

Dr Samah Choudhury:

For so many years and yes, still to an extent today, a central contention of our field has been well, what even is religion? How does this thing differ from culture? Or does it differ from culture at all? Does it have to? And so, these debates about constitution, what makes the thing, are just as present in humor and comedy.

Sierra Eickhorst:

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of a special series of study religion that we are calling Examples. Often in the study of religion, we find ourselves interested in and exploring topics that on the surface level, seem to have no connection to religion. And many people ask us, you're a scholar of religion, why are you studying this? We hope that through Examples, the audience will learn some new things along the way and discover that scholars of religion can find a variety of examples worth studying.

Sierra Eickhorst:

I'm your host, Sierra Eickhorst, and I'm a second year master student in the Religion and Culture Program at the University of Alabama. In this first episode of Examples, I interview Dr Samah Choudhury, an Assistant Professor at Ithaca College in New York. Dr Choudhury was in the first cohort of American Examples in 2019. American Examples is a Henry Luce Foundation funded grant that allows early scholars of religion to investigate larger theoretical questions. The Foundation of American Examples is the Examples approach, which allows scholars to use examples from America, to present analyses about how religion shapes, politics, gender, race, et cetera, without an audience needing extensive background knowledge in American history. For this first episode, I am discussing the concept of comedy with Dr Choudhury and how a scholar of religion can contribute to the conversation. I began my conversation with Dr Choudhury by asking her to introduce herself to us.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So I'm an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, at Ithaca College in New York. My research surrounds American Muslim humor and comedy and the politics that accompany what it means for Muslims to be socially legible in the United States today. So I'm writing a book on how Islam and Muslims are articulated through this medium of standup comedy, the ways that they gain recognition, but also the ways that they are obscured, because of broader understandings and operations of race, gender, and American secularism today.

Sierra Eickhorst:

How, as a scholar of religion, did you get into the study of comedy?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Sure. So there's a few things here. My graduate work was in Islamic studies, but what really lit the fire for me was, how to think about Islam and Muslims through the theorization that were being done in ethnic studies and critical race studies. How these fields account for religion and Muslims, but also what my training from religion might then, in reverse, bring to them. So when I first read Stewart Hall, it was like lightning struck. He has that very famous passage where he said, "I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea that the sugar from the west Indian plantations, the tea from Sri Lanka and India, that these all make up this important symbol of Englishness."

Dr Samah Choudhury:

But as a result of that, that means that Englishness is deeply and unchangeable colonial. That means that there's no English history without this history. And so, that clarified how deeply necessary, indeed how colonized people and religion are at the very center of these things that we call modernity, what we call the secular, despite how much we've been told that, not only is this thing partitioned into the private sphere, excuse me, but that is also where it should be.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And why was it specifically Islam and comedy that you got interested in?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

What was curious for me in this moment, as I was thinking about what to write my dissertation about, was that I noticed that in the span of just a few years, as I was writing or about to begin writing this dissertation, that there were three South Asian Muslim men who were, not necessarily household names, but they had a really prominent and enduring presence, not just in the comedy world, but also in US pop culture. And so, again, as a consumer and a fan of this work, I knew that these men weren't the first Muslim comedians who were performing in the US, not by a long shot. Many of us probably remember in the months and years after 9/11, there were a lot of Maradian Muslim comedy acts and comedy collectives. There was a group called the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Another group called the Allah Made Me Funny group. And so, these men, and they were by and large men, say for some women, but these men were touring across the US. They were touring across the world. They were getting write-ups in the New York Times and in The Post, John Stossel was interviewing them. There's a PBS documentary about them, but it was still really niche comedy. American Muslims might have been familiar with them, but the family living across the street for me probably wasn't. And so, that changes with comedians like Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, and Kumail Nanjiani. These men, as they start working their way up the comedy ladder, it's a really fast ascent that gets endorsed and fast tracked by these multimedia production companies, like Amazon and Netflix and Disney and Apple, beginning around 2015. So, Hasan Minhaj started off on The Daily Show, but then gets this standup special on Netflix called Homecoming King.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

It gets rave reviews. It also leads to a 32 episode order for a news comedy show. This time with Minhaj at the helm, this was called Patriot Act. It premiered in 2017, it ran for six seasons, won Emmy's and Webby awards and another Peabody. Kumail Nanjiani started stand up in the late 2000s, early 2010s, but that spring boarded him into the cast of HBO, their TV show called Silicon Valley. He was on that for about six seasons. And then he writes a screenplay with his wife about the story of their courtship. This catches the attention of Judd Apatow, a big director in Hollywood. It premieres at Sundance in 2017. It gets acquired by Amazon, which was actually one of the biggest deals in the history of the Sundance Festival. Amazon bought it for \$12 million. And then, that movie collected several nominations on the awards circuit in 2017.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

He even got an Oscar nomination for that. And then Aziz Ansari is probably the person most folks are familiar with. He started off on this show called Parks and Rec on NBC, goes to Netflix, creates and stars in this really popular series called Master of None. That gets a lot of awards as well. It wraps a second season in 2017, he gets Emmy's and Peabody's, even a Golden Globe. And then of course, the next year he gets named as a MeToo, #MeToo culprit. And then that becomes a wide ranging debate about whether or not he had committed assault against this woman who brought these charges, or if he had just been on a bad date. So all of this had caught my eye. Why these men? Why this moment? Why is it all happening around the time that a certain reality TV show star was gaining his own brand of popularity by talking openly about Muslim bands and Muslim registries. And that band eventually goes on to win not only the Republican nomination for President, but the presidency itself.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So I knew that there was a relationship here, between all of these things. I could sense that. And so, it was much bigger than just a curiosity about comedians who were just suddenly popular on Netflix and winning Peabody's. It was bigger and more precise than the fact that people like to say these days, representation matters. It was more than just this slogan. There was a political, historical, cultural moment that I really wanted to understand. And I knew that comedy and religion were at the center and the relationship between these two things were at the center. So by centering Muslims and humor in the middle of all this, we're not just getting a better sense of how Muslims take part in pop culture, or part of the American fabric. Sure. What is mostly driving my research, however, is getting a sense of how secularism our ideas about civic responsibilities, these principles that we uphold today, principles like diversity, like representation, how all of this actually allows us to think about race and religion at large, and how they're all actually tied up in regimes of social power that determine access, that determine legibility.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And how have you seen the concept of comedy and the way it's been performed and received, change over time. Could you walk us through a brief history of these conceptions of comedy?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Sure. So when it comes to humor and comedy, there's rarely a static moment. Scholars of humor have looked at the ways that humors actually start off in the way that they're talked about, as a physical constitution of the body, in pre-modern India and Greece. These are things like blood, phlegm, bile. And the idea is that the optimal bodily health of a person is achieved when there's a balance between these fluids, the different combinations inside of the body are what creates then, the manifestations of sickness on the outside of the body. And that's how people determine what people were ill with. But this conception of humor un-mores around the 15th century. It starts to be talked about, actually in very similar ways to models of personhood, models of individualism. These notions start to place an increasing importance on the interiority of people.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

The fact that we have these senses, these senses proliferate, that we can value emotional judgment, intuitive judgment, over just objective criteria or reason. That we have the capacity for feelings associated with sentimentalism, but also with sensibilities. So this translates into a new potential for what elicits laughter among people. Daniel Wickburg talks about how the distance between the object and the subject actually starts to collapse. Whereas laughter used to be about laughing at someone,

non-directive laughter becomes a possibility here. We are able to not just laugh at a person. Now, there is a positive social value placed upon the capacity to be able to laugh at yourself too. And there's room to recognize incongruity, but with sympathy. Not just with a directiveness, where you are able to notice a dissonance between both subject and object. And that's what enables this different form of humor that we see in standup comedy so often. Jokes about yourself that are inviting the audience to not just laugh at the comedian, but laugh at their joke, laugh with them.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And where did standup comedy come into the picture?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So standup comedy itself is often described as a distinctly American art form. It speaks truth to power. This is where the comedian is the intrepid cultural anthropologist on stage. They observe things about us that we wouldn't even notice about ourselves and make them funny. And it's a medium that has found a home across the world, but in the United States it emerges in the early 20th century. And it actually gains steam with Jewish comedians. Comedians who are performing in what gets called the Borscht Belt. They're performing in the Catskills mountain hotels, in the '50s and '60s. And that's how we get comedians like Lenny Bruce, Carl Rainer, Mel Brooks, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, all of them are creating acts that are responding to this moment in time, where there's shifting sensibilities about issues like public morality and politics, as the United States is coming off of the second world war. And as they're moving out of cities and into the suburbs.

Sierra Eikhorst:

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how different aspects of identity play a role in comedy, aspects such as race and gender, and then ultimately religion?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

That way black comedians, like Richard Pryor are also really exemplary of the transformative social possibilities that are enabled by standup. The content of his shows were cracking open the chasms between the visions that white Americans told themselves and the realities that black Americans were living through, throughout the '70s and the '80s. And so, he was doing the packed halls of black audiences, yes. But also white audiences, and most of whom were all well to-do types. Women comedians too, take on issues of social justice and gender, but even in the comedy world, which is not some gender neutral meritocracy, there remains a need for women comedians to perform their marginality by performing a certain type of femaleness on stage. So often their comedy will capitalize on gendered differences and disparities by calling attention actually, to their womanness, their femaleness, or any type of subordinate status that comes with that.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Joanne Gilbert has said that they have to project enough power to take control of their audiences, but also at the same time, project a vulnerability that allows them to be read as nonthreatening. And so, the introduction of Muslim comedians to this milieu takes on all of these types of issues, religion, race, gender, because there's so many presumptions of the dearth of humor among Muslims to begin with. Looking at the ways that Muslim comedians then, construct their comedy to speak to these issues. Even if they're not challenging these hegemonies or merely pointing them out. Sometimes they even

outrightly champion them. That allows me, as a researcher, to think about the power at play more broadly here.

Sierra Eikhorst:

You mentioned the beginnings of Jewish standup comedy in the early 21st century. And I'm interested to know if that comedy was primarily designed to be performed intra-religiously, performed by Jewish comedians for a Jewish audience, or if it was designed to be received by a large audience and a wide array of people.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So it's mixed. It begins with comedians performing to communities that look like them, or communities that they themselves come from. But there is an appetite for this new art form that brings in the broader American populace, a broader cross section of the American populace. So quickly, these halls start to get filled up with white audiences in particular, those that have the expendable income to spend a Friday night, listening to a performer.

Sierra Eikhorst:

In your particular research, what do you primarily look at?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So Hannah Gatsby in her comedy special, *Nanette*, she has this really great line. She says that artists don't create the zeitgeist. They respond to it. And so, that's what I'm looking at here is, both the construction and communication of comedy by Muslim comedians, but also what they are communicating to the world. And who wants those notions communicated? Is it just the comedian or are there other forces at play here? And so, these men are responding to decades of entrenched Islamophobia, Islamophobia that they've been subject to, whether they call themselves Muslim or not, or refer to themselves as Muslim or not. So there's a desire to speak the truth and the dignity of their experiences in a way that actively disproves these presumptions about Muslim stoicism and general un-funness, but at the same time, for all of that to be socially legible in the United States and what we might call a regime of humor, they also have to perform Islam and their Muslimness in a really specific way. So I'm trying to look at actually, all of what you've mentioned here.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And you mentioned this term regime of humor. Could you expand on what you mean when you say that?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Yeah, sure. So humor is a contested category. It means that there's power dynamics inherent in this construction. The fact that it can be weaponized is this idea of, "Why are you so offended? Stop being offended, just take a joke." That in itself is a violence. And so, when it's levied against women for not being cool about the rape jokes that someone is making, or when Dave Chappelle chose to walk away from Chappelle's Show on Comedy Central in 2005. When the Danish Cartoon Controversy that same year happened and the protests that Muslims levied about those images of the Prophet Mohammad took place. All of this speaks to those dynamics. So when I say regime of humor, I'm actually using a term coined by Ghislendi Coopers who refers to this as a systematized control, a dispersive control over

jokes over who can joke about what, about what topics can be joked about, where some topics end up being entirely off limits, but then also some subjects.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

And in here this case, I'm thinking about Muslims in particular, that some subjects have to demonstrate their ability to take the joke. They have to endure that caricature, often at their own expense and with very limited room to respond to that caricature as well. So the centrality of a sense of humor here, actually allows us to see how limited the capacity for agency is for a lot of Muslims in the 21st century, in places like the United States, but also in Europe.

Sierra Eikhorst:

So often in religious studies, we hear this debate about what gets to count as religion. What is religion? What isn't religion? Could you tell us how that translates over into comedy? How does a person get to decide what counts as comedic and what doesn't?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Right. So the fact that scholars of religion think about this as a contested category, means that we know that these boundaries are porous, they're difficult to pin down. But at the same time, there's always efforts to police these boundaries as being stark and unmoving. Scholars of religion do this, scholars of humor and comedy do this as well. Where we have people who say, "Well, this isn't exactly this one thing. It can be different for different people." And then, other are people saying, "No, this is what it is." So we get then stalwarts of the standup comedy world. People like Jerry Seinfeld who are participating in this kind of discourse.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Jerry Seinfeld has bemoaned what he calls, the recent turn towards vocally making room for women comics or comics of color. And he's asked, he's like, "Is this supposed to be the census?" No, to me, he says that all that matters is what's funny. If you're funny, I'm interested. If you're not, I'm not. And so, that notion that this industry, comedy, standup comedy is based on meritocracy, that it's the funniest people who always make it to the top. It implies that there is something instinctive and universal about what makes something comedic in the first place and what doesn't.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And when it comes to your particular research, how are you making that decision? How are you deciding what's going to count as comedy and what's not?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

And so, when determining what counts as comedy for me, I am taking the lead of my interlocutors here. So the majority of the archive that I'm working with, yes, is the classical standup special, where there's someone standing on stage, in front of an audience with a microphone in their hand, but I'm also looking at these men's armchair interviews on late night talk shows. I look at a piece like Homecoming King, which is a storytelling performance, that is funny, yeah. But it's also deeply autobiographical of Hasan Minhaj's life and the traumas that he's endured. And so for me, I'm mostly trying to follow the levity, but even that isn't enough to say definitively, as what counts as comedy and what doesn't.

Sierra Eikhorst:

So why is comedy something that a scholar of religion would be interested in studying?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Sure. So I think for the same reasons that so many people are curious about systems of religion to begin with. For so many years and yes, still to an extent today, a central contention of our field has been well, what even is religion? How does this thing differ from culture? Or does it differ from culture at all? Does it have to? And so, these debates about constitution, what makes the thing are just as present in humor and comedy. And what's more, the way that we evaluate both of these phenomena actually reveal a lot about the other. And so by that, I mean, how is it that humor is something that we assume, like we talked about before, is just universal, that we recognize a joke, that we know that the funniest people are the ones who will get the job.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

And if you're not funny, you won't get it. Why do we think that humor is something that every good modern person should possess? Why is it something that we look for in college applications? Why is it something that we look for on dating apps? When we want to find someone who just has a sense of humor? How have we assumed that this is what the most ideal person is, that they have this characteristic? In the same ways that religion gets constructed as an interiority of the self, humor is bound up in that as well. And questions of modernity, pervade both of these. So I think for that reason alone, a scholar of religion has a lot to mine from the field of comedy and humor studies.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And have you seen comedy as a way to distinguish insiders from outsiders?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Yeah, absolutely. I've definitely seen comedy being levied in this way. It's apparent even in the types of jokes that the three Muslim comedians that I'm studying, write their jokes and perform. Some of them do it a little bit more than others. Hasan Minhaj, for example, has a variety of jokes in his special, Homecoming King and in a show Patriot Act, where the minutia of the center of his joke is so particular to the experiences of suburban South Asian kids growing up in the suburbs who are middle class, that I wonder, if it doesn't land with the majority of your audience, is it a joke worth making.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Usually that's what the comedian is aiming for, right? To get everyone to laugh. And in these cases, Minhaj is departing from that a little bit, writing jokes that are... You could call them, for us, by us type jokes. And so, in that way, I think these men are also pushing these boundaries of legibility too, where these jokes might make them illegible in a way, if your standard white male audience member doesn't get the joke, is it going to continue to afford you the platform that you have? These men are taking a chance by departing from that model.

Sierra Eikhorst:

Could you give me a brief overview of your specific research?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Sure. So one of the main arguments that I make in my book is that, humor and it's embodied performance through this medium of standup comedy is actually a central pillar of what we call the secular modern. So my research is looking at the ways that Muslims are constructed through this medium of humor in the US. And of course, people ask why humor? But we ask this question while already knowing the answer. There's already this implicit recognition of an association between Muslims and humor, perhaps actually the fact that it's less a relationship between them and more a relationship between Muslims and a lack of humor. And so that relationship, especially in the last 40 some years, is something that feels and has actually been made to feel very natural. That Muslims are stoic. They're unfriendly, they're stubborn. They're quick to fly off the handle when you may have offended them.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

They just can't take a joke. And so, there's global flashpoints in our recent history that undergird this assumption. We have what gets dubbed the Salman Rushdie Affair in the '90s, the Danish Cartoon Controversy in 2005, the Charlie Hebdo shooting in 2015. And so, the social debates that surrounded these events boiled down to two really persistent questions each time, which is, why can't Muslims take a joke? And then immediately on the heels of that, is Islam compatible then, with modernity? And so, there have been scholars who take up this question. Some of them have argued that no, you just need to look at the earliest episodes of Islamic history for proof of Muslim humor. Look at the Prophet Muhammad, look at the Quran.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

And then there's others who point to the more contemporary emergence of Muslim comedians after 9/11, especially at a time when laughter, levity becomes a symbol of American freedom. It's a value of American democracy, in opposition to the "Enemies." And so, what I'm trying to articulate in my work is the how and the why. So how and why have humor, and here, I mean the ability to joke, to take a joke, how has that become a defacto principle of modernity? How has it become this admirable personality trait of a modern person? Because I think without understanding how humor and modernity have actually come to stand in for one another, what roles, gender, race, religion have played in that development?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

I think our discourse and our scholarship are really doomed to continue returning to these same, persistent and really tired premises, where Islam gets pitted against modernity. And we don't get beyond that. There's no greater comprehension as to why this premise is naturally assumed at the outset. So by centering humor, the idea of a sense of humor, we're able to see how minoritized Muslim subjects seize upon this notion, how they embody it, in order to then, find social legibility in the places that they live, like the United States.

Sierra Eikhurst:

I'm thinking about how, so often people will use laughter and comedy and humor as a way to work through and cope with different forms of trauma. And so, looking specifically at your research and the work that you do, 9/11 comes to mind and how traumatic of an event that was for Muslims living in America, who became further minoritized. Have you seen with the specific men that you look at in your research, have you seen them use comedy as an avenue to work through and discuss that trauma?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Yeah, absolutely. I think this is a really common phenomenon. It's a reappropriation in this case for Muslims, since humor taking a joke, as we've mentioned, has very much been weaponized against Muslims. And so, I think they're doing both. They're not only reappropriating this medium of humor, this affability, this affect of humor. They're also able to use it to speak to the truth of their experiences. And in this case, it actually reveals something really interesting for me, which is that their experiences of Islam are very racialized. Islam is not this private belief that you hold in your heart, but for them, it has been something that is read-off of their bodies and has actually opened them up to Islamophobia in a way that's simply believing "In Islam" doesn't necessarily, because that's not something you can just read off of people. So the ways that religion and race are getting muddled here, I think is really effective for, or at least it's an effective way to think about the trauma that you've mentioned here, as it comes out through the muddling of these categories.

Sierra Eikhorst:

In your chapter in *American Examples*, titled *What Makes Humor Muslim*, you talk about three specific Muslim comedians and you describe their humor as, "A mode of secular discourse." What do you mean when you use that phrase?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Yeah, sure. So I'm saying basically that, humor is not just some universal category of communication, that in fact it is a mode, a way of speaking the secular, speaking it and embodying it. And when they do that, they're demonstrating their fitness for secularity, despite the otherwise gendered and racialized meanings that are emanating off of their bodies by performing humor through standup comedy. They're performing the secular. So the ways that Muslims are spoken of, the ways that they're imagined, it's very much become muddled with this language of racecraft, that's very much the case with these three comedians. And a lot of that has come out of the rampant anti-Muslim hostility that we've seen in the US. And the fact that there's a need to then, counter that hostility. In the academy, we've seen that, certainly, but we also see that through social justice activism.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So I'm arguing that this has resulted in the use of racial nomenclature as the primary frame through which to then, understand Muslim identity. And the racial nomenclature, by virtue of not being "Religious", secularizes it. It allows them then to eclipse that religious identity religious difference, it allows them to "Fit again", quite well into these secular structures and the order of multiculturalism of diversity. So racialization is key here. It's fomented by what I'm calling a progressive consensus of recognition, which is very much part of a century's long transnational history of labor practices and empire, but it's been acutely impelled in the last several years by, I think these populist responses to the 2016 US Presidential Election, where yes, we saw flagrant calls for further institutionalizing, anti-Muslim hostilities into federal public policies.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

So this master category of race then, it gets raised throughout these discourse to understand and combat anti-Muslim hostility. But it also leaves the question of how to understand and categorize religion in its wake. So that's where I'm jumping off on this point of the secular. When religion seizes maintain a connection to the material, to the body. I think we can't understand it fully, when we operate with religion as a non-material category. If we think about it in terms of interiority of individual belief, we end up with a very limited range of possibility for how religion exists in the world.

Sierra Eikhorst:

You also wrote in your chapter that, "This loyalty is demonstrated by keeping particular cultural discourses intact, American exceptionalism, capitalist pursuits, aspects of gender and racial hierarchies that preserve the desirability and prestige of white women." I'm interested in hearing more about these specific discourses, their presence in comedy and the ways that they tie into your research.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Definitely. So like I said, these men are frequently speaking the truth of their experiences of being Muslim in the United States. But that experience has been colored by the fact that they are read physically as Muslim. That Islam is not treated as a belief system that they hold inside of themselves, that they ascend to with their minds and their hearts, but it's something that gets read off of their skin. And so, in that way, they can speak the truth of that experience, but to sanctify that experience, to legitimate that experience, they also maintain certain hegemonic discourses. So they push the envelope in one direction by keeping everything else in place. In this case, I've named things like American Exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is the best place to be a Muslim, because you are most free to practice your religion as you wish.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

These are things that Hasan Minhaj has mentioned in his standup, that he talks about in his White House correspondent dinner speech, that free speech is something that he has access to, that he appreciates. And the fact that Donald Trump didn't attend that dinner means that he doesn't have an appreciation for this kind of thing. I've mentioned capitalist pursuits, aspects of gender and racial hierarchies. The rest of the book goes into a lot of detail about this, but the ways that Islam gets racialized is that, it gets racialized as something brown.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

In a way, that means that black Muslims, in particular, are read out of the category of Islam, that they are instead overdetermined to be black and only black, as opposed to also being able to be a part of this category of Muslim. And these men maintain that category, they really step into the role as an emblematic Muslim, indicating that the Muslim is a brown figure. And the fact that it's three men, three South Asian men, whom we now think of when we think of Muslims in US pop culture, further ingratiates that assumption. And then, all three men also think and write and talk about white women a lot.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

They are the center of Master of None. Aziz Ansari's show in both seasons, he's pursuing a white woman. That's the central character arc for his character Hasan Minhaj's Homecoming King is about not being able to go to homecoming or prom, I believe with this white woman named Bethany, because her parents wouldn't allow her to go with somebody like Hasan. And then, Kumail Nanjiani gets this Oscar nomination for a movie about the story of his marriage, which is to a white woman and the difficulties of getting his brown Pakistani Muslim parents to accept this union. They all center white women at the center of their stories as objects of sexual desire, which I think is communicating something very particular to their audiences. It maintains women, it preserves their desirability, it makes them legible, because that is a desirability that has been made to be a universal desire.

Sierra Eikhorst:

And it's been a few years since you wrote your chapter for American Examples. Has your research expanded or changed since then? And if so, in what ways?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Absolutely. So this was actually the first thing that I wrote for my dissertation. It's hard to think back, because it's been through so many iterations since then, but now there is an entire book ending this chapter that appears in the American Examples volume, where I'm able to go into a little bit more detail about the ways that humor is studied, the way it's typically been studied, what interventions I'm making and the ways that we think and universalize about humor. How that gets caught up in racialized and gendered categories as well, and ways of thinking. And then of course, actually diving into the archive of examining and doing a critical content analysis of the comedy of these men. So the project has expanded and I'm really excited for it to be out in the world hopefully soon.

Sierra Eikhurst:

So what's the takeaway? Why is comedy something that should be studied or what makes comedy something worth being studied and what can a scholar of religion add to the discussion?

Dr Samah Choudhury:

Yeah, absolutely. I think the fact that we scholars of religion, are trained to think about meaning making in all of its formations, to think about how people orient themselves towards that meaning in ways that are embodied and ritualistic, but also textual. How people come to understand and create the shoulds of the world. We should be in this way, the right way to live the right way to be. That means that we can take those understandings and see how those forms of meaning making are actually present across cultural productions.

Dr Samah Choudhury:

And that comedy, the joy that comedy brings out in us is also a part of the meaning that we make for ourselves and how we understand ourselves, in relation to these much bigger questions too. So how we think we should be. In this case, we should be able to be humorous and light, while we maintain the ability and the capacity for gravity and for solemnness, makes us, "Well rounded". So I think without studying, if we don't study these lighter aspects of being, we have an incomplete picture of meaning making in general. And so, it's incumbent actually, on scholars of religion to take seriously things, like comedy and humor.

Sierra Eikhurst:

Examples is an American Examples production in the Department of Religious Studies, at the University of Alabama, with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. This episode was produced by Sierra Eikhurst. Special thanks to Dr Samah Choudhury and Dr Michael Alman. You can learn more about American Examples at americanexamples.ua.edu. You can follow the Department of Religious Studies on Twitter and Instagram with the handle @StudyReligion, or on Facebook, at facebook.com/relua. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to our podcast on SoundCloud, Spotify, or Apple Podcast and give us a rating and review. Okay. Testing 1, 2, 3 testing. Woohoo. Oh, ah, what was... Okay. Something fell.