

## **PodMag. November 2016**

### **Karen Foley:**

Hi and welcome to the November PodMag. I'm Karen Foley and in this seasonal addition of our monthly audio news magazine from Arts & Social Science at the Open University we take a look at religious festivals.

This month we've had Halloween, Dilwali and of course the countdown to Christmas is at the forefront of many people's minds. But how important are these festivals and to whom do they matter. To find out more I'll be talking to Graham Harvey, Gwilym Beckerlegge and Paul-Francois Tremlett all from the Department of Religious Studies at the Open University.

But first here are some news stories.

An OU study, 'Eye Spy', undertaken by two psychology academics found that many people think that the Internet makes affairs more likely. So we've commissioned a five part drama directed by Bafta nominated Fay Gilbert to explore how online behaviours are interpreted and the effects web flirtation can have on real life relationships. It's launching on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> November at 7.00pm and we'll be asking for your views as the drama unfolds. We'll be promoting this on Facebook, YouTube and then it will also be available on OpenLearn.

Inter Faith Week begins on 13<sup>th</sup> November. If you're interested in learning more about a range of religious buildings in London you may want to check out the Exploring Religion in London series of videos that use 360 degree technology. You can access these on YouTube, the OU Facebook page and again on OpenLearn.

Also on the theme of Religious Studies Paul-Francois Tremlett who I interview later in the PodMag has written a blog as part of the Methods in Motions series on Researching Ritual and Democracy. The links are available in the transcript or you can have a look at their CCIG websites.

In the first of our interviews Graham Harvey, the Head of the Department of Religious Studies discussed Halloween with me.

Graham Harvey I wanted to talk to you about Halloween. Now do you think that Halloween has become more of a commercial festival than a religious one?

### **Graham Harvey:**

I think for most people it probably is commercial, all the stuff in the shops and plastic pumpkins rather than real ones. And even that we've adopted American pumpkins rather than turnip lanterns. But it's still a sense of celebrating the beginning of winter. For some people it's for honouring the dead, whether they're Catholics honouring the

souls and the saints or pagans honouring ancestors. So there's a big mix of different things going on.

**Karen Foley:**

So we walk in to our local supermarket then around this time of year and it's really obvious all of the merchandise that's around for us. And some of this is going to pick up some more traditional, I guess, religious reasons about why we might celebrate Halloween. What is it about the way that we're seeing some of these images that might resonate with people in terms of how they're then expected to celebrate?

**Graham Harvey:**

Yeah, I think there's two different things going on. One is all this stuff about death and mortality, so we're looking at ghosts and skeletons and we're thinking about life and death. But there's also the 'trick or treat' side which is again a part of the beginning of winter, the games people used to play. It's a bit different now. In the old days it used to be adults trick or treating their neighbours, especially being unpleasant to the ones who've been unpleasant, so they're getting a bit of revenge on them. And now it's a prettified kind of thing for kids. And, you know, handing out sweets rather than money for beer.

But there's still, there's a sense in which that carries on and there are bits of old traditions that survive in a new sort of glittered up way.

**Karen Foley:**

And those traditions of course were the Christian festival of All Hallows' and also the Pagan festival. Are people still celebrating for those very traditional reasons?

**Graham Harvey:**

There are some people doing that. I mean particularly Roman Catholics honouring the Souls and the Saints on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> November. But Pagans - which is a kind of growing tradition now - honouring the festival of Samhain which is a beginning of winter festival which has become another time to celebrate the dead, the ancestors, to go and honour those of our relatives who've gone on.

For the rest of the population probably less so, it's more fun and games. But even for them, you know, there is this sense that it's winter, it's dark, let's have a bit of fun, let's have some candles and let's think about mortality in a light-hearted kind of way.

**Karen Foley:**

You were talking earlier about how children are, you know, often doing the trick or treating so may be the demographic in terms of who's participating in Halloween has changed. And a lot of schools, you know, there were Halloween discos and the parents are also dressing up as well. I wanted to ask about the way that we're, I guess, encouraging children to celebrate religious festivals, we've got Halloween and then Guy

Fawkes and all sorts of other religious festivals, you know, marking the winter. And some of them like you say are in a very fun way and some in a more serious way like Remembrance Day, for example.

What do you think about the way that we're educating children about celebrating religious festivals?

**Graham Harvey:**

Well we're probably not very good at it because as a culture, as a British culture, we're not very good at doing rituals. You know, we've had 500 hundred years of not thinking of ritual as a good thing to do. But, you know, we are I think in the last decades returning to thinking about seasonal festivals, marking the changes particularly in mid-summer and mid-winter, Halloween, beginning of winter. And we're getting there thinking about kids being re-introduced to death and thinking of their relatives. So it's not just an anonymous crowd of odd, dead ghostie people but actually our great grandparents. Our grandparents, our close relatives. And thinking about them in a realistic way.

We're not quite there with some of the southern European traditions where everybody will go to a graveyard, take flowers to their relatives. But I think I've seen some changes in people really beginning to engage with the dead.

**Karen Foley:**

So in terms of then these changes about the ways in which we're celebrating what would be the most useful thing that you think that the UK could adopt in terms of the future of celebrating Halloween?

**Graham Harvey:**

I think if you were to ask that of a Catholic or of a Pagan that they'd say that actually they're rebuilding this community that involves the living and the dead or those who have died, those who have gone on but are still in some sense alive would make our sense of who we are much richer. That we're not just a bunch of people living now and then we disappear but there's a continuity, the culture is handed on by our previous generations. That would make a big difference.

**Karen Foley:**

Graham Harvey, thank you very much.

**Graham Harvey:**

Thank you.

**Karen Foley:**

Diwali is another prominent festival at this time of year and Gwilym Beckerlegge and I talked about how it can be celebrated.

Gwilym anyone can participate in celebrating Halloween or even Christmas but Diwali seems to be a lot more owned by the Hindu religion. Would you say that's a fair comment?

**Gwilym Beckerlegge:**

No I think, I mean Diwali is celebrated not just by Hindus but in different ways by Sikhs and also by Jains in India. And I think now it's a festival where many Hindus would invite non-Hindus to join them as a kind of showcase. It's their most, I suppose, most popular festival and in some ways the most accessible.

**Karen Foley:**

How is it celebrated then in the UK?

**Gwilym Beckerlegge:**

Well it's celebrated in Leicester, for example, it's one of the biggest celebrations of Diwali outside of India simply because of the size of the community there. The other thing is of course in Britain most of Hindus in fact are of Gujarati ancestry or descent. And so the style of Hinduism we see in Britain is largely Gujarati. If we lived in western Europe it could be quite different.

**Karen Foley:**

So then the ways that people celebrate would differ depending on where they're based. What are some of the practices that are most common to see around this time of year in terms of celebrating Diwali?

**Gwilym Beckerlegge:**

I think it's more a question of a cluster of festivals. I mean it lasts over four or five days depending on how you count it. So I mean cleaning the house, doing decorative patterns, that's part of it. And then there's also special days when a particular deity is worshipped and that's where you might find the difference. I mean Gujaratis would offer worship to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. People who are Bengali Hindus they would offer worship to deity Kali on the same day. So if you have that kind of difference according to regional history. But as I said in Britain largely you're going to see a Gujarati style. So cleaning houses certainly.

Then the main day is the worship of Lakshmi and that's followed by a puja after that called Govardhan puja which is also called the mountain of food which gives you a good idea what it's about where people bring in prepared meals to offer to the deities in gratitude.

**Karen Foley:**

We've been talking a little bit about how we educate children about celebrating religious just festivals and one of the things that they are often doing in schools is candles and light. How important is the whole idea of light for this festival?

**Gwilym Beckerlegge:**

It's very important. It's also very important for, I think, in the Hindu tradition more generally because offering light to deities is one of the key aspects of a ritual, of the ritual worship, aarti offering light to the God. I mean Diwali means it was taken from a line of lights which again gives you a clue. So the lights here are lights used to decorate homes, to decorate interiors of temples, shrines. Also of course lights are placed on leaves and launched on to the river in India.

But the thing to remember here is of course that the main festival night is meant to be the darkest night of the month. So you need light to brighten it.

**Karen Foley:**

And you've mentioned about spring cleaning and about some of the other social things that people are doing around this time of year. Diwali is a very happy event, often with this idea of, you know, triumph over adversity and light over darkness, etc. How important is it, you know, socially for people to be able to have these religious practices that they can do to have a positive outlook on life?

**Gwilym Beckerlegge:**

I think it's hugely important. If we think about the timing of it during the year certainly in the northern Indian kind of seasonal cycle it would fall after the worst excesses of the summer heat and rain. So it's a time when people are ready to relax. It's now also a time when of course there's a huge, hugely important point in the consumer cycle, massive shopping spree, and of course you'd see this in Britain too. People give gifts, they get new clothing, they also buy consumer goods in great quantities. And this is where in India you'd see the shopping malls absolutely packed.

But it's also a time for family, with people coming together, they relax. Certainly in India they would have state holidays and so forth. So it's a very important time for coming together in that sense. And also I think it's a time simply for celebrating being in the community.

**Karen Foley:**

We've talked about Diwali having so many different facets to it and I wanted to end by asking you, what was your particular favourite aspect about celebrating Diwali?

**Gwilym Beckerlegge:**

Well I've seen it celebrated in India with the fireworks on the streets and so forth. But I think my favourite at the moment is my most recent, I was in Preston and joining the Swaminarayan BAPS community there for Diwali, a week ago. And I was there for what

is called the mountain of food which is absolutely fascinating but also it was a civic occasion. I mean the Lord Mayor of Preston was there and a lot of council members were there and the temple was packed. But the place was simply a blaze of lights and mountains of food which had been prepared, you know, by the devotees stretching down not just on the main areas in front of the shrines but stretching down on a huge kind of ornate pathway leading down through the temple. I mean it was absolutely glowing, glowing with light. And also glowing frankly with food as well.

**Karen Foley:**

It sounds glorious and absolutely delicious. Gwilym thank you very much.

Finally, Paul-Francoise Tremlett and I talked about Christmas in particular about the commercial aspects of this festival.

Paul we're going to talk about Christmas. Now Santa is possibly one of the most iconic images when we think about Christmas and when we were talking to Graham we talked about how so much of these religious festivals is very evident in our society and particular in supermarkets. Do you think that Santa is more of an iconic image than Jesus at the moment?

**Paul-Francois Tremlett:**

I think so. I think if we think about Christmas the first figure that we think of is Santa Claus. We all know that Santa Claus or the modern image we have of Santa was essentially manufactured by Coca-Cola in the 1930s. And Santa has become this global icon. Pretty much translates in to lots of cultures around the world.

It's also an interesting fact that in 1951 in Dijon in France he was burned in effigy by priests angry that Santa was essentially secularising what they felt should be a Christian festival. Whether we think they were right or wrong is perhaps a sociological as much as a theological question of course.

**Karen Foley:**

So do you think then in terms of the way that we're encouraged to consume, you talk about Coca-Cola and the whole nature of Santa linking with consumption. The way that we're expected to consume and have this excess of both goods, gifts and family and abundance over Christmas, how much pressure does that put on the average family and on society more generally?

**Paul-Francois Tremlett:**

Well Christmas is a peculiar time. It's a ritual moment. Whether we think it's still a Christian occasion it's certainly a kind of a sacred occasion because of this feasting that we do because of this partying that we do. But also that sense that we need to be with others, family, friends and that we need to give. And, you know, this idea of the gift which is very different from what we normally do for the rest of the year which is really

just buying things for ourselves and then the objects are really commodities. But in Christmas commodities become gifts.

And that means Christmas is quite a magical time of year because it's about transforming one kind of thing in to another kind of thing. And that's a very special, even in our secular society that's a very special thing that we do.

**Karen Foley:**

You mention the word spirituality and of course Christmas obviously has the religious story as well associated with it that's often taught and done through nativity plays and practiced especially with our children.

To what extent then do you think that Christmas retains some of that religious or more spiritual aspect?

**Paul-Francois Tremlett:**

Well Christmas is peculiar isn't it because often unbelieving adults whether they unbelieve in Jesus Christ or whether they unbelieve in Santa Claus, nevertheless through things like nativity plays and leaving a mince pie out for Santa Claus when he brings the presents for the children we cultivate belief in children. And so I don't think it's a question of whether a real meaning has been lost, it's more that Christmas is a special ritual occasion. Even in a secular society we have these kinds of rituals that are very important to maintaining our sense of identity, a sense of wholeness with others, a sense of relationship to others.

And that's what Christmas does, it allows us to connect with others through gifts.

**Karen Foley:**

Throughout all of the narratives of Christmas we're talking about the spirituality, the rituals, the displays of wealth, etc. there's a lot that's been written as well about this from a more literary perspective in terms of how we view Christmas. Sometimes that can be a very, very bleak view, sometimes a very happy view, they're very different takes on the whole religious aspect as well as the cultural activities that surround Christmas. What's your most memorable, I guess, narrative tradition around the whole Christmas festival?

**Paul-Francois Tremlett:**

Well, you know, every Christmas we get new presentations of a Dickens story, for example, on the television and of course Christmas appears in lots of films and literature. So I just thought I'd conclude with this small quote from a Christmas Carol by Dickens and he writes "Christmas is the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year when men and women seem to open their shut-up hearts freely and to think of people below them as if they were really fellow passengers to the grave and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys". And I think that quote sums up this

idea of Christmas being a special time but also, for Dickens, a sense that why can't we behave in that Christmas-like spirit for rather longer than just one or two days a year.

**Karen Foley:**

So even though Christmas can be a really happy time it could also alienate people who may not have those family networks or the wealth to be able to act in the way that they want to.

**Paul-Francois Tremlett:**

Christmas puts a lot of pressure on people to be with others, to participate in activities, sharing food, sharing gifts with each other. And that makes it a wonderful time but also it can be quite a difficult time for some people in our society.

**Karen Foley:**

I quite agree. Thank you so much Paul.

**Paul-Francois Tremlett:**

It's been a pleasure.

**Karen Foley:**

That's all we have time for in this edition of PodMag. I hope you've enjoyed it and to find out more look at Facebook, YouTube and OpenLearn. In the December PodMag we'll focus on human rights but until then have a great month.

Bye for now.