



Dear Woolf Friends,

Over the summer I had the joy of cycling with my daughter across the solar system. We packed our sandwiches and got on our tandem bike, starting our journey at the sun. Mercury, Venus, and Earth were all within a stone's throw, but it took us nearly an hour to cycle past the other planets all the way to Pluto (which we couldn't find, somewhat ironically, since it has been downgraded to dwarf planet status). If you were on Midsummer Common in Cambridge this August, you may have already worked out what I'm talking about. '[Our Place in Space](#)', is a public, interactive sculpture trail designed by the artist Oliver Jeffers with scientist Professor Stephen Smartt – a large scale model of the solar system which stretched from central Cambridge to Waterbeach near the rail station.

The purpose of the project (which is still touring) is to give the general public something akin to the experience astronauts have when they look back at Earth from space. On the surface, we carve up pieces of land and groups of people into 'us' and 'them'. From beyond Earth's atmosphere astronauts look back and see only one Earth. There are no borders or boundaries or seemingly insurmountable divisions visible. No 'them'; only 'us' Earthlings. Jeffers and Smartt created the trail on a scale that allows people to physically experience the immense distances across our solar system and how miniscule the Earth is in relation – and to imagine how vast the universe is beyond it all. It genuinely puts things into an entirely different perspective.

I recently listened in on a session our director, Dr

## Upcoming Events

22 November

The Quranic Notion  
of the Soul and Its  
Place in Science and  
Psychology



22 November

Shared Sacred Space  
and the Mosque in the  
Medieval  
Mediterranean



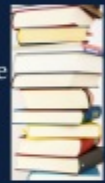
23 November

Interfaith Mixer



30 November

Edward Said and the  
Study of Religion



1 December

William Kessler  
Essay Prize  
Competition



6 December



Esther-Miriam Wagner, led in our Muslim-Jewish Relations course. She described the Cairo Genizah, the world's largest collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts – one thousand years worth of books, papers, and scraps of anything on which the Divine Name had been written, stored in a room presumably awaiting proper disposal by burial which thankfully never happened. It gives the world an invaluable insight into every aspect of life from legal documents to personal correspondence to children's scribbles. And for the purposes of exploring Muslim-Jewish relations, it is evidence of centuries of cooperative coexistence between people of these two faiths. Looking through the documents and fragments we catch a glimpse of a reality which exists in too few people's lived memories today: Jews and Muslims as neighbours in the Mediterranean interacting in all the everyday ways that neighbours interact, before anyone was expelled from anywhere and before generations of grievances had calcified into seemingly insurmountable barriers of mistrust.

And it reminded me of my glimpse of the solar system. Watching Miriam click through slides of the Genizah documents and seeing this amazing window into medieval Mediterranean coexistence was like that summer cycle ride with my daughter, but through time instead of space. There are many roads into interfaith encounter. Some of them are necessarily discussions of doctrines and differences which genuinely divide us – no one shies away from these discussions at Woolf; they are important. Some of them are about texts and beliefs and values that unite us, which are also important. But there are also other ways in, including the ability to step back and see from a new perspective the times and places where our ancestors already knew how to live together and trust one another and learn about life together. Just like a 10k scale model of the solar system can give us a small glimpse of what an astronaut experiences beyond our 'us' and 'them' divisions on Earth's surface, learning interfaith history can offer a small glimpse of what a time traveller would witness beyond our current constructions of religious and political 'us' and 'them' in contemporary societies. It does not deny or erase difference, but it puts it all into an entirely different perspective.

I highly recommend the journey. Be sure to pack some good sandwiches.

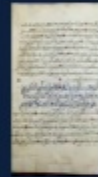
Best wishes,

Reading Group:  
Qur'an and Bible



13 December

Historiography and  
Politics in the Late  
Medieval Islamic  
Mediterranean



16 & 17 January

Perspectives on  
Judaism and Islam



26 January

London Research  
Day



31 January

Making martyrs in  
medieval Iberia



8 February

London Research  
Day



# WORLD CUP 2022



As the world cup 2022 is about to start we have gathered some interesting pieces on sport for your enjoyment.

**PODCAST: Diversity in sport**

**BLOG: A Wider View of Identity... in London to Fix Football**

Tuesday 22 November @13:00

The Quranic Notion of the Soul and Its  
Place in Science and Psychology

By Dr Mehdi Nassaji



On Tuesday 22nd November Dr Mehdi Nassaji will be giving us a seminar talk entitled – ‘The Quranic Notion of the Soul and Its Place in Science and Psychology’.

This research seminar is in partnership with the Faraday Institute. Join us in Cambridge and online at 1pm UK time followed by Q&A.

By the 16th Century, the dominant view among Muslim scholars was that the soul is a material substance. It was a kind of heresy to believe that humans are compound creatures, made up of a material body and an immaterial soul. Influenced by some leading philosophers, things changed in the last 4 or 5 centuries, and the dualist understanding of the soul became widespread among Muslims. However, it seems that a careful examination of the Quranic texts related to the notion of the soul support neither the material nor immaterial views. I argue that the Quran has adopted a ‘functionalist’ approach to address the soul without saying anything about its nature. IF the Quran has the potential for this functionalist reading, then the Quranic notion of the soul



equates with the notion of the mind in its functionalist sense, which is now the dominant view among scientists and psychologists. In functionalist theories, the nature of entities is not of interest, but the focus is on the entity's functions. Suppose the Quran has adopted a functionalist approach to the soul without addressing its nature, in that case, the concept of the soul can be embraced by scientists and psychologists, and whatever scientists and psychologists find about the functions of the mind can be compatible with the functionalist reading of the Quran.

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER TO ATTEND IN PERSON](#)

[CLICK HERE TO WATCH VIA ZOOM](#)

**WEBINAR 22 NOVEMBER @17:00**

Woolf Institute and the Society for the Medieval  
Mediterranean present:

## Shared Sacred Space – Confronting Narratives of Conversion



The Woolf Institute together with the Society for the Medieval Mediterranean invite you to their webinar series.

The Mediterranean has been a theatre of both sharing and contesting sacred space between Christianity and Islam. While some shrines appear to feature syncretic devotions, other places see the symbolic conversion of the sacred space. Especially in contested territories between Christianity and Islam, religious power dynamics often cause mosques and churches to transcend their function as mere buildings. The transformations of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque at the time of the Crusades, of Córdoba's Umayyad Mosque following the Reconquista, and of Istanbul's Aya Sophia, are famous examples that resonate until today. However, while popular narratives of the conversion of these edifices dominate modern scholarship, the archaeological evidence is often less straight forward. Focusing on aspects of their own research and examples from the Levant and Al-Andalus, this panel will discuss the extent to which these narratives ought to be nuanced, and how both medieval and modern communities have interacted with these sacred spaces.

Speakers are Dr Carmen González Gutiérrez (Universidad de Córdoba), Dr Hagit Nol (Université libre de Bruxelles), Dr Alejandro García-Sanjuán (Universidad de Huelva).

Chair: Dr Jan Vandeburie (University of Leicester)

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

# INTERFAITH MIXER

Wednesday 23 November @18:00

WOOLF INSTITUTE | KC SHASHA SUITE



## UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STUDENTS!

Join us at Woolf next Wednesday as we explore interfaith with some fun & (more importantly) food.

Ps. there may or may not be sushi involved (including kosher & vegan)

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

## THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

*Naked Reflections Podcast x The Woolf Institute*

ARE WE WITNESSING THE COLLAPSE OF THE  
NHS IN REAL TIME?



Since the COVID pandemic, satisfaction ratings with the National Health Service have plummeted. Should we look to other countries for alternative models? And Social Services, which have never been properly integrated into the NHS system, are on the brink of collapse, despite the claims of politicians to have “sorted” the problem. Sarah Smith and Gurch Randawa tackle a thorny problem...

[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN](#)

## COMING SOON

*Naked Reflections Podcast x The Woolf Institute*

# TIME TO STOP TALKING

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