

CORH Values – Season 3, Episode 3

Sarah Pike on Burning Man

Dr. Sarah Pike, who researches New Religious Movements and Environmental Activism, talks to us about Burning Man, a week long Art, Creativity and Self-Expression Festival that takes place each year in the Nevada desert and culminates in the burning of a human effigy that many attendees see as a deeply spiritual experience. We talk about the roots of the festival, what it means to people, and how it updates some ancient rituals that have been part of the human experience since time immemorial.

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Transcript:

Hello and welcome to CORH Values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities at California State University Chico. I'm your host and chair of the departments Daniel Veidlinger. This season's topic is fire. Over the summer, northern California was assailed by a number of very serious wildfires. The Dixie fire alone consumed almost 1 million acres of forest and the skies were filled with smoke for weeks upon weeks. That drove us to think about fire as a theme. And we're going to be talking about different approaches to fire in different cultures around the World. The role of fire in various religions, the mythical origins of fire and other metaphorical uses of the idea of fire and cons. I guess today is going to be Dr. Sarah Pike, who was the former chair of our department, and has researched ritual studies and new religious movements for many, many years. She has written numerous books and articles about contemporary paganism, about the New Age movement, about environmental terrorism, and about the topic of today, the Burning Man Festival. Some recent books by her are new age and neo-pagan religions in America, which is a wide-ranging study of this phenomenon in America today. And her most recent book for the wild ritual and commitments in radical eco activism was published by the University of California Press. She's written numerous articles about the Burning Man Festival in his attended it for many, many years. Now, there's probably nobody better suited to talk about this topic with us then Sarah Pike. Sarah, welcome. Thanks Daniel. It's great to be here. Good to have you. I'm really fascinated by all the work that you've done on the Burning Man Festival over the years. And it's certainly something that I would want to go to one day. I know we've been discussing this at great length every year. I say maybe next year, of course. I guess it didn't happen. It did happen, it happened online. Oh, I see. Okay. You still have a chance, Daniel. All right. Fantastic. At any rate, Let's go to the origins of this festival. I'm curious how did Burning Man get started? So it started in San Francisco by some artists. there specifically Larry Harvey, considered to be the founder. And they began the festival in the 1980s at the beach in San Francisco. pretty sure it was Baker beach. But it was on a beach and they burned a small effigy. And they started doing it every year. And every year it grew. More and more people were coming and finally got too big. So the San Francisco police made them leave and they realized that they had to move it somewhere else. Out of the way from an urban area. There were just too many people and that's when they moved out to the desert and 990. And ever since then it's been out in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada that's about need an hour and a half from Reno, it's north Reno, pretty much in the middle of nowhere. Right. So they built a whole city I understand. That's right. They build a city from scratch. So the Black Rock Desert is BLM land, Bureau of Land Management, public land, and they get a permit to setup there. But basically, there's nothing there but a flat prehistoric lake desert. There's no vegetation on it. There are really no rock formations on it. It's surrounded by mountains, but it's a big flat lake, so it's basically just dust. And of course, there's insects and other small things there that we can't really see, but it feels like a really vacant, empty space. And so the city is built. Out of scratch weeks in advance, people come out there and start working on it. They make street sign, they set up buildings. It really is a temporary city and when you arrive it feels like you're coming into the city. I think it maybe the third largest city in Nevada or something like that. Vegas and Reno. And then after the event a completely disappears. For weeks, volunteers scour the lake bed, picking up every tiny little piece of trash or debris of any sorts so that it ideally goes back to what it was like before the city was there. So it's environmentally sustainable there. Well, there's been a lot of debate about this been a huge issue for years now and certainly. A lot of internal critique from burners themselves. And when I refer to burners, that's what most people that

attend burning men regularly call themselves. So burners, other participants. And in a lot of ways, the event has not been very green. People drive from all over the country and they fly from all over the world to attend Burning Man. So we're talking about a pretty significant carbon footprint in terms of travel. And then people buy a lot of stuff as well as like lumber to build things. It's not all, everything isn't made out of recycled products, although that would certainly be an option and something that some burners had been pushing. So there's a lot of consumerism around the event, even though at the event itself there's no you're not allowed to sell anything there. So I think in that sense, carbon footprint, consumerism, it's not very environmentally sustainable and it's something the organization, it's a non-profit now, Burning Man organization, Burning Man project has been working on. But in terms of the footprint on the desert, I mean, you can't bring 80 thousand people out to a remote kind of fragile wilderness and expect there to be no impact. So obviously there's an impact. The soil becomes more compacted and all kinds of things you know, the effects on they might be microorganisms, but they're still in effect on the land there, so they've been trying to minimize that as much as possible and to become better stewards of the land. But it's very challenging anytime you're going to bring that many human beings to an environment where there aren't a lot of humans. Currently, it's going to be problematic. So do you have to take out everything that you bring in. What about, well, there's two kinds of waste right there's Human waste, right, and there is external garbage. So the garbage has to be brought back by each person. Yes, you get your empty bottles and everything, Right, take them out with you. So the idea is that, so one of the core principles of Burning Man is leave no trace. And so that means you need to pack out everything you bring in. So that's an old wilderness ethic that emerged, ya didn't emerge from Burning Man, no that came from Sierra Club and other wilderness kind of organizations, backpacking organizations that started that leave no trace ethic. But so you have to bring everything you need. So as much water as, you're going to need for a week, as much food you're going to need for a week. And then you've got to take all of your waste with you. You can't, there's no where to leave it. There is a recycling camp that some burners setup that you can take cans to, but pretty much everything else you've got to pack out. So you have to be prepared to do that. And then they do have porta potties, so they do have a service that takes care of the porta potty. So the human waste part the organization does take care of, but everything else is on you as a participant. How much food and water if you have to take for a week of this not refrigeration, right? Well, it's kind of like camping, there's no electricity. So there's a whole range of what people do. So there I'm probably on one end of the spectrum, which is simple like I'm going car camping, like I would do if I was going up into the Sierra. So I just pack my coolers and to bring all the food that I need, I try to make it as simple as possible. I prepare some things ahead of time. I bring a tent, just like I would do if I were going camping in the mountains here. But then there are people that come with huge RVs where they've got everything they need that got a shower, they've got everything sort of enclosed. So there's, there's a whole spectrum of the kinds of temporary homes that people set up there. So if you're in a tent, you're a lot more vulnerable to the elements. To me, that's part of the challenge of it. If there's a storm, you're kind of in the middle of it because you are in the desert. So let's, why bring an artificial home into that. But for a lot of people, that's the only way it's accessible for them. Yeah. Yeah, they're not going do it otherwise or they have reasons why health reasons why they have to have something a little more substantial. So you have the sand storms there. So yeah, One of the really interesting aspects of being out there, it's a beautiful site. I mean, really beautiful mountains all around it and just as kind of endless landscape that you get in the West and especially in the desert. But every now and then these, these dust storms will come up and the wind will start blowing and all of a sudden it's a white out. You can't see anything at all, and you just have to land somewhere safe because it's not safe to be out walking around, being run over, or the dust itself is gets in everything. So that usually happens at least once during the week, okay, granted, it can be worse and be very hot during the day and very cold at night and there can be rain. I mean, it's, it can be a challenging environment and I think that's part of what makes it attractive to people, is it's an ordeal that you aren't necessarily going to get back home. Since many people come from urban environments they're not necessarily exposed to the same kind of environmental challenges. So I think that's a, that's an attraction as well as a challenge for people, right? So that's part of it is roughing it out, part of it is that sense of roughing it. So I mean, I feel like and I've written about it as a kind of a pilgrimage. And it has this in common and in parallel with a lot of religious traditions. It's a, it's a pilgrimage and a way and people use the language of pilgrimage. To talk about it as a kind of sacred journey to a center of meaning that's out away from ordinary life. And so the fact that the desert itself is this environment that's so different than where you normally live. That helps to increase that sense of a contrast of really being a different kind of place. But I also think, and this is something some

colleagues have brought up when I've given presentations on Burning Man. It has those parallels with various religious figures who've gone out to have ascetic practices in the desert. You know, there's something about the desert environment and the simplicity of it, and the challenges of it, and the fact that it's away from quote unquote civilization that makes it a site, a powerful experience for people. I had not thought of that before, but that's a really good point that many of the great religious leaders have. Desert experiences. For sure, wilderness experience, yes. And the desert is a wilderness, right. The desert is a kind of wilderness and this a lot in religious literature, but the difference between civilization and the wilderness, exactly. And of course, in the Middle East, a lot of the wilderness is desert, so it happens to be deserts in India where I focus on this most of my studies. Of course, there are deserts there in India, but interesting then and now that I think about it, the wilderness experiences are associated with forests rather than deserts in now what about mountains? Yeah, of course, the mountains, forests and mountains. It is interesting that the desert hasn't been the place of choice for spiritual seekers in India. Yeah, that's right because there are plenty. But maybe it's just too hot to really, do anything, yeah But then again, the Arabian desert is also pretty hot. At any rate. That's an interesting parallel with that. We should actually back up a little bit. Yeah, Some of the list is might not know what Burning Man is at all. Can you say a few words about yet is yes, what is Burning Man? So Burning Man has been defined in many different ways. But most scholars would identify it as a transformational Festival. And that idea of a transformational Festival. It originated with a festival organizer who was giving a TED talk and talked about GK, lone is his name. He talked about these events like Burning Man, where people go to be transformed right in the sight. The event itself is kind of geared towards transformational experiences. And we can talk a little bit about what that means later. But so they are festivals. It's interesting. The Burning Man organizers Now don't want to be called a festival because they want to differentiate Burning Man from other kinds of festivals. But most scholars would approach it as a festival. It's a, it's a temporary event. It's a week long. It's a gathering of a lot of people. the festive aspect is emphasized. Its emphasis is on the art. So it's really this transformational Arts Festival and where people come and they set up all these artworks. There's lots of music events and there's workshop of sub all different kinds. Like there's yoga and there's you know meditation, and there's all kinds of parades and performances. There's a band contest. And so you have this sort of very rich sort of arts event as well as an event with a, a kind of, for, for many, but not all participants at a spiritual focus. So it's really many things. As I said, the organizers themselves want to be seen more as an event and a way of life. Whereas many people that come see it as, as a festival, something that, you know, it's, it's just this week out of their lives not going to have an effect on the society necessarily. So, yeah. Versus some people try to continue the Burning Man ethos during the regular year, yes Exactly. and others just feel that it's one thing that they do amongst many and doesn't really define what they do or the other, right. So one of the issues that I really focused on in my writing is kind of the tension between that. Because in many ways, this whole idea of the festival is a space apart, is kind of special sacred space apart from ordinary life is really important too many, many participants. On the other hand, there's many ways in which experiences at the festival and even material culture transgresses or crosses those boundaries between the festivals, the space apart, and life back home. So I think it's a really interesting tension. And it has to do with people's intentions going there and their experiences there and then what they bring home or don't bring home afterwards. So yeah, there'd be a lot of big range in terms that participants experience of that event as part of their life or really just something that's set aside. So it sounds like there's a lot of features of those are anthropologists, Victor Turner who talks about liminality But there's something about being on the outside of your regular life It'll comes up a realm of new possibilities. This seems to be a real instantiation of that kind of, yeah, exactly. And I think when I first started writing about Burning Man, Turner's work was very much on my mind, especially his work with his wife Eve Turner on pilgrimage. And really looking at that experience of being on a pilgrimage has been in this liminal space. That's betwixt in-between. It's not, you know, it. It's somewhere else, but, you know, it's, it's indefinable in a sense. But then there's also that model that Turner got from Arnold van Gennep up and then going to classic book, the rites of passage where he talks about there's a separation. There are three stages. And this is sort of it's a, it's a bit of an oversimplification, but it's also really helpful way to think about ritual and sacred space, and festivals and pilgrimages is that there's the separation from ordinary life, right? So you're traveling away to the desert and all the things that that means, all the preparations that you put into it, you're loading up your car and all, the expectations that you're bringing in your, you know, your heart and your mind of what that experience is going to. Separation. And then you enter the space at Burning Man or any Festival really are. I mean, most festivals have some kind of boundary at Burning Man, it's very distinctive. You get to the site and you wait in line for hours to get

in. So there's this whole ordeal about getting in. And then you drive down this road were all these signs, these sort of quirky signs about Burning Man's values that you're reading as you're going in through the entrance. And then the final stage of that entrance, you get to a greeter station. We have to get out of your car. And then you might get hugged or you might have to ring a bell or you might make a dust angel. You do some kind of embodied practice that brings you into the space of the festival. So that's the separation and in that language of van Gennep and Turner, and then you're in the liminal space, right? And then for Turner and van Gennep There's the reincorporation where you go back out. And again, it's this passage, this journey to go back home to your ordinary life. So in that sense is very much like the pilgrimages that Victor and Edith Turner talked about in their, in their classic book on pilgrimage. One thing that's always interested me about these kinds of things is whether they are purposely designed like this, or if they were just done in the way that feels right. And then retrospectively we can look as academics on and say, okay, this is this. But the people who did it didn't really realize that they were doing it at the time. Maybe Burning Man is a little difference in the sense that it's happening in the modern age and people know about these theories. But yeah, for that, I often wonder that how rituals like the Middle Ages were rituals God design. We're thinking about these issues. They did it. And now we look back and say, oh, this and this was going on there. Yeah, I think that's a really interesting question, Daniel. It's like how much is intentionally designed that way, or how much is it? Is it a kind of intrinsic, inherent part of being human? Yes, exactly right, you want to have those experiences the spiritual instinct, yeah, that causes us to behave in certain ways and end up having these patterns, right because the patterns are so universal, right? Yeah. And that's one of the things Turner wrote about a course about how universal and other scholars of religion and ritual, I've written about. The interesting thing about Burning Man is that, well to me, yes, I think that Burning Man organizers have been influenced by ritual theory and by other festivals. Consciously ritualistic it this way. So it's a little some would, yeah, some people that design rituals are very conscious about it. The founder Larry Harvey was always very slippery on this. He never wanted to pin down exactly what he had in mind. He wanted to leave that kind of open to interpretation, especially with the burning of the, of the figure, the man quote, unquote. He didn't want to give it a meaning. But I think that many of the organizers of various events are very conscious of a kind of ritual framework and original intention and drawing from other cultural festivals and rituals and ancient cultures and, and rituals that they've studied or read about. Um, so I think you really have both of those, the kind of, the desire to want this to be something different and the desire to draw on other cultural forms, right? Let's talk about the burning of the man. And so I guess it should be called the burning person Festival in today's day and age. But at any rate, the burning of the man, that's the, ends the festival I suppose. Well, it doesn't, in fact, one of the things that has changed over the years, so I started attending Burning Man 1997. And at the time that the burning of the man, which it's still called the man. But the figure itself is very androgynous. It's very abstract. And I'm kind of surprised that they haven't changed it, but I don't I think at this point they're probably not going to. It's, that's the tradition, right? Burning Man. So that was the kind of the main event, but now there are two events. So starting in 2001, there was the burning of the temple, which is now the last an event that happens. So I'll say a little bit about that because I've written about this, these two big collective events that almost everyone attends. So the burning of the man is on the Saturday nights of the festival opens on Monday. And you can arrive anytime during that week. Many people arrive before to set up things, but, but most people will arrive on Monday. And then you stay through Monday, it's Labor Day always on Labor Day weekend. So for Americans, most Americans have that day off. So the burning of the man that figure happens on Saturday and the burning of the temple happens on Sunday night and then everyone goes home on Monday. But the burning of the man, the burning of the temple are very different in feeling. So the burning of the man is this huge sort of. Festive event with people dressed up in costumes and music and lights and crazy parties and just, you know, this, this extravagant kind of outpouring of, of festivity and the man gets burned. It's very loud and raucous and, and that kind of feeling, that kind of party feeling like a big party. And then on the Sunday night, the burning of the temple is really the opposite. The burning of the temple is somber. It's a temple for the dead. So there's a lot of grieving and a lot of crying and a much different emotional register. And then everyone goes home. So it, I think it's quite fascinating that these two events have developed that are, that are kind of polar opposites to end the Festival, Saturday and Sunday night of the Festival ends, and then it's over. So, yeah, it's interesting that they don't burn the temple first, move them, have the party afterwards. Yeah. I don't know what went into that decision. I actually think it works pretty well because after that big party in a way the temple is, maybe you might even think of it as part of the transition back to ordinary life in a way, you know, it's like, oh, come down to the reality of life on Earth as a human being and

temporal, that is that it ends right? The event has to end. You're like us to end. People die. And I think some how it's, it's fitting that it should happen on the, on the last day. One of the main principles is that, you know, don't be a spectator, you know, be, be a full participant. Create something yourself, do it yourself. Don't rely on anyone else, you know, create the experience that you think people you want people to have at the event. And that's giving artists free rein to come up with some kind of sculpture that's interactive or for people to design a ritual that then they'll advertise and see who shows up and then what, what comes out of it. So there's a lot of that, that kind of ritual improvisation happening during the event and less of the plan. I mean, there's more planning now that it's become so large. But yeah, there's, there really is both of those going on. Gifting is the economy of Burning Man. There's, there's no bartering and there's nos. The only thing that you can buy there is ice. Speak to replenish your cooler and copy which the organization sells, but you're not allowed is participant to sell anything. I see. So it's all about gifting. And like I said, not even it used to be more of a focus on bartering, but now it's, there really is a very strong emphasis on gifting. And again, I think that a lot of the organizers read literature on the gift and gifting and other cultures and really wanted to incorporate that in this or culture, right. Well, let's talk about the burning again yet because the theme this season is fire, so is the burning of the man viewed as a kind of sacrifice? Well, it depends on who you talk to. And like I said, Larry Harvey and Harvey died a couple of years ago. But the other organizers have continued to resist any kind of defining explanation for the burning of the man. So they invite you to bring to it what you want. But many people do see it as a kind of sacrificial figure, right? And for some people, I've talked to many who would say, Well, you know, this was very cathartic for me because I had put the things that I wanted to get rid of into that intentionally thought about, that. This is going to symbolize what I wanted to get rid of. And so I think that, that sense of a sacrifice is, can be a part for some and not for others, for others. What's really important is the collective experience there. And you might think about Emil Durkheim and other sociologists of religion that I've talked about, what happens with a group of people. That you have this kind of collective effervescence, right? This experience that can happen where you transcend your sense of self identity and you become part of the group, right? And this kind of that group feeling. And I think for many burners, the burning of the man is this collect and being part of a community and a sense of being part of a collective. As well as this, this sort of sacrifice that, and people will talk about it as this. And they'll use this language of, oh, this is an ancient human thing that we need to gather around fire, right? So that the end, they will identify this as a, as a, as a theme in many cultures where there's some kind of gathering around fire. And that it does sometimes involve a sacrificial figure of not necessarily living figure, but an abstract figure of some sort that then is burned. So it's that combination of the figure that you can put meaning on, but also the meaning that emerges from people gathering together in that, for that event, for that burning. It's actually really interesting example of again, how many human rituals and religions evolve. That it's not something that's completely pre-planned. So people often ask me, what does this mean in some religions? And I say, Well it means different things like, you know, people often say, why did Jews wear the Yamaka, yeah. Well there is no one why. There's various different reasons coalesce together and this is the same sort of thing. There isn't an official reason why it's done and each person gives it the meaning that they want. Yes, exactly. And people think, well, yeah, that's because it's merging them. But they think that with established religions. That there is an official reason but in fact there isn't Yeah. I think it's really very similar. Yeah. And I think also one of the movements It's happened over time is now people talk about Burning Man, the event as the burn or you go into the burn this year, you know, how is your burn? And so that the burning event comes to symbolize that week-long experience is really interesting to me as well. That you know, most of the burning of artwork and the man and the temple that happens on the last couple days. And yet everything during the week is kind of leading up to that. And so the burn really kind of captures that whole experience. But I do think the, the kind of ritual improvisation that happens, That's not just a 21st century thing, right? That, that happens, that's happened everywhere at all different time periods. You know, we have this tendency to think of the past as kind of set in stone and this is never changing rituals, they were always changing. They're always being improvised around. And so even the ones that said All you have to do it this way. Well, what you had to do this way changed over time. Absolutely. And I think that the temple is a really interesting one because it does end up being kind of similar every year. And yet there's all this and small changes and it really did evolve. It wasn't pre-planned. It really did evolve over time based on kind of how what worked for people and what didn't work for people. And so a couple of years they tried to have more music in it, but now it's pretty much, there might be a song at the beginning, but it's pretty much silence. People watch the temple burn the listened to the flames, they cry. And I should say something else about the

Temple Burn, which is that for the whole week leading up to the last day, people visit the temple and it's a huge structure. It's like a cathedral kind of structure. It looks like a temple made of wood. It's usually made of wood, yeah and it's a little different every year, but it has a kind of similar feeling. It has a central location just as the man figure does, central located in the middle to each other. They are in a kind of visual line, but they're not that close. It probably takes about ten minutes to walk from one to the other. Yeah. But you can see them there in that they have the end. There's a, there's a kind of road lined with lanterns going down between them. And so all week long people go to the temple and they write messages to the dead and they leave photographs and they build altars and the temple becomes just full of thousands and thousands of messages to the dead and mementos of that person's life. It's a, it's a really beautiful, it's a site and people come out and they meditate and they sing and they pray that whole week long. So becomes a real hub for what we might think about. A more explicit kind of religious or spiritual kind of experience where man structure doesn't have that same feeling. People do come out there and hang out. They might write something on it. But the temple, very much, partly because it's designed to evoke a kind of religious space. You're drawing on temples and cathedrals and in other, other, other religious traditions. But also, that it is a site of mourning and people do other things with the temple. I mean, there have even been weddings there and people will write messages of other things that they want to mourn, like some past self that they want to mourn. But it's almost the majority of the messages are about the dead and the alters are about the dead. And so when it comes to that last event, the burning, this is a ritual of kind of mourning and grief that people feel like they don't have anywhere else. And I think that is a really essential thing about Burning Man. is that burners will say, when I come out to Burning Man, I have these experiences that I can't have anywhere else. And that includes a sense of community and being able to grieve the dead in a way they feel like they can't in a public to be able to grieve the dead with thousands and thousands of other people has become very meaningful part of that experience. And so I always think it's interesting where people have been to Burning Man especially will say it's just a party in the desert. It is. But then you'd have these other aspects like the temple which has become so central. And that's a much more serious. And not the parting isn't serious, but it has a, it has a different emotional register. And again, it provides a space that many people, especially if they aren't attached to religious tradition, feel that they don't have access to the outside world. Yeah, I was going to ask about this. Do most of the people who go into the category of it's now called spiritual, but not religious. Yeah, so a number of scholars have written about this, including myself. There's a really great book by Lee Gilmore who teaches in our department called Theatre in a crowded fire. That's about religion and spirituality of Burning Man. And it really is about that spiritual but not religious. So in a survey that Burning Man did, this was a few years ago. Now, when they asked, How do you describe your spirituality? 45 percent to almost 46% of the people of the burners said spiritual but not religious. And 23 percent said atheist. And religious was 5%. Okay, so compared to the American population, this is a community that is mostly spiritual but not religious or atheist. And then 50 percent said agnostic. So again, you know, it really is disproportionate to the regular American population. You really have a large proportion. People that are spiritual but not religious, and that would be all ages. Burning Man does attract all ages, but the largest group of those would be between like 25 and 35. And that's where the event is grown the most is in the kind of that category. Kind of yeah 20 to 35, 20 to 40. Minimum age. Do you have to be over 18 or you have to be over 18 unless you're with a parent. I mean, people bring their family, oh they do? Yeah, people come with families. It was very controversial when I first started going. There were some burners that really didn't want kids there because they wanted it to be an adult space. But the families went out and now, you know, they're a lot. it made a really wonderful experience for kids, but there are places and there's like a red-light district now, so kids don't go there, right? If you want to have kind of adult entertainment or but there is nudity so you have to be comfortable with that as a parent. I should also say about the, I do want to go back to the spiritual but not religious. They did, on the survey ask about religious belonging. And I did think it was really interesting about where those statistics fell. So the largest proportion of those who were religious were Catholic, and after that it was Jewish. And other kinds of Christian like Protestants were only 13 percent. So again, this is not at all representative of the larger population to have so you're saying of the total amount of the total. amount that's relative to So this raw numbers, raw numbers, more Christians than Protestants, who define as, significant more people define themselves Jewish. And there would be a number of reasons for that. You know, that you can be Jewish and secular, or Jewish, an atheist and a sense. But anyway, but still it is very interesting. So Burning Man's burners, statistics in terms of religious belonging and religious identification, do not represent the larger US population, right? So I think that's quite interesting in itself. And to the people who, I guess many of the attendees feel that it is a kind of

religion. Yes, So many people have told me over the years, Burning Man is my church, Burning Man is my religion. And other people will say, Oh no Burning Man. I just go there to have fun. But you get a lot of people who will talk about it with religious language. We'll talk about it as being a trance, spiritually transformative experience. It's a place where their ultimate values are expressed and created. So I think it does fulfill a lot of the characteristics of a, of religious belonging. So I think it is, We're really important site for that reason. I mean, I've argued in some of my writing that is transformational festivals and not just Burning Man. There's a lot of other ones that aren't as large as Burning Man. They do serve this purpose for many people that they become especially younger adults. That they become a site of religious belonging in a religious community or spiritual community. And I think that's, that's a really important trend on the American religious landscape is defined religious identity outside of churches. And that would be, you know, the, the nones, those people that choose no affiliation on a survey rather than a religious affiliation. Those that say their spiritual but not religious than many of those are finding this kind of, of religious or spiritual community at festivals and other similar kinds of gatherings that or not institutionalized in the same way as that religious tradition would be, yeah, right? Well, I do you know that in ancient India during the Vedic Period let's say around 500 or 1000 BC, they also used to burn the temples after they were finished with the sacrifice. And there's some amazing footage of a modern re-creation on a movie called altar of fire. That's so interesting. I've never heard of any other religious tradition where the temple was burned. Yes, Absolutely. Yes, I was wondering if the people who organized Burning Man knew about this or again, it could just kind of a coincidence because it was something that feels something completed, something very final in it. I don't know. I think again, because so much of the large artwork does get burned at the end to Burning Man. So I'm not sure. Yeah. So in that sense it would be kind of norm, the norm, but I would think then later on people mindset, Oh, this is like, I mean one year they did do a Vedic fire ceremony. This was before the temple. This is in the early years. But I don't think there was a temple there was they had agni and they had some other Hindu gods there, but they didn't burn down the structure at that, in the Vedic period, they didn't have solid, that they didn't have fixed temples. They have traveling temples that they would build temporarily before the sacrifice. this might be a week-long sacrifice and at the end they burn the temple, yeah, really makes me wonder if, if since that started if people haven't, I haven't seen any discussion of that, but I wouldn't be surprised. I mean, burners are, many burners are interested in other cultural traditions. So yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if they, if they knew about it. It's a really fascinating event that which, I really want to go the more I hear about it. So is it going to be happening this year. Yeah. So the, it was really interesting when they decided to go online. It was very controversial in 2020 yeah, Being there, is the whole thing. And some people are like, Oh, this is just going to be a video game version. I'm not going to go. This is a waste of time, but And it turned out, I mean, from the people that I talk to, they, people found it very meaningful. I mean, they did burn the man and they burn the temple online. And people told me they cry during the temple burn at home alone in front of their computers. And then again, this year was a little different, so that was 2020. And then this year was also online, but a lot of people went to the desert anyway, even though there was no infrastructure or organization, they called it the renegade burn because it wasn't official. Or if I write it wasn't official and they didn't have the permit and all the infrastructure of the porta parties and the whole infrastructure that is usually required. But I was really struck by how the virtual event still was very powerful. To many participants, I mean, a lot of burners didn't go, but those that did tended to be people that were more comfortable in online formats. So Burning Man has always attracted a large tech community from the Bay Area. Video game designers, digital artists, graphic artists, programmers or lots of computer programmers. I mean, since the very beginning. And so I think when they decide to go online, those folks really just jumped up and said, Okay, we're going to make this work. And then within such a short amount of time, they created these video game like environments with incredible graphics and beautiful, beautiful, like the temple was incredibly beautiful. And it was designed by a digital artist, all online. And many people that had the fullest experience had the virtual reality headsets. And so would be more like oh, yeah, so that was what was recommended. So I didn't have one of those. So I had a flatter experience. So I think for many people who went, they felt that they were able to fully participate in that way, that kind of virtual way. But others that aren't as comfortable like myself. I don't I don't play video games. I haven't really had never used a headset. Virtual reality set that it was a little there was more of an obstacle there. But then they, you know, they like I said, they felt that the burning of the man and the burning of the temple were still very meaningful to them. So it's been interesting to watch one of the themes that came up a lot in when I was interviewing participants on the virtual event is they said that what was most helpful for them was their memories of being there in person that they really drew. So when they went into the virtual

temple, they remembered what it was like to be in the temple, in the desert. So they could smell it and they could feel the feeling of it and they could, they could hear, they remember hearing the sounds they heard in the temple of someone playing music. So even there in this virtual space, they had these embodied memories that then shaped their virtual experience. So found that really interesting the role of the kind of memory of the past festivals played in their experience of this virtual format. And one last question. Just one little detail I want to ask is the fire started with a regular match or do they start it from nothing and like spinning sticks to kind of get it going. No it's started with some kind of I'm trying to remember they use accelerant on the structure and I think it's usually started with a torch or something and now it's never done. I just ask because of the Vedic system. Even modern day if they do it you can't use a match, and you've got to start the fire the traditional way. oh how interesting, I love that. I've never seen anyone suggests that, but it would be interesting if they did. I think it's really hard when you've got like 80 thousand people waiting for the fire to start because you've got enough trouble anyway, it's usually windy. Dust is just to try and do it with a stick that that just sounds like that would be way too much, but yeah, that's an interesting difference. Yeah. They're going to rely on the technology if that they have it. Yeah, well, you know, every all the listeners one day you should try to start a fire with just sticks. Rather than. I've done it. I've done it and it takes a long time and it's frustrating. But it's an interesting human experience because that's how everything that we see around, yeah, well, all of humanity as humanity came to its own by learning how to do that. Great, well, you gave us many sparks to think about today, so thank you very much. Really fascinating and I certainly want to go even more. oh good Daniel. I hope I hope I'll see you out there in the desert and thanks for having me. It's been a pleasure. Thanks for being here. Take care. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at CSUChico.edu/CORH. That's [CSU CHICO.edu/CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH). I want to point out that the opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our departments. When I first started the fire, I was at our ancestral skills gathering and it took me a long time, maybe ten minutes to really get it ten minutes. I tried it for 10 hours. I couldn't get anything going.