'He, effortlessly and magisterially as we have come to expect from him, delivers a siren warning of the dangers of sidelining the gods to a comprehensive audience' Peter Stanford, *Observer*

'All religious life is here . . . The triumph of *Living with the Gods* is its marrying the aesthetic and political dimensions of religion without reducing it to either' Nick Spencer, *Financial Times*

'If I were to permit myself a household shrine, it's likely that it would consist of a silver-framed photograph of Neil MacGregor, a selection of his books and a collection of objects bought at the British Museum shop. . . . As with his other books, the pictures are gorgeous, the choices MacGregor makes of what to write about are often surprising and therefore fresh' David Aaronovitch, *The Times*

'Based on his wide knowledge of religious artefacts from all over the world, it presents religion not as a private matter, but as an essentially social and political phenomenon . . . In one sense the ancient past is made accessible to us: we could so easily have walked past objects like the Lion Man in museums without taking the trouble to pay attention to them. But when such objects are explained to us, not only is the ancient past made accessible, our present reality is also made strangely questionable' Angela Tilby, *Literary Review*

'This scholarly, elegantly written book is a reminder of how seldom, when visiting a museum, most of us take the time to inquire what lies behind the objects we look at. *Living with the Gods* is a celebration of curiosity' Caroline Moorehead, *Guardian*

'MacGregor's warm and friendly prose is often reinforced by contributions from a wide range of scholars famous in their fields . . . the device is effective: to place the unfamiliar and familiar side by side so that the echoes between them can be heard is to make the familiar fresh and sometimes startling. . . . rich and rewarding' Lucy Beckett, *The Times Literary Supplement*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil MacGregor was Director of the National Gallery, London from 1987 to 2002 and of the British Museum from 2002 to 2015, and Chair of the Steering Committee of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin from 2015 to 2018. His previous books include *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, *Shakespeare's Restless World* and *Germany: Memories of a Nation*, all available in Penguin and now between them translated into more than a dozen languages. In 2010, he was made a member of the Order of Merit, the UK's highest civil honour. In 2015 he was awarded the Goethe Medal and the German National Prize. In 2018 the radio series *Living with the Gods* received the Sandford Saint Martin Award for Religious Broadcasting.

Neil MacGregor

LIVING WITH THE GODS

ON BELIEFS AND PEOPLES

BBC RADIO 4 92–95 FM

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PENGUIN BOOKS

30

LIVING WITH EACH OTHER

It is the human predicament; it is the story of each one of us; it is the history of the world so far, and for ever – all in a single brilliantly coloured painting which shows the endlessly turning wheel of our life and our lives. This *thangka*, a nineteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist painting on textile, mounted on blue cotton with loops for rods at top and bottom, was made to hang on the walls of a temple in Tibet or India. It is about the size of a very big home television screen, and it has the same high-definition intensity of colour and detail. Designed for slow meditation, especially for those unable to read, it offers a guide to the terrain of everyday life, and how to move beyond it.

All the way through this book, from the Ice Age to the present, we have been looking at how societies first imagine and then enact their place in a world that is constantly changing, and often dangerous. In conveying the Buddhist view of the universe, this *thangka* does what all religions have to do: it tells a story – one that connects our individual lives to the community and to the world of which we are, fleetingly, a part. And it tells it in a wheel, because

Life determined and devoured by transience. The Buddhist Wheel of Life shows the cycle of rebirth and different aspects of the human condition. A nineteenth-century Tibetan *thangka*

though our lives are finite, the tale of the world that it presents has neither beginning nor end.

The rim of the wheel is pistachio green, and its spokes divide it into six sections, each with landscape and figures. At the very centre, in the red hub, are the three driving forces which govern our lives, keep turning the wheel and make the world go round: greed in the form of a green snake, ignorance, shown as a pig, and a proudly plumed cockerel for hatred. Each of these destroying habits feeds off the others: so in an inspired visual metaphor they are shown here spinning round and round, biting one another's tails. There is only one way we can be freed from them and their cycle of destruction: following the path and teachings of the Buddha – detachment from desire, and compassion for all living things. If we are left to our own unenlightened devices, these three ravening beasts will inform all our actions, shape our lives, and take us through a sequence of births and rebirths into six different realms in the cycle of existence, each shown in one of the large segments of our wheel.

In this *thangka* we can see, set out for tranquil contemplation, the essence of the Buddha's first sermon, on the wheel of the law, which he preached to his followers in the deer park at Sarnath (Chapters 14 and 19): how we choose to behave to each other has consequences that resonate not just through society but across time, as the cosmic wheel endlessly turns. Morality is destiny.

In the centre at the top, as you might expect, is the golden realm of the gods, a world of abundance and ease. But this is not eternal paradise as Europeans usually think of it: these gods are mortal. Because they have so much, they are distracted by meaningless pleasures, and so fail in compassion and self-discipline. Greed, ignorance and hatred drive even them forward. When the wheel turns, they will die and be reborn into a lower realm. And so the story goes on, clockwise around the wheel, our progress determined by our behaviour: self-indulgent gods who become

squabbling and discontented demi-gods, or animals living in constant fear of violence, or even descending, right at the bottom, to the many torments of hell itself.

To the left of hell are nine oddly shaped naked human figures. Every other segment of the wheel, even hell, has a bright abundant landscape, but these figures, known in Buddhism as the hungry ghosts, are in an almost featureless realm of dull grey. Madeleine Bunting, a writer and religious commentator, shaped by both Catholic and Buddhist traditions, finds them especially worth pondering:

They have huge pot-bellied tummies and, famously, pinhole mouths. The point about the hungry ghosts – and I feel I see them every day of my life – is that these are people who would love to experience a depth and richness of life, but cannot. They are hungry, hungry, hungry, but they don't know how to absorb the joys of existence. They seem to me to embody the T. S. Eliot line: 'We had the experience and missed the meaning'. The question this section of the wheel asks is: how do you open your mouths so that you can take in the nourishment that a life can bring – connection to other people, sheer gratitude for the astonishing beauty of the world, and compassion for others, to help wherever and whenever you can?

Our realm, the human realm, is the scene just above the hungry ghosts, and we are clearly doing a little better – but only a little. There is a lush fertile landscape, and winding through it is the path which leads us all from birth towards old age, sickness and finally death. It will not be an easy journey. On either side of the path, we see extremes of heat and cold, hard work, suffering, hunger and thirst. Everywhere there is separation from loved ones and the frustration of desire.

Despite this unvarnished depiction of the human journey, the point of the painting is emphatically not to cast us into gloom

over our condition, but to give us hope. This great image of the cosmos declares in its circularity that everything the world contains – pleasure and pain, love and loss – is always changing and turning. Nothing is for ever. It is perhaps similar to the idea of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus that 'we cannot step into the same river twice'. In our *thangka* the wheel of life is being held, is possibly about to be devoured, by a fearsomely fanged bear-like monster, the embodiment of transience. Our human world, as we see it here, and as we ought to understand it, is caught in the claws and the jaws of impermanence.

And that gives us hope. For, as the world must change, so must we, but the simple message of this complex painting is that it is possible to escape from the three base passions of greed, ignorance and hatred. By practising the teachings of the Buddha, by exercising detachment from the things and affections of the world, and showing compassion to everybody, all may be well. And we are not asked to struggle alone. As you can see in the *thangka*, Madeleine Bunting tells us, the Buddha is always within sight, to counsel and to guide:

The key thing is that in each of the realms there is an image of the Buddha. You may be in hell or you may be amongst the gods or the hungry ghosts. But, wherever you are, there is the potential for enlightenment and for Buddhahood. We all have a Buddha nature. It is close to the Christian idea of the God within. We can all reach enlightenment, no matter where we are, whatever our life stories are. That is the radical hope and promise that this painting and this teaching offer.

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Every year on the banks of the Ganges, a drama of transience and renewal, comparable to the one we see in our *thangka*, is played out on a massive scale, with a similar focus on the redeeming virtues of detachment and compassion. As we saw in Chapter 3, the waters of the goddess Ganga – waters which in a spiritual sense

may be found in many rivers of India – link earth to heaven, and play a central role in the Hindu understanding of life and death.

In Chapter 3 we looked at the virtues of dying and being cremated on the Ganges at Varanasi, and so being freed from the endless cycle of reincarnation. But Hindus believe that to bathe in the Ganges at Allahabad, at the point where it is joined by the River Yamuna, confers outstanding spiritual benefit on the living, especially on certain days in January and February. So every year, in the dry autumn months after the monsoon rains, a great city is built in the riverbed at Allahabad, to allow many millions of pilgrims to come to bathe over fifty-five days, and to celebrate the Magh Mela – the festival (*mela*) that begins in *Magh* (the Hindu month that straddles January and February). Every twelve years it is even more than usually auspicious to immerse yourself in the life-renewing Ganges here, when an even greater celebration, called the Kumbh Mela, takes place (*kumbh* means a water-pitcher). In 2013 it is estimated that an astonishing 120 million people – twice the population of the UK – took part in the Kumbh Mela over the two-month period.

Every year, in order to house the Magh or the Kumbh Mela, a transient metropolis, a mobile megacity, is built in the riverbed of the Ganges. There is literally nothing like it in the world. Rahul Mehrotra is an architect in Mumbai, and also teaches at Harvard. He has made an exhaustive study of the ephemeral city that accommodated the Kumbh Mela in 2013:

There are about seven million people who live there for the entire festival, so it's essentially a megacity where people settle for fifty-five days. For the annual Magh Mela the numbers are slightly smaller, but still several millions. At both there are some specially sacred days, when there are large influxes of people, so on each of

Over: A transient city. Thousands of Hindu pilgrims crossing pontoon bridges over the Ganges at Allahabad, during the Kumbh Mela, 2013. On the most auspicious days, around twenty million bathe in the river

the three particularly auspicious bathing days there are influxes of over twenty million people.

The site on which the city must be built emerges after the monsoon rains, when the rivers recede and the sand banks are revealed, some time between the end of September and the middle of October. So essentially the government has about two months to erect a megacity for seven million people, who will start arriving in January. The striking thing about it is that it emerges from an undefined landscape which is virtually a sandbank. Equally compelling and beautiful is that it completely disappears again when the rivers flood in the next monsoon.

The logistics of such an event are more challenging even than those for Hajj, where there is a large permanent infrastructure and a well-established system of quotas to manage the huge influx (Chapter 14). But as with Hajj everybody here has come with the same purpose: to focus for a time on the essentials of their existence, to pray, to worship and to be freed from the weight of their wrongdoing. It is a holy city, but, unlike Zion, here there is no thought of permanence, and it can be regularly – briefly – attained.

Visiting this huge but temporary city is an unforgettable experience. The population on any given day is likely to be larger than any European capital except perhaps London. It has street lighting and sanitation, its own hospitals and its own police force (mostly to manage crowds and reunite people who are lost – very few crimes are reported). Walking in the streets you are conscious of a gentle serenity that would be surprising anywhere, a quiet sense of shared purpose which grows stronger as you approach the bathing places.

There are no hotels. The city is laid out on a grid plan, with the city blocks made up not of buildings but of large tents. These are big enough to house 700 or 800 people, who bring rugs and bedding on which to sit and sleep. In the centre of the tents are spaces kept free for spiritual instruction by a wide range of gurus, for religious services and private meditation. It is never a quiet

environment, but many people seem surprisingly able to find a space to focus on their own inner meditations.

The pilgrims come from all over India and stay, free of charge, for as long as they like. They bring few possessions. Most will bathe several times. The tents – there are many thousands of them – provide a safe environment for pilgrims, many of whom are unused to travelling outside their village. Within them, religious organizations ensure that everybody is not just lodged but fed at no cost. Everything is provided. This is charity on an extraordinary scale, and with another unusual feature, as Rahul Mehrotra recounts:

One of the most interesting things about the Kumbh Mela – and the Magh Mela – is that it has the scale of any contemporary megacity, but just one, single purpose. And, crucially, it does not function as a commercial space. Food and shelter for everybody are provided. That for me symbolizes the bigger idea of the whole city – that it is about producing something with real commitment but then accepting its disappearance just as easily.

You are all the time aware that this great metropolis, laboriously built, is no abiding city. In a few weeks, if it were not dismantled, then the very river which offers pilgrims a new spiritual life would destroy it completely. But next year there will be a new city, new pilgrims, and the same river will be flowing with different water.

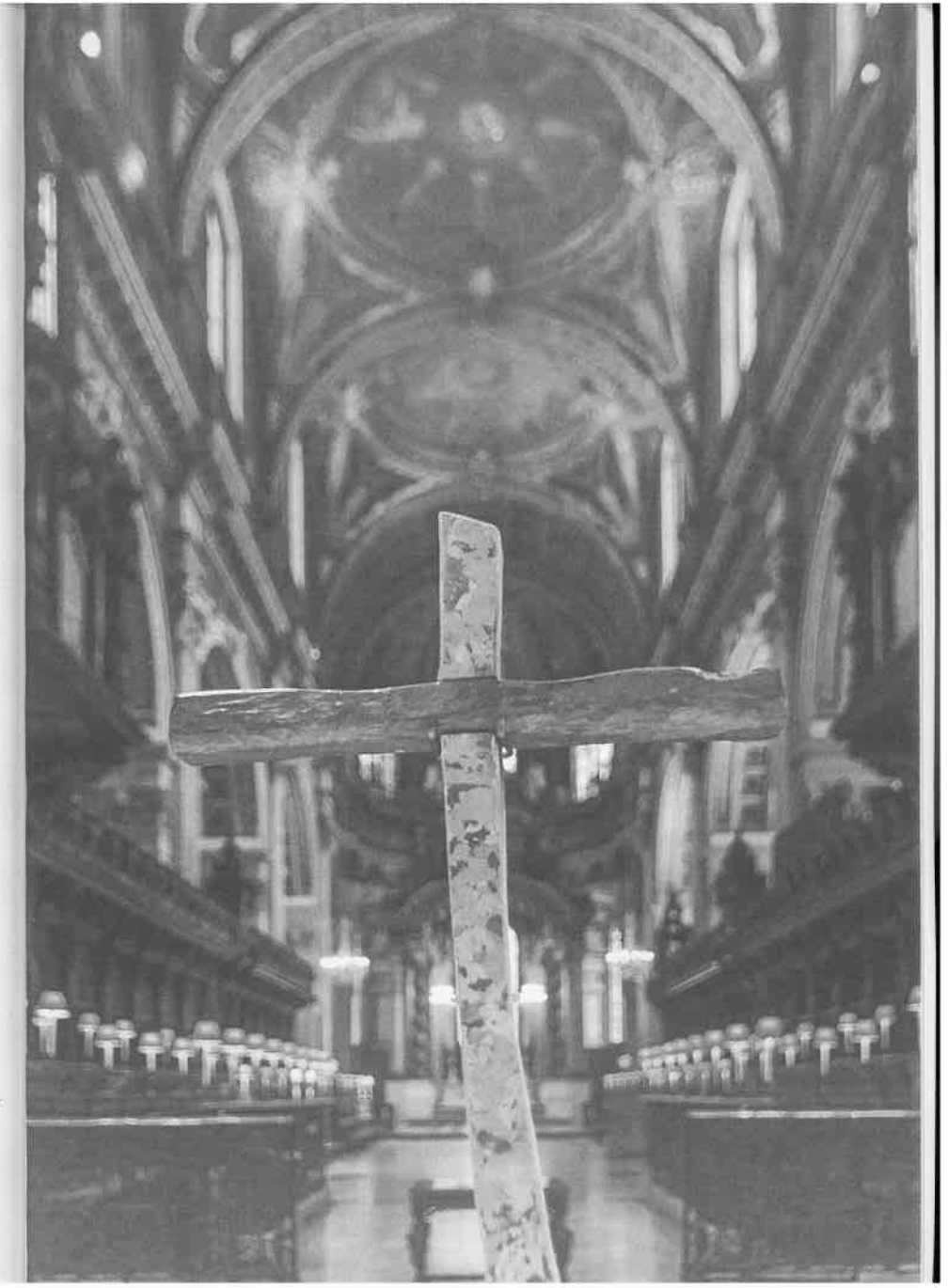
The Kumbh Mela is by far the largest religious event – indeed by far the largest human gathering – anywhere on earth. But the millions of bathers in the Ganges are, I think, doing something similar to other groups whom we have looked at in the course of this book – the farmers who built the great tomb at Newgrange to link the living and the dead at the moment of the winter solstice, the festivals that mark summer in Siberia or honour the slaughtered seals in Alaska, the congregations singing in Lutheran churches, or the pilgrims to Canterbury or Guadalupe or Mecca.

All are taking part in complex and demanding rituals by which they understand their place in the world and in time. Participation brings the hope of a new beginning, and strengthens the community that enacts them.

This book began in a cave near the river Danube, where 40,000 years ago a small, portable sculpture of the Lion Man played a central part in what we can reasonably describe as a religious ceremony. It is an imagined reshaping of the world, a magnificent work of art, in which the destructive, threatening power of the lion has been transformed by imagination and great skill into a source of strength that can be shared by everyone. I want to end in another echoing space, St Paul's Cathedral in London, with another small sculpture, which was also designed to be held in the hand, this one made in our modern world in an attempt to turn destruction into an emblem of hope. It is a small cross, simply made of two pieces of wood fitted together, which in Refugee Week 2016 stood on the high altar of the cathedral.

Francesco Tuccio is a carpenter on Lampedusa, the tiny Italian island between Sicily and the coast of Tunisia. It has become the goal for tens of thousands of migrants and asylum-seekers from Africa, desperate to reach a Europe which does not want to receive them. Thousands have drowned in small, overloaded boats that sank during the short sea crossing. Most of those who do reach Lampedusa are destitute and many are traumatized. Tuccio, wanting to give something to the migrants as a token of welcome and compassion, began fashioning crosses like this one from the wreckage of migrant boats that had been washed ashore, from wood that, as he said, smelt of salt, sea and suffering.

We have talked many times in this book of objects where the material itself is part of the message. Of none is that more



The Lampedusa Cross on the High Altar of St Paul's Cathedral, June 2016

Refugees arriving by boat at the island of Lampedusa, between Sicily and Tunisia

powerfully true than of this cross, made from the wreckage of a boat which foundered off Lampedusa on 11 October 2013 – 311 Somali and Eritrean migrants drowned. The inhabitants of Lampedusa managed to save 155 others. On the horizontal bar you can see the remains of the scuffed blue paint of the shipwrecked boat, with the bare wood beneath; on the upright, many layers of paint, time and again damaged, scraped back and renewed, remind us of the shattered human lives which the boat once carried. In 2015, Francesco Tuccio gave the cross to the British Museum. It is an object which in its simplicity and in the directness of its message humbles even the great museum that houses it.

The teachings of the Buddha, represented in the *thangka*, offer reconciliation and release to those who follow them. The Lampedusa cross is a statement, Christian and also universal, that out of destruction and suffering can come redemption and new life. Tuccio intended it as a plea that our idea of community should be able to embrace not just those who share our beliefs, but all those

who share our world. He gave a similar cross to Pope Francis, who carried it in a penitential Mass held on Lampedusa on 8 July 2013, in memory of the migrants who had lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean. In his homily the Pope called on all to consider their responsibility for, and their response to, the moral danger that he described as 'the globalization of indifference'.

The objects we have looked at in this book have been connected to many faiths, some long dead, others that today shape the lives of millions. We have encountered a wealth of different stories about the world and our place in it, but we have looked less at what individuals believe, and more at what communities do as ways of giving expression to those shared beliefs. And all those practices seem to me to assert essentially the same thing: that we are each part of a narrative much bigger than ourselves, members of a continuing community in which there is a shared companionship of purpose. Practices like these mark identity and strengthen cohesion – which is why societies from the Ice Age onwards have been willing to pour such enormous resources into them. That heightened sense of identity can of course be exclusive and confrontational, as we saw in Ayodhya, Jerusalem, Nagasaki, Paris and Khartoum; but it will also enable societies to survive against enormous odds, as when the Parsis were forced to leave Iran for Gujarat, the Ethiopians resisted Italian invasion, African-American slaves struggled for freedom, or the Siberian Sakha preserved their traditions in the face of Russian encroachment over centuries.

The decline of Christian religious observance in Europe began with the rejection on rationalist grounds of the dogmas of the church and hostility to its political power. It has continued through growing indifference, until for many people it is now little more than a folk memory. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many believed that governments used religion to maintain control of their potentially criminal or rebellious subjects. There

appears to be no connection today between levels of secularity of particular states and their levels of criminality – or rebelliousness. But the declining role of institutional religion has, I think, led to a serious loss of community, as the religious participant has given way to the ever more atomized consumer. All the traditions we have looked at affirm that the life of the individual can best be lived in a community, and all of them offer ways of making that affirmation a reality. Jean-Paul Sartre famously observed that 'Hell is other people.' The narratives and practices we have looked at in this book argue precisely the contrary: that living properly with other people, living with each other, is the nearest we can get to heaven.

One sculpture, more than any other object that I know, gives physical form to this idea. It comes inevitably from a particular tradition – the Christian – and from a particular time – around 1480. But it embodies the universal phenomenon of a sustaining community of belief. It closes the circle of this book, for it was made in south Germany, in the neighbourhood of Ulm, not many miles from where the Lion Man was found. It shows, slightly smaller than life size, what Germans call a 'Schutzmantel-Maria': the Virgin Mary spreading her protective cloak. Beneath its sheltering folds are ten small figures, representatives of a whole society: men and women of different ages and types, all either praying or looking anxiously out. But Mary, who by tradition represents the Church, is serene. Splendid in gold and blue, she gathers the community of the faithful, holds them together and shields them from harm. On a different scale from those she protects, she is the continuing story in which they are mere episodes, an enduring institution which embraces them all, and will outlive them all. She looks steadfastly to the future and strikingly, she – and they – are moving forwards.