

Brief Report

# Change—But Not Enough Yet

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**Abstract:** Many museums are now taking religion much more seriously, and there is a lot of academic interest in the subject. But many of the changes are very slow, and many museums are still ignoring religion.

**Keywords:** museums; religion; communities; multiculturalism; change

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Things have changed, but there is a lot more change to come. Museums worldwide now pay a great deal more attention to religion than they did a generation ago; this brief (and inevitably very personal) note sets out to summarise the state of the field. I find that attention is very varied and uneven, and there is a long way to go before we can say that museums generally take this huge aspect of human initiative and life very seriously.

There has been a worldwide explosion of museums and museum-going over the past generation: the ‘official’ number of museums in the world is now 55,000, but this no doubt ignores many small and private museums, and the real figure is likely vastly greater. The role of museums has been dramatically expanding, too: museums are increasingly asked to reach out to new audiences, to share their authority with local communities and with the communities from which their collections came, to make appropriate use of digital technology, and to show value for money. Of course, museums are given other roles too: tourism development, political propaganda, family entertainment—even scholarship.

This museum explosion, outlined in many of the papers in this issue, has been mirrored by an explosion of academic interest in museums. This morning, ‘Academia’ claimed to have 110,623 papers on ‘Museum and Heritage Studies.’

All this is in the context of a world where traditional religion seems to be declining in countries where people feel more secure, and growing in those where they don’t. Everywhere, though, religion is changing—sometimes becoming more political and more important to people’s identity, and sometimes turning into ‘spirituality’, something much more personal. For a world facing the challenges of climate change, inequality and shifting balances of power, understanding religion is crucial, for it underlies so much of our daily news. Museums have a duty to help people understand religion.

For museums in particular, though, this can be a challenge. Although they can trace part of their history to collections in places of worship, the context from which the modern museum first emerged was the European Enlightenment, and it is this that brings us the traditional conversion of religious object to museum object or work of art. How well are museums adapting to this new request? The answer must be: in some areas well, in others very unevenly. First, there is now a small group of museums which may be called ‘religious’:

1. Treasuries and museums at places of worship, from the Jubilee Galleries in Westminster Abbey, London, to St Mark’s Treasury in Venice, to the Sri Dalada Museum at the Temple of the Tooth, Kandy;
2. Museums set up by individual faith traditions and groups, e.g., The Salvation Army Museum in London, The Creationist Museum near Connecticut, the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle, the Twenty-Six Martyrs Museum in Nagasaki;

3. Those few museums worldwide that aim to objectively treat religion as a human phenomenon. Some are primarily scholarly, like the State Museum of the History of Religion in Saint Petersburg, or the Museum of Religions at Marburg. Others derive from faith traditions that accept many paths to the Infinite, like the Chaitanya Jyoti Museum at the Sai Baba Ashram in Puttarpathy. Finally, there are museums with a strong multicultural agenda, like the Museum of World Religions in Nicolet, Quebec, or Saint Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow—these aim to help local people of different faiths to understand each other.

Far more important than these museums which focus on religion are the thousands of other museums and art galleries in the world for which religion is only part of the story they tell, and in which religious objects are but part of their collections. Here the picture is improving—in some places improving fast—but it is still very patchy indeed.

Anthropologists, closely followed by archaeologists, have always taken religion very seriously as a human phenomenon, and the great ‘World Cultures’ museums continue to do so (at least, they take other people’s religions seriously; their own traditions they tend to ignore.) Archaeology museums, too, often foreground statues and other finds that reflect religious practice in antiquity. Seldom, though, does one come away from a museum archaeological display feeling that one understands ancient religion on a personal and interior level. Only occasionally, as in the London Science Museum’s new medicine galleries, does one encounter religion in science or natural history museums—unless, of course, one counts Creationist museums.

Some of the most notable change is taking place in art galleries and decorative arts museums. Exhibitions like ‘Seeing Salvation’ at London’s National Gallery in 2000<sup>1</sup> have had a big impact, but, though there have been a good number of such impressive exhibitions, there has been little change in the approach galleries take in their permanent displays. The emphasis is still on beauty, artist, style, school. An altar-piece, painted as the focus of a priest’s devotion when saying mass, is still usually presented as a work of art rather than a functional object whose function needs explaining. It is perhaps in those museums which cover a range of topics but are not rigidly departmentalised that the most change has occurred, for there—for example—an anthropologist can negotiate access to art collections. So, often, valuable initiatives are the product of the enthusiasm of individuals—directors or curators or educators.

Very often, the motive for foregrounding religion in museums is either multiculturalism or (its opposite?) nationalism. There are many examples worldwide of national and local governments recruiting religion as part of their use of museums to promote loyalty and respect. [Bozoğlu \(2019\)](#) shows how Panorama 1453 Museum in Istanbul invokes Sunni Islam in aid of the policies of Erdoğan’s AKP party.

A more common motive, perhaps, is multiculturalism. The ‘multicultural agenda’ sees religion as one of the defining characteristics of minority communities, and museums (especially in places with large immigrant communities) present their religions both as a way of attracting a more diverse audience, and in order to help others to understand that community better. Much of the new concern over religion in museums, and museums’ attitudes to and treatment of sacred objects, comes from museum ethnographers and from curators in countries where relationships between dominant and indigenous cultures have become politically important. In some countries, there is an assumed dichotomy between ‘western’ museums and ‘indigenous’ culture ([Lathrop 2016](#)).

Again, temporary exhibitions are far more common than permanent displays, but one should also note the frequency of museum activities aimed at schoolchildren that focus on aspects of religion; we know far too little about the activities of museum educators in this field. Museum educators, moreover, are often involved in the provision of events and activities for adults, and frequently take the initiative in building links with local communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The lead was taken by Neil MacGregor, the museum’s Director. See [MacGregor and Langmuir \(2000\)](#).

Helping people understand religion and to sense what it can feel like to be a believer, is an enormous challenge for museums. Objects by themselves can only go so far, and museums use many other techniques, including employing people from the relevant faith group as guides or volunteers, who can relate personally and directly to visitors. Some museums open their galleries to faith groups willing to hold services/rituals in the museum itself. A wonderful new tool will perhaps be available once Augmented Reality techniques become more affordable; visitors will be able to 'take part' in rituals themselves and to virtually handle museum objects.<sup>2</sup> Multimedia techniques, including AR, are already used in theme parks to tell 'religious' stories, although, to date, these mainly seem to be creation myths. The recently-opened 'Legend of Pan Gu' at Lanzhou tells the story of the god who, helped by the dragon and the phoenix, created the earth. In the Virtual Experiential Museum in Varanasi, the visitor can experience the descent of the Ganges from the hair of Siva.

If museums are sometimes reluctant to get involved with religion, especially unfamiliar religions, this is understandable: religion is highly emotive as well as hugely complicated. Any museum that accepts a responsibility to involve the originating community in the care and display of 'their' objects is committing to a great deal of time as well as gaining great benefit. Many faith traditions see their sacred objects as living beings, and, for example, forbid their display or severely restrict who can see them. Some require their objects to be kept in special conditions: on a top shelf, facing in the right direction, not with 'alien' objects, not frozen or pest-treated, regularly revered with an appropriate ritual. Other communities, of course, simply call for their objects to be returned to them, and, to the general public, 'restitution' is perhaps the best-known aspects of religion in museums. The 'de-colonisation' of museums is one of the main ways in which museums with World Cultures collections find themselves actively involved with religion, and, despite the huge demands it makes on museum time and resources, they become a different sort of institution, and a more valuable one.

It is in social history museums that the least progress seems to have been made so far. Social history museums have traditionally treated religion mainly in terms of the history of organisations; when they have researched local history, it is the dates that churches were built that have loomed largest. However, below the religion of the big buildings, the organisations with their powerful leaders, the disputes over doctrine and the focus on the next life, there has always lain a popular religion put together by the local community, focussing on this-life benefits, and often dismissed as 'superstition'. One might hope that social history museums would give as much or more attention to the religion constructed by their local community as to the formal religious structure of the land. Of course, folk museums have always been attentive to superstitions, and have displayed old boots found above the hearth, bottles full of pins, and horseshoes hung above stable doors. But they have made little attempt to understand the people who used these objects, which are too often simply seen as curios. Social history curators in Western Europe nowadays tend to have had no religious background or education, and, as a result, tend not to see the 'religion' in the communities they are studying. As a one-time social history curator myself, I find the failure of social history museums to research and interpret popular religion a disappointment.

Equally or more unsatisfactory is that we know so little about our visitors. What religious beliefs and practices do they have, if any? How much do they know about other people's religions? How do they respond to the stories we are telling? Only a few museums seem able to afford this type of qualitative visitor survey, or to attract scholars willing to do this kind of research (Berns 2015). Here, perhaps, lies the greatest challenge for those of us who see interpreting religion as one of the key roles of museums over the next generation.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>2</sup> This will, of course, raise many questions over what reality religious rules and practices refer to. Can the visitor use the museum's real altar and chalice to say a virtual mass?

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