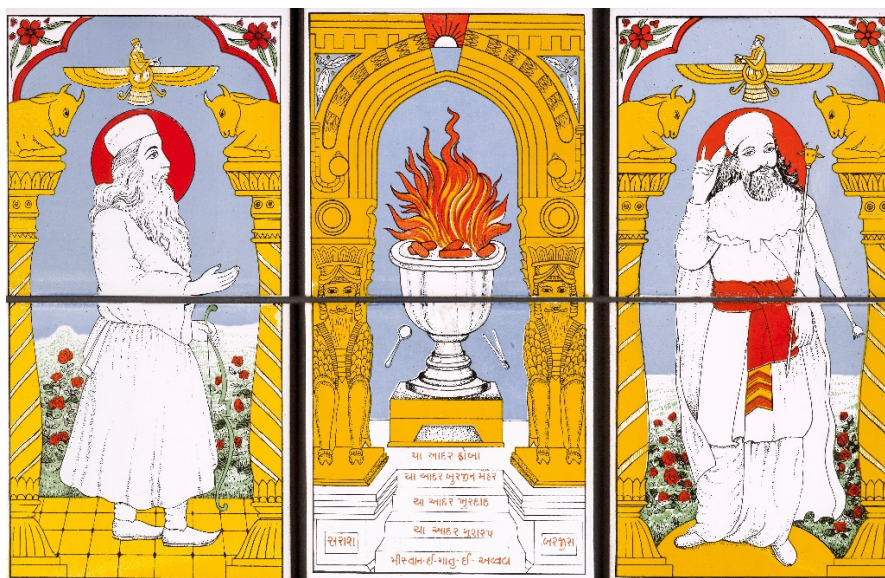


Homo Religiosus: Living with Gods

Living with gods: people, places and worlds beyond at The British Museum, 2nd November 2017 to 8th April 2018

Huge credit must go to all those involved with *Living with gods: people, places and worlds beyond* currently on at the British Museum, as the exhibition attempts nothing less than to survey the history of religious belief. Coupled with a Radio 4 series of the same name, the show's attempt to tackle a subject that is so astoundingly broad and so fraught with pitfalls is heroically courageous even if the underlying plea for understanding and acceptance of differences is much needed.

The opening premise of the show is that we have for too long thought of ourselves solely as homo sapiens, or 'wise man', and this emphasis on our rational capacities has obscured the view, as the curator Jill Cook argues, that belief in spiritual powers has been part of every known human society. These beliefs are reflected in shared stories, objects, images and rituals which provide ways of explaining the world we live in and which lay the foundations of strong and cohesive societies. In fact, so pervasive is this instinct to find meaning beyond our known world that the show suggests we might equally call ourselves 'homo religiosus'.



Set of Shrine tiles from a Parsee household representing Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian god, as a constantly burning fire. Mumbai, India, 1980s. © the Trustees of the British Museum

To explore this idea, the show focuses on everyday objects that embody these beliefs, and does so both chronologically and thematically, reaching back in time and across cultures to find common patterns. And with the Lion-Man, the first object you see, the show reaches a very long way back indeed – about 40,000 years in fact. It is hard to overstate the significance of the Lion-Man. About a foot tall, this is a statue with the head of a cave lion, the Ice Age's most fearsome predator, and the body of a man. Made from the tusk of a mammoth, it stands alert and poised; at the same time sinuous and full of life, and yet

austere. It is the earliest evidence we have of man's capacity for imagination, the ability to bring into being something that doesn't exist in the known world. Even the statue's backstory is fascinating. Found in fragments in a cave in southern Germany, the Lion-Man was kept in storage for more than thirty years before being painstakingly restored. And not only is it the earliest evidence of man's attempt to reach beyond the known world, this little statue also offers tantalising suggestions of organised religion. It seems to have been kept in a small uninhabited cave, perhaps a sanctuary; to have been rubbed smooth through handling; and to have organic matter, possibly blood, in its mouth. An extraordinary start then.

The show that follows presents a variety of objects by theme and by practice. The section on Light, Water and Fire for instance features a 14th century mosque lamp, a Japanese woodcut from the 19th century, Zoroastrian shrine tiles from 1980's Mumbai, and a contemporary piece inspired by Native American beliefs about the origin of light. Later, contact with spiritual beings through prayer is illustrated by Islamic, Christian and Buddhist prayer beads, as well as Thai prayer flags, Indian prayer wheels, a church coat from Transylvania and a Japanese prayer avatar of a fox; while our all too human fear of mortality is shown through the Buddhist wheel of life, a Roman 'death passport', grave guardians from Burkina Faso, and a jaunty Mexican Judas-devil that is paraded as part of the Day of the Dead festival.



*Judas-devil figure paraded and exploded on the Day of the Dead. Mexico City, Mexico, late 20th century.
© the Trustees of the British Museum*

Individually these objects are often mundane, even trivial, but there are also some surprises. At first glance for instance, the larrakitj poles made from eucalyptus wood by the Yolngu people of Australia's Northern Territory to contain the bones of their dead look like the sort of white-washed birch branches used to decorate Ikea. But look more closely and you'll see they teem with life, being covered with minute painted fish that swirl in currents around the trunks. Look more closely at the memento mori pendant from 16th century France as well and you'll see a miniature skeleton in an enamelled coffin decorated with tongues of fire and visible through a rock-crystal lid. And you really will have to look closely – this is a less than an inch long and a quarter inch wide. The photograph below is likely to be bigger than the real thing. Collectively then all these items show the human capacity to seek out patterns in nature and in life, and to see in these patterns evidence of spiritual beings from worlds beyond our own.



Memento mori pendant reminding believers to think of their spiritual, rather than worldly wealth. France, 1500–1600. © the Trustees of the British Museum

The show however doesn't shy away from the capacity for religion to divide and exclude, leading to prejudice, persecution and violence, and the final section titled Conflict and Co-existence reflects on the querulous nature of present-day relationships between and within religions. Two powerful pieces stand out – the Lampedusa Cross made by a Sicilian carpenter from the timbers of a boat that capsized in 2013 off the island of Lampedusa with the loss of more than 300 refugees, and shirts now dipped in plaster but which were once worn by two Syrian children who drowned at sea. All that is known about them are the barest of details – 'Unknown Girl 3 months' and 'Unknown Boy 6 months'. This is a show then that aims to have a powerful message.

But hang on a minute. What is this message? I was about half way round the exhibition when I began to have some doubts. Are these all gods? Early on, we are told that there are 4,000 religions in the world

covering 85% of the world's population. But Christianity and Islam, the major religions which together account for more than two thirds of the world's believers, are monotheistic, often violently so, and would deny the existence of other gods. The show is remarkably even-handed but how should we square away this uncomfortable fact? Can there be one God as well as many other gods? Or are all gods equal? Or are there no gods?

And what is the correct way to respond to the exhibits? I was in front of a 17th century Russian icon when this thought struck me. Had it been in context, I might have dropped to my knees and prayed to it, touched it, maybe even kissed it. But it was in a glass case and tastefully lit, so instead I leaned forward, looking at the craftsmanship and noting the date. It might have been made and venerated by homo religiosus, but I was studying it with the eyes and mind of homo sapiens. The religious element of these objects is then not in them; it is in their context and in us. Out of context, the Japanese fertility symbols are just wooden dicks and the Chinese Wonder Toad thought to bring wealth and happiness could have come from Gerrard Street.



Wonder toad, believed to bring wealth and happiness. China, late 1800s – early 1900s. © Religionskundliche Sammlung der Universität Marburg, Germany

What too if you don't personally sense the presence of spiritual beings? If homo religiosus is an essential part of being human, are you less than human if you don't see gods in the flames in your hearth or think prayers can be carried on the wind?

At this point, I began to think about frogs. E. B White famously said 'Humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific

mind'. Substitute 'religion' for 'humour' and I'm afraid this is how the show left me. It might be about homo religiosus but it is for homo sapiens. 'We' are studying 'them'. In reality, this is a show with a secular world view. We are being asked to appreciate humanity and our innate capacity to find meaning in the world however expressed. But as a consequence, homo religiosus becomes less about spirituality and more about superstition, and the show is ultimately undermined by the contradictions in its own assumptions.

So my advice would be to still visit the show, marvel at the Lion-Man, and respect the efforts of all involved in the exhibition and radio series – the British Museum, curator Jill Cook, Neil McGregor who wrote and presents the radio series, and the Genesis Foundation. Their message of tolerance and respect for differences is a powerful one that is much needed in our fractious world. But try to keep your personal frog alive for as long as possible.

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