



## **Empires of Faith: *Talking Religion* program 2017/18**

To coincide with the exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, '*Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of the World Religions*' (19<sup>th</sup> October 2017-18<sup>th</sup> February 2018), the *Empires of Faith* project<sup>1</sup> has established an interdepartmental research group consisting of first and second year doctoral students in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and members of the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers museums, and the British Museum. Thanks to the support of the TORCH-AHRC Graduate Fund, from Spring 2017 to 2018, the group will be participating in a series of workshops, and academic and public events designed to highlight the importance of material culture for the study of religion.

The exhibition focuses on the creation of religious identity through imagery across Eurasia, from India to Ireland, in the first millennium AD. This crucial period in the development of religious art in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, has never before been addressed in the same space. We will show that religious imagery developed through cultural encounter and dialogue as well as differentiation in late antiquity. The *Talking Religion* program is focused on the objects and images of *Imagining the Divine*, drawing out the central role that material culture can play in the study of religion, but also on how we might deal with the difficulties of working across disciplinary boundaries.

Collaboration lies at the heart of the program. Over the course of the exhibition, the students will give joint presentations to members of the public on aspects of their research in relation to objects in the exhibition. These will specifically draw comparisons between cultural and religious spheres that are often dealt with discreetly, in an attempt to share the ideas of the *Empires of Faith* project with a wider audience, whilst instilling the passion and means to work comparatively in a new generation of scholars. *Talking Religion* will also provide a basis for interdepartmental and Museum collaboration in the future, forming part of the wider *Empires of Faith* academic and community outreach over the coming year.

### **Summary of Workshops**

1. Religion and Material Culture: from the particular to the general.
2. Comparativism: power and authority in religious art and artefacts.
3. Material religion at the British Museum: the creation of the images of gods.
4. Material religion at the Ashmolean: what is a religious object?
5. Presenting to the Public: Exhibition Training

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<sup>1</sup> For further details of the project visit [www.empiresoffaith.com](http://www.empiresoffaith.com)

### **Gallery Talks**

Students will offer Gallery Talks over the course of the exhibition, working in pairs to cover at least two religious traditions, conveying the research that they have developed over the summer in relation to the *Imagining the Divine* exhibition. These talks will build on the ideas of collaboration, comparativism, and cross-culturalism that the students will have discussed in the workshops.

### **Graduate Conference**

As part of the *Empires of Faith* project's final year, a conference will be held in early January 2018 for invited senior academics from a range of national and international institutions. We will strongly encourage the associate student members of the project to organise and participate in their own graduate conference to run just before, providing an opportunity for interested students to work independently, developing important skills for later on in their careers.

### **Further Opportunities**

The Empires of Faith project is publishing the first volume of a new book series, '*Visual Conversations*' in March 2017, currently under contract with Oxford University Press. The book, entitled '*Images of Mithra*' is a collaborative volume written and edited by five members of the project, including British Museum employees, and doctoral and postdoctoral students. Students will be encouraged to develop their own ideas for possible collaborative projects for academic presentations, with the potential that these might be worked into collaborative volumes in the future. This work will provide invaluable experience of working collaboratively, as well as offering junior academics an invaluable opportunity to publish their work.

### **Key Outcomes**

#### ***Students will:***

- present their research to public audiences through Gallery Talks at the Ashmolean Museum
- present their research to their peers and to academic audiences
- be given feedback on their work throughout the process
- be able to pursue publication opportunities in collaborative, interdisciplinary volumes

#### ***Students will learn:***

- about the significance of material culture for the study of religion
- how to effectively incorporate material culture into their research
- to work collaboratively with students and researchers in the same and adjacent fields
- to develop presentation skills, allowing them to communicate effectively with both academic and public audiences

## Contact Information

### ***Talking Religion:***

[talkingreligioneof@gmail.com](mailto:talkingreligioneof@gmail.com)

### ***Empires of Faith:***

Philippa Adrych

[Philippa.Adrych@magd.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Philippa.Adrych@magd.ox.ac.uk)

Stefanie Lenk

[SLenk@britishmuseum.org](mailto:SLenk@britishmuseum.org)

Dominic Dalglish

[Dominic.Dalglish@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Dominic.Dalglish@wolfson.ox.ac.uk)

### ***Participants:***

Sylvia Alvares-Correa

Penny Coombe

Andrew Doll

Helena Guzik

Fuchsia Hart

Hugh Jeffery

Justine Potts

Ilenia Scerra

Hugo Shakeshaft

Kristyna Syrova

Sajda Van der Leeuw

### ***Supporting Departments:***

#### *Ashmolean Museum*

Dr. Mallica Kumbera Landrus

Dr. Paul Roberts

Dr. Giovanna Vitelli

#### *School of Archaeology*

Prof. Bert Smith

#### *Classics*

Dr. Lisa Kallet

Dr. Neil McLynn

#### *History*

Dr. Conrad Leyser

Prof. Bryan Ward-Perkins

#### *History of Art*

Prof. Craig Clunas

#### *Oriental Studies*

Prof. Martin Goodman

#### *Theology*

Prof. Sarah Foot

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