

**SPEAKER 1:** Why do people line up at a pasta bar? Is classification a political act?

**SPEAKER 2:** Is football religion?

**SPEAKER 3:** Why do they say fake news instead of propaganda?

**SPEAKER 4:** Why do you wake up every morning and try to recreate the same appearance that you've had on the previous days to be recognized?

**SPEAKER 5:** That's good.

**SPEAKER 4:** Why? Why? Why?

**SPEAKER 5:** Study religion and find out.

**SPEAKER 1:** Study religion and find out.

**SPEAKER 2:** Study religion and find out.

**SPEAKER 3:** Study religion and find out.

**MIKE ALTMAN:** Welcome to the *Study Religion* podcast. I am Professor Mike Altman. This podcast is a production of the Department of Religious Studies here at the University of Alabama. And to begin with in this episode, I want to talk about turkeys. One of our students posted to the Religious Studies Student Association Facebook group, Ellie Cochran posted this wonderful video of turkeys.

And it was a group of turkeys. And here's the video.

**SPEAKER 6:** That was the craziest thing I've ever seen. Turkeys walking in a circle around a dead cat in the middle of the road.

**MIKE ALTMAN:** Yeah, there's 17 turkeys, this guy is showing us, is a circle around this dead cat.

**SPEAKER 6:** This is wild.

**MIKE ALTMAN:** And so this video got me thinking about the category of religion, and the kind of stuff that we do around here. When is something a ritual? Ellie posted this great-- she just posted the question, turkey ritual? Question mark. And it got me thinking, is this a turkey ritual?

And what would make it a turkey ritual? And what makes us call something a ritual, period? And I just thought this was a lovely example, right, that you can imagine, much the same way that in the 18th and into the 19th century, when Europeans showed up in these brand-new worlds around the globe, these brand-new places, right, you know, the Americas was called the New World, capital N, capital W, and they saw people doing things, and those things they were doing, the actions they were taking kind of resembled something they had seen back in Europe, but not exactly. And they said, that must be their religion.

And it got me thinking about a wonderful quote that I use in class a lot from the thinker Jonathan Z. Smith, who-- here's what he says about ritual.

**SPEAKER 7:** And so if you look at religion as I do, as something that is not out there, people are not going out there and, if you ask them what they're doing when they're cutting the head off a chicken or jumping into water or eating a cracker or something, they'll never ask you I'm doing religion. So that religion as a category that we make up as scholars and say, no matter if you're cutting the head off a chicken or jumping in water, we know what you do not know, that you're doing religion. At that level, there is a lot of similarity between religion. But the similarity is the scholar who's created the category in the first place.

**MIKE ALTMAN:** And I just love that, that little interview segment from Smith, because it gets at exactly what's going on with this so-called turkey ritual, right, or turkey religion. We see, those of us who recognize things as rituals, right, things that are done in a certain way, some sort of circumnavigating this dead cat, right, seems like something religion to us, or ritual to us.

And so we know what those turkeys don't know, that they are doing religion. And in some ways, that's what all religious studies is, is it's folks going out in the world and not finding religion. It's not out there, Smith says, but it's a category, it's a way of cordoning off some things that we find interesting and we want to study or talk about or understand more, some behavior that we find interesting.

And that's really what I want to talk about a lot today. We have two more segments coming. The first one I think is really interesting. And it's students in our REL 490, our senior seminar. I have three students out of the class who I gave them the project to think about this category of sacrifice that we are studying, and to go out and find sacrifice in the world around them.

So they did. They found sacrifice in some places that you may or may not have thought about.

So let's take a listen to what they found on their quest to go find sacrifice.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SPEAKER 1:** Wow. What a theme song. Hi this is Keely. And today, I'd like to talk about everyone's favorite x-rated series, Game of Thrones. Since the producers at HBO have pushed back the season 7 release date to July, I thought it would be fun to revisit and analyze one of the show's more controversial moments, back in season 5-- the sacrifice of Shireen Baratheon, an innocent daughter of the usurper, Stannis Baratheon.

When the shocking episode premiered in June of 2015, fans were outraged by the crude death of such a young and lovable character, even though this seems to be a recurring theme throughout the run of the show. The episode received so much backlash, that producer Dan Weiss was asked to comment on several media platforms, where he coolly claimed that-- quote-- "religion can cloud judgment. To those characters, magic is real and it works. It gives you a window into the heads of people who believe irrational things on faith." End quote.

Jumping off of this comment, I'd like to enlist the help of my friends, Henri, Hubert and Marcel Mauss, whose work in sacrifice, its nature, and functions can help explain this cinematic phenomenon.

While Shireen's sacrifice in the episode does not adhere entirely to the standard rituals they discuss, there is clear evidence of a sacrificial system used to entreat the positive will of a divine being. Stannis Baratheon plays the role of the sacrificer, who is to undergo the divine benefits of the sacrifice. He gives his only daughter, Shireen, to reverse his own fate in the war for the iron throne after a significant portion of his army and supporters starve and perish in the harsh winter. Thus, Shireen becomes the human victim, who is consecrated and destroyed as she is burned at the stake. She is brutally separated from the rest of the group by force, despite Stannis' attempt to soften and persuade Shireen to give herself up willingly.

**STANNIS BARATHEON:** The man knows what he is. And remains true to himself. He must fulfill his destiny and become who he is meant to be. However much he may hate it.

**SHIREEN** Is there any way I can help?

**BARATHEON:**

**STANNIS**

Yes, there is.

**BARATHEON:**

**SPEAKER 1:**

The sacrificer in this case, is the red priestess, Melisandre. She, alone, is able to connect and communicate with the Lord of Light, the one and only God to whom Stannis and his community give their devotion. The priestess counsels Stannis before and through the sacrifice, ultimately lighting the pyre herself when Shireen is secured at the stake. Melisandre is the intermediary between the profane and sacred worlds overseeing Shireen's passage to the latter, by way of fire.

In turn, Shireen becomes the intermediary between Melisandre and the Lord of Light. So, if we were to classify this sacrifice, it would not be a stretch to call it a Holocaust. The entire victim, Shireen, is consecrated and destroyed. The Lord of Light claims her entirely, and the community is not invited to dine with their god. While Shireen's sacrifice is a communal event, spectators only watch, rather than participate by consuming the spoils or saving a portion of her body for themselves. What an episode that would have been.

Ultimately, we have here, a sacrificial system that Hubert and Mauss describe in their book. The link between the sacrificer and the sacred-- between Stannis and the Lord of Light-- is established through the victim, his daughter, Shireen. Melisandre, the sacrificer counsels Stannis and oversees the process, ensuring the connection is made and the Lord of Light is satisfied. Those that remain faithful to Stannis and Melisandre after witnessing such a disturbing act, later observe what they believe to be the benefits of the sacrifice-- the melting of the snow and reappearance of vegetation and game. They see magic, where others, including Hubert and Mauss, might just see the changing of the seasons.

In his comment that I read earlier, Dan Weiss touches on an idea better explained by Hubert and Mauss. They write that religious ideas, because they are believed, exist. They exist objectively, as social facts. The sacred things in relation to which sacrifice functions are social things. And this is enough to explain sacrifice.

[GAME OF THRONES THEME SONG PLAYS]

**JACKSON NOCK:** Hello, and welcome in. My name is Jackson Nock, and today I want to talk to you about sacrifice. Have you ever thought about the way we use the term sacrifice to refer to things that

are outside of the religious realm? A quick search on Twitter or Google will yield tons of examples of people sacrificing things-- from time, to money, to their dignity, to whatever. You get the idea. But what about sacrifice and sports? As I looked for an intriguing case study for this assignment, one instance just popped out at me. And yes, as you'll see, pun intended.

Have you ever watched a baseball game and heard the announcer talk about a sacrifice fly ball? It's where the batter intentionally hits the ball high up in the air, in hopes of advancing a base runner to score a run and put him in scoring position.

[EXCITED BASEBALL ANNOUNCER]

**BASEBALL ANNOUNCER:** Jonathan Lucroy, with a sacrifice fly! And a 5-4 Milwaukee win, opening day.

**JACKSON NOCK:** The batter does this, despite knowing that he will be out when the outfielder catches the ball. Which means he can really only do this when there is 0 or 1 outs in the inning. But in effect, he is sacrificing himself for the good of the team.

In fact, this is actually recorded as an official statistical category in baseball. And the batter doesn't even record an at-bat if he is successful. So it doesn't affect his batting average, or stats, or anything like that. The statistical category first appeared in 1954. But what is really interesting, is that the sacrifice fly ball has a long history, going back more than 100 years.

According to the Society for American Baseball Research, the term "sacrifice hit" first appeared in baseball box scores in 1889. Yes, you heard that right. People in baseball were using the term sacrifice even before Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss wrote their book in 1895. This term was used to describe various actions-- including bunts and ground outs in addition to fly balls-- that all serve to help the team by advancing or scoring runners, while the player who hit the ball was ruled out. And the terminology stuck.

To understand why the language of sacrifice and the usage of sacrifice terminology became so ingrained in baseball vernacular, and why fans of baseball would view the actions called sacrifice as sacrificial, scholar Kathryn McClymond offers a valuable insight. In her piece, *Sacrifice and Violence*, she talks about theorizing sacrifice as a means to justify violence. In the case of baseball and the sacrifice fly ball, the violence would be the out inflicted on the

batter-- which usually does not help the team batting, but rather helps the opposing team to end the inning.

However, because the batter is helping the good of his own team through his action, in this particular instance, the violence is not a bad thing. But characterizing what we know as the sacrifice fly as sacrifice, Mcclymond would say it lends a kind of moral authority and meaning to one's own suffering. She also goes on to point out that this is the way many Christians understand Jesus' crucifixion. And that, because of this, Western sacrificial discourse is dominated by an understanding of sacrifice of this sort.

Could it be possible to understand the use and prevalence of the term sacrifice in baseball as a product of the dominant Western Christian understanding of sacrifice? I think the case could certainly be made. So, next time you're watching a baseball game with your friends and you hear the announcer say sacrifice fly ball, you can let them know that the terminology used there-- like so many other things we take for granted-- it's just another product of looking at things through a Western, Christian lens. Thanks for joining in. Be sure and join us next time as we continue to theorize sacrifice. Bye, now.

**SPEAKER 3:** The term sacrifice is widely used in society today, specifically in casual conversation. Before taking REL 490, I had not thought about how often I use the terminology associated the sacrifice. People, myself included, use a term so frivolously without truly thinking about what it means. I say things like, I have to sacrifice my time for this. Or, I have to sacrifice one thing in order to have something else. When thinking about this assignment, I was planning to examine the use of the term within society. And albeit, I overheard a conversation on my way home one day.

To give you some context, I was walking home from class last Monday and I had unfortunately forgotten my headphones. Because of this, I was forced to listen to my surroundings from the wide variety of highly interesting conversations that were occurring. Behind me, two girls were talking about going out to bars and restaurants this semester. One girl said that she hadn't been to Taco Mama once this semester, like it was such an unforgivable thing that she had not gone at all. Next thing she says is, I would sacrifice a child for Taco Mama.

Now, having just left REL 490 and spent two and a half hours talking about sacrifice, I kind of stopped in my tracks. I was like, did this girl really just say that she would sacrificed her child for a meal? Now, don't get me wrong. Taco Mama is a wonderful restaurant and some really

good food. But her statement was so extreme, that it got me thinking about the way it fit into the views of sacrifice that we have been talking about in our class meetings.

According to scholars like Edward Tyler and William Smith, sacrifice functions as a gift to a god or a higher being. By giving this gift, the sacrificer is establishing or fixing a relationship with that higher being or god. Now, this concept of sacrifice as a gift got me thinking about the statement, I would sacrifice a child for Taco Mama. The child, in this scenario, would serve as the gift. The person is offering this child to the higher being-- that which would be Taco Mama, in the specific instance.

By offering this gift to the higher being, scholars like Hubert and Mauss would argue that the person would end up better off than they were before the sacrifice. In return for their sacrifice, the sacrificer would receive something that they wanted. In this case, the girl would receive food, or a margarita, or one of the many other things offered at Taco Mama, because she was willing to sacrifice the child. She would leave the restaurant better off than when she had arrived, because she would have said satisfied a need and fixed a problem.

I realize that this curiosity and scenario is a stretch, but the statement of sacrificing a child for a meal that couldn't cost more than \$10, really caught me off guard. It made me want to ask the girl if she truly understood what she was saying, and how far-fetched it actually was. The terminology is so far ingrained in society, that people don't even think about it when they say that they are willing to sacrifice one thing for another. Next time I overhear someone say that they will sacrifice something, I'll ask them, would you really?

**SPEAKER 4:** Special thanks to Keely McMurray, Jackson Nock, and Alison Pressler for sharing those really interesting insights into how sacrifice is all around us. I want to shift gears for the last half of this show, and talk about something very dramatic.

[INTENSE MUSIC PLAYS]

**ANNOUNCERS:** Reza Aslan is an author and scholar--

--Reza Aslan is a scholar of religions.

Best-selling author Reza Aslan--

--as a scholar, as a Muslim, as an American--

**REZA ASLAN:** I've been studying the world's religions for 20 years. And now, I'm going to live them.

**SPEAKER 4:** That my friends, is the introduction to a new show on CNN called *Believer*, hosted by Reza Aslan. And if you haven't seen the show yet, it airs Sunday nights at 10:00 Eastern, 9:00 here in Alabama-- central time zone. And the first episode looked at a small sect in India, known as the Aghori. The second episode look at a small group of folks in Hawaii who follow a prophet. Aslan described them as a, quote, "doomsday cult." They followed a prophet named Jezus, with a z. And then the latest episode that aired, just this past Sunday, was about Haiti and Voudon religion there.

But after the second episode-- on the so-called doomsday cult-- I thought that I needed to talk to somebody and get some opinions and thoughts about the show. And so, I reached out to a friend of mine.

**MEGAN GOODWIN:** Hi. I'm Megan Goodwin. I'm the visiting assistant professor for race, religion and politics at Syracuse University's Department of Religion. I also co-chair of the New Religious Movements Group at the American Academy of Religion.

**SPEAKER 4:** And I've known Megan since graduate school. And she specializes in minority religions, so-called cults, and new religious movements. And so, I thought she'd be a great person to have a conversation with about the show. But more broadly, about how do we do religious studies in a more public way? How do we take the study of religion into broader audiences? Like Aslan is doing with this show. And I think we had a really interesting conversation.

And I began by asking Megan just to summarize what was happening in the show. What was the episode at all about?

**MEGAN GOODWIN:** This episode specifically focused on-- OK, the title was *Cults*. It specifically focused on what Aslan kept calling doomsday cults. And focused on one new religious movement on the big island in Hawaii, run by Jezus with a z. Jesus with z is from the Yucatan, has millennial prophecies, also is a Pele worshipper. So, there's some goddess worship stuff in there. And they are responding to the threat of climate change by building a new ark.

So, one of the things that I found really challenging about the framework, was that you're looking at-- certainly a mixed race group-- but most of the folks that got the most camera time are pretty white. living on the big island, and land that Jezus with a z has purchased for them,

supporting their construction projects with money that the community makes largely from legal marijuana farming on the mainland. And so, there's just-- there's this weird embrocation of, like, colonialism and American imperialism-- because this is obviously occupied territory. Where you've got white folks worshipping sort of an indigenous Hawaiian god or goddess, but interacting very little-- it seems like-- with the native folks. With the unexplained exception of Reza Aslan's indigenous guide, who tried to get him to spend a night in a cave. And then he refused.

**SPEAKER 4:** All these problems aside, I'm curious what you think-- was there anything the show did well, you thought? Moments of the show that somehow turned it around for you, maybe?

**MEGAN GOODWIN:** OK. So, there was no turning around an episode where 57 minutes into a 60 minute episode, no woman had spoken. That being said, the one moment that I truly endorse was when Aslan says, religion is what you make it. Right? Because the social construction angle is exactly what we try to push. My problem, though, was that the approach that he was taking there was very much kind of-- well, sometimes these groups do positive things. I'm not really going to focus on that so much, but maybe they do. So, he ends the episode with this, "meh, what's the harm?" And as I said on Twitter, I felt the harm was that the episode started with pictures of Jonestown corpses, with the fire at Waco, and with framing the Heaven's Gate exit as tragedy. When the members of that group deliberately exited their body.

So, I mean, this is a problem overall with kind of popular takes on cults-- which again, I just think is shorthand for religion I don't like. But they tend to focus on the extremities. They tend to focus on the body counts, right? Without thinking about root causes for why people end up dead in these situations. Right? So, whether it's the ATF, or whether it's-- well, individual psychosis coupled with crippling racism. These things don't come from nowhere, and I don't think it's helpful to frame them as inherently irrational.

**SPEAKER 4:** Like, what is the lesson for scholars of religion when it comes to the public? When it comes to doing our work and making it more accessible? I don't know. What's the story? Like, because we see obvious problems with all this. But then, it's still on CNN.

**MEGAN GOODWIN:** Yeah. And he's getting paid. Good for him. I'm not on CNN. Although, you know, we are Twitter buddies now, with the producers. So-- no. Again, I think that that-- and this comes-- and I think you can sympathize here, very much from training and working in public universities, I think we have an absolute duty and responsibility to the public to be able to

translate our work. Or else, what is the point of us? Right? Why are the taxpayers supporting our salaries? Why are students subsidizing their salaries?

So, again, I appreciated the move. At the same time, I understand-- yes, capitalism. ratings. You'd want to do something eye-catching. But I think we all kind of struggle with this problem if you teach a world religions class. Right? Like, the kids want literally this. Give me a tasting menu of the world, right? And at the same time, I think those of us that are trying to be really thoughtful about that model, build in questions about gender, about race, about imperialism.

You can give them the tasty, tasty, like, McNuggets of weirdness. I mean, JZ Smith, again, said he studies religions because they're funny. And I have never gotten over that quote. But you can give them that entertainment factor, and still make them aware of the stakes. Right? And I think that's what's missing from this exoticization approach. Right?

Like, I really appreciate [INAUDIBLE] when he's talking about snake handling. Trying to take a suspensive approach to this unfamiliar-- and really, unsettling-- practice. Right? We should be unsettled. Hopefully, we can take that unsettling back to infant baptism. Right? Which is honestly-- when I teach my world religion class, why we do Christianity last. Because you don't get to talk about Christianity until you know how we're talking about religion, broadly. Like the terms-- if we're going to use the same terms-- we're going the same terms for everybody. And I think it's very challenging to make that CNN-sexy.

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah. And I think-- I mean, I think this is the question. I don't know how much stuff, from the classroom, can translate to larger audiences. I mean, I tend to think-- kind of like we were saying, these sorts of questions have to happen in our survey courses. But I also think that there will sort of always be teaching.

**MEGAN**            Absolutely.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** And I do think I've seen students respond better to-- we don't do a world religions course-- but they respond better to intro courses that engage these questions of social construction, and the politics of categories, and all this stuff. Because it actually shows up in their world around them. Right? So, there's a way that if you're starting-- if you're doing this sort of religion buffet class without asking these questions, then there's a huge gap between the experience of, you know, the experience of a 19-year-old young white woman who grew up in the Baptist church and is at college here in Alabama, and a Hindu Saint. Right? Like, there's a huge gulf.

But if it's about, well, look at the ways that this community used these stories to make sense of the world around them in this particular way, and actually oppose this other group. And, you know, oh, I see people using stories to oppose one another constantly. Right? And so, there is a way that-- and I feel like maybe there's a space for that on CNN, in some way. And maybe that's what--

**ANNOUNCERS:**

**MEGAN GOODWIN:** Yeah. I think, absolutely. If you can teach-- I've had these conversations with first semester, first-year high school students. There are ways to make this accessible. It's harder. It's easy to go into a group and say, look at the weirdos. I was uncomfortable, look at the weirdos. That's the easiest possible way to do that. I don't know that that pushes the conversation forward in a way that CNN is claiming the show can and should do. And it was really jarring, frankly, to see the show put up against commercials where Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is talking about the problems of Islamophobia. Right?

Like, I think are absolutely ways to have conversations about the stakes and the power dynamics. And that, frankly, that can be really engaging. And again, I don't think you need a degree in religion to get that point across. If you ask anybody that took my REL 120 class-- my intro class last semester-- why do things matter? The answer is always power. Right? Where are the power dynamics, here? And I haven't seen a really good, popular introduction to religion that takes the power dynamics seriously. Right? It's still very much this-- look at the weirdos. And it's exhausting.

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah. And if you think about the shows in this genre that do the best-- right? I mean, we can think of you sort of-- not really reality TV shows, but like-- the Anthony Bourdains. And the Good Eats, and the-- whatever the show with Mark Summers where he shows you how they make candy and stuff. This whole genre of kind of History Channel show-- this particular kind of History Channel show-- they're most successful, I think, and interesting when they give you that extra level of detail and nuance.

Like no one's like-- the food shows are a great example. It's like, no one likes-- the thing that's interesting about Top Chef is not the food. Because you can't taste it, right? It's the interesting processes, and methods, and-- oh, I would have never thought that's how you do that. Oh, you use that thing this way. Or, in the Good Eats example, like, the science behind these things. Like, there's a certain level of like, with religion, we have to just keep it exotic and

National Geographic-y.

**MEGAN** Well, I think there's even a way to do that-- and I'm thinking here, specifically, of my courses.  
**GOODWIN:** But also, UNC alum-- go Heels-- very much the kind of-- it's a modified Bart Ehrman approach, right? Where you think you know what this says, and you don't. And let me show you why.

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah.

**MEGAN** Right? So, we think we know things about cults. Right? Diane Winston's got a great piece on religion dispatches about this. When somebody says cult, you expect certain things. I think you could do a great episode on cults, where you're like, oh, you thought Jonestown was about everybody voluntarily drinking the Kool-Aid. Actually it's really complicated. Isn't this interesting? Like, did you know they did all this social justice work? Did you know that an enormous amount of black women died?

But we really only focus on Jim Jones and the white women. Right? Did you know that they were endorsed by Harvey Milk? There's so much to know about these unfamiliar modes of religion. And I think the, hey you thought you knew a thing, I'm going to help you think harder about that-- wouldn't be that hard to do. But instead, the show replicates that-- religion is weird, religion is dangerous. Be scared of religion. But the commercials say you shouldn't be scared of religious difference. So, I don't know that the showrunners are thinking about the political work that the show is doing.

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah, and there's a really big difference between all religions are basically the same-- which is the kind of-- I mean, at the end of every episode, it sort of ends in this very kind of Oprah, religion, liberal spirituality, we're all doing the same thing in our different methods way.

**MEGAN** Sure, climbing the same mountain.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah, there's a huge difference between that and-- these folks think the end of the world is coming near. And look, most Americans think the end-- like, many Americans who are not shirtless and dread-headed also think--

**MEGAN** Particularly since November. Yes, I think a lot of us are in an apocalyptic mindset. Absolutely.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** Well, and there were folks-- I mean, there's a whole-- and so, that's a different move. And it's a

move that actually makes it familiar-- not into what I want it to be. Right?

**MEGAN** Exactly.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** --into myself.

**MEGAN** Right.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** And what do you think-- what do you think this says, though, about the field of religious studies? When I often get told that I and others that I hang out with academically, that we're all just tilting at windmills? Like, [INAUDIBLE] been dead. JZ Smith won. We all know religion isn't an essential, sacred thing that's sacred because it's sacred. Because of some sort of power.

**MEGAN** Maybe we don't! CNN don't know.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** So, yeah. I'm curious. Like, what do you think-- does this have any connection at all to that argument in the field? Or, is this just something happening on CNN. And we should all just ignore it. Look the other direction, cross the street.

**MEGAN** Nope. I mean, at least for me, no. Absolutely not. Because, again, I spend a huge portion of

**GOODWIN:** my time trying to explain to-- mostly undergraduates-- that they should care about religion.

I am not, in any way, opposed to trying to make mainstream America think harder about religion. I think there are exciting, interesting, challenging ways to do that. I don't think this is it. But I also don't think that we just kind of shrug it off as inconsequential. Right? Like, people that don't know anything about Hinduism are going to watch the show and think they know a thing about Hinduism, because Aslan profiled this incredibly fringy group. Right? And this is the kind of thing that I try to pay attention to my work, is how does mainstream America get thinking about religious difference? Right?

And largely, it doesn't happen in classrooms. It happens because you read-- I don't know-- *Not Without My Daughter* or *Under the Banner of Heaven* and think you know a thing about minority religions. Right? And then act on them. And it's not just private citizens acting on these narratives. It's Congress acting on these narratives. 1986-- what's his face? Strom

Thurmond entered the entirety of a 20/20 transcript about satanic ritual abuse into the congressional record. Like, that is-- that's just there. Right? So, like, these shows do real work out in the world. And if we're going to be students of American culture-- as I think we are-- we don't just get to write it off because it's-- nuanced is a nice way to say that.

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah. And I think the struggle is how do we let people know that what Aslan is doing isn't religious studies?

**MEGAN** Well, I mean, I yelled about it on Twitter a lot.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** Well, yeah. But here's the thing, the only people who are liking and re-tweeting that were scholars of religion, who knew already. But like, there's this way-- I think as the whole show as, not as scholarship, but as data for my scholarship, in many ways.

**MEGAN** Yeah. I mean, that's fair

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** But, it's like, how do you- communicating that and saying, we kind of need that second level removed, to talk about this. Because the problem-- the thing that-- I think we both experienced this as we were watching the show-- is the feeling that we're taught to see ourselves as colleagues with Aslan. And like--

**MEGAN** I can't afford that. But, sure.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** Well, no. But like, that we're all somehow all in the same game.

**MEGAN** Yeah.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** We're disagreeing about-- we're all in the same game, disagreeing about, like, the outcomes. But not-- but I think, no. I couldn't figure out a judicious way of saying this. It's like, no. No, we're doing radically different things. And what you are doing is actually the data, the case study, the example for what I'm doing. And that may sound horribly condescending. Yeah, I guess it is.

**MEGAN** I think it's fair to assume that we are not on the team of everybody that does public

**GOODWIN:** conversations about religion. Right? Even when they're-- presenting themselves as sort of removed, if not scholarly. At the same time, I mean-- I don't know. I want to think that we're on the same team. I want to think that this is an attempt to make people think harder about religion. And that I just don't like the way that he's going about it. So, maybe that's a little Pollyanna of me.

**SPEAKER 4:** Like, should there be a *Believer* panel at the AAR?

**MEGAN** Hmm. That sort of feels like shooting fish in a barrel. Right? Because the panel is just going to

**GOODWIN:** talk about, here's what's wrong with this episode, here's what's wrong with this episode. If we were going to do a panel, I would want us to think harder about, OK. We don't like that the framing of this project. What is public scholarship on religion look like, then? How do we do this? And not-- I'm going to go and talk about my latest book. But like, seriously, how do you get the seniors down the street from you-- how do you get random high schoolers excited about this, so that they want to learn more?

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And I think it's funny. There was a lot of people on the Religion South Asia mailing list-- email list-- complaining about the Hinduism episode. And my thought was, how many of you guys have published in a public forum?

**MEGAN** Well, exactly. Like, where are the blog posts? Where are the things that-- this is honestly one

**GOODWIN:** of the reasons that I made my Religion in Politics kids, last semester, do a Buzzfeed-like explainer for their final project. Because the subject matter felt way too pressing, frankly, to have them walk out and not be able to take this to their parents, or their friends, or their dorm-mates, or whatever, and say, like, here's why you need to care about voter suppression. Right? So, thinking about ways to be able to present that information where people will actually read it. And that was part of their grade, was how compelling is this? How much do I want to keep reading?

And, like, the fact that part of the way that you're doing that is through animated GIFs, just made it more fun to grade. But also, like, more fun to read.

**SPEAKER 4:** So, there's something about-- there are scholars doing this in various places and different ways.

**MEGAN** Absolutely.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** But, yeah. The overall, I think, religious studies-- and I think you see this, especially in contrast to, say, what's going on at the MLA or the AHA, between historians, and English, and comp lit folks. Like, there is a real-- for all of its claim that AAR-- not that I love to-- that I just want to bash the AAR. But, for all of its claims that its job is really not about departments, but about the public understanding of religion-- well, I think the fact that we have *Believer*, but nothing else to compete with it, is a questionable sign of that.

**MEGAN** Yeah. Yeah.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** Thank you for hanging out. So, I think you just had a article released recently in the Muslim World.

**MEGAN** I did.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** *They Do That to Foreign Women: Domestic Terrorism and Contraceptive Nationalism in Not Without My Daughter*. So, folks should check that out. I will-- They should check out the whole issue, actually. It was based on a conference that Elise Morganstein first did at UVM last year. It was amazing. And they pulled together a really, really smart-- not just me-- a really smart journal episode. So, check it out.

**SPEAKER 4:** Yeah. So, we'll post the link to it that. We'll post the link to the *Believer* website. People can check that out and see what they think. Thanks so much, Megan.

**MEGAN** Yeah, thanks for having me.

**GOODWIN:**

**SPEAKER 4:** And I think there is a theme across the Turkeys, and the sacrifice, and *Believer*. A big thanks to Megan Goodwin, by the way, for joining me for that conversation. But, across all three of these, we see that the religion is up for grabs. That-- to go back to that Smith quote that I played earlier-- that we scholars, look at something and say, that's religion. Or, in the case of Reza Aslan, say, that's a doomsday cult. And there are real repercussions and real things at stake when people claim this or that is or isn't religion-- or is or isn't sacrifice, or is or isn't a turkey ritual.

Thank you, guys, so much for joining us for another episode. And I really hope that you will

recommend the show to other people. Find us on the iTunes store and leave us a comment and a rating that helps people find the show. Put our episodes- post them to your Facebook, post them to your Twitter. Email mass emails to your friends, saying have you checked this podcast out? This is a new venture, and we're hoping to get as many listeners as possible.

You can find us on iTunes-- Study Religion-- or on SoundCloud. And I look forward to talking to you all again sometime soon. Take care.

Hi, I'm Wayne Ingram. I'm a religious studies and accounting major from Birmingham, Alabama. Study Religion is a production of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama. For more information on our department, go to [www.religion.ua.edu](http://www.religion.ua.edu) or find us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/RELatUA](https://www.facebook.com/RELatUA).

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Special thanks to the REL 490 Capstone Seminar, for the show's introduction. Roll tide.

It's not every day you get to interview a cult leader, let alone a doomsday prophet.