Department of Religions and Theology

Semester B

Religion in Public: Great Images: BCRE17

ECTS: 5
Contact hours: 22 Lecture Hours
Lecturer(s): Prof. Damien Janos, Prof. Daniele Pevarello, Prof. Cathriona Russell, Dr Gesa Thiessen (russellc@tcd.ie/ext. 3493)

Module Description:
In the study of the religious ‘discourse’, great importance is often ascribed to the centrality of words and verbal expressions. Religion is too often seen as a matter of reading and interpreting religious texts and holy books and verbal acquisition of doctrinal and dogmatic formulations. Religious expression, however, is also a function of the eyes, where seeing and being seen play a central role in the public expression of religious thoughts. The purpose of this module is to offer a fresh approach to materiality and visual culture in the religious discourse, promoting an understanding of the acts of seeing and being seen as religious and social acts. Looking at examples of “Great Images” which have played a central role in the public understanding of religion from antiquity to contemporary society, this module investigates the power of the religious gaze, beyond the classic divide between word and images. Specific emphasis will be given to the different levels (political, social, and cultural) at which the religious gaze has influenced human society. Students will be offered the opportunity to reflect on examples of religious visual culture such as the depiction of crucifixion in early Christianity, the role of the visual in religious devotion and worship (e.g. the function of icons in the Orthodox Christian tradition), the study of the centrality of the visual element in the study of important landmarks of Islamic architecture, the role of artistic expression in the theological debate of European modernity (e.g. depictions of the story of the Annunciation in Western art), as well as the visual expression of religious faith in contemporary interreligious discourse and the use of sacred images in religious propaganda and in the portrayal of religious dialogue and conflict.

Learning Outcomes:
On successful completion of this course, students will be able to:
• Identify and assess the importance of materiality and visual culture for the understanding of the impact of religion in the public sphere.
• Recognise the main methods of investigation and the core methodological issues related to the study of religious visual culture in the public sphere, learning to approach the use of images in religious thought with a methodological awareness which goes beyond the divide between word and image and the centrality of verbalisation of belief.
• Identify religion and religions as an important factor in the production and fruition of visual culture in ancient as well as in contemporary society.
• Understand the centrality of the study of the religious gaze and of religious visual culture as a learning tool for further research in fields such as history, politics and sociology and for independent thinking on the study of religion and transfer the awareness of the discourse on religious images to the comprehension of the function of images in contemporary debates about public life, democracy and politics.

**Indicative Reading:**

**Methods of Assessment:** one essay of 3,000 words, deadline Fri, April 7, 2017.