

twitter-jinn-and-the-great-conjunction-with-dr-ali-olomi

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SPEAKERS

American Gods "Head Full of Snow", Megan Goodwin, The King and I, Dr. Ali Olomi, Simpsons, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, 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're grateful to live, teach, and record on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples. And our guest is coming to us from the lands of the Lenape.



Megan Goodwin 00:41

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



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:47

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



Megan Goodwin 00:53

Ilyse, let's just jump in. I am too star struck, or... moon struck? I'm gonna try to snap out of it but it is an astronomical event to have this guest on.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:05

Well, in that case, hi, Dr. Olomi. Before we get into it, would you prefer Ali or Dr. Olomi today?



Dr. Ali Olomi 01:12

I would love it if you all called me Ali.



Megan Goodwin 01:15

Thanks. Fabulous.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:17

Okay, but-



Megan Goodwin 01:17

I'm gonna bury my Cher impression but it was really hard.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:21

I know, I had a feeling that that Moonstruck was gonna get us like a Nic Cage or a Cher, but I'm glad that you refrained-



Megan Goodwin 01:27

I lost my hand, I lost my bride! Sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:32

And we're back. Okay, well, like, listen, let me introduce our guest formally. Dr. Ali Olomi, a historian of Middle East and Islam, is with us today. And he is a researcher who writes and

publishes on Muslim communal identity, and the post caliphal context at Penn State Abington. His work focuses on how Muslims from the early to modern period thought about themselves, their collective identity and imagined a global Muslim world. Doing that is all part of research that examines the deep roots of religious nationalism, Islamism, and the tension between imagined global religious communities and local identities. So stuff that we're really into here on the pod, but also, he's a Twitter luminary with over 50,000 followers, which is a galaxies worth for anyone, let alone an academic, in part because of his work on Islamic esotericism, which includes things like monsters and jinn. He hosts one of my always-listen podcasts "Head on History," and we are so glad that you're with us.



Dr. Ali Olomi 02:34

It is such an honor to be here, I'm a big fan.



Megan Goodwin 02:38

We obviously could have had you on for any number of episodes, Ali, given the wide range of interests and your theoretical savvy- we're just- we're just so glad you're here. And welcome to the pod.



Dr. Ali Olomi 02:48

Thank you very much.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:53

The 101: ON TODAY, the segment where we do professor-work. Ali we have you on mostly because Magic Wednesday is my favorite, and to talk about jinn, and astrology, and monsters, things that we've assumed most of our listeners, frankly, don't associate with Muslims or Islam, things that might not make it into that intro to history to 1258 Mideast course that we all have to teach or that intro Islam course, that I'm teaching currently. And so, I guess where I want to start is a question that we're asking everyone this season, which is what is the most basic, most important takeaway you want our listeners to know about the work you do? What's the 101?



Dr. Ali Olomi 03:38

Yeah, I mean, I- when people talk about Islam, they really don't think astrology. It doesn't

come up-

M Megan Goodwin 03:46
Not usually.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 03:46
No, not at all. And in fact, as sometimes the pushback on Twitter can attest to, they still don't think of it that way. And- and similarly with the jinn, and when I first started talking about the jinn, people were like what the F is this dude talking about, right? And so for me, talking about Islamic thought, particularly Islamic thought about cosmology and the world around is a really interesting way to understand how Muslims identified themselves, constructed identity, but also how they imagined 'the Other.' And so, the histories of science and religion offers us- offers opportunities to sort of examine the anxieties, the ideas, the beliefs of people, and the way that they interact with their world, the way they interact with other people. It's histories of empire, it's histories of colonialism. So when we talk, for example, about the jinn, we're also talking about what Muslims imagine exists outside the borders of their empires.

M Megan Goodwin 03:53
YES! Sorry, I just got-

D Dr. Ali Olomi 04:41
We talk about astrology- oh go ahead.

M Megan Goodwin 04:52
I got- I got so excited, I got so excited, well it's also- this feels like a beautiful melding of like, all of the stuff that Ilyse cares about most in the world, ie empire and me: monsters. So I'm teaching a witches class right now and it sounds like we're doing a lot of similar work. But can I ask just a really stupid like possibly sub-101 question?

D Dr. Ali Olomi 05:14
Of course.



Megan Goodwin 05:15

Hey, what's a jinn? Are these genies, or what?



Detox 05:17

It's our secret word of the day!



Dr. Ali Olomi 05:20

Perfect, perfect question, right? So the jinn are these alternative form of life that Muslims believe in. A sort of pre-Islamic belief that then gets codified into the Qur'an. They are creatures, supernatural and natural at the same time, created out of a sort of elemental fire that exists both alongside humanity and as a sort of different experience than humanity. And so the Qur'an regularly references humans and jinn, humans and jinn. And so for Muslims, jinn aren't just, you know, a set of folk beliefs. They're not just, you know, 'old wives tales' (whatever that means), but they're actually a central part of Islamic belief, even if Muslims may not always talk about it, or the study of Islam doesn't always talk about it. And it becomes a site for Muslims to really examine their relationship to the natural world. What is the place of humans, if they're not the only being that lives on the planet? What is the place of humans if they're not the only intelligent life that exists alongside nature? So it's a really kind of complex site that can explore Muslim thought, but is deeply rooted both in orthodoxy and even predates Islam- Islam itself.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 06:39

Yeah, I love- and- and just to remind both our nerds and you, we will have set up this interview conversation with a previous episode, but we'll talk about things like jinn and- and some of the historical stuff. So you don't need to feel like you need to do all of that historical lifting. But I do appreciate all of this reframing and rejiggering and cluing people in, but I think one of the things I love so much about jinn- so, a lot of my research happens in Delhi, in India, which is often called the 'city of jinn.'



Megan Goodwin 07:09

Wait, what?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:10

Yeah.



Dr. Ali Olomi 07:10

Oh yes.



Megan Goodwin 07:11

Really?



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:12

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 07:13

I didn't know that! I'm learning so much today- sorry. This is gonna be my whole contribution to this, like 'WHAT!'.



Dr. Ali Olomi 07:18

There's whole shrines to jinn saints in India.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:21

Yeah, yeah, yeah.



Megan Goodwin 07:21

Really?!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:22

Yeah, and like-



Megan Goodwin 07:22

Wow!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:22

And like- but what I- what I find so fascinating about your, like, 101, Ali, is that, like, jinn is that thing where I show up in India, I have all these degrees- you know, I'm this, like, white Jewish girl who has all these degrees in Islamic Studies, but when I show up in India, jinn feel like home to me, because it's all the stuff that I associate with, like, yidisher... Uh, it's like that al- that analogous thing of yidisher culture, like when my mom sweeps the floor, she says these incantations against the ghosts, which are like Yiddish prayers, but they're not Hebrew. So they're not quite Jewish.



Dr. Ali Olomi 08:01

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:02

But also, if you don't put salt in your cupboard, like they will come and get you.



Megan Goodwin 08:05


Yes.





Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:06


So, like, when I would hang out with, you know, host families and colleagues over the years of going back and forth, Delhi, and particularly the Muslim families in Delhi who would talk to me about jinn, like, in the kitchen in these gendered spaces, just felt like home in this very particular way where it's religious, but not. It's orthodoxy, but not. You absolutely pay attention to this stuff, but also, maybe not in all places in all times do you talk about it out loud. And if I asked a question, like an ethnographic-style, like, "Alright, tell me about going in Nizamuddin shrine, and let's talk about this ritual." They'd give me kind of like, textbook Sufi Islamic answers, but then at home, in private spaces, while we're like, cleaning up dishes or something. It'd be like, "oh, but also, let me tell you about the jinn." So I feel so connected to these stories that really do push the boundaries of where we might see like- like the porousness of Islam, of religion, of ghost stories, of "old wives tales," and I really do resonate with that gendered balance of it. So you're with your threads give me life, not just because I love them and they're so smart, and it's such an interesting take on public scholarship, but also because I think it- I think it does all of this really fascinating historical lifting, with just- with stories, and I find that that, I don't know,


not to like hype you up too big, buddy. But like, I feel like that's the power of humanistic research. I feel like that's the power of really smart historical labor. And I feel like that's- that's the kind of stuff that turns me on to the subjects that we study.


 D Dr. Ali Olomi 09:54
Right.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:54
So I-

 M Megan Goodwin 09:54
Yes! Yes!

 D Dr. Ali Olomi 09:55
I mean, I totally resonate with that. And one of the things, I think, the- the underlying intention or motivation for some of the stuff that I do, is to really highlight the fact that there is a lot of sites of cross cultural exchange and shared experience. And I think the jinn is one of them. I mean, when you talk, for example of ghost stories and the jinn- if we situated historically in late antiquity, then the jinn are part of a class of spirits that exists in the Near East. The jinn relate to the Jewish shedim, right, the idea of these spirits that are sometimes evil, sometimes not, sort of ambiguous, but exists alongside humanity, and they introduce ideas about health, introduce ideas about identity, introduce ideas about shared space- what happens if your house is not just your house, but also the home of the jinn? And so these kind of cross-cultural points fascinate me. And the porous boundaries, if we can call them that, of religion, is where I do my work.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 11:00
Yeah.

 M Megan Goodwin 11:00
I love that so much. I also just have to say, we are recording this now- what on the... Where are we in January? This is the fourth week in January. And I just have to personally thank you for making all of the Wednesdays in January not completely overwhelming and

crappy and hard, terrible, days-

D Dr. Ali Olomi 11:08
I'm trying to do my part.

M Megan Goodwin 11:20
It's like, I love this. I mean, I love all of this. I am I'm thinking particularly of Thomas King, and "The Truth About Stories." And he says the truth about stories is they're all that we are.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 11:30
Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

M Megan Goodwin 11:30
And I just- yeah, I'm really excited to learn so much more, as I do from you every Wednesday, about-

D Dr. Ali Olomi 11:37
You're very kind.

M Megan Goodwin 11:39
You know how I'm on Twitter, like- but, like, I do threads but my threads- my threads are long, but my threads are not intense and researched in the way that yours are. And I just, I am in awe. Thank you so much for sharing that expertise with us.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 11:52
It's- It's been a pleasure for me. I absolutely love doing them.

M Megan Goodwin 11:55
It is time for GETTING TO KNOW YOU.

T The King and I 11:58
Getting to know you, getting to know all about you.

M Megan Goodwin 12:06
Ali, can you tell our nerds what's at stake in your project? Why is it important beyond the work you're doing? Beyond classrooms, nerdy conferences, you know, why- Why is Twitter so excited about these, like, deep dives into Islamic history when we can barely get people to learn a goddamn thing- I swore- But, well- but a goddamn thing about Islam, usually? Like, I can't- I can't get anybody to focus on this. I feel like it goes right out of their head. And meanwhile, you're in these like, tiny minute, cool, like, little jewel boxes of stories, and 50,000 people on Twitter are obsessed.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 12:42
It's a fantastic question. I mean, there's obviously the scholarly stake, right, the intervention we make. But why do we- why do this stuff on Twitter, why share this stuff.

M Megan Goodwin 12:51
Yeah!

D Dr. Ali Olomi 12:51
And I think there's- there's a lot of, kind of, motivations for why I do what I do. The first was, I'm very keen on thinking about Islam beyond what I call the "beards and burkas spectrum."

M Megan Goodwin 13:04
Oh, I don't think I'm allowed to say that but it's funny.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 13:05
It really, for me, one of the things I noticed online was that the conversation was so reductive about Islam. It reduced Islam into a series of legal prescriptions as if there was no poetry, as if there was no storytelling, as if there was no art or architecture, all of this, it created an impression of Islam as a dead thing and not as a lived experience. And the second component was fundamentally that if it wasn't about reducing Islam to a series of

legal prescriptions, it was about regulating women's bodies. "Women, you should do this" and "Muslim women, you should do that." So I wanted to kind of step in and go Hold on a minute. There's so much more here. There's so much more that we can examine. The other stake of this was, if I say the word fairy, 99% of the people know exactly what I'm talking about. If I say elf, most people know what I'm talking about. But when I say jinn, they kind of look at you and go: 'the thing from Aladdin.' And so, I was very keen on kind of, you know-



Megan Goodwin 14:07

I mean, don't say elf to Ilyse, honestly, because she watched all The Lord of the Rings, and it was, like,- it was nonsense. But yeah, sorry.



Dr. Ali Olomi 14:16

Well, you know, it was about provincializing, to a certain extent, the European imagination, and thinking about imagination in a global context. Because the jinn are not limited to the Middle East. They exist in Africa. They exist in India, they exist in Indonesia and Malaysia, and they offer us an opportunity to talk about the supernatural, about people's beliefs, in complicated and nuanced ways. And similarly, with- with astrology it was- the stake was to argue that the early history of astronomy is shaped by these phenomenal thinkers that exist outside of Europe, that they do exist in places like Baghdad and Cairo, and that it was important for us to understand that history that we don't fall into this sort of teleological understanding of science that 'Oh, it started in Europe, took a detour in the Middle East and then came back to Europe.' No, there's this really rich history there. But also, that every time I was online, I saw, and it was always a Muslim woman, mention, you know, her zodiac sign, and then just get piled on by people.



Megan Goodwin 15:21

Really?



Dr. Ali Olomi 15:21

Just dog piled.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 15:22

Yeah.



Dr. Ali Olomi 15:23

And so there was just like- okay we need to open up this space a little bit to go, look, this history may not be understood all the time. But there is a deep and rich history of astrology and astronomy and cosmology and apocalypticism in Islam. And if we talk about these things, then we can examine questions of identity, we can question identity- questions of like, how cultures interact with one another? What does it mean when we say astrology is an Islamicate science if many of the thinkers thinkers are Jewish? If many of the writers are Zoroastrian? So it's offers us an opportunity to introduce nuance, and move away from what I thought was a very limiting conversation around Islam.



Megan Goodwin 16:06

All of this is all of the stuff I'm so excited about when we think about public scholarship. So if I'm hearing you correctly, though- not though, and, uh, part of this work is decolonial or post-colonial, pushing back against the the europeanisation of how we think about knowledge is created. Plus, it sounds like people online have found ways to be shitty to Muslim women that I didn't even realize they've done. So that's-



Dr. Ali Olomi 16:34

Oh, yeah. I mean, there's always- there's always been a gendered component to the conversation about astrology, right? The meanings around it is very gendered, right. But yeah, this is absolutely about decolonizing the history of science, about thinking of science in kind of unique and different ways, but also taking serious pre-modern people's beliefs to treat astrology as a pre-modern science, not as a sort of superstition that those people did back then. But as a rigorous form of thinking, as a site of knowledge production, as a way of engaging with Muslim thought and the way they imagine their universe.



Megan Goodwin 17:11

I have 18 million questions. But I just- I feel like Ilyse should say something. Sometimes I get excited.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:17

I know you want to ask one of your witchy questions, go for it.



Megan Goodwin 17:19

It was actually a witchy question, I-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 17:20

I knew it.



Dr. Ali Olomi 17:21

Bring on the witchy question. I'm all about the witchy questions.



Megan Goodwin 17:23

Well, no, I just, I think that's- I am- I am seeing parallels here, between how we think about these worldviews and the historical context that you're highlighting, and say, Puritan New England, which is where my Witches class starts, where one of the things that I think my students really struggle with, is taking seriously that the devil is not theoretical.



Dr. Ali Olomi 17:50

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 17:50

It's not a concept. It is the literal devil working on these people's bodies in this worldview and if you don't take that seriously, it's easy to dismiss them as exactly what you're saying: superstitious, and stupid. And just- they just didn't know any better. And I one of the things that's exciting about working with this history is watching students go, 'Oh, wait, this is a really sophisticated, and, like, incredibly complex and really rich way of seeing the world.' It just also feels completely bizarre to them. So this- I'm, like, wanting to talk about stuff outside the United States so you know it's working- this is exciting for me.



Dr. Ali Olomi 18:31

No, you're absolutely right. I mean, that being able to- and I think in the academy, we struggle with this a little bit, and certain disciplines, more so than others, I know- I know that in history in particular, we have a difficult time with belief. We really do, right? We're really grounded in texts, we're really grounded in historical materialism, we're grounded in certain historiographies that don't always make space to acknowledge people's beliefs as important, as significant, as shapers of their future and their ideas. I think anthropology

does it far better. There's a sort of- an attempt at neutrality or, it's like 'Oh, people believe this!' So I'm- I'm a big believer of saying, look, let's take people's beliefs seriously. And let's examine them, because they provide us a glimpse into a really rich understanding of the world. And it's far more complicated. And it's not just something that we can dismiss as oh, you know, antiquated, but rather, has deep impact on the way that we understand the world to this day. Why is it that we still look up zodiac signs, right? They- we only understand that if we first look at that pre-modern history, if we understand why these things resonate with us, it's a way of making sense of the chaos of the present. And people have been doing that since time immemorial, and that engenders historical empathy, we now start to see historical actors not as distant abstract figures, but real people.



Megan Goodwin 20:06

Okay, several things. One, can you start a podcast where you just read to me before I go to bed because your voice is so soothing.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 20:13

Subscribe to Head on History, there's a Patreon, we can- we're gonna link to it.



Megan Goodwin 20:17

Yes.



Dr. Ali Olomi 20:18

I put people to sleep regularly.



Megan Goodwin 20:20

It is amazing. But two, I wonder, just as a follow up question that I swear to God, I will let Ilyse talk. You're mentioning beliefs and taking those beliefs seriously. And I think that's so important. But one of the other things that I see in my Witches class is conversations around Brujeria or Lukumi.



Dr. Ali Olomi 20:38

Oh yeah, very cool.

M Megan Goodwin 20:39
Where you have- Yeah, it's- it's- it's really fun.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 20:41
I wanna take this class now!

M Megan Goodwin 20:43
Hey, the syllabus is online, there's a medium page, I'm happy to share. Um, but one of the things that I think anthropology, as you note, does so well, is highlight the complexity of people's relationships to these stories and these beings.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 20:58
Yeah, yeah.

M Megan Goodwin 20:58
So you get folks, and- and I'm thinking of like Romberg's "Witchcraft and Welfare," where you have people straight up saying things like, well, I don't believe in Brujeria. But also, I'm definitely gonna do all this stuff, because like, I'm not getting that- I'm not getting the bad stuff on me.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 21:13
Oh, yeah.

M Megan Goodwin 21:14
So the like- I don't believe this, but I'm still acting as though it might be true just in case. I'm thinking of like Gerialin Thomas talking about Shinto as a just in case, wink, wink, nudge, nudge, sort of religion.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 21:27
Yes, absolutely. Cover your ass, as I like to say. Spiritually cover your ass.

M Megan Goodwin 21:31
Yes. Do we see this with jinn as well? Like, Oh, no, jinn? Whatever. But...

D Dr. Ali Olomi 21:36
Yeah, we absolutely see it. There's a- there's a really fascinating, I think, overlap between the religious traditions that you often find in- in, for example, Brazil, Latin America, Brujeria you mentioned, but also the African traditional religions, right? Like, like Lukumi, Vodun, Candomble, and you- when you talk to people who live within those cultures, they almost always talk 'Oh, yeah, I don't believe in it.'

M Megan Goodwin 22:02
Yeah.

D Dr. Ali Olomi 22:02
But if they see an offering left out at the crossroads, they're like, 'yeah, I'm not gonna mess with it either,' right? Or 'I'm gonna make sure that I say that particular prayer,' and you find a very similar thing with the jinn, that I would say that more people definitely believe in the jinn when you ask them privately, then they will admit publicly. They'll say, 'Oh, yeah, absolutely,' because everyone knows somebody that's had an experience with the jinn. They'll say, 'Oh, my uncle, my aunt,' or whatnot. And so there's-

M Megan Goodwin 22:27
I won't- I won't name names, but I was definitely part of a, like, study group, where we got- like, we went out for ice cream, and suddenly, it was just like, 'Oh, yeah, this is my jinn story, like, obviously.'

D Dr. Ali Olomi 22:39
Exactly. Everyone has a jinn story. But even the people that don't, and the people who may not think of the jinn as real, are still careful. They still acknowledge that it's better to be safe than to earn the ire of the jinn, just in case they actually do exist. So everyone knows, you know, if you're going to throw something into a hole, ask permission before you do it, don't pour out that hot water, maybe say Bismillah before you do that one thing. And so there is definitely a "spiritual cover your ass" component, to even the jinn when it comes to people that don't believe in it.



Megan Goodwin 23:16

Okay, it's- it's totally Ilyse's turn, I promise.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 23:20

Well, I was just gonna say, I think- I think that's where, I think- I think- I think many things- but I think your use of manuscripts, as someone who was trained up in manuscripts, I think that's where I find where you're telling these stories to be just as important as the stories that you're telling. Because I think what you called historical empathy not that long ago, I think that is- that is the hardest thing for folks who are not historically inclined, who are not obsessed with what it would be like themselves to live in, like- I do not lack this imagination. I think one of the things I always start with my students is like, okay, and where did these people go to the bathroom?



Dr. Ali Olomi 24:02

Yes.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:02

And they're always like, this is horrifying? And I'm like, no, no, these are people with basic needs. So tell me, if you can't imagine, like, your hero, George Washington, or some other stupid slave owner, like using the toilet, then you're not doing history right? Because all of those systems matter for how these people then become so called, like, 'great moments in history.' So I think it's like recovering or, I don't know, that may be too strong- but this really, like, deep dive into thinking about how folks are thinking, why they're thinking the way they're thinking, and then humanizing them as- as not like documents that are left for us to read in stuffy archival spaces or on microfiche or on digital- digital spaces.



Megan Goodwin 24:49

The children don't know about microfiche, Ilyse.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 24:51

I only know about microfiche, because every so often it's like, the British library is like, we have this on microfiche and I'm like, "for the ninth time, will someone show me how to use the machine again because I don't remember." But like, I think it's- it's who did that

writing? It's not just what's on the page. It's who did that writing? I think it's so easy actually to do that ethnographically or anthropologically, like it's really easy to- and I'm going to draw on the folks that I know, it's really easy that when something really good or something really bad happens, you throw in that, like, that quick honorific or that quick Mashallah, Hamdulillah, right? And it's like, okay, is that religious? Or is that cultural? Are you doing that, because you don't want me to get the evil eye because I said too loud that like, I got engaged or something, or like, or whatever? I mean, forget it, the time that I was pregnant, and I traveled, I was living in India for a little while when I was pregnant and it was like- like, I could not do enough to get rid of the evil eye. And I was like, listen, I have all of my parents, like, they are spitting on the floor every five seconds to ward off the evil- like I can't, there's too many cultural evil eyes to back off. But I think- I think that's almost easy, because you can tell that story in your day to day life, but finding that in manuscripts and then recreating that as not just superstitious or not just religious practition, or practitioning, but like, also a proper science. That like there's muster behind it, there's scholarship behind it, there's literal math and research that says, "okay, but on this day for real, like don't- don't do X, Y, and Z, or absolutely, this is the day to beseech for X, Y, and Z." And so I think that kind of opening up of history, as not just, I don't know, like thinking about some sort of linear progress, like, how did we get from there to here? But also like, how was the 'then' really similar to the 'now?' And how are those people- I don't know, I often think about it as like kin, like, how are these people just part of the big family?



Dr. Ali Olomi 27:04

Absolutely, well I say the good historians are necromancers.



Megan Goodwin 27:08

That's really funny.



Dr. Ali Olomi 27:10

We do- we do two things, we either raise the dead so that we can see that we're just like them. Or, we lay the ghosts of our past down, right? This is the work of decolonizing, this is the work of dismantling white supremacy, the ghosts that continue to haunt, right? That are- that are built into the machine. But the other component of us is to kind of reawaken the ghosts or the dead that have been silenced.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 27:34

Yup.



Dr. Ali Olomi 27:34

Right? The ghosts that have been forgotten, to remind us, you know, we're- we're- we're remembrancers in the sort of Roman tradition, to kind of say, look, there is- there is a real person here, not just a text, not just a set of words on a page. And what was that real person's beliefs, and ideas, and life? And how does that inform the text? So I'm very keen, and whenever I write a thread, or whenever I do any form of scholarship, even on the academic side, but I spend a good amount of time exploring the person, that there's an element of saying, alright, if I'm going to write about astrology, I'm also writing about Abu Ma'shar. And I'm writing about how Abu Ma'shar's ideas, and beliefs, and fears, resonate with us in 2021. And that is- it's not just about historical empathy, which is super important and a key component of what I want to do, but it's also a way of recovering what seems to have been lost, right? It's a way of recognizing that our collective memory is sort of catastrophic. It's a big mess. As Walter Benjamin says, right, it's a big mess. And we're just trying to kind of figure it all out. And so this is what the historian does. And if they're good, they're able to do so. And it's just a sort of glimpse- we're working with fragments, we're working with very shaky memory, we're working with little- little sparks, right. But if it- if it's good history, then it will be able to capture that spark, even if for just a little moment. And if we can shrink that time, so that someone sitting here in 2021 resonates with someone living in the ninth century, and goes, "I feel that, I resonate with that, I understand that," then we create a more inclusive world, we create a world in which we're able to deal with- with the realities of the present by understanding the deep roots of it, rather than having a historical imagination that lasts a year or two years. We're able to-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 27:43

Weeks. Weeks.



Dr. Ali Olomi 28:46

Yeah, weeks, right? I mean, in fairness, sometimes weeks feel like centuries.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 29:09

That's fair.



Megan Goodwin 29:11

Amen.



Dr. Ali Olomi 29:13

This is a way for us to really kind of decolonize memory to a certain extent, really decolonize collective memory. What do we remember is political. What we choose to forget is political.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 29:52

And what we've been forced to forget, because I think what I find so fascinating, and where, you know, I'm not going to super geek out the whole way around, but like, I think a lot of the work I do is really on memory and memorialization.



Dr. Ali Olomi 30:06

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 30:07

And I think that as someone who works, you know, at this point almost exclusively in the colonial period-



Dr. Ali Olomi 30:14

Right.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 30:14

It's- it's- it's- it is agency, what are we choosing to write out of our communities, right? So when do Muslims write jinn out, where does that orthodoxy say 'yeah you might do this at home but I don't want to see this in our in our public spaces, or in our public writings, or in Khutbahs or something.' But also where are you forced to shed those- those associations? Where is that stricken from the record by the various sets of authorities, so not just internal authorities like the 'ulema or something, but- but external authorities, like, you know, my favorite beanbag to punch, the British!



Megan Goodwin 30:54

I mean, fuck those guys, though, for real.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 30:57

For real. But- but I think that is something so fascinating about- about- about this process of necromancy that you were talking about.



Megan Goodwin 31:08

I'm literally reading a book about necromancers right now, I'm so happy you don't even know.



Dr. Ali Olomi 31:12

The synchronicity was perfect. But I mean, it really is. And I know people kind of laugh oh, necromancy, but it is- it's so- there's something in it- academic necromancy, right? So, like-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:20

Yeah, no, I love it.



Dr. Ali Olomi 31:21

I would absolutely describe "Indian-Muslim Minorities," your book, as a work of dealing with the ghosts of the system of modern India, right? Like if you want to understand the contemporary racialization, nationalism, right? That's the work of the necromancer. Get in with those ghosts!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:36

I know, no I love it. I'm feeling it!



Megan Goodwin 31:38

And their guns, and their guns.



Dr. Ali Olomi 31:40

And their guns. Exactly.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 31:41

Megan will never forgive me for all those-



Megan Goodwin 31:43

The rifles. The frickin' rifles. But it's- Yes, absolutely. Can I just say also that a place where I have really appreciated your work is exactly that piece that you're highlighting of making the past not just more vivid or more accessible, but the- the place where it's not even past, right? And I'm going to make it specifically about the Great Conjunction because that messed me up, man. I will- I will just- I will let you explain it because you'll do a far better job than I will. But that like, "Oh, no, oh, that is our current political moment. And it's not isolated to our current political moment." But like, "Oh, I feel seen from a millennium ago, woof."



Dr. Ali Olomi 32:27

I- absolutely. It's one of my favorite astrological theories. And it's an area I work on a lot, particularly in its relationship to apocalypticism. But for people who don't know, the Great Conjunction is in astrological theory that was first developed by Mashallah Ibn Athari, a Jewish Persian astrologer in the Abbasid Caliphate, and then picked up about a century or so later by Abu Ma'shar, who was probably the preeminent astrologer of the medieval Islamic world. And what it does is it divides up all of history into a series of conjunctions, that is planets aligning together, and specifically Jupiter and Saturn because they were the slowest moving planets, the most distant planets that they could observe. And what they sort of noticed is that every 20 years or so, Jupiter and Saturn would align in a particular sign of the zodiac. And then every 240 years or so, Jupiter and Saturn would move from one family of zodiac signs into another, this was a mutation between elements. So each zodiac sign has an element. So for 20 years- every 20 years, it would be in fire, and then 240 years, you'd move from fire to a different element; to water. And it would sort of repeat this cycle over the course of several centuries, and then started all over again, 960 years or 1000 years. And so this was a way of organizing history. And so on one instance, it's a really great example that religious history isn't always, 'oh, the world was created 1000 years ago,' but there was this deep understanding of history. Muslim astrologers are writing about tens of thousands of years; about the great flood happening tens of thousands of years ago, and how do you organize history from there? But it also

speaks to political and social anxieties when you see this sort of celestial event happen. These two great wandering stars lining up within a particular zodiac sign, and they would be given significance that in Aquarius, for example, which is the one that happened in 2020, they wrote about the incoming invaders that the Mongols would arrive, and the caliphate would collapse, that old dynasties would crumble and new ones would arise, and then there would be barren Earth and they would be pestilent winds. Sometimes you read it, and I remember as I was translating, I'm like, holy shit this is intense.



Megan Goodwin 34:56

This is happening. This is happening right now. And I remember being snarky because- was it November or December? Or October? November? I was like, yeah, you know, it's supposed to happen in November. But I feel like this has been happening for a while. And you're like, actually it started about nine months earlier, right about when we went into quarantine, goddamnit.



Dr. Ali Olomi 35:13

And it is so fascinating how it lined up. And it just- it really- it was a moment for us to understand that as wild as things get, as chaotic as things get, on one hand, they've always been like that. We've experienced it over, and over, and over, and over again. And so as sometimes people read these threads, and that kind of- the apocalypticism bringing down dismay and despair. But for me, there's an element of hope there, that those people endured, and so will we, right? That there's an element of the human condition remains the same. So there's an element of empathy. There's an element of hope there. But it also is a really great reminder that science is not neutral. Science is political. These astrologers weren't just writing casual observations. These were the court astrologers the Abbasid, saying, look, our time is coming to an end, right? They may have imagined the strange Empire of the Mongols. And the irony is that the Mongols saw the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction, not as the omen of doom, but a chance of rebirth. This- there is an element of politics that plays into it, who is interpreting the Jupiter and Saturn conjunctions, right? But it was, it was fascinating translating that and going Oh, yeah, definitely 21st century.



Megan Goodwin 36:34

It's happening! It's happening right now!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:43

Hey, what's your sign? It's time for PRIMARY SOURCES.

M

Megan Goodwin 36:46

[singing] Primary sources! As a way to focus us in our primary sources for today, Ali, can you tell us your primary source? Where do you fit into this work? Why religion? Why this project or this cluster of ideas? Not just like why it's interesting, obviously, like, we have talked so much about why it's interesting. I feel like we could do this for like another eight hours. But- but where are you in this? Well, what made you want to become a necromancer?

D

Dr. Ali Olomi 37:16

Fantastic question. So I think where I fit into this is, I see myself as the legacy of my grandparents. So I grew up listening to stories from my grandmother in particular, who told me about the jinn, who told me about these kind of great moments. And so I see myself as continuing that. All I'm doing is transcribing my grandmother's stories. But I'm doing it academically, by drawing from sources and drawing from historical examples. It's a way of preserving legacy, and to a certain extent, preserving her memory. And so that's what I see if I am- if I were to say, I'm a necromancer, I'm a custodian of her memory to a certain extent. And so that's- that's part of why I do what I do and kind of how I fit into it. But also because growing up, I see myself as fundamentally existing on the margins of communities, right? Growing up as a brown dude in America, growing up in a Muslim community in America, right? You live on- in sort of liminal spaces to a certain extent, you live on these kind of weird, outside the norm, right? Even even small things like do you celebrate Thanksgiving, you kind of feel on the outside of it.

M

Megan Goodwin 38:36

Don't get llyse started on the calendars, man.

D

Dr. Ali Olomi 38:38

I want to explore that. I want to explore the liminality. I want to explore other people who through history may have existed in these areas where there was cross cultural exchange, but also who lived on the outside of the mainstream. So I am- I'm part of a long chain of people that lived outside the norm, if we will.



Megan Goodwin 38:59

It sounds like there's a great conjunction of all of these influences in your work.



Dr. Ali Olomi 39:04

Absolutely, I love that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 39:06

Do you have a favorite jinn story?



Megan Goodwin 39:08

Ooh.



Dr. Ali Olomi 39:09

Oh, yes, I absolutely do. There's this really great jinn story, and it's very kind of- sort of a minor one in which there is a- it has a- it sorta has a weird moral to it as well, which I- which I find quite funny. But there was a young woman who her father wanted her to get married. And the young woman only wanted to get married to one dude, this particular person who the father was not very keen on, not very interested in. And it's like, 'Oh, this guy's kind of shady. He's a bit of a brigand, do I really want my daughter to marry her,' but she was very keen on him. And so the daughter devised a very clever plan. She said that she would only marry somebody if they could create this elaborate necklace and she created this design that would be impossible for everyone to make. Except, she would secretly give the instructions to her wanted suitor so that he would make it together they would then trick the father. Look, he's a good man. He made this jewelry, he passed the test. What they didn't account for was invisible ears.



Megan Goodwin 40:24

Ohhhh.



Dr. Ali Olomi 40:24

Who were listening. And the jinn who was like, hey, she's kind of cute, decided that he would use his magical abilities, and the jinn have great abilities to create jewelry, he creates the jewelry and runs up and gives it to the father and ends up marrying the girl.

There's- I love it because one, there's some really fascinating gendered analysis that you can do there that very clearly in this story, right? You can understand this idea of like, whose will that you need to follow the father's will, not the girl's will, the father's will. And if you don't follow the father's will, you might end up with a jinn husband. So I absolutely love this story.



Megan Goodwin 41:04

How does that work- Is that, like, a good thing? I- like- does-



Dr. Ali Olomi 41:07

This is interesting. So the stories are very ambiguous when it comes to this. There are certain instances where marrying a jinn is seen as a sort of reward. The prime example of this, is the story of Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, her father saves deer from being hunted, and as a reward is given a jinn wife, and so Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, the paramour of King Solomon, is half jinn. In that story, her jinn ancestry is a good thing. It's seen as a reward of the piety of the family. But in other instances, it's considered the marriage to the stranger, 'the Other,' that being that exists beyond. And so it has a sort of weird, sometimes good, sometimes less so.



Megan Goodwin 41:54

Sometimes it's not without my daughter...



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 41:57

Oh, Megan.



Megan Goodwin 41:59

Sorry, I had to! I had to! I have one more follow up question if we have time.



Dr. Ali Olomi 42:03

Of course, of course.



Megan Goodwin 42:04

Okay. Well, I'm just wondering, so I have seen tiny sparks, if you will, of jinn pop up in contemporary American popular culture.

D

Dr. Ali Olomi 42:14

Oh, yeah.

M

Megan Goodwin 42:14

I mean, you mentioned Aladdin, which like, meh. But I'm thinking of things like "American Gods," or Matt Ruff actually has a book about it, or even if we wanted, I mean, not that Salman Rushdie is American, but there are moments of jinn in there too. And most of them are not great. In terms of what they're trying to say about Muslim culture. I'm wondering if you've seen it done well anywhere?

D

Dr. Ali Olomi 42:38

Yeah, I mean, [G. Willow] Wilson's "Alif the Unseen" is phenomenal.

M

Megan Goodwin 42:44

Oh yeah!

D

Dr. Ali Olomi 42:45

Absolutely phenomenal, highly recommended. [S. A.] Chakraborty's "The City of Brass" and I'm- if I'm mispronouncing her name, I apologize. Brilliant author who works in fantasy, but her background is, as a historian, if I'm not mistaken, she wrote a three part series. So, City of Brass, highly, highly recommended, probably, in terms of fantasy, one of the best depictions of a jinn. "There's a Dead Jinn in Cairo" is really good, it's a bi- bit of steampunk-ish, if you will. Yeah, a little bit of steampunk, a little bit of Cairo. So there is, there are- they do exist in fiction a lot. Fascinatingly, we do find the jinn also show up in sort of just popular stories now, just the stories that people tell. And I have found them within the context of the War on Terror and so American troops coming back, talk about jinn. Yeah, I've had kids in my class who were- who were- who were- been, you know, troops in Afghanistan or Iraq, and they'll talk about jinns stories. So it's interesting that they're showing up, but they're showing up within the context of imperialism, right? Yeah, showing up in the context of the War on Terror. And it's almost like the ghosts of colonialism are now the jinn. And so you'll- soldiers will talk about the haunting of their air bases and the haunting of places in Afghanistan.



Megan Goodwin 44:13

I fucking hope they're getting haunted! Sorry, that's so interesting.



Dr. Ali Olomi 44:16

Well, I did- I commented once that you- you know, if you invade a land, the land will respond, right? It responds in all sorts of ways, but it is fascinating to see it show up in- in American military stories, right? It was not something that I had anticipated when I was teaching a class and we did our section on jinn to see the kid who was in the US Army raise his hand go, "Oh, yeah, we heard jinn stories and Bagram Air Base was haunted." So it's a fascinating way that once more reminds us that when we examine things like the jinn, we're also examining things like empires and identities, and borders and whatnot.



Megan Goodwin 44:54

Oh, this is so interesting. Thank you.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:55

Perfect. But don't pack up your stuff yet, nerds! You've got HOMEWORK!



Simpsons 45:02

Homework. What homework?



Megan Goodwin 45:03

So in the last episode, we assigned lots of things to prepare our beloved nerds for your classroom visit today. Obviously, your new book is assigned and on the list and in the show notes, but following our highly esteemed Judith Weisenfeld in Season Two, we are trying to ask all of our guests this season what you've written or- or produced, that you're most proud of? What- what piece of your work are you feeling really great about?



Dr. Ali Olomi 45:29

Well, I- the last year was a big writing year for me. But as all things- as all things academic- well I mean we had nothing else to do, I was stuck at home. So I was trying to be semi-productive, and most of the unfortunate reality is that academic publishing takes forever. One of the chapters I was very interested in- very excited about, was the jinn and

the Qur'an which is going to be a chapter in the Routledge Handbook of the Qur'an with Professor Archer who reached out. And that's really fascinating because what it does is it introduces the pre-Islamic history of the jinn, the way it's codified in the Qur'an, the varieties of jinn that exist, the role of Iblis or Shaitan or the devil as a jinn, the controversies around that and the jinn as a global folklore, so how it intersects with North African spirits and Persian and Indian divs and peris. So there's- that one is- I'm super excited about I don't know the exact date that it'll be coming out.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 46:32

Totally okay, we will cite you regardless.



Dr. Ali Olomi 46:33

That was one I enjoyed the most of. And then I just, speaking of great conjunctions, wrote about the Great Conjunction and apocalypticism; examining the role that the great conjunction plays in revolutions and rebellions, messianic movements that arise and go 'look there's a great conjunction upon us, let us overthrow the empire.' That's really excited, but on the radar, so keep an eye out.



Megan Goodwin 46:59

Yeah. So now I'm doing like a thing where I want to think about Nat Turner and the eclipse setting off the rebellion and-



Dr. Ali Olomi 47:06

Oh, yeah, I mean, there's been a long history of people of noting celestial events and using them for political events. Nat Turner perfectly example, that- the Zanj rebellion was dated according to a lunar eclipse, the attack on Basra, and even during the Abbasid Civil War, Caliph Al-Ma'mun overthrew his brother, but didn't actually march into Baghdad until an eclipse happened. So people have always used celestial events to justify, motivate, their political actions.



Megan Goodwin 47:39

This is awesome. Thank you so much for teaching us so many cool things. This was great.



Dr. Ali Olomi 47:44

It's been an absolute pleasure.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 47:46

Yeah, this is really fun. And nerds, as a reminder, a summary, links to citations and references and all the important transcript-stuff can be found on the show notes at keepingit101.com. Shout out as always, to our awesome research assistant, Katherine Brennan, whose transcription work makes this pod accessible, and therefore awesome. Do you need more of this? Find us all on Twitter.



Megan Goodwin 48:08

You can find Megan that's me on twitter @mpgPhD and Ilyse @profirmf or the show @keepingit_101 . Find Dr. Olomi @aliaolomi . You can find the pod website, at keepingit101.com and please drop us a rating, review in your pod catcher of choice. Ilyse loves when you rea- rate us, she loves to win. And with that- you do!



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 48:40

Peace out, nerds.



Megan Goodwin 48:42

Do your homework. It's on the syllabus.



American Gods "Head Full of Snow" 49:01

Are there many jinn in New York? No. There are angels, there are men who Allah made from mud, then there are the people of the fire, the jinn. They know nothing about my people here. You think all we do is grant wishes. If I could grant a wish do you think I would be driving a cab?