

Chair of Enlightenment Studies

Case for support

The University of Oxford is seeking to create a new professorship of Enlightenment studies as a first step towards developing a multidisciplinary institute for the study of the Enlightenment. This unique post, the Chair of Enlightenment Studies, will combine responsibilities for establishing the new institute with those of the director of the Voltaire Foundation.

The impact of the chair

The holder of this post will be an outstanding scholar in the field, will coordinate, stimulate and facilitate multidisciplinary research and teaching at Oxford and attract Enlightenment scholars from around the world.

At a time of uncertainty regarding the UK's place in Europe, a new focus on the Enlightenment at Oxford will strengthen links with research centres across Europe, as well as with centres in North America and elsewhere. The new professorship will be a catalyst for innovative research and will establish Oxford as the pre-eminent centre for research into Enlightenment history, culture, literature, and the values that continue to inform our world.



With an established professorship, the University of Oxford will be the world's leading centre for the study of the Enlightenment.

Context

The Enlightenment is a defining moment in European and American culture and a dynamic area of research. The eighteenth century, sometimes dubbed 'The Age of Reason', was a period of intellectual giants – Franklin, Jefferson, Hume, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and of course, Voltaire. In their passionate defence of human reason and their equally passionate attacks on fanaticism, they laid the foundations of equality and tolerance that are at the heart of modern liberal thinking. The French declaration of human rights and the American Constitution are both equally indebted to Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and Locke. Today, when modern values of democracy are challenged, by intolerance, populism and fundamentalism, it is to the thinkers of the Enlightenment that we turn for guidance, inspiration and rational argument.

The importance of Voltaire and the Enlightenment was powerfully illustrated when, following the Charlie Hebdo massacre, Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance*, was brandished by participants in the Paris rallies of 11 January 2015, leading to the publisher Gallimard printing an extra 10,000 copies of the book. The Enlightenment represents a body of thought that can help twenty-first century society address the profound challenges it faces; challenges that mirror many of those faced by thinkers in the eighteenth century, as their world was rocked by war and revolution.

The University of Oxford and Enlightenment studies

The University of Oxford is in a unique position to provide global leadership for research on the Enlightenment:

- It is the home of the Voltaire Foundation – a unique scholarly and publishing organisation that has done more than any other to disseminate the works of great Enlightenment thinkers, and, through its book series *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment*, to support the global Enlightenment research effort;
- It is unsurpassed in the number of world-leading scholars working on all aspects of the Enlightenment – from literary studies to philosophy; from history to musicology, and;
- It is home to one of the world's great collections of Enlightenment manuscripts – within the Bodleian Libraries – a collection that has yet to be thoroughly researched.

Established in the 1970s, the foundation is working to publish the first digital edition of Voltaire. The Voltaire Foundation will complete the massive *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* in 2020 – the first time all of Voltaire's work will be available in a definitive and thoroughly researched edition (which will soon go online as Digital Voltaire – the first widely accessible edition of everything he wrote). The publication of the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* represents a major milestone in Enlightenment Studies.

The new institute will be interdisciplinary and multilingual. It will study the different forms that the Enlightenment assumed in different European countries and in North America and the ways in which ideas circulated and evolved. There will be a strong digital component to this research (for example, mapping correspondence networks). The institute will be a global leader.



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