsuits that around this are significant, but it means that food cultures, we're using an extreme example here, but food cultures are really they really are dictated around what your access and context is. More so than just like, Jews like to eat bagels.



Megan Goodwin 22:47

Yeah, well, it's also a place where we see what's a nice scholarly way of saying hypocrisy. Tension. We see tension in American Jurisprudence around where and how the United States decides to care about animals. And I'm thinking very specifically of the 1993 *Church of the Lukumi Babalu IA Incorporated v. Hylia*. Which was a case where the Supreme Court said that practitioners of Lukumi also sometimes known as Santaria, could kill animals for ceremonial purposes, without their primary purpose for killing that animal being food consumption. So, there are some practitioners of Lukumi, slaughter animals as part of ritual. And Florida, tried to say that they couldn't do it because it was cruelty to animals. Anyone who knows even a tiny fraction of something about meat production in the US knows that most animals raised as food are treated very, very badly indeed. So again, a space where we see tension between actual everyday practices, and the US saying you can't do that because your religion is weird. And also the people doing it are not white, for the most part.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:19

And like, to make it not just about the US, we see other nation states manage this through law as well. So I'm thinking about in India, the so called "Sacred Cow Acts", and the prohibition of butchers. Now, not all Hindus have been vegetarian for very long and vegetarianism historically, was located in two places, one amongst the rural poor, who might have been any number of castes and amongst Brahmins. Right, so the tippy top of the system, and folks who

may not have had... like meat was not widely available, so you're not a vegetarian by ethical choice, you were a vegetarian because the cow giving you milk is better as a milk cow than as a meat cow because like meats a one off. Right?



Megan Goodwin 25:07

No more cow after that....



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 25:08

There's no more cow after that. But like you can, right same with chickens like, I'm gonna make this chicken lay eggs until that chicken can't lay eggs anymore and then maybe we'll have like the Indian version of Coco Van or something like. So, but the sacred cow laws assume that all Hindus in all times in all places find all beef to be sacred and therefore not food and thus, predominantly Muslim butchers should be restricted from owning either abbatoirs or butcher shops, and restricted in what they can sell. So it doesn't matter that Muslims eat beef, it matters that it is an impingement or it causes religious conflagration to have cows be eaten, even though again, we could talk about animal abuses and the state of cows in India and like it's not as if they're all living in like cow Utopia right. But it is a way to use the state to make an argument about who actually belongs here and what religions are prioritized.



Megan Goodwin 26:08

Absolutely. Okay, so we are putting it all together. Here are the big things we'd like for you to remember, "putting it together that's what counts!" One, religion and food we often think of in terms of dietary laws, which is internal religious designations about diet. So, things like Jain Ahimsa, Muslim Halal, Judais and Kashrut.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 26:38

Yes, we are also thinking about customs, things that are widely practiced, but not necessarily codified. So like saying grace before a meal, or being really grateful for things as part of our foodways or being excited about fish on Fridays?



Megan Goodwin 27:01

We also see cultures that grow around specific foodways. And now I'm just stuck on bagels. Right? There is, to the best of my knowledge, and I am I am not a scholar of the Torah, but I'm pretty sure that there are no bagels there.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 27:14

And yeah, sadly, no bagels in the Torah.



Megan Goodwin 27:17

I do know that there are fig trees in the Quran though. But right. So there are bagels are a big part of particularly American Jewish culture, but not all Jewish culture. But also Yeah, it's it's complicated. food cultures.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 27:32

And finally, we're thinking about cuisines, some which have to do with religion, but also reflect the context in which religious people are harvesting, eating and preparing food, right? So it's not enough to just say Jewish food, because Jews living in Morocco will have a radically different understanding of what Jewish food is than Jews living in Brooklyn. Even if both of those cultures and communities abide by Kosher dietary laws.



Megan Goodwin 27:59

Sorry, I'm still stuck on you insisting that you're allowed to eat rice during Passover. Nothing, we don't have to share that story. Also, do we think that Swedes don't share food because of the atheism? Question mark? Anyway, don't pack up your stuff yet. Nerds, it's time for homework! "Homework? What homework?"



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 28:20

All right, we have a lot on food. And I want to just say we're gonna say maybe three things each, but I have stashed like 14 things in the shownotes. So, I have tried to be representative in the shownotes of multiple religions and religious worldviews. We can't read all that to you nerds, it's too boring. So, here's what I recommend. I recommend like all of Michael Twitty's work. He hosts the afroculineria.com super great. He also wrote "The Cooking Gene". And one of my favorite books of the last, say three years. "Kosher Soul: The Faith and Food Journey of an African American Jew". It's just so good and the recipes are dope as hell. So all of Michael Twitty's work, I recommend. A book that I think I gave my dad a few years ago is Ted Mewin's book called "Pastrami on Rye: An Overstuffed History of the Jewish Deli." And it's just it's good, it's good, you know, it's good. And then I'll end with another really good food about curry.. sorry, a good food about curry a good book about curry it's an edited volume by Krishnai Nurai and Tulasi Shrinivas. It's called "Curried Cultures: Globalization, Food, and South Asia."



Megan Goodwin 29:41

Well now I want curry though.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 29:44

What do you recommend Goodwin?



Megan Goodwin 29:44

Oh, let's see I recommend Febe Armanios and Bogoc Ergene, their, "Halal Food: A History". I also recommend, "Religion, Food, and Eating in North America" edited by Marie Dahlem, Reed Nielsen, Nora Rubel and Ben Zeller. and I will remind our listeners that Dr. Abel Gomez talks about a native salmon ceremony on our episode from last season. So that's the indigenous religions Part Two episode and then yeah just check out the show notes for every single other thing that Ilyse listed because there's a lot. Shout out to Evie Wolfe, Rachel Zieff, and Juliana Finch the KI101 team whose work make this pod accessible and therefore awesome, listenable, and social media-able among many other things for which we are grateful. We 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. Find us on Insta and now, apparently TikTok?? Brave new world drop us a rating or review and your pod catcher of choice and with that...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 30:56

Peace out nerds!



Megan Goodwin 30:58

Ro your homework, it's on the syllabus.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:22

That's just a waffle that back tossed up there. I know I shouldn't eat the butt.



Megan Goodwin 31:31

Sec release years