

# Encountering the sacred in museums

Friday 15 March, 10.30-17.00  
Stevenson Lecture Theatre

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10.30      **Registration**

11.00      **Introducing the sacred**

## **What is sacred?**

Karen Armstrong, Historian of Religion

The talk will discuss the meaning of the word “sacred” which, like the word “religion”, has been much understood in our modern secular age. I will especially dwell on the idea of a sacred or holy place in all the major world faiths and see how this applies to a museum. Since becoming a trustee, I have come to see the role of the museum in an entirely different way. How can a trip to the British Museum increase the sense of “wholeness” and “completion” that pilgrims get when they visit the centre of the world and discover new regions within themselves?

11.45      **Break**  
refreshments provided

12.15      **Focusing on faith**

## **Beyond belief - the role of museums in interpreting religion**

Rickie Burman, Development Manager, The National Gallery and Emeritus Director, Jewish Museum London

This presentation will explore the role of museums in interpreting religion for diverse audiences and building connections and understanding between people from different faiths and backgrounds. It will focus on the displays and learning programmes of The Jewish Museum London, and will also make reference to art depicting religious themes at The National Gallery.

### **Presenting Islam**

Qaisra Khan, Project Curator- Faith & Islam, ZNM (Zayed National Museum) Project, The British Museum

This lecture will examine the challenges for new museums in the Middle East which seek to represent the Islamic faith to a predominately Muslim audience. In regions where there will also be many non-Muslim visitors the balance needs to be correctly addressed so that the messages reflect visitors with differing levels of familiarity, convictions and suppositions of Islam.

13.15      **Lunch**

14.15      **Researching visitors**

### **Visitor responses to the British Museum's Treasures of Heaven exhibition**

Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation, The British Museum and David Francis, Interpretation Officer, The British Museum

This talk traces how consultation with community groups shaped the exhibition Treasures of Heaven: saints, relics and devotion in medieval Europe (23 June – 9 October 2011). The exhibition included reliquaries loaned from churches and posed unique challenges. The summative evaluation of this exhibition reveals differing responses from visitors with and without faith to the display of sacred objects within the supposed secular space of a museum. The final part of the talk places these findings within the wider context of two other British Museum's exhibitions which explored spiritual journeys.

### **God in the museum**

Steph Berns, AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Researcher, University of Kent and The British Museum

Steph Berns will draw on her doctoral research at the British Museum's exhibition Treasures of Heaven in order to identify the material and immaterial elements that enabled and inhibited visitors' encounters with the divine. From the glass cases and the wood benches to the items visitors brought with them to bless at the exhibits; these often overlooked objects played a substantial role in visitors' engagements with sometimes surprising results.

15.15      **Break**  
refreshments provided

15.45      **Specialist museums**

### **Humans riding on the backs of Dinosaurs: A walk through the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky USA**

Dr John Troyer, Deputy Director of the Centre for Death and Society Department of Social and Policy Sciences University of Bath

Dr. John Troyer will give a pictorial tour and critique of the twenty-seven million dollar Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. Since its opening in May 2007, over 1,000,000 visitors have gone to the museum, which advocates a "young earth," Christian explanation for the planet. Dr. Troyer's presentation will closely (and humorously) examine the relationships between Creationism, Intelligent Design, and Evolution in America.

### **Keeping magic live**

Dr Fiona Candlin, Senior Lecturer in Museum Studies, Birkbeck

After visiting the Museum of Witchcraft in Boscastle, Cornwall, Mr Smith wrote and apologised. 'I am afraid that we did not leave a donation. He then described a series of minor misadventures which he attributed to his lack of generosity. The envelope contained some money and he hoped that it would remedy the situation. The Museum's curator, Graham King, laughed when he showed me this and similar letters. 'What do they think we are?' he asked. 'This is a museum'. Nonetheless, I have some sympathy. The Witchcraft Museum is a subtly unsettling place and like the apologetic visitors, I also felt that its collections needed to be treated with some caution. This paper considers why the Museum prompts such a reaction.

16.45      **Closing comments**

17.00      **Finish**