[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, in this session we have another academic discussion about some very topical things that I'm sure you'll have an opinion on. We're going to be talking about religion and politics.

But fear not, because I have Paul-Francois Tremlett from the Department of Religious Studies. And what I've noticed about religious studies is that you very seldom talk about religion. You'll often, in fact, talk about anything other than religion.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: We're always talking about religion and something-- religion and society, religion and politics, religion and culture, religion in nature.

KAREN: It's the most interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary subject, I think, going at this point. So we've got a couple of widgets on the screen-- only a couple this time. Have you ever attended a protest event? And have you ever been to a festival? There are also a few demographic informations that we'd like to know as well. So have you been to an event before? Which level are you studying? Et cetera.

So do fill those in, if you are just joining us. You can select the widget that applies. Click on the one that is most suitable for you. And then you'll not only be able to see everybody else's results, but you'll also have submitted your data.

If you're in the watch only, you can reconnect with the Watch and Engage by going back to the Student Hub Live web site, studenthublive.kmi.open.ac.uk. Select Watch and Engage, and just sign in with your student details. And you'll be able to connect with that screen.

Now Paul, you've been doing a really interesting project-- Reassembling Democracy.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Say more about that, yeah?

KAREN: Yes. How is that going? That seems huge.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: So funded by the Norwegian Research Council. Myself and Graham Harvey is also in the religious studies department here at the OU. We're the two OU partners in this project. But the

project is led from Norway.

And it's an international project. There are lots of people in it from Canada, from the USA, from France, from Norway, obviously, and us. And Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as a Cultural Resource, there's lots of different strands to the research, different people are doing different things.

There's a colleague, Sarah Pike in the United States. She's been looking at eco protests. My colleague here Graham has been looking at Arctic indigenous peoples, and festivals. And Norwegian partners have been doing things from pilgrimage to the spontaneous commemorations that took place after the Anders Breivik terrorist attack in Oslo. I think that was 2013.

KAREN: So there's so many different strands of all of this. But what's holding it together?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Ritual is what's holding it together, spontaneous assemblies of people coming together, whether to protest, whether it be to commemorate and morn or remember, whether it's to celebrate something. These kinds of assemblies, and the kinds of things that take place, the kind of factors, bringing people together.

But also the kinds of things that are happening in these assemblies. Why do people spontaneously congregate? What are the kinds of things they do? And what are the effects-- effects and affects-- of their coming together off their assemblies.

KAREN: So we have asked people have they have attended a protest event, and have they ever attended a festival. These were quite interesting, because when I looked at them, I thought I can say whether I've been to a festival. That's quite clear. But I haven't advertently been to a few protest events, or been beside them. And please do vote for those. The results are coming in. And you'll see how polarised they are if you vote on them.

But what categorises someone as having attended a protest event? Do you need to be protesting, or can you be with a friend? How political do you have to be considered in that event?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Well I'm not sure if there's a straightforward answer to that question. I mean, I think, for example, on Monday I went to a protest in Nottingham. It was about the Trump and the Muslim ban thing. And it was there about why has he done this, and is it right? Is it wrong?

And I felt that I was part of that protest.

But I've been to comparable events where I've stood on the fringes as a researcher. And then my participation is different. My engagement with what's around me is different.

And I'm sure we've all had experiences-- maybe being in the edge of football fans pouring into a match, or pouring out of a match-- where we're connected with a crowd, an assembly of people who've come together to do something together. And sometimes that can be quite exhilarating. Sometimes it can be quite frightening. And because you're caught up in a crowd emotion, which can be quite overpowering. And these are interesting occasions, how we react to them, how we respond to them-- not just cognitively in terms of I believe this, or I believe that, but physically as well.

KAREN: So what do you expect in the results of this poll to be before I show them to you? Do you think more people have been to a festival or a protest?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: I've got no idea who will have been to more. But I'm kind of certain that over the next weeks, months, and years, more people will be going to protests than have ever been before, because I think we live at a very interesting political juncture, which is bringing people onto the streets in ways we didn't really expect even just a year ago.

KAREN: It's a lot more accessible protesting. You don't necessarily have to go down to Westminster. There are lots of local protests you can join. And also protesting in different ways. Facebook, for example, signing petitions. Are those protests?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yes, I think they are. I mean people have been using Facebook for quite a while now, for Twitter, too, and other apps. And social media have played such a big role in mobilising people, and bringing people together, enabling discussions, enabling all sorts of people to meet. And the amazing thing about these media is we're not confined to a national territory to protest, or to make a point about something. We can come together. We can congregate virtually beyond our borders to create new kinds of citizen, new kinds of protest in the process. I think that's very exciting, and very interesting.

KAREN: Well let's see who's been to a festival, first, before we start looking at protests. So we asked you, have you been to a festival? And 75% have said yes. That's been changing quite a bit, actually. And 25% have said no. So the majority are agreeing that they've been to a festival.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Well that's great. And I hope they had a jolly good time.

TREMLETT:

KAREN: I hope you're not advocating that this should then lead to having such a good time in a mass of spontaneous ritual gathering, that a protest is another good option. Let's see how many people have been to a protest.

OK. So 54% saying, no. OK. So again, that's changed. That's gone down in the last few minutes as well, as more people have been adding in. So very different sorts of behaviours, then. Were you expecting a mapping between the two?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: I was expecting more people to have gone to a festival. And so the numbers aren't particularly surprising to me. And I'm sure people can suggest alternative big occasions, such as sporting occasions, where they've been part of big crowds, where big emotions are played out, and strong feelings are brought to bear. They may have attended a football match, or the Olympics in London, or elsewhere for that matter. And being part of a crowd like that can be, as I said before, exhilarating, frightening, but very powerful experiences.

KAREN: So why aren't people going to protests as much? Is it because they're worried about safety, their personal space? Being caught up in something? Identity? There are all these issues, I guess, to think about.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Well I guess it may be to do with issues. But I do think people do think about their safety. And also the thing with protest is there's a funny thing where people know other people are protesting. So that's being managed by them, so I don't have to. So there's sort of vicarious protesting. Or because I'm clicking this online, or I'm participating in this discussion, virtually, I don't have to physically be somewhere. And that's fine. I'm not making any judgement at all. People find different ways to do the things that matter to them.

KAREN: That would have been a very interesting question, actually, is to ask how many people had signed online petitions, but not protested directly themselves. Because I mean if we go back to this idea about religion in terms of a social form of control, a social way of being and acting and performing various rituals within society, protesting is one that can have various sorts of forms of going along.

I guess what you're saying is is that there are options in terms of how you can display things. But are you saying that protests as a mass spontaneous gathering have more emphasis in terms of getting a share of voice, or encouraging change, than say these online petitions do?

Or is that shifting, even?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: I think protesting is something that's integral to a democratic society. We can't be a democracy without protest. We can't be a democracy without dissent. That's one of my beginning points.

Where religious studies, I think, starts to come into the equation is when we're thinking about protest, whether online or face-to-face situations, we're imagining a higher power that we think is more important than us that brings us together to do something, to make a point about some piece of legislation, some particular law. Maybe it's to do with an issue of race, or an issue of gender, or an issue of disability that people want to protest about. Or maybe it's a conflict in some other place.

But nevertheless, people draw on this conception of a higher power, a sacred, let's say, a moral line. And that is fundamental to the protester [INAUDIBLE]. It's fundamental to what happens in protest spaces, whether those spaces are virtual or, as I said, physical.

KAREN: All right. Let's take a trip to the hot desk and see what people are chatting about as they're beginning to join this evening's session. HJ and Sophie.

SOPHIE: Yes. I have lots of really good, really good chat. It's actually interesting for me to hear that you can protest online. You don't really think of it that way. So in that case, I've been to a protest. So I can change my answer.

HJ: I think on the widgets as well, one of the reasons it changed is because initially a lot of people, including myself, thought of a very narrow view of what a protest is-- going out with a placard or something. But actually there's, as we discovered together, that there's lots of different ways. And actually, yeah, I have been in a protest.

And I remember reading up once about an ongoing protest in Germany where they didn't destroy, but took down a website. And the German court said, oh, that's a legitimate form of protest against that company, which is very interesting as well.

SOPHIE: Davin has suggested that this event should count as a festival. But in order to do so, as Stuart says, he says specifically HJ, you need to get your hands in the air. So I [INTERPOSING VOICES] I can sit here and watch. So aye!

HJ: Am I doing it? Does this count?

SOPHIE: Does that count? I don't know. I think it needs to be a bit more boppy.

HJ: Mobile phones lit.

KAREN: We're recording it, HJ, from our mobile phones.

SOPHIE: We should now be 100% on that. We have now all been to a festival!

KAREN: Ah, excellent. All right. So I wanted to also ask about some of the we were talking about this redo project, before we sort of got a bit sidetracked and started talking about other things. You've been doing some work and some research in Hong Kong as well as in London. And you mentioned before how many areas are involved with this redo project as well. So I guess there's this whole sense that protests and religious festivals happen in a time and space, and those will differ depending on where that is and when that is.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yeah. Of course. So maybe when people think about religious festivals, or religious rituals, perhaps the first things they think of are things like baptisms, or marriages, or that kind of thing. So if we expand our understanding of ritual, I think one of the people watching suggested this was a festival. Equally, this could be a ritual.

KAREN: It is for lots of people.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Well it is like a ritual, that this isn't normal space. Something different is happening. Oh I didn't meant it. But something different happens in this space, where when we leave this room we're in ordinary space. When we come in here, we're in a non-ordinary space. Something unusual happens. And then we go out again. So it's like you move through these stages of from the ordinary world into this non-ordinary conversation space, which is filmed and mediatised and so forth, and then back into the ordinary world, which in a way is a bit like your ordinary, any ordinary ritual of, let's say, a marriage or a baptism, where an individual is taken for one state and moved into another state.

KAREN: So could you almost say that you're acting out different identities and different roles.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yes. And a protest is very similar. The protesters will gather. Maybe police will gather. Maybe they won't. Sometimes protests are not policed. Sometimes they are.

But the point is people gather. They assemble at a specific time in a specific place. Sometimes they wear specific clothes to do so. They bring specific things with them to do the act. And

then, after a certain time period, they disperse again. It's a ritual occasion with ritual significance for those people.

KAREN: Or even no clothes, because there have been cases of naked protests.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: [INTERPOSING VOICES] But again, before they were clothed, and after they're clothed. It's the bit in the middle where they take the clothes off. And that's the liminal moment.

KAREN: Yes. So is there a difference, then, between Hong Kong and London? Are you looking at two different settings for a similar sort of event?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: So what I was looking at was the Occupy Movement in both cities. And actually what was quite remarkable was how similar things were. The protesters had assembled for the same reasons. It was part of the anti-capitalist response, or the left response to the financial crash 2007, 2008. And the camps in both places really all about experiments in decision making, and how can we re-imagine democracy.

And in Hong Kong, given Hong Kong's very different sort of political settlement to the UK's, that had an extra sort of tension. Because Hong Kong's relationship with China, with Beijing, they're the real power brokers about how political decisions are taken in Hong Kong. So there's an extra frisson, if you like, there. But really what was happening in the camp wasn't that dissimilar.

And just the act of putting a chair and a tent and a stove in a place that's usually a place of transit, is quite a radical thing to do. Hong Kong's very fast city. Everyone's so busy. And everybody looks so cool.

And then there's these other people just sitting there talking about some art film, or who's going to cook tonight's dinner. Or a very different engagement with city space, with an open space. And urban space in Hong Kong, there's not much of it around there. Everything is used.

KAREN: You've written a lot about experiments in politics and democracy. Is this the sort of experimentation that you refer to?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yes, absolutely. Because what they were trying to do in both Occupy camps-- and arguably we could argue about whether they were successful, or whether they weren't successful. But they wanted to bring people into tent cities to have a tent city university to discuss ideas about

economies, about democracy, about politics. They wanted to play with different ways of engaging people, making decisions, reaching out to new publics.

And I think we could probably say nearly everything that happened then has now been overtaken by much more recent political events-- Brexit, then the election of Trump in the United States. But nevertheless, Occupy did change the way people thought about protests.

So for example, in Hong Kong, people may recall the umbrella protests in Hong Kong. That conception of demonstrating, occupying space, occupying streets, directly came from the Occupy protests which preceded it. So Occupy gave people a new methodology-- one of occupying spaces; another of using, as we talked about before, in fact, Facebook, social media, and that kind of thing.

KAREN: So just going back to our sort of concept of protests, which initially was very narrow in terms of the placards, and going out and doing something. You're arguing that protesting and these sorts of religious festivals can create this re-imagined space, and saying what if, and allowing people almost to make that move, to think, well, if this is something that is worth fighting for, this could happen, and able to actually, more tangibly I guess, engage with that change.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yeah. Absolutely. People, as you get older in life, people expect you to be realistic. Now when someone says to you, be realistic, you should always go, no, I won't be realistic. Or at least I won't be realistic all the time.

KAREN: Yeah. That's what I say.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: And what these spaces do is allow you to not be realistic in a meaningful way that matters. Because you can experiment in different ways of being with others, different ways of making relationships, different ways of making decisions. And that's really important that societies allow themselves through these kinds of protest events to experiment with how to be a society. Because it's in these spaces where society can ask itself real questions about what it wants to be. Protest is imagining other futures, and imagining other sort of sacred or moral ideas for organising that other future.

KAREN: This whole thing about what is sacred, and I guess whose future this is, makes me think about who is entitled to be in some of these protests. Because there's a variety of things. We can all sort of say, well, I'm protesting about this on behalf of somebody, or the supplies [INAUDIBLE]. Some of the places I've visited, and spaces I've been and observed where spiritual and

religious things have happened, I felt that I can be an observer, but not a part of those events, even though they are inclusive, and there are no barriers. But I guess emotionally and maybe culturally I don't feel able to take part in them. To what extent, then are some of these festivals bound by some of those sacred, or those parameters?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: I think that's a really good question. I shall have to think about answering this. One of the big problems the camping of Hong Kong had was that there were two different groups with very different visions of what the camp should be. And those two different groups were the sort of prime energy, sources of energy taking it forward.

One wanted to represent demands, wanted to make appeals to government. One was very much, well, the camp is our demand. That's all we want to do, is just live in the camp. And the accusation would be that they were lifestyle protesters, rather than real protesters.

Now I wouldn't want to judge whether one side was more authentic, or politically pure, or whatever, than the other. But that tension was really interesting. And how I had to do research with those two different groups-- so one group I could only basically do group meetings with them. The others I interviewed one at a time in different locations. And I think that's because they had very different conceptions of what the boundaries were.

So for the group that wanted to be interviewed all together, for them they were one kind of one entity. It was all of them together in their place with sharing food with them. Basically, if you don't want to participate in that, then they really didn't want to get to know you. And it was for them the camp itself, and that particular way of living was the message, was that was everything. That was their sacred. Whereas the others, the camp was just a vehicle for a political demand. Very different mentality.

KAREN: So I'd like to end by asking you, because you're not getting off the hook with this coming and talking about religious studies. I'd like to talk about non-human agents. Because we've spoken about the way in which religion is very important sociological way of acting out certain things. But these are all done by human agents, often with political or non-political agendas. So what about the non-human agents?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: OK. There are lots of different kinds of non-human agents out there. I mean, most of you might be thinking, well, if he's from religious studies he probably means deities or spirits or something like that. Or maybe just one god.

Actually, I don't necessarily mean those things, although I might be talking about those things. It might also be something, as I was indicating before. When I was talking about that moral force that's outside oneself when one protests, that is non-personal, non-human, sort of transcendent something that we draw upon when we protest, or one draws upon when one protests.

But there are other agents out there, too. And this might sound a bit weird. But objects can be agents. They're also non-human agents.

If we think about some of the powerful political spaces in our cities, monuments are agents. They register in our minds in a particular way. The objects the protesters bring with them are agents. They can have important effects on what happens at a protest. And they can have important effects on people who may be at the edge of a protest, or watching a protest, about that kind of boundary marking we were talking about before.

So there are whole plethoras of agents that aren't the protesters, that aren't the police, that aren't the politicians. It might be the architecture of the place that the protest happens in. It might be placards or music or sound that accompanies the protest. It might be a particular moral idea that protesters draw upon, when Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream." That dream was a powerful agent that he was drawing upon, drawing his audience into that idea of something transcendent that we could work towards together.

KAREN: And it's amazing how powerful symbolism can be in terms of actually motivating people, and expressing something.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yeah. I mean I've had lots of different experiences as part of crowds, whether at a festival or at a protest. I've seen some great bands at some festivals, and it's been really fantastic. I've also been to some incredible protests where I felt incredibly exhilarated, and at times also afraid. But those feelings are really something. And I think they're worth challenging yourself to experience them so that you can broaden your life experience if possible.

KAREN: Wonderful. Paul. That's all we've got time for in this session. Thank you so much. As always, I wish that we had more time to talk about these things.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yeah, it was good.

KAREN: It is, because you really explain religious studies so well. Because I think so many people think

that it is about all of these non-human agents and deities. And actually it is so fascinating, and so relevant just to so many different areas. So before we show a video of Paul talking about religion further, I'd like to go to the hot desk. HJ and Sophie, how are you both?

SOPHIE: You've inspired me to take a protest, because I'm hungry again. So I would like more biscuits, fish [INAUDIBLE] please.

KAREN: Are we back to this idea of the hobnobs?

SOPHIE: Well I'd like to expand on hobnobs. I'd like a little bit more variety in my biscuit selection as well, please. Maybe some cookies? Or some Bourbons? No?

KAREN: HJ. Where's your placard?

HJ: Oh. I already did the online petition. But I'm actually having a look at some festivals, and getting ready. And apparently this is a thing. So I'm practicing all my moves for the festivals.

SOPHIE: [INTERPOSING VOICES] change my sign?

KAREN: And you two don't have to stay [INAUDIBLE], because you've been sitting in all day.

Oh, wonderful. All right. Well that's going to end this session. Thank you very much for participating. I hope you all are still having a good time here.

We're going to take a short break, as I said before, to talk about religion. And then we're going to come back. We've got a tutor. I hope you've got some questions. But if not, Jonquil Lowe is going to fll us in on her most commonly asked questions by students. We'll be back in about five minutes for that session. So see you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]