



# **Keeping faith** New approaches to interpreting religion in museums

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## A place for the devoted in County Durham

A new museum devoted to faith is being built as an extension to Auckland Castle in County Durham. Opening in 2019, the Faith Museum in Bishop Auckland will be the first museum in England dedicated to tracing religion and its impact in the British Isles over 5,000 years.

But why have a Faith Museum at Auckland Castle, out of the thousands of cultural venues across the UK? The reason is that it was the residence of England's only

prince-bishop. Granted exceptional powers by Norman kings, the bishop of Durham remained the virtual monarch in his diocese up to the 19th century, but, more importantly, the castle and its park represent the centre of a wider sacred Christian landscape that may date back as far as 1,500 years.

Auckland Castle's permanent galleries allow visitors to explore the history of the prince-bishops – the residents of the castle for 900 years. The Faith Museum will be attached to the Scotland Wing, which



has walls that date back to the 16th century and is where Scottish prisoners of war used to be held. Once complete, the new museum will have 10 gallery spaces across 450 sq m over two floors.

The museum's 5,000 Years of Faith exhibition will feature artefacts such as a Catholic chalice from the castle's collection, as well as other items loaned from major public and private collections. Showcased in chronological order, the display will cover Paganism, Roman beliefs, the rise of Christianity and today's multicultural and multi-faith society.

Auckland Castle's curatorial team has worked closely with an expert advisory panel from York, Cambridge,

Durham and Newcastle universities, and the British Museum to accurately represent the stories told in the Faith Museum.

The Auckland Castle Trust, based in Bishop Auckland, was created in 2012 to protect 900 year-old Auckland Castle. In September, the trust changed its name to the Auckland Project in order to reflect its ambition to turn the castle and the surrounding area into a major international visitor destination.

The £130m project includes the creation of the Faith Museum. The project's first new attraction, the Mining Art Gallery, opens in Bishop Auckland later this month (see p11). *Laura Rutkowski is a freelance writer*

the curator of the show. "A History of the World in 100 Objects showed how, as humans, we materialise our thoughts by making things. The objects here show how we symbolise what we make.

"The exhibition is not a show of treasures. Some items are new, but many are ordinary things – the important element is the mystical part of the experience. It's not about what people believe, but that they do believe and how they believe, and that faith rather than conflict is a common thread through humanity."

The objects are not necessarily overtly religious and are not reflected in an art historical way as they are in the museum's other galleries. Instead, the items have been chosen to reveal their power in communities and societies.

"The word religion doesn't mean 'to believe in supernatural spirits', it means 'to bond' and comes from the Latin 'religare', or 'to bind'," says Cook. "Many rituals and observances are about bonding, sometimes to God, sometimes to the wider state, to family or to celebrity. We distinguish between faith and belief."

### Living on a prayer

Throughout the exhibition there will be contemplative spaces for the major world religions, but the opening object will be the Lion Man sculpture, which does not fit into any faiths we now identify. This ivory figure with a lion's head, standing 30cm tall, was found in a cave in West Germany. It

is 40,000 years old and the oldest known human-made object.

"We start with Lion Man because it depicts something that doesn't exist in the natural world and therefore shows that we have minds that are capable of imagination," says Cook. "We know that it took more than 400 hours to make, so someone allowed all that time to create something with no practical use in an extremely cold period when survival was utmost.

"It's not possible anthropologically to know what Lion Man was made for, but it could depict an avatar or a deity, something that connects to worlds beyond, which strengthens emotional and social bonds

in order to marshal other strengths and forces," Cook adds. "And we've been doing the same thing ever since. It's a key characteristic of being human. There is no society in the world that does not have some form of belief and associated observances."

The exhibition will include practices that replace religious rites and observances today, such as roadside shrines and ghost bikes – the painted white bicycles at sites where cyclists have been killed in London.

"These serve the needs of people who cannot find solace through one of the great faiths but need to go through a process to make their own connections with the dead," says Cook.

One item is a perspex disc with a red tassel, the kind of thing you hang from the rearview mirror in your car, with an image of Chairman Mao. "It's a modern totem of belief," says Cook. "It has Mao's signature and a prayer asking for his protection on the journey, like a St Christopher medal. Chinese millennials who never lived under Mao are showing how he is becoming an ancestor and a semi-deity."

At the end of the exhibition, visitors will glimpse Lion Man again, but now with a new perspective, and a question is posed: homo sapiens or homo religiosus?



This 1920s embroidered dress (jillayeh) from Palestine will be on show in the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, which opens next year at the British Museum, London

*Deborah Mulhearn is a freelance journalist. There will be a session on interpreting Islamic objects at the Museums Association Conference & Exhibition, 16-18 November, Manchester. [www.museumsassociation.org/conference](http://www.museumsassociation.org/conference)*