



Empires of Faith: *Talking Religion* programme 2017/18

To coincide with the exhibition *Empires of Faith: Art and the Rise of World Religions* (provisional title) at the Ashmolean Museum (19th October 2017-18th February 2018), the *Empires of Faith* research project is running an interdepartmental research programme for first and second year DPhil students in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We are looking for ten students from a range of departments to join the project as associate members from Spring 2017 through into early 2018, to take part in a series of workshops, and a range of academic and public events. We particularly encourage applications from students in Art History, Classics, Oriental Studies, Theology, History, Anthropology and Archaeology. The Empires of Faith project is particularly concerned with the study of material culture and religion in the first millennium AD in the area from Ireland to India, but we welcome applications from any interested parties.

Talking Religion is designed to highlight some of the key themes of the *Empires of Faith* exhibition, to encourage greater cooperation between the Ashmolean and University of Oxford departments, and to train selected doctoral students in how to talk about religious objects and to incorporate them into their research. The public events will supplement the existing outreach, education and engagement programme of the Ashmolean museum, as well as help to foster important contacts between both students and academics in a range of departments. The programme has been made possible thanks to the support of The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities' (TORCH) through their graduate funding scheme.

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I. The Workshops

We envisage four workshops (one per fortnight) to take place during Trinity Term 2017. Two of these will be classroom-based, introducing students to the ideas of comparativism and cross-culturalism, based on reading set over the Easter break. These will take place in Oxford. Two further workshops will be museum-based, allowing students to engage with objects first hand. One of these will be in the Ashmolean museum, the other in the British Museum. A fifth workshop will take place in early October 2017, where the focus will be on the *Empires of Faith* exhibition, and how best to communicate research ideas to the general public. This workshop will be specifically aimed at providing the students with the means of presenting their own research, as completed over the summer of 2017, to members of the public and fellow academics over the course of the exhibition.

The workshops will be led by the Empires of Faith research team, alongside senior faculty members and staff from both the Ashmolean and British Museum. The workshops will enable students to discuss methodological problems involved in the study of material aspects of religion and more generally in interdisciplinary work. They will also give participants an insight into the benefits of working collaboratively, and to applying the theories and practices of one discipline to another. Each workshop will require students to be free from 10am to 5pm, and include a guided session, refreshment breaks, lunch, and an open discussion.

2. Summary of Workshops

- 1) Religion and Material Culture: from the particular to the general.
Workshop on the problems we encounter when trying to incorporate material culture into the study of religion, and how we can develop better questions.
- 2) Comparativism: power and authority in religious art and artefacts.
Workshop on the difficulties of comparing examples drawn from different cultures, with a focus on how religious material culture can be used to convey messages of power and authority.
- 3) Material religion at the British Museum: creation of the images of gods.
Workshop on the development of the images of gods, a central theme of the Empires of Faith exhibition.
- 4) Material religion at the Ashmolean: what is a religious object?
Workshop on the range of objects that can be considered religious and in what ways this is expressed.
- 5) Presenting to the Public: Exhibition Training
Workshop reviewing research students have completed over the summer, helping them to develop this into Gallery Talks suitable for the general public.

3. Gallery Talks

Participants will give Gallery Talks to public audiences of approximately fifteen minutes over the course of the exhibition, working in pairs to convey research developed over the summer in relation to the *Empires of Faith* exhibition. These tours will build on the ideas of collaboration, comparativism, and cross-culturalism that students will have discussed in the workshops. Each student will give their talk twice: once on a Saturday during term, and again on a weekday afternoon. All participants **must** be willing to give these talks to be a part of the programme, and will be given training throughout the process.

4. Graduate Conference

As part of the Empires of Faith project's final year, a conference will be held between 11-13th January 2018 for invited senior academics from a range of national and international institutions. We strongly encourage the associate student members of the project to organise and participate in their own graduate conference to time accordingly with the Empires of Faith conference. Whilst members of the existing Empires of Faith project will be on hand to help, we would hope that this would provide an opportunity for interested students to work independently, developing important skills for later on in their careers.

5. Further Opportunities

The Empires of Faith project is set to publish 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. As part of the programme, participants 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.

6. Key Outcomes

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

Students will:

- present research to public audiences through Gallery Talks at the Ashmolean
- present their research to their peers and to academic audiences
- be given feedback throughout the process

7. Important dates

Application Process:

- Application deadline - Wednesday 22nd February
- Shortlisted applicant meeting - Friday 3rd March

Workshop Dates:

1. Oxford - Thursday 4th May 2017
2. Oxford - Thursday 18th May 2017
3. Oxford, Ashmolean - Tuesday 30th May - Friday 2nd June 2017 [TBC]
4. London, British Museum - Thursday 15th June 2017
5. Oxford, Ashmolean - Early October 2017 [TBC]

Provisional Gallery Talk Dates - Ashmolean, Oxford:

- Wednesday 1st November 2017
- Wednesday 15th November 2017
- Wednesday 29th November 2017
- Wednesday 17th January 2018
- Wednesday 31st January 2018
- Saturday 4th November 2017
- Saturday 18th November 2017
- Saturday 2nd December 2017
- Saturday 20th January 2018
- Saturday 3rd February 2018

Provisional Graduate Conference Date:

- Thursday 11th January 2018 [Empires of Faith conference 11-13th January 2018]

8. Empires of Faith

Empires of Faith is a five-year (2013-2018) humanities research project funded by the [Leverhulme Trust](#) and jointly hosted by the [British Museum](#) and [Oxford University](#). Taking the broadest possible view, the project examines imagery from those religions that have survived (Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam as well as the polytheisms of India), but also many lost religions from the cults of the Roman Empire to Manichaeism in the first millennium AD. To do so, its members look across the North Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds, the Indian Ocean and beyond, from Britain and Spain in the west to the Indian subcontinent and the borders of China in the east. The project aims to put the best of new and current research on late antique religious history and archaeology at the University of Oxford, side by side with the unparalleled scholarly and material resources of the British Museum; this is an experiment in intellectual collaboration between the two institutions in the United Kingdom with the greatest strengths in the material culture of this period.

The project is curating the exhibition *Empires of Faith: Art and the Rise of World Religions* (provisional title) at the Ashmolean Museum (19th October 2017-18th February 2018). Other outputs of the project include the first in a series of new books published by Oxford University Press, '[Images of Mithra](#)' due for publication in March 2017; a historiographical

volume currently under review by Cambridge University Press, and a series of international conferences held at the Humboldt University, Berlin, and the University of Chicago.

The project is headed by Professor Jas' Elsner of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and is primarily hosted by Wolfson College, Oxford. The project includes members of the Departments of Art History, History, Classics, Oriental Studies, and the School of Archaeology in Oxford, as well as employees of the British Museum. More details of the project's members and activities can be found on our website: www.empiresoffaith.com

9. Contact Information

Talking Religion:

talkingreligioneof@gmail.com

Empires of Faith:

Philippa Adrych

Philippa.Adrych@magd.ox.ac.uk

Dominic Dalglish

Dominic.Dalglish@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Stefanie Lenk

SLenk@britishmuseum.org

Supporting Department Members:

Ashmolean Museum

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