



# IMAGES, ICONS & IDOLS

## Images, Icons and Idols - Postgraduate Conference

9-10 January 2015, University of Manchester

Organisers: Naomi Billingsley, Rosie Edgley, Scott Midson & Charlie Pemberton (Religions & Theology)

[#SSTi3](http://sstpg2015.weebly.com)

This one-and-a-half-day conference was the fourth annual postgraduate conference associated with the Society for the Study of Theology, the body which exists to support and promote the study of theology and is based in the UK, but also has international members. All four of the organisers attended the 2014 conference at the University of Oxford and we put ourselves forward to host the 2015 event in Manchester.

The Society provides a grant of £750 towards the conference, and requires that the conference be free to attend and that some travel bursaries be available for postgraduate speakers. All other decisions relating to the conference and the sourcing of additional funds are left to the organisers to make.

### Conference theme

The theme ‘Images, Icons and Idols’ was chosen for two primary reasons: first, in order to cover a range of sub-disciplines within theology that are not always brought into conversation, including theological anthropology and theology and the arts; second, because the inter-disciplinary potential of the theme reflects the research environment at Manchester. This was reflected in attendance from delegates from other disciplines in SALC. In addition, we were able to work with the Manchester Museum to host collections-based sessions during the conference.

### Practical matters

We decided to follow the pattern of the previous three conferences of beginning at lunchtime on the first day followed by a full day so that most delegates would only need one night’s accommodation.

Following experience of working on previous ArtsMethods events, we created a weebly website for the conference which hosted all information about the conference - from the Call for Papers (including a form for submitting abstracts through the website), to details of keynote speakers, to information about travel and accommodation, and later the programme and registration. We had a number of comments, both via our formal feedback form, and informally, that the website was very useful and we would

encourage others organising conferences and initiatives to consider using a similar platform for your events.

We also registered a hashtag, #SSTi3, via Twubs, and embedded a widget into the website which displays tweets using this hashtag.

Registration was via Eventbrite, which enables organisers to capture a large amount of information from each person registering (dietary requirements, photography permission etc.), whereas forms on a free weebly website have a limited number of fields. Another advantage of Eventbrite was the facility to create two ticket types which we used to have a limited number of speakers tickets which included the option to apply for travel bursaries. Eventbrite registration can also be embedded into your website which avoids delegates having to visit multiple external links.

We were able to collaborate with the Religions & Theology Society (The ‘RaT Pack’) to book rooms in Samuel Alexander Building through the Students’ Union and therefore only pay out-of-hours staff costs (our first day finished at 6pm and our second day was a Saturday).

We hosted a wine reception and optional conference dinner at Kro Bar on the evening of the first day. This was cheaper than hosting the reception on campus because we avoided staffing costs. Payment for the dinner was processed via a University of Manchester e-store.

## Finances

In addition to the £750 from SST, we were awarded £500 from ArtsMethods, £1200 from the Lincoln Theological Institute (linked to R&T) and £100 towards the wine reception from a publisher, SCM Press.

Payments from the SST monies were processed via the Society, which we aside for travel for keynote speakers and postgraduate travel bursaries. It proved difficult to find a way to transfer the grant from SCM Press owing to the complicated finance systems on both sides (something others organising events should be aware of when seeking external funds); the solution was for SCM to pay Kro Bar directly.

Our other main costs were catering, staffing costs and keynote accommodation, all of which had to be covered by our budget.

## Feedback

Overall, the event was a success, with a lively and friendly atmosphere across the two days - both in the paper sessions and in the breaks. A number of people commented that the wine reception and dinner was a good opportunity to extend conversations at a more informal level, and is something we would encourage organisers of other events to consider.

The suggestions for improvement received via our feedback form (via google forms) were mainly factors beyond our control. For example, a couple of people commented on panel chairs arriving late; all panel chairs were from Manchester and had been briefed to take responsibility for arriving early as we as organisers could not be in multiple parallel sessions at once. We will nevertheless take all such comments forward and also pass them on to future organisers of conferences in this series.

Highlights of the feedback include:

About the conference: ‘One of the best-organized conferences I have ever attended! Well done to all of those involved! The presentations were all very high value and I met wonderful people. Thank you all so very much.’

About the museum workshops: ‘Very engaging curator and lots of input. A good thing!’

The image above is *Dante pulling a head from the ice* by Gustave Dore (1866) and is reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.