

KAREN FOLEY: The Arts Hub was an online interactive event. And you're about to watch a session from that. But I wanted to explain to you how it all worked. You're about to see the video stream of the studio, but our audience participated online through chat and through interactive widgets. And those ideas were fed through into the studio from the social media desk. Of course, because you're watching it on catch up, you won't be able to do those activities. But I do hope you enjoy the discussion that follows.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, and welcome back to the Arts Hub. In this session, we're going to be talking all about religious studies, which I'm really looking forward to. But first, I'd like to thank Owen Jones, who has sent us in a suggestion for our caption competition to win 10 pounds of Amazon purchase. And if we could just have a look at the picture. We selected one from our range. You can have a go at any, but the one we're focusing on right now is this one here that you will see. And he says "when you confidently click on the final link in the week's materials to find a 25-page reading."

Yes, again, very similar feeling of horror. Yeah, I can completely get that. Good one, Owen. That's a very nice one.

So don't forget, if you'd like to have a go at our caption competition, you can send us that by email, you can text us-- sorry, not text us-- you can send us a tweet, or you can use our chat in the chat box facility.

HJ and Rachel, how's it all going there?

HJ: It's going really well. We've thoroughly enjoyed having our clavichord performance. And we're just having--

KAREN FOLEY: Something fell off your board.

RACHEL: Oh, no.

KAREN FOLEY: I've see you've been putting things on there.

HJ: Yes, I know.

KAREN FOLEY: What have you been putting on your board?

HJ: Well, people have been telling us what they're studying. So we've been putting it up on the board, all these interesting modules. So we have people doing Classical Studies, just at level two. Someone's doing master's in Classical Studies as well. Got language and creativity module. And I think it's really nice that some people, they've done their BA open. So they're choosing all different types of modules, including arts ones, to go in.

RACHEL: With the MA in Classical Studies, they also did their BA in history as well. I think that was at the OU. So I'd like to know in the chat what it's like going through undergrad and postgrad at the OU, especially within the arts faculty. That'll generate some discussion, I think.

HJ: We're also looking at where everyone is. So we've got a little widget to the left. We want to know where you hailing from. We've got an international viewer from somewhere in Europe. So we'd love to know where you're chilling out. It's probably lovely and sunny.

RACHEL: We put an arrow on the map as well.

HJ: Yes, I know. We got a little arrow here pointing toward Europe.

RACHEL: Somewhere.

HJ: Somewhere in Europe you are.

[BELL]

RACHEL: Oh.

HJ: Oh, I nearly forgot. We have a notification ding, don't we, for our in-box. Have a little look. There's always some lovely stuff in here. But we've got a-- let's have a look here.

So we've got a-- this one is quite little. So we hope you can see it. Natalie Dickson is a-- oh, she sent us a view from the OU Scotland office.

**KAREN FOLEY
AND RACHEL
(TOGETHER):**

Aw.

HJ: So that's lovely. So it doesn't look too sunny up there, though, does it? But, no, a bit like

Wales, isn't it, the weather? It can be so temperamental.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, now.

[LAUGHTER]

RACHEL: Well, you can stay indoors and watch this whole event. So that's perfect, isn't it?

HJ: Oh, yes. That's definitely perfect. Well, even if it's sunny, we'd hope you would stay indoors and watch the event, of course.

RACHEL: Yeah, well, take the laptop outside, but watch the event.

HJ: Yes, definitely.

RACHEL: We've also got our lovely Karen from the sofa. She's got rollers in. She's going to hate me for this.

KAREN FOLEY: Who put that in there? I was just doing a position.

[LAUGHTER]

RACHEL: But lots of glamour. So we do have one of these in the studio. But definitely, again, send in your selfies at artshub16 or studenthub@open.ac.uk. I see some lovely smiley faces and some more places.

HJ: Yes. It's lovely to see where you're from.

RACHEL: Faces and places.

HJ: Faces and places.

RACHEL: We're getting arty, aren't we?

HJ: Oh, yes. We're getting into the groove of this one.

KAREN FOLEY: Right. Now, now. Back to sensible matters, I think.

Well, thank you for joining me today. I'm joined by Graham, John, and Paul. John, you're the director, even, for religious studies. And I asked what you were interested in apart from that. And you said you were interested in football. And, in fact, you follow Manchester United.

JOHN: I do, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, we're going to find out what that's got to do with religion a bit later. And then, Graham, you're the head of department.

GRAHAM: I am.

KAREN FOLEY: And you prefer gardening to football, which I think is very sensible.

GRAHAM: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: And Paul, you're a senior lecturer. And you prefer science fiction to both football and gardening.

PAUL: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Unless we're talking gravity-free football. What's that all about?

PAUL: That was just the what would football be like in space.

KAREN FOLEY: All right. OK. Fair enough. I don't know. I imagine a lot better.

OK, so here in this session, we're going to be talking specifically about religious studies. And we're going to be talking about the level 2 module and also more generally how we teach religion and how we study it.

So I wanted to start by thinking about what religion is because you both brought things. And, I know, Paul, I mean, we've got some "Star Wars" things up here before. This whole idea of what religion actually is. So how do we set those parameters then? What's the current thinking on it all?

GRAHAM: OK, big question that we spend most of our lives doing, as well as introducing--

KAREN FOLEY: Only got five minutes.

[LAUGHTER]

GRAHAM: So for some people, the first question is always, what do you believe? But we keep wanting to ask questions about what people do. So not what does this religion teach in terms of ideas and so on, but what do people eat? What do they not eat? How do they dress? How do they not

dress? And so on. So these kind of relational questions around what people do in everyday lives as well as in these big ceremonies people get involved in.

JOHN: We've actually brought in some objects that--

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Because I have a cabinet of curiosity here.

JOHN: Great.

KAREN FOLEY: So we're very into our objects. But the ones you brought in don't seem quite compliant with my wonderful artistic setup here. So tell us what you've brought in for your objects.

JOHN: Well, my first object-- I mean, I guess it's something that might seem quite obviously religious. It's a Christian Bible. And often, as Graham was saying, when people think about what religion is, they tend to think about belief. And you might look at this object and think of it mainly in terms of the meanings and the beliefs and the ideas that people draw from it.

But also, you could think of it as a performative object. It's something that's read in public. It's something that is memorised, perhaps. It's something that is dramatised in films, in all kinds of artistic works. But it's also just a material object and something that is used in all kinds of ritual activities. So there are lots of different ways in which you could think about this as being significant religiously, just this one object.

My second object-- I'll put that there-- is I thought this was particularly appropriate given the European championship is going to start tonight. And I guess this object prompts me to think, is football religion? And I think there are some striking commonalities because with football, it's about people coming together.

You might call it a kind of secular ritual. It has its own kind of coordinated material culture, people wearing stuff like this. And also you see displays a real passion and devotion. So, I mean, I guess this prompts me to ask where does the boundaries of religion and not religion-- where are those boundaries?

PAUL: Graham?

GRAHAM: So I got another object that also tests boundaries. So this is a copy of a statuette of a goddess from-- it says on the label. It says this is an idol from Mycenae the 13th century BC. So there are all kinds of issues around that, I mean, why somebody has decided to call this an idol

rather than a statute. For some people, idol suggests a bad thing, a false thing. For others, you call it an image or a statue or just a goddess. So she is a goddess. Identifying it by a date in the Christian calendar rather than any other is also kind of interesting.

But, for me, what's more interesting is that I bought this on the island of Rhodes, not in the Mycenaen locations, but as a tourist souvenir. So it's a replica. It's a copy.

But for some people, even though it's a copy made recently, it or she is still the goddess or a goddess who could be venerated. She could be put on a shelf, on an altar and spoken to, addressed in various ways.

So there's questions around, can you make a copy of something that is not the real thing, not authentic? Or is every copy still the real thing? Is this still the goddess even though she's made for tourists? So, yeah. So this quite nice too.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Can we put that on our shelf? Cabinet of curiosities.

GRAHAM: She's a nice bird goddess.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. I'll put that there for the moment. And then we will position her appropriately in a moment. What have you got, Paul?

PAUL: I brought this. It's a Star Wars T-shirt. And you can see the light sabre being held up. And it says "May the force be with you."

So this is another piece of material culture. And I guess the sentence "may the force be with you," this idea of the force is a central theme in the Star Wars movies, the Star Wars franchise. And it's that idea probably plugging into various notions we have to do with maybe mystical knights or samurai or zen, or, indeed, animism of the idea of this force that pervades the universe, a natural force that people can plug into.

One of the interesting things in Star Wars is how the force actually plays out. Some people seem to be-- sorry, at some points in the film, the force is available for anybody to use. At other points in the films, the force seems to be only available to people with a certain genetic code. So there's all sorts of issues around the force and elitism and the ordinariness of things.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. These are really interesting objects because you're introducing this idea of religion and what is religion, which we don't have a, I guess, definitive answer to. But what's really

coming across is that so much of this is sociological. It's all about the culture. It's about how things are used. It's about the various ways in which these forms can have different meanings for different people.

So I wanted to talk a little bit about how you're actually studying religion. And I guess the reason I wanted to do this was for students who are doing religious studies, you can see quite clearly the key skills that would be useful. But in terms of what we actually go and do with religion, you three have a very diverse range of research interests. And you're all doing different things. So I wanted to talk about how you're actually doing religion.

So John, can I start with you because you've really been looking at the historical role.

JOHN:

Yeah, I'm a historian of religion. So I'm not interested in origins or the early history of Christianity. I'm actually interested in 20th century history. And, I guess, when I study religion, I'm trying to understand how religious people, how religious institutions have acted and why they've behaved in certain ways, and how they've shaped and been shaped by culture and society.

So for me, studying religion is about engaging with prime resources. It could be correspondence. It could be other cultural products like newspapers, pamphlets. But also, because I work on quite contemporary history, I'm actually able to interview my subjects, people who remember certain events or places or experiences, and to talk to them. And so when I'm studying, I guess I'm trying to draw from this rich range of primary sources to try to understand the past and the significance of religion in the past.

KAREN FOLEY:

Whereas, Paul, you approach it from a very different perspective, don't you?

PAUL:

Well, my training is anthropological, qualitative, sociological. So my research has recently been about protest camps. It started with the Occupy camp outside St. Paul's. And there was an obvious question that the camp was asking. It was situated right in between St. Paul's Cathedral representing the idea of the parish and the moral community on the one hand. And on the other side was the stock exchange, which seemed to be very much an amoral institution.

And so I started getting interested in how the camps made possible other kinds of experiences, experiences that we don't normally associate with the secular city experiences of collective participation, almost ritual type events. So that's the way my research is going

currently.

KAREN FOLEY: And this overlaps a little bit with what you're doing.

GRAHAM: Yeah, so my research is also around contemporary religions but mostly with indigenous people. So at the moment, my major project is spending time at a Sami organised festival in Arctic Norway. So I go and hang out at a festival and try to remember that I'm working and I'm observing and watching people doing things.

And I'm seeing how what happens on the stages or in other performance spaces sometimes moves from being what we might call just entertainment to being a ritual, being something that catches people up and changes their lives in some other ways, and then a break from everyday life, does different things. So it's a place where a lot of different indigenous communities come together and share their perspectives, their understanding of the world, their way of being in the world. And I'm just trying to understand those shifts backwards and forwards from performance, ritual, and the practises of every day and high moments of real ritual drama.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Interesting. And what's really interesting as well is that whilst you both are studying-- not both, all of you are studying-- very different areas. The range of methods that you use is actually also very diverse as well. And I wanted to ask next why we should actually study religion. So what is the point of studying it? And what's the point of studying religion as religion as opposed to-- we've mentioned anthropology, sociology, and all these various other things that are informing it in the background. In terms of religion, then, why would you say it's important to study it? John, do you want to take that?

[LAUGHTER]

JOHN: Well, I mean, that's a big question. Religion is not going away. It is a really significant aspect of human culture. It's implicated in all kinds of things-- in wider social issues, in politics. And most people probably in the world today are religious in some way.

So if you want to understand human culture, if you want to understand and engage with social and political issues, then it's really important to understand, to be religiously literate, to understand how people think and act religiously.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely. Thank you. I do want to cover briefly, because we are getting short on time, the module A217. And I wanted to give our audience a flavour of what's in it, how we structure the

module, and a little bit about how it's assessed so that students might know what to expect because a lot of students out there aren't quite sure what course they're going to be looking at next. So A217, then, I mean, Graham, can you talk us through what's in the module? How's it structured?

GRAHAM: OK. So I've brought one of the study guides for A217, which is called "Introducing Religions." So this is our main second-level module. Basically it's divided into six parts, each related to six of the most well-known religions in the world, so-- it doesn't really matter about the order-- Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and Hinduism.

But we're not just trying to convey a series of facts or key moments or ideas about the founders and the texts and the beliefs of these religions. We want to get a rich sense of what people do, how they live those religions, but also how issues in the world impact those people and everybody else, how they are impacted by politics, by gender issues. So everyday life issues as well again as official institutional things.

So we look at texts. We look at the practitioners. And we do a range of different things to do with-- for example, in the Judaism section, we talk about food rules and where people eat and what they eat and what they don't eat and so on.

So it's assessed with six TMAs, one related to each of these religions. In each year, we reorder the things a bit differently so that there's a range of different possibilities. And at the end of the module, there's an exam. Does that cover--

KAREN FOLEY: That's absolutely perfect. No, that gives a really-- so what sort of things are included, then, in the assessments? Are they varied? Or, you've mentioned that one of them will relate broadly to each various religion. How do they work? Is there a variety? Are they all essay-based?

GRAHAM: Yes, they're essay-based. There are slightly different versions.

KAREN FOLEY: So people will be developing different skills along the way, but a lot of it is about writing and, I guess, taking those concepts and ideas in a written form as opposed to looking at artefacts and various other things.

GRAHAM: Yes, so one of the things will be about a text, and another will be about a practise, looking at a range of different possibilities and trying to think-- so we think of questions that could be addressed to one religion, we ask about another religion, how they do things differently.

KAREN FOLEY: And you also get films. So you can meet people who practise different religions, don't you?

GRAHAM: Yeah, the module's very rich with films. Some of them are interviews. And some of them are watching people performing or observing religious practises. So we go with them to mosques and temples and churches and so on. And we see what happens there. And, as you say, we interview people. So it's as good as we can get in terms of taking people on location.

KAREN FOLEY: On that journey.

GRAHAM: And see religion happening.

KAREN FOLEY: I'd like to ask you, Paul and John, what do you think students would most enjoy from this module, in particular, and also about religious studies? What's your experience that students think, oh, the best thing about, I guess, studying this or doing religious studies is? What would be some of the things that they might say?

JOHN: Students come to religious studies maybe from a religious background, maybe from a non-religious background. And having really being able to engage with a whole range of different ways of understanding and being and living in the world, and often ways that will be quite unfamiliar, but fascinating.

KAREN FOLEY: What was your take on it be?

PAUL: Yeah, I think quite similar. They get to explore different kinds of ideas. They get to explore difference, actually. But they also, I think, get to see the world in slightly new ways. And I think that journey, that exploration can help make sense of a range of contemporary issues-- politics, economics, as John was saying earlier.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Would you like to add anything to that?

GRAHAM: I think there's a sense that for some people, they come thinking that they know either their religion or they know a dominant religion where they come from. And then we open up possibilities saying things very differently. And I think that grabs people so that they go away quite inspired to go on and look at other religions, too.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, thank you both-- all-- so much. I keep saying both. I don't know why I'm doing that today. Thank you all very much, Graham, John, and Paul, for coming along today and talking about religious studies and this module in particular.

Our next video break is going to feature our very own Paul. So we're going to show you some video this time, which should be about six minutes or so. And then we'll be back after those. So grab a cup of tea.

Don't forget, if you've got any questions, to email them to us or put them in the chat box. studenthub@open.ac.uk. Also, send us your photos, your selfies, all your study buddies, so we can put those on the board so we can get a sense of our wonderful community out there. Grab a cup of tea, and we'll see you back in about six minutes or so.

[MUSIC PLAYING]